

Managing Pauperism and Poverty in Axminster Union c.1860-1901

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Abstract

This thesis explores how the Poor Law Guardians in Axminster Union, situated on the Devon/Dorset border, responded to challenges to their policies and practices in the period c.1860 and 1901. The Union, a mix of small market towns and rural villages, had historically been accustomed to considerable local self-governance. In the late nineteenth century it experienced difficult economic conditions, depopulation and extensive poverty. It was also publicly criticized in the 1870s and 1890s by the Central Poor Law Authorities for its excessive pauperism and inadequate management. Against this background this study explores how policy and practice developed as Axminster defended its traditional way of working. It shows how an overriding localism and local relief culture responded and adapted to central policies, pressure to change and challenging local circumstances. Using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods and drawing on a range of sources including Guardian Minutes, government reports, central-local correspondence and local newspaper reports this micro-study builds a detailed picture of Guardians' approach to Union management, and evaluates the role and importance of Guardian Boards, the Poor Law Inspectorate, central-local interaction and localism. The study shows why the Centre saw Axminster as a problem and how the approaches taken by Axminster's Guardians contributed to this. Although the Union achieved some success in maintaining local control in the 'crusade' era of the 1870s, in the longer-term its confident localism exacerbated pauperism and led to the Union becoming increasingly out-of-step with central policy, eventually resulting in a recognition that policy needed to adapt. This thesis adds to the historiography of the Poor Law by focusing on the role of the Guardians and their response to pressure from the Centre. Its focus is on a period and area that has been less frequently studied so far.

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Abbreviations:

'ABG'	'Axminster Board of Guardians'
DHC	Devon Heritage Centre
JP(s)	Justices of the Peace
LGB	Local Government Board
MP(s)	Member(s) of Parliament
NPL	New Poor Law
OPL	Old Poor Law
PLB	Poor Law Board
PLC	Poor Law Commission
TNA	The National Archives
UKPP	U.K. Parliamentary Papers: House of Commons Parliamentary Papers Archive

Definitions: 'Central Poor Law Authority', 'Central Authority' or 'the Centre' are used to describe the Poor Law Commission (PLC) (1834-1847), the Poor Law Board (PLB) (1848-August 1871) and the Local Government Board's (LGB) Poor Law Department (1871-1919).

Chapter 1: Introduction

1. Introduction

This thesis comprises an in-depth case study of local poor law management and the administration of poor relief in Axminster Poor Law Union between 1860 and 1901. It addresses key questions and debates about the impact of local culture, practices and relationships on New Poor Law (NPL) administration in a period of changing national policy and growing Union responsibilities.

Axminster provides the basis for a valuable case study because in both the 1870s and the 1890s the Union's management was highlighted as a problem by the Central Poor Law Authority due to the extent of its pauperism and the failure of the Union to adopt new legal obligations. Disputes between the Centre and Axminster Union generated extensive dialogue which provide insights into poor law administration. This thesis explores the archive generated by this dialogue to ask why pauperism was a problem in Axminster, and how a Union that faced economic and demographic decline responded to the changing demands of Poor Law policies in the later nineteenth century. In so doing, it takes up questions about the impact of local values, the significance of local autonomy on local poor law management and how far the situation in Axminster Union reflected the Central Authority's conceptualisations of pauperism.

The thesis focuses on interlinked themes in answering these questions: the clash of central and local approaches to poverty arising from differing ideas and values, the impact of key central policies on local approaches to poor law management and the way local environment and culture, and how the Guardians themselves shaped administrative practice and pauperism. In exploring these issues over time this thesis adds to knowledge of poor law administration for a period and locality in South-West England which has received relatively little attention, showing how a strong and continuing ethos of localism adapted to a changing environment and pressure from the Central Poor Law Authorities.

The thesis argues that an overriding localism shaped Axminster's poor law practice, persisting as a major influence throughout the period of this study, thus adding a further strand of explanation to the wide-ranging scholarship on the later nineteenth century poor law by historians such as Elizabeth Hurren, Steven King and David Englander. It also confirms Keith Snell's views on the importance of local attachment.¹

¹ Elizabeth T. Hurren, *Protesting about Pauperism: Poverty, Politics and Poor Relief in Late-Victorian England, 1870-1900* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press for the Royal Historical Society, 2007); Steven King and others, *In Their Own Write: Contesting the New Poor Law 1834-1900* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022); David Englander, *Poverty and Poor Law Reform in Britain: From Chadwick to Booth, 1834-1914* (Harlow: Longman, 1998); K.D.M. Snell, *Parish and Belonging: Community, Identity and Welfare in England and Wales, 1700-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

The term pauper (and the associated term pauperism) has a long history, predating the NPL. It was defined within the *Poor Law Amendment Act 1834* as someone applying for or receiving relief from the Poor Rate in England and Wales (or chargeable to it), differentiating paupers from the self-sufficient poor. Concern about extensive pauperism was inherent in the NPL. The Act focused on reducing pauperism in the belief, as Lynn Hollen Lees notes, that it was caused by ‘individual immorality and fecklessness encouraged by public policy’ which in turn exacerbated dependency.² The formal, technical definition of pauperism with its strong negative connotation remained the dominant central and national perspective until challenged at the end of the nineteenth century when there was a gradual reappraisal and understanding that the problem was nuanced, with most pauperism resulting from involuntary causes such as ill health, age, misfortune or lack of employment.³ However, as this thesis argues, the local approach to managing poverty and pauperism in Axminster was established in the context of the local economy, environment and people. Shifting perceptions of poverty and pauperism nationally and locally, and the interaction between them, forms a backdrop for this thesis, shaping policies on poor law management.

The study focuses on the period 1860-1901, a time of change in NPL administration which brought Axminster into confrontation with the Centre. The period between 1870 and the early 1890s is often defined as the ‘crusade’ era, when the cost-cutting policy of deterrent out-relief found favour amongst central policy makers and amongst some Boards of Guardians, as explored by Mary MacKinnon. Outdoor relief had been a feature of the Old Poor Law (OPL) and Unions continued its use after 1834 because the policy allowed flexibility in relieving paupers outside an institution, although the Centre believed this approach was misguided, increasing the frequency and cost of claims.⁴ ‘Crusade’ policy was controversial and although some Unions enthusiastically adopted it, others, like Axminster did not.

This first chapter reviews the literature before setting out the research questions, the sources and method adopted and the organisation of the thesis.

² Lynn Hollen Lees, *The Solidarities of Strangers: The English Poor Laws and the People, 1700-1948* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 118.

³ Englander, *Poverty and Poor Law Reform*, pp. 11, 56-79; Lees, *Solidarities of Strangers*, pp. 40-41, 117-19, 135; United Kingdom Parliamentary Papers (UKPP), ‘Report from His Majesty’s Commissioners for Inquiring into the Administration and Practical Operation of the Poor Laws, 1834’, (1834 (44)), pp. 127, 146-47; *Poor Law Amendment Act 1834* (4 & 5 Gul. IV. CAP.LXXVI) <<https://uk.westlaw.com>> [accessed 16 July 2023]

⁴ Mary MacKinnon, ‘English Poor Law Policy and the Crusade Against Outrelief’, *Journal of Economic History*, 47 (1987), 603-25; Mary MacKinnon, ‘Poor Law Policy, Unemployment and Pauperism’, *Explorations in Economic History*, 23 (1986), 299-336; Mary MacKinnon, ‘The Use and Misuse of Poor Law Statistics, 1857 to 1912’, *Historical Methods*, 21 (1988), 5-19. See also Englander, *Poverty and Poor Law Reform*, pp. 2, 19; Karel Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), pp. 102-03.

2. Literature Review

The considerable scholarship on the Poor Law has taken many different directions and perspectives providing valuable insights and explanation for this study. The subject lends itself to varying interpretations, reflecting contemporary interests such as continuing debates on welfare provision and, as such, over time the focus of study has altered. Early historical studies tended to focus on the initial impact of the NPL in the 1830s and 1840s or on the subsequent development of the welfare state after 1900. The period 1860-1900 was often overlooked in this scholarship, reflecting the relative lack of importance attached to questions on how NPL administration developed in the later nineteenth century.⁵

Although research has diversified over recent years with greater focus on topics such as the experience of poverty and use of the workhouse by the poor, gaps remain. The recognition of the range and multiplicity of poor law practices has led to calls for more research on the 'crusade' era, on diversity in practice between localities and for a greater understanding of local administration and administrators.⁶ As this literature review shows recent scholarship has begun to address these omissions, creating a more nuanced picture of the NPL.

Bearing these points in mind, this literature review has been organised chronologically in the first instance, reflecting the influence of changing political concerns and new directions in historical scholarship, before exploring a range of themes and debates in more depth.

2.1 Pre 1950s: The Webbs' Approach

For much of the twentieth century Sidney and Beatrice Webb dominated Poor Law studies. Their interpretation of the NPL was regarded as the standard work and most alternative approaches positioned themselves in relation to their analysis.⁷ Consequently, although their interpretation has been superseded, any study of the NPL, especially one with an interest in administration, needs to understand the significance of their work.

⁵ Hurren, *Protesting about Pauperism*, pp. 3, 261-62.

⁶ Hurren, *Protesting about Pauperism*, pp. 261-62; Lees, *Solidarities of Strangers*, p. 9; Peter Jones and Steven King, 'Obligation, Entitlement and Dispute: Navigating the English Poor Laws 1600-1900', in *Obligation, Entitlement and Dispute under the English Poor Laws*, ed. by Peter Jones and Steven King (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), pp. 1-19 (pp. 7-13); Steven King, 'Thinking and Rethinking the New Poor Law', *Local Population Studies*, 99 (2017), 5-19.

⁷ Alan J. Kidd, 'Historians or Polemicists? How the Webbs wrote their History of the English Poor Laws', *Economic History Review*, 40 (1987), 400-17 (pp. 400-03); Michael E. Rose, 'The Crisis of Poor Relief in England 1860-1890', in *The Emergence of the Welfare State in Britain and Germany 1850-1950*, ed. by W. J. Mommsen with Wolfgang Mock (London: Croom Helm, 1981), pp. 50-70 (pp. 50-52).

Originally published in 1929 when the NPL and its administrative structures were being dismantled, *English Poor Law History* formed the culmination the Webbs' long-standing critique of the NPL.⁸ Together with their earlier work, *English Poor Law Policy* (1910), *English Poor Law History* focussed on poor law administration in a descriptive analysis of the structure and function of English local government.⁹ According to the Webbs, *Poor Law History* explored 'a unique episode in English constitutional history, [...] the [story] of Board[s] of Guardians ...as an elected *ad hoc* Local Destitution Authority....under the direction and control of a Central Department, itself....a constitutional innovation'. To this they added the 'life history' of the social theory comprising the 'Principles of 1834' and problems of destitution relief and unemployment.¹⁰

The Webbs had an in-depth knowledge and long-standing aversion to the Poor Law.¹¹ Their approach to it was shaped by their politics and background as Fabian Socialists, social investigators and campaigners rather than as academic historians. As Alan Kidd suggests, their work was primarily a contribution to social policy debate, demonstrating, as Englander argues, a 'distinctive political purpose aimed at replacing the relief of destitution by a policy of prevention and cure.'¹² The Webbs' championed collectivism and the role of institutions as agents of change and their work charted the movement from an individualist welfare system under the NPL, towards a new, modern social ethic comprising greater mutuality between state and individual.¹³ In the mid-twentieth century these views chimed with those of many historians, partly because memories of the social inequalities of the 1930s and of collectivism during the Second World War remained strong.¹⁴

Since the late 1970s the focus of Poor Law study has shifted. Historians have criticised *English Poor Law History* for its idealised views, limited scholarship, generalisations, restricted perspective and for marginalising the 'crusade' era because its repressive policies did not fit their thesis of increasing progression in Poor Law policy over the nineteenth century.¹⁵ As Kidd has argued, their interpretation, even at the time, was backward-looking, focusing on the 'condition of England' and reflecting research for the Royal Commission undertaken more than 20 years prior to publication.¹⁶

⁸ Kidd, 'Historians or Polemicists?', pp. 412-13.

⁹ Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *English Poor Law Policy* (London: Longmans, 1910); Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *English Poor Law History: Part II: The Last Hundred Years*, English Local Government Series, 8 and 9, 2 vols ([London]: [Longmans], 1929; repr. London: Cass, 1963).

¹⁰ Webb and Webb, *Poor Law History*, I, p. v.

¹¹ Englander, *Poverty and Poor Law Reform*, pp. 75-77, 81.

¹² Kidd, 'Historians or Polemicists?', pp. 400-417; Englander, *Poverty and Poor Law Reform*, pp. 81-82.

¹³ Webb and Webb, *Poor Law History*, I, pp. v-ix; Englander, *Poverty and Poor Law Reform*, pp. 81-82.

¹⁴ Kidd, 'Historians or Polemicists?', p. 403.

¹⁵ Englander, *Poverty and Poor Law Reform*, pp. 81-84; Hurren, *Protesting about Pauperism*, pp. 4-5; Kidd, 'Historians or Polemicists?', pp. 404-05, 409; Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty*, pp. 91-96.

¹⁶ Kidd, 'Historians or Polemicists?', pp. 408-09.

However, provided these caveats are borne in mind, *Poor Law History* provides useful insights for this study, providing a reference source, a description of administrative structures and hierarchy, analysis of central policy, a top-down view of local management and a strand of near contemporary opinion.

2.2 Overview: 1950s--Early 1980s

Post-war Poor Law scholarship largely reflected predominant contemporary values such as a belief in the new welfare state and positive support for interventionist socialist and collectivist policies. The Webbs' interpretation remained central, creating what Michael Rose described as a 'static view' of the NPL, especially evident in the 1950s and 1960s.¹⁷ Debates played out in works with an administrative and political focus that concentrated on the design and impact of the 1834 Law or investigated the antecedents of the welfare state, often through local studies.¹⁸ However, subsequent scholarship has overturned the view that the NPL was a 'staging post' in a linear progression towards the welfare state.¹⁹ As outlined below, such studies forced a reappraisal of the NPL, presenting it as an integral part of the history of state development in the nineteenth century transformation of government.²⁰ Finally, a broadening of historical analysis evident by the mid-1970s heralded the growth of new perspectives.

In the 1970s a series of studies challenged the Webbs' perceptions of local administration, providing valuable context for practice in later Victorian England. The debate between Anthony Brundage and Peter Dunkley on the landed interest's influence provides insights into the early role of Guardians. Brundage's contention that elites continued to exert significant influence on the Poor Law was weakened because his focus, Northamptonshire, was known for its aristocratic interest. Dunkley contended that magistrates' involvement waned after 1837 because they had to share power with elected Guardians and, instead, he argued that there was significant regional variation in poor law

¹⁷ Rose, 'Crisis of Poor Relief', p. 51.

¹⁸ For example, Mark Blaug, 'The Myth of the Old Poor Law and the Making of the New', *Journal of Economic History*, 23 (1963), 151-84.

¹⁹ Martin Daunton, *Wealth and Welfare: An Economic and Social History of Britain, 1851-1951* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 521; Englander, *Poverty and Poor Law Reform*, pp. 80-3, 87-90; Derek Fraser, *The Evolution of the British Welfare State*, 3rd edn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. xii, xxiv-xxxvi; Keith Laybourn, *The Evolution of British Social Policy and the Welfare State c.1800-1993* (Keele: Keele University Press, 1995), pp. 10-12; Rose, 'Crisis of Poor Relief', pp. 51-52.

²⁰ Robert M. Gutchen, 'Local Improvements and Centralization in Nineteenth-Century England', *Historical Journal*, 4 (1961), 85-96; Jennifer Hart, 'Nineteenth-Century Social Reform: A Tory Interpretation of History', *Past & Present*, 31 (1965), 39-61; Royston Lambert, 'Central and Local Relations in Mid-Victorian England: The Local Government Act Office, 1858-1871', *Victorian Studies*, 6 (1962), 121-50; Oliver MacDonagh, 'The Nineteenth-Century Revolution in Government: A Reappraisal', *Historical Journal*, 1 (1958), 52-67.

administration.²¹ In another strand of scholarship, David Roberts and Ursula Henriques debated the cruelty of local administration. Roberts suggested that the evils of the NPL had been overstated in early historical accounts. It was, in his view, unnecessarily harsh but not ruthless, and failures resulted from local administration rather than the Law itself. Henriques argued from a Marxist perspective that whilst there were instances of kind behaviour, the NPL was 'part of a body of class legislation based on selfishness and class interest', which 'tainted' good elements such as infirmaries.²² Finally, Rose's study of outdoor relief allowances provides an analysis of local administration and relief provision after 1834. He evaluated its rationale and application to different groups of paupers, stressing continuity with the OPL in a study focussed primarily on Northern England. Although maintaining an administrative angle, Rose's focus on continuity with the OPL marked a change in perceptions of the NPL.²³ This radical departure in histories of the NPL was a forerunner of later studies which debated the extent of continuity or change in Poor Law policy and practice.

The development of historical analysis from the mid-1970s onwards opened new perspectives, influenced by developments in social and economic history, and gradually moved away from the focus on administration, as post war certainties began to erode.²⁴ The result was more nuanced interpretations of the NPL, which have been subsequently developed in the scholarship. For example, though Derek Fraser's edited collection on the New Poor Law focussed on administration, the aim was to explore aspects of the 'actual operation of the New Poor Law'.²⁵ The contributors provided a wider perspective than previously, including work on settlement, medical relief, pauper education, philanthropy and the political dimension of the Poor Law. Local studies, mainly from Northern and South/South-Eastern England, illustrated urban anti-centralisation sentiment and reviewed the operation of the Poor Law in rural areas. Fraser himself concluded that the 1870s formed a watershed in the NPL and called for further local research into principles and local practice, image and reality and the place of the NPL in Victorian Society.²⁶

²¹ Anthony Brundage, 'The Landed Interest and the New Poor Law: A Reappraisal of the Revolution in Government', *English Historical Review*, 87 (1972), 27-48; Peter Dunkley, 'The Landed Interest and the New Poor Law: A Critical Note', *English Historical Review*, 88 (1973), 836-41; Anthony Brundage, 'The Landed Interest and the New Poor Law: A Reply', *English Historical Review*, 90 (1975), 347-51.

²² David Roberts, 'How Cruel Was the Victorian Poor Law?', *Historical Journal*, 6 (1963), 97-107; Ursula Henriques, 'How Cruel Was the Victorian Poor Law?', *Historical Journal*, 11 (1968), 365-71.

²³ Michael E. Rose, 'The Allowance System under the New Poor Law', *Economic History Review*, 19 (1966), 607-20.

²⁴ Rose, 'Crisis of Poor Relief', pp. 50-52.

²⁵ Derek Fraser, 'Introduction', in *The New Poor Law in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Derek Fraser (London: Macmillan, 1976), pp. 1-24 (p.1).

²⁶ See the various chapters in Fraser, *New Poor Law*.

The increasing number of local studies from this time forward provide a bedrock of poor law research, filling gaps in knowledge and testing assumptions found in nationally focused studies. However, drawbacks arise from the lack of a broader context and from over-specialisation, as argued by Karel Williams, which prevented the development of broader conclusions and limited the significance of studies.²⁷ Englander further suggests that local studies can hinder the over-arching development of poor law history, because the number of studies, their individuality and the disparate specialist subject matter they outline makes it difficult to gain an overview.²⁸

2.3 Early 1980s Onwards: Diverging Approaches to Poor Law Studies

The focus of historical scholarship has altered markedly since the early 1980s, influenced by a changing political landscape, creating a diversity of approaches and perspectives on the role of the state and its relationship with charity and private welfare provision.

This has been accompanied by a striking change in approaches associated with methodological shifts such as micro-history, post-modernism and the cultural turn, making the grand narrative often found in early NPL studies appear simplistic.²⁹ Barry Reay's *Microhistories*, for example, highlights the value of the micro-historical approach suggesting that 'the local becomes the site for the consideration of much wider issues', a view which encapsulates and justifies the methodology taken by many local studies, notwithstanding Williams' and Englander's reservations noted above.³⁰ Jose Harris's *Private Lives, Public Spirit* argues that these new approaches to social history, with their breadth of subjects, pulls into view 'riotous pluralism' and competing interests, nuanced conclusions, emphasising 'contingency and contradiction'. She describes this as the difference between explanation of 'objective, interlocking, patterned reality' and the 'nuanced, idiosyncratic, private and relativist' history provided by '[t]exts, artefacts, and language [which] have replaced institutions, movements and social forces'.³¹

These new directions encourage diverse themes and specialist investigations, building over time a nuanced but fragmented picture of poverty and the operation of the Poor Law.³² In consequence, views on the concept, execution and impact of the NPL have diversified, overturning aspects of the

²⁷ Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty*, pp. 59-90, 94.

²⁸ Englander, *Poverty and Poor Law Reform*, pp. 84-85.

²⁹ John Tosh with Sean Lang, *The Pursuit of History*, 4th edn (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2006), pp. 193-226.

³⁰ Barry Reay, *Microhistories: Demography, Society and Culture in Rural England, 1800-1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. xxii, see also pp. 257-62.

³¹ José Harris, *Private Lives, Public Spirit: Britain 1870-1914* (London: Penguin, 1994), pp. vii, 2, 251, 255.

³² For example: Anna Clark, 'The New Poor Law and the Breadwinner Wage: Contrasting Assumptions', *Journal of Social History*, 34 (2000), 261-81; Englander, *Poverty and Poor Law Reform*, pp. 13-30, 80-92; Laybourn, *Evolution of British Social Policy*, pp. 9-35, 129-50; Lees, *Solidarities of Strangers*, pp. 177-293; Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty*, pp. 59-135.

Webbs' assessment, with some reinterpretation of its operation, including an emphasis on some positive aspects such as medical services.

The shift towards more complex patterns of explanation is usefully seen in the work of Keith Laybourn and Martin Daunton. Laybourn's comprehensive survey of developing social policy, largely via an historiographical analysis, suggests an evolutionary process in the development of the Poor Law, emphasising the roles of pragmatism, incrementalism and pluralism in generating change rather than linear progression. His analysis draws together valuable themes, including the roles of the state, ideology, philanthropy and the treatment of poverty between 1850 and 1900.³³ Similarly, a collection of essays edited by Daunton in the mid-1990s explores welfare history without grand narratives or linear progression. It includes topics such as demography, charity from a cultural focus, old people, the economy of makeshifts, the role of women, and economic self-interest. This range of focus illustrates the increasing diversity of study when compared with topics favoured by Fraser in the 1970s.³⁴

Several over-arching themes have emerged since the early 1980s. This includes a focus on the operation of the NPL in the workhouse, following Margaret Crowther's exploration of the topic in 1981.³⁵ These workhouse studies have resulted in more nuanced views on its evolving role, the variability of regimes and pauper experience and include more positive attitudes to aspects such as education and some health services.³⁶ More recently the experience of poverty and the agency of poor people in negotiating poor relief has become a significant trend in historiography. This is notably explored in the work of Steven King, both on an individual basis and in collaboration with other historians, developing a history of the poor law 'from below'. Peter Jones and King, for

³³ Laybourn, *Evolution of British Social Policy*, pp. 9-36, 129-50.

³⁴ See the various chapters in *Charity, Self-Interest and Welfare in the English Past*, ed. by Martin Daunton (London: UCL Press, 1996) and Fraser, *New Poor Law*. See also, for example works by David Thomson and Pat Thane on the elderly and Nicola Verdon on the role of rural women workers. David Thomson, 'The Welfare of the Elderly in the Past: A Family or Community Responsibility', in *Life, Death and the Elderly: Historical Perspectives*, ed. by Margaret Pelling and Richard M. Smith (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 194-221; David Thomson, 'Welfare and the Historians', in *The World We Have Gained: Histories of Population and Social Structure*, ed. by Lloyd Bonfield, Richard M. Smith and Keith Wrightson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp. 355-378; Pat Thane, *Old Age in English History: Past Experiences, Present Issues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Nicola Verdon, *Rural Women Workers in Nineteenth-Century England: Gender, Work and Wages* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2002).

³⁵ M.A. Crowther, *The Workhouse System 1834-1929: The History of an English Social Institution* (London: Batsford Academic, 1981).

³⁶ For example, Bill Forsythe, Joseph Melling, and Richard Adair, 'The New Poor Law and the County Pauper Lunatic Asylum – The Devon Experience 1834-1884', *Social History of Medicine*, 9 (1996), 335-55; King, 'Thinking and Rethinking the New Poor Law', pp. 6-12; Steven A. King, and Peter Jones, 'Fragments of Fury? Lunacy, Agency, and Contestation in the Great Yarmouth Workhouse, 1890s-1900s', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 51 (2020), 235-65. See also Steven King, *Sickness, Medical Welfare and the English Poor 1750-1834* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), pp. 56, 115, 321, 332. Although focussed on the Old Poor Law King suggests that medical relief was a key and increasing component of relief provision by the 1820s, due to widespread sickness, setting a context for its continuing importance after 1834 and for understanding the development of practice under the New Poor Law.

example, develop the theme of pauper agency and relative rights, duties and obligations, bringing the experience of being poor to the fore.³⁷ Two of King's more recent works utilise large collections of correspondence between poor people, paupers, and/or their advocates and the Poor Law Authorities. Initially focussing on the Old Poor Law in his *Writing the Lives of the English Poor*, King finds that agency, negotiation and contestation were of central importance in relief discussions with the Poor Law Authorities and that state power was 'malleable'.³⁸ These findings are important for a study of the New Poor Law because his subsequent co-authored study of the 'New Poor Law from below' entitled *In Their Own Write*, (a study that emanated from a project of the same name) finds evidence of this pauper agency continuing into the later Victorian period.³⁹ *In Their Own Write* adds nuance to our understanding of the operation of the NPL through focussing on the voice and perspective of poor people. It demonstrates how poor people and their advocates exercised agency and engaged with Central and Local Authorities and, in turn, how the Authorities responded to complaints and challenges. Furthermore, it argues that the power of the central and local state 'could be ... systematically challenged, constrained and contested'.⁴⁰ The project itself, which aimed to understand 'how the poor understood, experienced and exercised agency ... using historiographical methodologies [and] tools from corpus linguistics' has generated further work and studies by the 'In Their Own Write Collective', investigating aspects of the experience of the poor under the NPL.⁴¹ For example, working with Natalie Carter, King explores the impact of a direct connection between Centre and paupers, suggesting that this created problems for central and local administration as paupers could exercise agency through trying to bypass local jurisdiction.⁴² Overall these newer works provide useful perspectives on changing attitudes towards the NPL, agency of the poor, and practice compared with policy and image.

The proliferation of studies has fuelled the need for works of historiographical synthesis and the passage of time allows previous NPL scholarship to be assessed and placed into context. Works by Englander and Brundage illustrate this. Both draw together disparate themes on Poor Law policy and practice, overviewing current scholarship and partly answering the challenge of over-

³⁷ Jones and King, 'Obligation, Entitlement and Dispute', in *Obligation, Entitlement and Dispute*, ed. by Jones and King, pp. 1-19.

³⁸ Steven King, *Writing the Lives of the English Poor, 1750s-1830s* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019), pp. 245-350.

³⁹ King and others, *In Their Own Write*.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

⁴¹ The *In Their Own Write* project ran between 2018 and 2022. Participants extracted, transcribed and analysed thousands of letters from 102 English and Welsh Unions contained in Poor Law Correspondence records in the National Archives (MH 12), records previously little used by historians. *Projects, Poverty and the Poor Under the Poor Laws/In Their Own Write 2018-2021*, <<https://intheirownwriteblog.wordpress.com/in-their-own-write-2018-to-2021>> [accessed 1 February 2024]

⁴² Natalie Carter and Steven King, 'I Think We Ought Not to Acknowledge Them [Paupers] as That Encourages Them to Write': The Administrative State, Power and the Victorian Pauper', *Social History*, 46 (2021), 117-44, pp. 1-19.

specialisation and provide a base from which to explore the topic more widely.⁴³ In this synthesis, several key themes have consistently remained the focus of scholarship despite the diversity of studies. These include the welfare environment, continuity and change in Poor Law policy in response to changing ideas and values, evolving political and administrative culture and the contest between national ideas and more local and traditional values and approaches. As the new directions explored in Section 2.4 demonstrates, this diversity suggests a mixed economy of welfare, in which the Poor Law needs to be understood as a part of a wider framework of local economic and social systems.

2.4 Topics, Debates and Controversies

2.4.1 The Welfare Environment

Since the 1980s the 'mixed economy of welfare' has become a dominant theme in literature so that the Poor Law is seen as but one aspect of provision for the poor, alongside charity and self-help.⁴⁴ Joanna Innes' work on the 'mixed economy' in Early Modern England provides a keynote exposition of its role and importance. Although focussed on the OPL era her study highlights the changing balance over time in the mix of tax based statutory provision and charities, rather than considering these elements separately, as had been usual.⁴⁵ Innes' study sets out in some detail what King and Alannah Tompkins describe as 'the multiple overlapping authorities providing a plethora of benefits to differently-defined groups of the needy'.⁴⁶ Although interpretations of its constituent parts vary, the concept of the 'mixed economy' highlights the role of localities and agency in poor relief, offering valuable understanding of the importance of local NPL administration for both poor people and administrators. It also allows a greater focus on central-local and intra-local interaction. Lees, for example provides a useful interpretation of the mixed economy, examining welfare negotiation between officials and clients, residualism (minimal welfare provision, when all other methods of support have failed), the 'multicampaign war on pauperism', changing cultural attitudes to poverty and pauperism, gendered provision of benefits, and poor peoples' perceptions of relief.⁴⁷ Historians

⁴³ Englander, *Poverty and Poor Law Reform*, pp.1-92; Anthony Brundage, *The English Poor Laws, 1700-1930* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 1-132.

⁴⁴ Geoffrey Finlayson, *Citizen, State, and Social Welfare in Britain 1830-1990* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994); Fraser, *Evolution of the Welfare State*, pp. xxxv-vi; *The Poor in England 1700-1850: An Economy of Makeshifts*, ed. by Stephen King and Alannah Tomkins (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).

⁴⁵ Joanna Innes, 'The "Mixed Economy of Welfare" in Early Modern England: Assessments of the Options from Hale to Malthus (c. 1683-1803)', in *Charity, Self Interest and Welfare in Britain*, ed. by Martin Daunton (Routledge, 1996), <<https://doi-org.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/10.4324/9780203985915>>, pp. 104-134. See also, for example, Geoffrey Finlayson, *Citizen, State, and Social Welfare in Britain 1830-1990* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994); Fraser, *Evolution of the Welfare State*, pp. xxxv-vi; *Poor in England 1700-1850*, ed. by Stephen King and Alannah Tomkins.

⁴⁶ Alannah Tomkins and Steven King, 'Introduction', in *Poor in England*, ed. by King and Tomkins, p. 13.

⁴⁷ Lees, *Solidarities of Strangers*, pp. 177-287.

taking this approach note that provision was complex. For example, Philip Harling, in his review article examining the importance of locality in late nineteenth century England notes that central government was of marginal importance in this 'mixed economy' in the later nineteenth century.⁴⁸ Marguerite Dupree concurs, citing the scale of voluntary assistance, local provision, and 'constantly shifting boundaries' between Poor Law, Local Authorities and central and local government. She concludes that the combination of voluntarism, Poor Law and municipal help provided social welfare in towns in mid-nineteenth century, although by the turn of the twentieth century there was an increasing demand for national input following financial crises.⁴⁹

Alongside the 'mixed economy', welfare scholarship has a focus on what is often described as the 'economy of makeshifts', a concept first developed by Olwen Hufton in the 1970s, centred on the French poor.⁵⁰ Investigations into the 'makeshifts' explore the wide range of resources and methods used by poor people to make ends meet, including work, charity and poor relief. King and Tompkins' edited collection of essays, for example, although focussed primarily on the OPL, considers the debates on the experience of being poor and explores the wide range of makeshifts and strategies employed, their relative importance and regional differentiation, whilst setting a framework encouraging further research.⁵¹ However as Innes notes these approaches to welfare history are often separate and fragmented and there has been limited work to synthesise the different aspects. Hurren repeats Innes calls for more work, arguing that to understand the experience of being poor it is necessary to combine research on makeshift economies with the mixed economy of welfare.⁵² To date few studies have successfully combined these two elements as it is difficult overall to reconstruct the experience of poverty.

This literature has had particular resonance when combined with studies of the social and economic context of rural poverty. Rural poverty has been explored in depth at a national level covering complex and interlinked issues of widespread poverty and deteriorating social relationships, alongside issues of migration and depopulation. For example, Alun Howkins argues that a series of

⁴⁸ Philip Harling, 'The Centrality of Locality: The Local State, Local Democracy, and Local Consciousness in Late-Victorian and Edwardian Britain', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 9 (2004), 216-234 (pp. 217-18).

⁴⁹ Marguerite Dupree, 'The Provision of Social Services', in *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, ed. by Martin Daunton 3 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), III, pp. 351-94 (pp. 351-52, 355, 393-94).

⁵⁰ Olwen Hufton, *The Poor in Eighteenth-Century France, 1750-1789* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1974).

⁵¹ *Poor in England*, ed. by King and Tompkins; See also, for example, Barry Reay, *Rural England: Labouring Lives in the Nineteenth Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 72-92; Pat Thane, 'Old People and Their Families in the English Past', in *Charity, Self-Interest and Welfare in the English Past*, ed. by Martin Daunton (London: UCL Press, 1996), pp. 84-103 (pp. 99-100).

⁵² Hurren, *Protesting about Pauperism*, p. 159; Innes, 'Mixed Economy', pp. 104-34.

crises led to a 'period of flux and readjustment' between 1872-1895 in a 'crisis of rural society'.⁵³ Rollo Arnold and Dudley Baines include consideration of Devon in their studies of migration, as the county was one of those most affected in the nineteenth century, highlighting a variety of factors such as population pressure and lack of employment opportunities amongst the causes.⁵⁴ However, generally the literature on the South-West is limited, so that there are contrasts and differences with the national picture which impact on poor law management. The need to address this gap, and the value of a study based on Devon/Dorset, is introduced later in this chapter.

2.4.2 Policy: Continuity, Change and the Crusade Against Out-Relief

This greater interest in the 'mixed economy' of welfare and local variations of practice has increased interest in change over time, both in the decades immediately after the introduction of the NPL and in the later 'crusade' period, which is increasingly seen as a critical period when matters came to a head in central-local relationships.

Some of the most important investigations emerging from this historiography address the linked questions of continuity, change and compromise, the extent to which the Central Authorities could impose their policies, diversity in practice and the importance of out-relief. Although these investigations often focus on the period immediately after 1834, they set a context in which later periods of poor law history can be understood. They highlight the need to obtain a better understanding of the role of the NPL on local welfare provision and variations in practice. Englander for example, dismisses the over-emphasis on continuity with the OPL, arguing that NPL practice undermined local accountability with impersonal bureaucracy, large Unions and remote boards replacing local parish relationships.⁵⁵ The historiographical debate on the importance of out-relief after 1834 also provides diverse views on the extent of change on the ground. The consensus view, supported by local studies, tends towards central failure with initiatives frustrated by economic conditions, elites and local authorities who believed it was more humane and/or economic to relieve paupers outside the workhouse.⁵⁶ Williams disagrees, arguing that this conclusion emanates from

⁵³ Alun Howkins, *Reshaping Rural England: A Social History 1850-1925* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 3, 138-98. See also: W.G. Hoskins, *Devon* ([n.p.]: Collins, 1954; repr. Chichester: Phillimore, 2003); Howard Newby, *Country Life: A Social History of Rural England* (London: Cardinal, 1988); Barry Reay, *Rural England*; K.D.M. Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor: Social Change and Agrarian England, 1660-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

⁵⁴ Rollo Arnold, *The Farthest Promised Land - English Villagers, New Zealand Immigrants of the 1870s* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1981); Dudley Baines, *Emigration from Europe 1815-1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139170994>; Dudley Baines, *Migration in a Mature Economy: Emigration and Internal Migration in England and Wales, 1861-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

⁵⁵ Englander, *Poverty and Poor Law Reform*, pp. 86-87; Laybourn, *Evolution of British Social Policy*, pp. 24-35; Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty*, pp. 59-75, 81-90.

⁵⁶ Anne Digby, 'The Rural Poor Law', in *The New Poor Law*, ed. by Fraser, pp. 149-70, (pp. 157-58); Englander, *Poverty and Poor Law Reform*, pp. 15, 85.

an overreliance on local studies. He uses national government statistics to contend that out-relief ended for able-bodied adult males by 1850. Unfortunately, as Hurren notes, William's approach discouraged engagement until relatively recently and, as a result, Englander believed his statistical analysis has not been challenged in detail.⁵⁷ Recent work by the 'In Their Own Write Collective' adds nuance and challenge to these broad top-down interpretations of policy and practice. Their analysis, focussed on poor law history 'from below' highlights complex elements of both continuity and change, challenging the idea that poor people were powerless. As noted above, they argue that 'the power of the central and local state could be ... systematically challenged, constrained, and contested', building on King's earlier work on the OPL to contend that negotiation and agency on the part of poor people continued throughout the nineteenth century with strategies, knowledge and the impact of literacy skills developing over time.⁵⁸ In addition, they highlight diversity of approach, for example in arguing that the importance of individual influence, asserting that the NPL needs to be understood as 'a network of individuals working within loose societal and legal frameworks, rather than as a single closely bound and unified system of law or practice'.⁵⁹ Consequently, whilst this national picture provides a sound grounding, the need for a greater understanding of the NPL in the context of local cultures in later Victorian England and Wales remains important.

The mid-period of the NPL between 1870-1900, largely associated with the 'crusade against out-relief' has attracted less attention than earlier or later timeframes. In the 1960s to 1980s Rose, Williams and MacKinnon explored aspects of the 'crusade' but the subject then received limited attention until Hurren's work in the early 2000s. Rose's analysis of the 1860s 'Crisis of Poor Relief' argues that the 'crusade' was backward-looking, achieving the NPL's initial aims, set down in the legislation of 1834 in the 1860s and 1870s, a view which has gained support in recent years from historians such as George Boyer.⁶⁰ Williams disagrees, claiming that the 'crusade' was a new initiative of welfare retrenchment and a classification and treatment strategy. Hurren supports this view suggesting it was a radical new policy.⁶¹ Williams' analysis is based on the strategy devised by Local Government Inspector Henry Longley which he views as a failed attempt at pauper re-education that degenerated into repression. Williams' conclusions were very influential, meeting

⁵⁷ Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty*, pp. 59-75, 81-90, 147-233; Hurren, *Protesting about Pauperism*, pp. 52-56; Englander, *Poverty and Poor Law Reform*, pp. 85-86.

⁵⁸ King and others, *In Their Own Write*, pp. xvii, 18-19; King, *Writing Lives*, p. xiv, 348-49, 352-53; See also *Projects, Poverty and the Poor Under the Poor Laws*, <<https://intheirownwriteblog.wordpress.com/in-their-own-write-2018-to-2021/>> [accessed 1 February 2024]

⁵⁹ King and others, *In Their Own Write*, pp. 321, 326, 330.

⁶⁰ Rose, 'Crisis of Poor Relief', pp. 50-70; MacKinnon, 'English Poor Law Policy', pp. 603-25; George R. Boyer, *The Winding Road to the Welfare State: Economic Insecurity and Social Welfare Policy in Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), p. 25.

⁶¹ Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty*, pp. 91-107; Hurren, *Protesting about Pauperism*, pp. 250-51.

with relatively little challenge. However, his approach merits review, as he adopted an unusual methodology with limited sources, basing his conclusions on language analysis and an evaluation of national statistics which overlooked the potential limitations and reliability of his statistical source.⁶²

MacKinnon's interesting examination of the reasons Poor Law Unions endorsed the 'crusade' focuses on the increased tax burden faced by wealthy ratepayers after the 1865 Union Chargeability Act. She suggests considerable support for the 'crusade' from voters and Guardians and that increased funding from rich Unions facilitated better workhouse provision. This then supported restrictions to out-relief.⁶³ Her research raises the question as to whether her conclusions hold true in different local cultures, or in poor Unions.

Both Williams and Hurren focus on the severity of the 'crusade'. Williams' statistical analysis shows it was highly successful in terms of 'dispauperisation' between 1871 and 1876, reducing out-relief by 33% overall and indoor relief by 11%. This analysis has been widely accepted, alongside Williams' view that although relatively few, mostly urban Unions, adopted wholesale restrictive measures, most must have implemented some.⁶⁴ Extended use of the workhouse test and use of formal rules (adopted by over one third of Unions according to the Webbs) or more informal guidelines restricted availability. Bleakly, Williams concluded that the outdoor strategy was 'dispauperisation by any and every means'.⁶⁵ However questions remain about regional diversity and variations in severity.

Hurren's valuable study, *Protesting About Pauperism*, published in 2007, builds on previous 'crusade' scholarship investigating the interaction of poverty, politics and poor relief in Brixworth, a 'crusading' hotspot. She explores the ideological and socio-economic background to the 'crusade', its practical implementation, resistance from the poor and the effect of increasing democracy after 1884. Hurren identifies a range of policies employed by Brixworth's Guardians which underpinned the brutal reduction in relief within the Union, arguing that support for paupers was reduced because of the agricultural recession. She demonstrates that this situation was not accepted by Brixworth's poor and that their protest and resistance was ultimately successful after the advent of local democracy, beginning in the mid-1880s and gathering pace in the 1890s following local government reform. Through exploring the 'crusade' at a local level and testing the views of Williams and Rose, her study expands the range of research into areas such as the impact of local government democratisation, central-local relationships, changes in paternalism and poor law

⁶² See for example: Englander, *Poverty and Poor Law Reform*, pp. 85-86; Hurren, *Protesting about Pauperism*, pp. 45, 52-56.

⁶³ MacKinnon, 'English Poor Law Policy', pp. 603-25.

⁶⁴ Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty*, pp. 102-07; Hurren, *Protesting about Pauperism*, pp. 45-52; Boyer, *Winding Road*, p. 86.

⁶⁵ Webb and Webb, *Poor Law History*, I, p. 444; Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty*, p. 102; Hurren, *Protesting about Pauperism*, pp. 45-155, 256.

politics, showing that much still needs to be done in this complex field.⁶⁶ She highlights the need for investigations into the practical application of later Victorian relief policy in a range of localities and environments and in Unions which did not espouse the 'crusading' ethic.⁶⁷

A second strand of Government thinking, alongside the policy of deterrent out relief, comprised a focus on private charity for those not actually destitute, aiming to coordinate the provision of relief between charity and the Poor Law to avoid the duplication of aid. The Poor Law Authorities looked to the Charity Organisation Society (COS) founded in 1869 to undertake this role for the charity sector. The COS subsequently achieved a high profile through its work with Government and extensive self-publicity.⁶⁸ The historiography on the COS has taken differing perspectives on both its work and value, changing over time. The Webbs highlighted the Society's influence on public opinion, suggesting it educated the public on 'effective' philanthropy.⁶⁹ This view has been challenged by Robert Humphrey's study, *Sin, Organized Charity and the Poor Law* which focusses on the Society's work in urban provincial England and argues persuasively that the COS was largely ineffective, lacking financial and personnel resources to carry out its aim of co-ordinating charity and deeply unpopular with, for example, both existing charities who declined to work with it, and with potential recipients of their assistance who disliked their intrusive approach.⁷⁰ Boyer takes a different perspective suggesting that the COS's propaganda and focus on the deserving poor contributed to 'hardening' working class attitudes towards the Poor Law, creating an environment where many poor people avoided seeking relief.⁷¹ However, the Society's limited reach and focus centred on activities in London and urban England means that in practical terms its work had little impact on the rural South-West.

2.4.3 Political Culture: The Contest of Ideas and their Application

The focus on the practical application of policy and administration in the scholarship on the 'mixed economy' of welfare brings debates about local politics and political culture into view in new ways. The emphasis is now more focussed on central-local relations, the interaction between centrally generated utilitarian policy and the ideas that underpinned them, and local moral economies formed from alternative understandings of poverty and pauperism based on local knowledge, and the extent

⁶⁶ Hurren, *Protesting about Pauperism*.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 261-62.

⁶⁸ Englander, *Poverty and Poor Law Reform*, pp. 21-22.

⁶⁹ Webb and Webb, *Poor Law History*, I, pp. 455-56.

⁷⁰ Robert Humphreys, *Sin, Organized Charity and the Poor Law in Victorian England* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1995), pp. 159-74.

⁷¹ Boyer, *Winding Road*, pp. 293-94.

to which this interaction impacted over time on local NPL practice and central and local perspectives on the Poor Law.

Much of the original scholarship on the ideas underpinning early NPL philosophy dates back to the 1950s and 1960s. Focussed on the relevance of various political theories and cultural ideals, this older scholarship is typified by the debate about the importance of Benthamism versus the role of chance, unintended outcomes or common ideas circulating at the time.⁷² Laybourn reviewed this debate in the early 1990s suggesting it was 'almost redundant ... in a climate of opinion that tends to accept the pluralism of society in the development of social policy'.⁷³ Both he and Englander highlight the role of a broad range of ideas, including Benthamism, laissez-faire and the influence of Burke and Malthus in the development of the NPL. More broadly, liberal ideas incorporating utilitarianism, laissez-faire, the ideas of John Stuart Mill and self-help are now widely accepted as creating a contradictory situation where both laissez-faire and state intervention were simultaneously important in developing social policy.⁷⁴

The change in perceptions of society and ideas in social theory in the later Victorian period, and the increasing credence given to collective solutions to poverty in intellectual and policy-making circles, is ably captured by Harris who notes the variety of new approaches which impact on the final decades covered by this thesis. Over time these ideas partly replaced older orthodox liberal thinking. She highlights 'evolutionary ideas' of Social Darwinism (dominant by the 1880s) and their role in developing empirical enquiry, alongside Marxism, Fabianism and New Liberalism, which together created multi-faceted and sometimes contradictory approaches to social policy. She suggests substantial change in social and political attitudes occurred between the 1860s and 1914 so that poverty was no longer seen as a natural condition, a consequence of individual moral character exemplified in the division between deserving and undeserving in the 1860s and 1870s. She argues that the 1870s and 1880s should be seen as a watershed in society, establishing patterns of stability, strong elements of morality and 'civic consciousness' for example.⁷⁵

Questions relating to the timing, nature and causes of change in social policy have been the subject of considerable scholarship, although debates on the turning point from individualism to collectivism have been dismissed as misleading by Englander. He concludes that influences such as evolutionary thinking, social enquiry, redefinitions of poverty and a greater understanding of pauperism and

⁷² Gutchen, 'Local Improvements and Centralization', pp. 85-96; Hart, 'Nineteenth-Century Social Reform', pp. 39-61; MacDonagh, 'Nineteenth-Century Revolution', pp. 52-67; David Roberts, 'Jeremy Bentham and the Victorian Administrative State', *Victorian Studies*, 2 (1959), 193-210.

⁷³ Laybourn, *Evolution of British Social Policy*, p. 129.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 129-36; Englander, *Poverty and Poor Law Reform*, pp. 7-13.

⁷⁵ Harris, *Private Lives*, pp. 220-56.

poverty are more plausible reasons for changing policy.⁷⁶ Notwithstanding this, there are differing views of timing. For example, Harold Perkin suggested that an 'earthquake' in society occurred in the 1880s and Harris argues for a 'watershed' change in society in the 1870s, whilst E.P. Hennock argued that significant change in social theory occurred in the late 1860s and late 1890s with continuity in between. Rose's analysis of 'The Crisis of Poor Relief in England' explicitly supported Hennock's periodisation.⁷⁷ This range of views highlights that uncovering the nature, timing and impact of change at a local level remains important.

Latterly, the cultural turn facilitated more diffuse interpretations of the relationships between state and local government, focussing, for example on the role of new forms of knowledge in creating a bureaucratic state.⁷⁸ These more recent interpretations of the influence of liberal principles in social policy highlight the need for greater understanding of the impact of national orthodox philosophy and political ideas and later social theory on the older, more diffuse ideas that still held sway in localities such as Axminster.

Traditionally, as noted above, historians highlighted liberal policies of low taxation, expenditure reduction and reforms to increase institutional efficiency and a desire to reduce interference in individual rights as setting an ideological framework favouring deterrence in Poor Law policy. However recent work by historians such as Chris Otter, James Vernon and Mary Poovey opens up new perspectives and interpretations of the impact of liberal principles on social policy. They focus on the relationship between state and local government showing how the state used new forms of knowledge in various ways to monitor and control administration. Otter's investigation into the role of technical systems such as lighting underlines the role of the state and inspection.⁷⁹ Vernon meanwhile argues that the changing nature of an increasingly urban society, lacking interpersonal connections - 'a society of strangers' - led to a gradual re-ordering of state administration, which was disinterested, anonymous, increasingly standardised and organised by a new machinery of state, the civil service.⁸⁰ Vernon's ideas on the importance of centralised and organised knowledge within a developing bureaucracy echo Poovey's detailed analysis and deconstruction of texts on social reform. Her work demonstrates how institutions adopted a more formalised approach to knowledge production in the mid-nineteenth century using numbers, statistics and narrative

⁷⁶ Englander, *Poverty and Poor Law Reform*, pp. 56-57.

⁷⁷ Harold Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society 1780-1880* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), pp. 437-54; Harris, *Private Lives*, pp. 252-54; E.P. Hennock, 'Poverty and Social Theory in England: The Experience of the Eighteen-Eighties', *Social History*, 1 (1976), 67-91 (p. 89-91); Rose, 'Crisis of Poor Relief', pp. 52, 65.

⁷⁸ For example: Chris Otter, *The Victorian Eye: A Political History of Light and Vision in Britain, 1800-1910* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); James Vernon, *Distant Strangers: How Britain Became Modern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), pp. 51-76.

⁷⁹ Otter, *Victorian Eye*, pp. 20, 99-134.

⁸⁰ Vernon, *Distant Strangers*, pp. 51-76.

descriptions to produce policy. She also notes the power of individuals in implementing their vision.⁸¹ These valuable perspectives underline the importance of continuing to build understanding of the impact of systems and the role of standardised, formalised communication in sustaining and developing the Central presence within the locality.

Research into the extent of increasing state intrusiveness and potential for contest and co-operation highlights the scope for variation in practice, despite attempts at standardisation by the Centre. Christine Bellamy, David Eastwood, John Davis, Laybourn and Lees amongst others consider the developing role of the state and local government and the extent and causes of central-local conflict. Interpretations range from contest to co-operation.⁸² Varying reasons for differing perspectives are based on the relative balance of administrative power between Centre and localities and include for example the continuing attraction of localism in country towns. These historians have argued that central power was limited legally, philosophically or practically, as the Centre accepted a degree of local autonomy was desirable, that central power was unenforceable, although it is acknowledged that over time the state's fiscal power increased its reach.⁸³ Taking a different perspective, a focus on the impact of local government reform and the widened local franchise demonstrates how the growth of local democracy, middle-class and later working-class participation from the 1860s onwards created further potential for central-local tension resulting from differing approaches to central and local social policy and expenditure.⁸⁴

2.4.4 A Contrasting Approach: The Local Perspective

Having discussed several strands of scholarship in Poor Law and administrative history, this final section adjusts the perspective, examining a further important strand of poor law historiography which runs alongside these wider studies and focused on local policy, practice and governance.

Despite the development of a central Poor Law policy, older ideas about poverty and the Poor Law bound up with localism and a local 'moral economy' continued to resonate in the middle decades of

⁸¹ Mary Poovey, *Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation 1830-1864* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

⁸² Christine Bellamy, *Administering Central-Local Relations 1871-1919: The Local Government Board in its Fiscal and Cultural Context* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988); David Eastwood, *Government and Community in the English Provinces, 1700-1870* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997); John Davis, 'Central Government and the Towns', in *Cambridge Urban History*, ed. by Daunton, III, pp. 259-86 (pp. 262-68); Laybourn, *Evolution of British Social Policy*, pp. 129-36; Lynn Hollen Lees, 'Urban Networks', in *Cambridge Urban History*, ed. by Daunton, III, pp. 57-94 (pp. 84-85).

⁸³ Bellamy, *Central-Local Relations*; Martin Daunton, 'Introduction', in *Cambridge Urban History*, ed. by Daunton, III, pp. 1-56 (p.15); Davis, 'Central Government', in *Cambridge Urban History*, ed. by Daunton, III, pp. 262-68, 283-84; Lees, 'Urban Networks', in *Cambridge Urban History*, ed. by Daunton, III, p. 85; Stephen A. Royle, 'The Development of Small Towns in Britain', in *Cambridge Urban History*, ed. by Daunton, III, pp. 151-84 (p. 163).

⁸⁴ Daunton 'Introduction', in *Cambridge Urban History*, ed. by Daunton, III, pp. 24-25; Pat Thane, 'Government and Society in England and Wales, 1750-1914', in *The Cambridge Social History of Britain 1750-1950*, ed. by F.M.L. Thompson, 3 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), III, pp. 1-61 (pp. 40-47).

the nineteenth century, presenting a rival set of ideas to evolving national trends and centralist bureaucratic ideals.⁸⁵ The concept of the moral economy is discussed further below. Laybourn usefully defines localism as: ‘the local organisation of state provisions in the interests of local bodies and to the detriment of state control, severely circumscrib[ing] the powers of civil servants’.⁸⁶ The literature exploring the continuing importance of this localism, ‘belonging’, and the moral economy it produced provides interesting insights, with Snell’s *Parish and Belonging* being particularly useful. He investigates local prioritisation, in terms of identity and control, exploring the pace of ‘de-localisation’ and sentiments, cultures and structures of local attachment at parish level. He makes a strong case for ‘invigorated localism’ between the 1850s-1870s, which strongly opposed centralism arguing that resistance gradually unravelled, partly due to financial grants from the Centre. He suggests that the erosion of localism was not linked to industrialisation or early stages of modernisation and concludes that ‘belonging’ was complex, suggesting local pride and community were still important in the early twentieth century, culturally and legally.⁸⁷

The debates regarding central versus local approaches to local government take us back to the mixed economy of welfare and the concept of the moral economy, paternalism and to questions on how the moral economy might shape administration. In many localities the NPL was imposed on an established local moral economy but could be subject to struggle and negotiation depending on how it matched local policies and ethos in governance.

E.P. Thompson’s original definition and use of the moral economy focussed on rights of access and entitlement to ‘necessities’ by eighteenth century poor people. It included protest against the practices of authorities in defence of these rights in times of crisis.⁸⁸ This understanding has been more broadly interpreted by historians, including Lees and Snell, to include customary rights, parish settlement and belonging, and rights to poor relief and the Poor Law generally. This concept is valuable in exploring custom driven relief philosophy shared by both the people and local authorities.⁸⁹ Linked to this, the role of paternalism in local poor law practice, with its overtones of patronage, duty, social control and competing claims between authority and liberty, is explored in important studies by David Roberts and William Lubenow. Although both Roberts and Lubenow focus on early Victorian England, their works provide a range of perspectives on paternalist approaches that, although declining, shaped local poor law practices and continued to have

⁸⁵ Edward Thompson developed the concept of the moral economy in the early 1970s and further considered and refined it in the 1990s. E. P. Thompson, ‘The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century’, *Past & Present*, 50 (1971), 76-136; E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (London, Penguin, 1993), pp 259-352.

⁸⁶ Laybourn, *Evolution of British Social Policy*, p. 134.

⁸⁷ Snell, *Parish and Belonging*, pp. 4-6, 496-504.

⁸⁸ Thompson, *Customs in Common*, pp. 336-40; Thompson, ‘Moral Economy’, 76-136.

⁸⁹ Lees, *Solidarities of Strangers*, pp. 74-81; Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor*, p. 112; Snell, *Parish and Belonging*, p. 132.

influence in the later nineteenth century.⁹⁰ Overall, as this scholarship indicates, an approach to the Poor Law is needed that is more aware of the interaction between value systems and process and how they are played out locally in the way the Poor Law was administered.

Interest in ideas and the practical organisation of the NPL has helped turn attention towards local administration and the work of Guardians, which until recently had appeared infrequently in the literature. Previously Guardians' work was often dismissed or considered as an adjunct with wider topics in poor law management.⁹¹ King remarks that 'about those on outdoor relief and those who administered their relief we know almost nothing'.⁹² Exceptions include Hurren's study of Brixworth, the debate about the role of the elites (although as noted above this concentrates on the period before 1860) and Harling's study of new poor law bureaucracy in the 1830s-1840s and its effectiveness as a centralising force despite entrenched localism.⁹³ As these studies indicate, ideas and practice come together in the work of individuals who administered the NPL locally.

Recent work by Karen Rothery, Jones and King and Alysa Levene identifies the importance of Guardians to the history of the NPL with calls for more research across a range of localities. Topics include the character and composition of Boards, their role and influence on policy and practice including their approach to the Centre, the importance of personality and the balance of obligations between paupers and ratepayers.⁹⁴ Recent PhD theses have started to address this challenge. For example, Geoff Hooker's study of the Welsh Union of Llandilofawr found power vested in elected Guardians with little involvement of from the local elite. One individual dominated the Board, leading a group which shaped local practice in a Union that provided nearly all relief outside the workhouse within a 'vibrant' local culture which embraced a continuing element of 'belonging' at parish level.⁹⁵ Rothery's study of four Unions in Hertfordshire in the early years of the NPL highlights the importance of Guardians as middlemen between locality and Centre and emphasises the role of personality and individual contributions to local policy. In contrast to Hooker, she found significant

⁹⁰ David Roberts, *Paternalism in Early Victorian England* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1979); William C. Lubenow, *The Politics of Government Growth: Early Victorian Attitudes Towards State Intervention 1833-1848* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1971).

⁹¹ King, 'Thinking and Rethinking the New Poor Law', pp. 5-19; Karen Rothery, 'Who Do They Think They Are?' An Analysis of the Boards of Guardians in Hertfordshire', *Local Population Studies*, 99 (2017), 20-30; Webb and Webb, *Poor Law History*, I, pp. 229-30.

⁹² King, 'Thinking and Rethinking the New Poor Law', p. 5.

⁹³ Hurren, *Protesting about Pauperism*; Philip Harling, 'The Power of Persuasion: Central Authority, Local Bureaucracy and the New Poor Law', *English Historical Review*, 107 (1992), 30-53. See also: Brundage, 'Landed Interest and the New Poor Law', pp. 27-48; Dunkley, 'Landed Interest: Critical Note', pp. 836-41; Brundage, 'Landed Interest and the New Poor Law: Reply', pp. 347-51.

⁹⁴ Rothery, 'Who Do They Think They Are?', pp. 20-30; Jones and King, 'Obligation, Entitlement and Dispute', in *Obligation, Entitlement and Dispute*, ed. by Jones and King, pp. 7-13; King, 'Thinking and Rethinking the New Poor Law', pp. 12-19; Alysa Levene, 'The Future of Welfare History: The Local Perspective', *Local Population Studies*, 100 (2018), 33-42.

⁹⁵ Geoff Hooker, 'Llandilofawr Poor Law Union 1836-1886: The Most Difficult Union in Wales' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Leicester, 2013), p. i.

elite participation amongst the Guardians, alongside considerable diversity of practice within the Unions in her study.⁹⁶ Jonathan Pratt's thesis on urban Wigan highlights a further variation in 'crusade' era management: he found that the Guardians were politically engaged in defending the public interest, financially cautious, and superficially 'crusade' supporters. However in practice their approach to poor law management was paternalistic and pragmatic, but with a strong sense of their own professional knowledge and expertise which at times resulted in challenging central-local relationships.⁹⁷ Together these theses illustrate the need for further studies in different regions and environments as it is evident that Guardians played a significant role at both a collective and individual level, setting and reflecting local poor law culture and influencing how the law was interpreted and implemented locally. Further insights will provide a greater understanding of the varied approaches taken by Guardians and enhance the knowledge provided to date.

In conclusion, as this literature review shows, there has been a long history of scholarship on the NPL which has over time moved away from the Webbs interpretation and discussions of welfare state origins into diverse fields of study. Together these studies provide an increasingly rounded appreciation of the nuances and regional variations in ideas about poverty and in Poor Law policy and practice. The review also highlights the need for further studies which draw together themes such as the impact of differing approaches and perspectives on poverty and its causes and on Poor Law policy and administration, centrally and locally. There remains work to be done in understanding the impact of enforced change in administrative structures on local culture and policy and practice, all of which raise questions about the timing and nature of Poor Law reform over the nineteenth century. New approaches raise questions about the interaction between the local and central authorities, the dynamics of personalities and the way knowledge of the economic and social environment influenced local attitudes, Poor Law policies and practices. Section 3 explores how this thesis plans to take these questions forward.

3. Research Goals

Local studies that bring together different strands of scholarship to provide a greater level of understanding of Unions that struggled to meet the expectations of NPL and of the links and interaction between Centre and locality in Union management will help fill a gap in our understanding of local/central dynamics in Poor Law development, through a focus on the role and

⁹⁶ Karen Rothery, 'The Implementation and Administration of the New Poor Law in Hertfordshire c.1830-1847' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Hertfordshire, 2017), p. ii.

⁹⁷ Jonathan Pratt, 'Paternalistic, Parsimonious Pragmatists: The Wigan Board of Guardians and the Administration of the Poor Laws 1880-1900' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Central Lancashire, 2011), pp. 3, 280.

impact of local Guardians and their relationships with the central Inspectorate. A study based on a Union that became a focus of central attention as a problem in later Victorian England is a good place to do this as the subsequent clash forced both Centre and locality to articulate their differing beliefs.

Axminster Union provides a valuable case study for exploring these issues. Situated in England's understudied South-West, Axminster's attitude towards the Centre set it apart from other more accommodating Unions found elsewhere in England. The Union was notable for its negative response to central initiatives and for resisting pressure to change and was often in dispute with the Centre because of its approach to poor law management. In the 1870s the Centre severely criticised Axminster for its high level of pauperism and for attempting to ignore new legal responsibilities in public health administration. Nearly forty years later the Centre again highlighted the Union as one of thirty in England and Wales where the rate of pauperism was more than twice the national average.⁹⁸

Axminster also had several features which, although not individually unusual, together distinguish it from other Unions which have been the subject of study. Firstly, the Union area faced complex economic, social and political challenges in the mid-to-late Victorian period. As elsewhere in the South-West, the Union area suffered economic decline and faced the impact of long-term, insidious deindustrialisation and depopulation which exposed the limitations of central Poor Law policy. Centrally imposed local government reorganisation also challenged a locality which had been used to a significant level of self-governance. Together these fuelled concerns about a loss of status and contributed to a backdrop of tension between Guardians and the Centre. Secondly, the Union's extensive pauperism continued unabated throughout the late nineteenth century. Although changing in nature over time, it far exceeded national levels, partly due to a shifting demographic profile. Thirdly, as explored in this thesis, local values influenced the Union's ethos and shaped its response to poverty management. This ethos encompassed economy for ratepayers, a relatively benign approach to relief for paupers and a determination to retain independence in the face of increasing pressures to conform to centrally approved approaches.

⁹⁸ UKPP, 'First Report of the Local Government Board, 1871-72', (1872 (C.516)), pp. 63-68, 88-103; UKPP, 'Royal Commission on the Poor Laws, Appendix volume IA'. Appendices to Minutes of Evidence ... being mainly the Evidence given by the Officers of the Local Government Board', (1909 (Cd.4626)), pp. 38, 216; 'Axminster Board of Guardians' ('ABG'), *Pulman's Weekly News and Advertiser*, 15 December 1874, p. 4.

3.1 Research Questions

The thesis explores three interlinked research questions. **Firstly**, how and why did a Union identified as a problem by the Centre respond to pressure to change? To address this, the thesis explores the dynamic between centre and locality, and the dialogue that developed over time between Inspectors and Guardians, ranging from challenge and conflict to accommodation and co-operation. **Secondly**, it questions the causes of the many clashes between the Centre and local Guardians and the practical impact of disputes and disagreements, exploring the defence of strongly held local ideals, including a local moral economy and a traditional way of working in opposition to newer ideas in social policy and an increasingly interventionist if unevenly applied central bureaucracy. **Thirdly**, it asks to what extent the Union really reflected the problems of pauperism as conceptualised by the Centre. Were the high levels of pauperism the result of the policies of the Union, as believed by the Centre, or were they simply the result of chronic poverty, deindustrialisation and social challenge, economic decline and outward migration?

Overall, the controversy generated by Axminster's refusal to cooperate with the Centre, its response to centralising, homogenising pressures and to challenges to its cultural values makes it a valuable case study of developing poor law practice and central-local relations. It engages with historiographical debates on resistance, compliance or compromise and on continuity or change in the poor law. It adds a new perspective to 'crusade' studies offering a counterpoint to Unions where deterrence dominated the agenda and provides a greater understanding of the difficulties encountered by Unions facing demographic and economic decline. Though it can be argued that Axminster is not a typical example, its atypical response to 'crusade' policy and pressure to change shows the importance of understanding the complex local context in which policy is applied. By bringing together a time and place where issues, tensions and the challenge of change converge, the thesis adds to scholarship through the study on the management of a non-crusading Union in a less studied environment and time.

3.2 Axminster: Description and Context

As the thesis demonstrates, the local social and economic conditions in Axminster explain the type and level of poverty and pauperism in the Union area and the local values which shaped the response. Axminster Union, centred on the Devonshire town of Axminster, straddled the Devon/Dorset border with five of its eighteen parishes situated in Dorset (see **Appendix 1**). One of more than 600 Unions in England and Wales in 1871, its mid-century population had declined substantially by 1901. The parishes were diverse with differing economic and social backgrounds.

They included two old-established market towns (Axminster and Colyton) and a small port and parliamentary borough (until disenfranchised in 1868) at Lyme Regis. All three towns had had industries that had provided work for locals in the early part of the nineteenth century but were coming under pressure in the later nineteenth century. All three were used to considerable autonomy in local governance as there were few large estates or resident large landowners, a situation which also applied generally to parishes within the Union. On the coast several developing seaside resorts such as Seaton became relatively more prosperous over time, challenging the dominance previously enjoyed by the older towns. Together with outlying villages, some of which had had small factories but were increasingly dominated by agriculture or fishing, the Union provides a contextual mix of old and new environments. Individually the parishes had had considerable experience and infrastructure in managing poverty under the Old Poor Law. For example, ten of the parishes had had their own poor houses prior to 1834. The Union, formed in 1836, clearly anticipated a need to manage large numbers of paupers as the workhouse was built to accommodate over 400 people (approximately 2% of the Union population).⁹⁹

Modern academic works on the Axminster area are rare. The study by Bill Forsythe, Joseph Melling and Richard Adair on the impact of Guardians' policies in the management of pauper 'lunatics' is an exception as it included Axminster, highlighting the key role of Guardians in this process. Their study noted significant variations in local practice which led them to raise questions on the ideology policy and practice adopted by Unions more generally.¹⁰⁰ Pamela Sharpe's and Jean Robin's microhistories of Colyton, one of Axminster Union's parishes provide useful context, although the former ends in 1840. Sharpe studies demographics, class, economic and social history and poor relief, ranging widely, exploring local politics, migration, and the female-dominant sex ratio. Her study highlights the diversity of local experience and the unusual features of an area that does not fit easily into models of change.¹⁰¹ Robin's studies of mid-nineteenth century Colyton investigate poverty and relief provision primarily from the perspective of the recipients. They also explore cultural issues such as illegitimacy as an indicator of local attitudes, suggesting that society in 1860s Colyton was

⁹⁹ Peter Higginbotham, 'Axminster Poor Law Union and Workhouse' ,<<https://workhouses.org.uk/Axminster/>>[consulted 10 August 2022]; UKPP, 'Returns of Population of every Union and Parish in England, Scotland and Ireland showing the Amount of Workhouse Accommodation, 1854', (1854-55 (524)), p. 3.

¹⁰⁰ Forsythe, Melling and Adair, 'New Poor Law and County Pauper Lunatic Asylum', pp. 335-55.

¹⁰¹ Pamela Sharpe, *Population and Society in an East Devon Parish: Reproducing Colyton 1540-1840* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002).

relatively permissive.¹⁰² Consequently, this study of Axminster looks to add new knowledge on an area where the historiography is thin.

4. Sources and Methods

The thesis aims to answer the research questions by recreating local patterns of practice through a deep reading of reports and correspondence, simple statistical analysis and the use of micro-historical methods. It uses the different perspectives revealed by the sources to establish a picture of local administration in Axminster Union, building a better understanding of the relationship between centre and locality. This is explored through the interactions between Guardians and Inspectors, and clashes between the two force the articulation of their respective views. These methods allow national and local perspectives and actions to be analysed in a focussed way, looking in at everyday practice whilst charting change over time.

Four main qualitative and quantitative resources are used in a variety of ways to build the picture of the poor law in Axminster. The resources complement each other, filling gaps where material was fragmentary or missing. Using them in combination provides a more rounded picture, helping to overcome their individual limitations in accuracy, singular perspective/bias and availability.

Axminster Union's Guardian Minute Books provide a core of valuable source material. They record every bi-weekly meeting of Guardians between 1860 and 1901, including details of local organisation, management issues, limited details of some relief cases and dealings with Poor Law Officials. Although well-kept, sub-committee reports are absent and at the beginning of the period the material is condensed, but over time they become more detailed. Careful reading makes it possible to establish the evolving approaches to priorities, crises and stakeholders.¹⁰³

The National Archives' **Poor Law Correspondence records**, especially communication between the Centre and Axminster Union complement the Minutes, providing valuable insights into central-local interaction, priorities and relationships. These voluminous records include reports, audits, case queries, disputes and matters raised by local officials and inhabitants. They include both sides of correspondence and internal discussions between Central Officials, allowing Central interests and

¹⁰² Jean Robin, *From Childhood to Middle Age: Cohort Analysis in Colyton, 1851-1891* (Cambridge: Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure Working Paper Series 1, 1995); Jean Robin, 'Illegitimacy in Colyton, 1851-1881', *Continuity and Change*, 2 (1987), 307-42; Jean Robin, 'Prenuptial Pregnancy in a Rural Area of Devonshire in the Mid-Nineteenth Century: Colyton, 1851-1881', *Continuity and Change*, 1 (1986), 113-24; Jean Robin, 'The Relief of Poverty in Mid Nineteenth-Century Colyton', *Rural History*, 1 (1990), 193-218.

¹⁰³ Devon Heritage Centre (DHC), Axminster Poor Law Union, PLU/Axminster/7-21, Axminster Guardians' Minute Books, 1849-1909.

perspectives and local concerns to be evaluated. There were difficulties associated with their use, as at the time the main research for the thesis was being carried out several volumes were unavailable through fragility and mould, so that sampling was necessary. They are also only roughly in date and topic order, often barely legible and time-consuming to study. The Centre's **Correspondence with Poor Law Inspectors** provides a central perspective on Union related matters, though availability was limited.¹⁰⁴

National and local collections of **newspapers** provide context and a further perspective on local attitudes to the Poor Law. The main local newspaper, *Pulman's Weekly News*, carried detailed reports on Guardians' meetings from Axminster and surrounding Unions from the early 1870s onwards, providing forthright commentary on topics related to poverty. In the 1860s and 1870s it was hostile to the Centre and Axminster Guardians.¹⁰⁵ These reports complement and elaborate upon the official record in the Minutes and occasionally the paper's correspondence columns contribute a perspective on the area's localism. Explored in more depth in later chapters, its original editor George Pulman had a distinct anti-Poor Law and anti-central bias. This gradually disappeared following the paper's sale in 1878. Other local newspapers and national press offer further viewpoints. Generally, local press interest in poverty and individual paupers declines after the 1870s and Poor Law matters focus on wider management issues.

Contemporary Government policy reports and statistics provide records of policy development, specialist reports, some local detail and a wealth of statistics in, for example, Annual Board Reports. They provide valuable insights into the developing outlook of policy makers and allow policy, priorities and rhetoric to be compared with local practice. The bi-annual local Union Returns on pauper numbers and expenses were collected centrally and published at Union level. They inform, challenge or corroborate other evidence, building a picture of changing levels of pauperism within Axminster and provide comparative data from other Unions, although caveats as to accuracy must be borne in mind.¹⁰⁶ Local **Census Returns** provide demographic and biographical detail and are used, for example, to understand the changing make-up of Axminster's Guardian body.

These major resources are supplemented by a **variety of contemporary works** used to provide contextual detail, to examine how the Poor Law was perceived in Victorian Society or provide contemporary guidance on Union Management. Specific literature on the Axminster area, however,

¹⁰⁴ The National Archives of the UK (TNA): MH 12/2100-2120: Local Government Board and Predecessors: Correspondence with Poor Law Unions and Other Local Authorities. Devon Poor Law Unions. Axminster 76. 1849-1900; TNA: MH 32, Local Government Board and Predecessors: Assistant Poor Law Commissioners and Inspectors, Correspondence.

¹⁰⁵ *Pulman's; Newspaper Press Directory* (London: Mitchell, 1875), pp. 53, 183.

¹⁰⁶ MacKinnon, 'Use and Misuse', 5-19.

is neither very abundant nor informative.

This study uses these sources to build a qualitative and quantitative account of the Poor Law in Axminster. Close study of qualitative sources has been used to develop an understanding of dialogues and perspectives, patterns of interaction between the Inspectors and Guardians, relationships and evolving everyday practice. This was reinforced by integrating and cross-referencing evidence from the Minutes, Correspondence and newspaper reports in a timeline to chart change over time. Quantitative evidence has been compiled to build a picture of the changing numbers and proportions of paupers in different categories and to evaluate the extent of pauperism compared to national averages and to corroborate and check anecdotal evidence and descriptive accounts. A database which combined detail from Minutes, Census Returns and the occasionally available Guardian election results allowed the composition and service record of Axminster's Guardians to be examined.

A selective use of microhistory techniques as employed by historians such as Barry Reay enhanced the analysis. Reay's *Microhistories* shows the depth of knowledge that can be obtained from a small-scale study using a 'bottom up' approach and utilising aspects of cultural, demographic, economic and social history to build a complex understanding of poverty and a wider understanding of society and culture.¹⁰⁷ These sources allowed the key and disproportionate role of a small number of central and local individuals in influencing policy and practice to be evaluated. However, the inherent drawbacks in this approach – a lack of roundedness, limited overview, and a risk of overspecialisation - need to be borne in mind. These drawbacks are addressed in this thesis through the use of quantitative analysis and comparative data which provides an overview and reveals the impact of wider cultural shifts in the approach to the local management of pauperism.

5. Thesis Organisation

The thesis is presented in two parts. Chapters 2-4 explore the social and economic context in which the local NPL was operating in relation to, and alongside, emerging national policy on the Poor Law. Chapters 2 and 3 consider aspects of the national Poor Law and the background of poverty and pauperism in Axminster Union respectively. Chapter 4 explores the backdrop to local Union governance, focussed on the Guardians and the pervading ethos of localism. The second part of the thesis explores the impact of these factors chronologically, going deeper into the interaction between Guardians and Inspectors and exploring the impact of changing and unchanging policy on Union management and local paupers. It focusses on the work of Axminster's Guardians and the

¹⁰⁷ Barry Reay, *Microhistories*, pp. xxii, 262.

impact of relationships with Government Inspectors. Chapters 5 and 6 concentrate on relief policy and practice in the later 1860s and 1870s. Chapter 7 investigates issues relating to Union management and the widening responsibilities of Guardians for the services the Union provided. Chapter 8 explores difficulties the Union faced as a result of its diminished status in the 1890s before returning to a problem of pauperism and challenge from the Centre encountered at the very end of the nineteenth century.

The responses to these challenges as seen in Chapters 5-8 reveal the impact of developing central policy requirements and local values and approaches such as localism, the local moral economy, paternalism and the development of central-local relationships. However, the themes of the chapters differ as they examine distinctive policies and problems which change over time. They are examined chronologically, although there is some overlap in timeframes especially between Chapters 6 and 7.

This approach provides a narrative of developing policy and practice and captures the significance of key turning points in the 1870s and 1890s. The thesis argues that an overriding localism shaped Axminster's poor law practice, persisting as a major influence throughout the period of this study. The argument develops to show how and why Axminster was repeatedly seen as a problem by the Centre, highlighting the continuing importance of localism and local relief culture in managing the Union. Axminster experienced extensive pauperism throughout the period of this study, but this thesis shows that poverty and the impact of demographic change were insufficient alone to explain this or the criticism the Union received. The thesis argues that the local culture of relief, the significant role played by Axminster's Guardian Board and the over-riding importance of local control and decision making shaped local practice. The second half of the thesis establishes that Axminster's defence of its traditional way of working became a problem for the centre as its deeply embedded localism clashed with an increasing central desire for uniformity. Although the Union achieved some success in the 1870s in maintaining local control, in the longer-term confident localism set up problems in local management, exacerbating pauperism and leading to the Union becoming increasingly out-of-step with developing central policy and modernising practices. A recognition that change was necessary is explored in the final chapter, with an acceptance that introverted localism needed to adapt, and relief policy needed adjustment.

Chapter 2: The Central Context and Perspective

1. Introduction

This chapter explores the national context in which poor law management in Axminster needs to be understood. It focusses on the central perspective on poor law provision to provide the background necessary to understand why central and local approaches to Union management in Axminster continued to be contested into the later nineteenth century.

The chapter briefly examines social and economic developments and their impact on rural localities in the later nineteenth century England, setting the scene for revisions in Poor Law policy. It then considers the emergence of national standards in poor law management, the growth of the central and local administrative state and the complex relationship between the two. The development of poor law administration is outlined in Section 4, providing an essential context for later chapters in the thesis. Section 5 explores the background and approach of the South-West's Inspectors during the period of the study, outlining their importance in influencing poor law management policy and practice centrally and locally.

As a contextual chapter, Chapter 2 helps to explain how the changing role of the central state and local governance generated differences in the way central and local authorities approached poor law and Union management and why Axminster Union was repeatedly seen as a problem by the Centre. From the Centre's perspective, local involvement and support was an essential component of the New Poor Law (NPL), as although the system was centralised, it was locally run. However, as this chapter shows, where there was disagreement, the Centre had limited tools to enforce its views. The Centre's Inspectorate comprised one of the most important potential influences on local practice, using powers of reporting and persuasion to encourage reform. Later chapters in this thesis demonstrate how this body had a significant impact on local practice, placing their own stamp and priorities on Union management.

2. A Context of Destabilising Change: Rural Southern England in an Industrialising/Urbanising Country

The transformation of the British economy and society over the course of the second half of the nineteenth century had a significant impact on localities, driving change and increasing differentiation between dynamic urban manufacturing and commercial districts and those left behind, such as parts of increasingly rural southern England, especially those distant from major

urban areas. As will be seen in later chapters, these national changes had a direct impact on Axminster as de-industrialisation, agricultural recession and continuing depopulation reduced opportunities for business and work, increased poverty and reduced income for rates, all of which challenged the management of its Union.

As is well documented by historians including Eric Evans and, more recently, James Vernon, mid-late Victorian Britain experienced a period of destabilising change with rapid population growth, large-scale industrialisation, urbanisation and the development of global trade. The extent of urbanisation was such that the British population living in a rural environment fell from 50% to 25% between 1871 and 1911.¹ This 'maturing industrial society', experienced periods and pockets of recession and urban unemployment from 1871.²

The performance of the English agricultural sector in the last quarter of the nineteenth is of particular importance in this thesis because as will be seen in later chapters, agriculture increasingly formed the backbone of Axminster's economy. The extent of change and crisis affecting agriculture has been the subject of much discussion since the 1960s, with the debate epitomised by the differing views of Peter Perry and Michael Thompson. Perry argued for a widespread and enduring national agricultural crisis, albeit with some time and spatial variation, highlighting that the period 'was certainly one of agricultural depression, of falling prices, more numerous bankruptcies, lower rents and untenanted farms' over an extended period, basing his conclusions on an analysis of changing levels of bankruptcies between 1875 and 1911 to provide a view of a depressed industry facing significant change and decay.³ Thompson's research challenges this view as overly pessimistic, arguing that the situation was nuanced and concluding that 'the notion that there was a general or chronic depression in English agriculture ... between [the] mid-seventies and mid-nineties must be abandoned'.⁴ He argues that whilst some sectors such as wheat production suffered, others such as dairy and horticulture thrived.⁵ He specifically challenges Perry's use of bankruptcies suggesting it produced 'eccentric' conclusions, not borne out in practice. Instead his county-based analysis focusses on movements in rents, farm outputs and employee numbers.⁶ Thompson's

¹ James Vernon, *Modern Britain 1750 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 182.

² Eric J. Evans, *The Forging of the Modern State: Early Industrial Britain 1783-1870*, 3rd edn (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2001), pp. xxiv-xxv (quotation p. 25); Michael Lynch, *An Introduction to Nineteenth-Century British History 1800-1914* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1999), pp. 2-22.

³ P. J. Perry, 'Editor's Introduction', in *British Agriculture 1875-1914*, ed. by P. J. Perry (London: Methuen, 1973), pp. xi-xii; P. J. Perry, *British Farming in the Great Depression 1870-1914: An Historical Geography* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1974), pp. 139-45.

⁴ F. M. L. Thompson, 'An Anatomy of English Agriculture, 1870-1914', in *Land, Labour and Agriculture, 1700-1914*, ed. by B. A. Holderness and Michael Turner (London: Hambledon Press, 1991), p. 240.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 211-40.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 223-40.

overall conclusion suggests a variety of experiences, ranging from growth in a small number of counties, mainly in the North and West of England, a majority where outputs were static and 'not particularly dynamic' and a smaller number, mainly in the South, South Midlands and East England facing real difficulties. These problems primarily affected farmers and landowners rather than labourers. However he acknowledges the importance of change over time and that many areas experienced 'real decline and hardship' in the 1880s, but contends considerable recovery occurred by the later 1890s.⁷ Overall, although it remains debatable, Thompson's nuanced analysis appears more robust than that of Perry, suggesting a period of recession rather than depression.

Perry and Thompson's views on regional differentiation are echoed by other historians who find strong local differences in the experience of economic distress, the extent of social change and the subsequent impact on poverty. Alun Howkins for example argues that prolonged problems in the agricultural sector from the mid-1870s onwards were regionally South specific both in timeframe and severity, with arable areas of southern and eastern rural England most badly affected. Arable farming areas had prospered when wheat prices remained high during the period of 'high farming' between the 1850s and the early 1870s following removal of the Corn Laws. However, they were deeply distressed following the price collapse of the 1870s when repeated poor harvests and cheap food imports, especially grain from North America, reduced farm profitability.⁸

The economic challenge felt by farmers and landowners translated into a differentiated experience of regional poverty. In the North, the combination of higher levels of industrialisation, proximity to urban areas and a primarily pastoral agricultural economy created a distinctive social and economic environment which supported employment and higher wage levels. In contrast rural poverty in southern England was more extensive through lack of industrialisation, low pay and through the continued operation of settlement laws (discussed in more depth in Chapter 8), which limited employment opportunities.⁹

This destabilising economic change also impacted on social relationships between local elites, land and business owners and poor people, affecting attitudes and approaches to poor relief. This was particularly evident in rural areas of the South, as prosperous farming conditions gave way to a period of prolonged recession between the mid-1870s and the mid-1890s. For example, sustained pressure on landowner incomes limited the resources that underpinned paternalist approaches to

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 234-35, 240.

⁸ Alun Howkins, *Reshaping Rural England: A Social History 1850-1925* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 1, 138-43. See also: K.D.M. Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor: Social Change and Agrarian England, 1660-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 1.

⁹ G. E. Mingay, *Rural Life in Victorian England*, rev. edn (Stroud: Sutton, 1998), p. 7; Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor*, p. 1.

local governance. At the same time ties of deference were gradually weakened and elite authority challenged in areas such as religion and local government by an increasingly educated rural population. These changes were accompanied by a short-lived upsurge of conflict (or threat of conflict) through agricultural trade unionism in the 1870s, which sought better terms for labourers. Discontent was at its height in 1874 with both strikes and lock-outs. However the South-West, the focus of this study, with its smaller family farms and annual hiring fairs was less directly affected by these changes.¹⁰ Although the challenge posed by agricultural trade unionism quickly faded, migration from rural areas further altered the dynamic between rural employers and their workers, explored further in later Chapters.

As is well understood, these wider changes in social and economic life over the course of the Victorian period affected political attitudes towards the role of the State, the development of social policy and Poor Law provision, providing a backdrop for the central-local contest explored in this thesis. As was highlighted in Chapter 1, the dominant philosophies and politics of utilitarianism, liberalism and free trade political economy influenced the mid-century growth of the administrative state and social policy. This was demonstrated most obviously in the 1834 New Poor Law. The ideas and philosophies that underpinned the NPL and that became predominant in national politics, albeit often contested, served to throw the alternative Poor Law practices in areas such as Axminster into sharp relief. In Axminster, a range of more diffuse, older ideas still held sway. As introduced in Chapter 1 and discussed further in Section 4 below, these traditional ideas and values comprised a staunch localism which encompassed a mix of a local moral economy and a paternalism that shaped Poor Law provision in ways that ran against the principles of the NPL. Both the orthodoxy of 1834 and newer modernising ideas developed in the later Victorian period, challenged, but struggled to displace Axminster's deep-rooted beliefs and practices, creating a divergence in views between the locality and the Centre on how the administration of the poor law at a local level should work. The impact of this continuing central-local dichotomy forms a central theme of this thesis.

3. Development of the Administrative State: The Balance Between Central and Local Power and Central-Local Relations

Nineteenth century localism such as that found in Axminster, was increasingly refracted by reforms to the administrative state that raised expectations of national standards in areas such as education, health and welfare. These were implemented by an expanding local administration and enforced, encouraged and monitored by an increasingly professional central administration with its systems of

¹⁰ Howkins, *Reshaping Rural England*, pp. 3, 138-95; Howard Newby, *Country Life: A Social History of Rural England* (London: Cardinal, 1988), pp. 53, 78-79, 104-33, 141.

inspection and reporting. Martin Daunton, for example, highlights that more than twenty Inspectorates were created between 1832 and 1875.¹¹ Keith Laybourn and Jose Harris argue that this evolution of the state was complex, identifying a range of central approaches and local responses to these new developments.¹² Laybourn argues that this state intervention through social reforms, agencies and their Inspectorates occurred in different ways and for different reasons, including pragmatic responses to identified deficiencies, permissive power preceding obligation, 'self-generating administrative momentum' and a combination of state aid and philanthropic approaches.¹³ As a consequence, at a local level, although on the one hand central intervention became more acceptable, on the other greater intrusion in local affairs created potential for central-local discord. Ultimately, these changes affected the balance of central and local power and the nature of relationships between them, posing a challenge to traditional modes of governance in localities such as Axminster.

The emergence of national standards across a wide spectrum of social policy, alongside the imposition of new authorities which sought to enforce them, provided a platform for greater state involvement in local governance, particularly important where local authorities were not performing to a standard deemed acceptable by central government. Better organised and professional structures facilitated attempts at standardisation and the imposition of uniformity. Organised and centralised knowledge became very important in managing large administrative authorities. For example, poor law authorities made great use of standardised forms and statistics from each of more than 600 Unions, providing comparative data on performance, a focus for directing policy, and reports for the purpose of public accountability.

Contemporaneously, the expansion of the local administrative state created separate local power bases. As local authorities grew in importance, they became responsible for a greater range of functions, setting up a potential arena for greater central-local interaction and contest. As explored by John Davis, these changes could enhance local power if central and local perspectives were aligned.¹⁴ However, there was also potential for tension if attitudes and priorities differed, heightened by the diversity of approaches and directions in political thinking. Daunton for example argues that throughout the Victorian period there was a tension between forces seeking central

¹¹ Martin Daunton, 'Introduction', in *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, ed. by Martin Daunton, 3 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) III, pp. 1-56 (p. 14).

¹² Keith Laybourn, *The Evolution of British Social Policy and the Welfare State c.1800-1993* (Keele: Keele University Press, 1995), pp. 129-36; José Harris, *Private Lives, Public Spirit: Britain 1870-1914* (London: Penguin, 1994), pp. 180-250.

¹³ Laybourn, *Evolution of British Social Policy*, p. 135.

¹⁴ John Davis, 'Central Government and the Towns', in *Cambridge Urban History*, ed. by Daunton, III, pp. 259-86, (pp. 263-68).

control and those seeking local autonomy.¹⁵ Numerous factors determined the local response. These included local identity and culture, the strength of localism (noted by Stephen Royle as continuing in small towns), the extent and power of vested interests, the size and wealth of the individual authority and the overall outlook, whether outward-looking and modernising, or inward-looking and traditional.¹⁶

An underlying cause of central-local friction arose because the balance of power between Centre and locality remained unresolved throughout the later nineteenth century. As Davis argues local autonomy, although often highly valued, was incomplete, because local authorities had to act within the framework of centrally dictated law. He suggests that the framework for NPL management was constructed on Benthamite principles that incorporated elements of centralised control and 'administrative rationalism' that did not fit easily with those local authorities whose governance was based on historical tradition.¹⁷ Consequently, as shown in the work of David Eastwood, Christine Bellamy and Laybourn, despite attempts at standardisation, there was scope for considerable variation in practice, and responses included conflict, cooperation and continued independent action by local authorities.¹⁸ As a result, the impact of central government initiatives was patchy. Pat Thane argues that working class electorates might support central initiatives, provided local independence was not undermined, or, more generally, as Philip Harling suggests, if it was focussed on locally driven policy innovation.¹⁹ At the other extreme some localities which had been used to, and valued local autonomy resented the imposition of new responsibilities and sought not to engage.

The Central approach to disagreement in the local administration of social reform measures was complex and varied, with responses including enforcement, persuasion, or backing away from confrontation. Where new powers were supported by legislation, as in the 1834 Poor Law or compulsory schooling, the state could seek enforcement through fines, or prosecution. However, encouragement, persuasion and permissive legislation were all tools more usually deployed by the state to achieve their ends. Conflict could be avoided by 'permissive power' through legislation

¹⁵ Daunton, 'Introduction', in *Cambridge Urban History*, ed. by Daunton, III, pp. 1-56 (p.15). See also: Harris, *Private Lives*, pp. 181, 198.

¹⁶ Stephen A. Royle, 'The Development of Small Towns in Britain', in *Cambridge Urban History*, ed. by Daunton, III, pp. 151-84 (p. 163).

¹⁷ Davis, 'Central Government', in *Cambridge Urban History*, ed. by Daunton, III, pp. 262-63, 283-84.

¹⁸ David Eastwood, *Government and Community in the English Provinces, 1700-1870* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997); Christine Bellamy, *Administering Central-Local Relations 1871-1919: The Local Government Board in its Fiscal and Cultural Context* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988); Laybourn, *Evolution of British Social Policy*, pp. 129-36.

¹⁹ Pat Thane, 'Government and Society in England and Wales, 1750-1914', in *The Cambridge Social History of Britain 1750-1950*, ed. by F.M.L. Thompson, 3 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), III, pp. 1-61 (p. 45); Philip Harling, 'The Centrality of Locality: The Local State, Local Democracy, and Local Consciousness in Late-Victorian and Edwardian Britain', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 9 (2004), 216-34 (pp. 221-22).

which responded to varying demands from local authorities and enabled the authorities to choose whether to adopt measures. Participation might later be made compulsory.²⁰ This approach was also useful where new policies were not backed by legislation, when persuasion or encouragement (which might include financial incentives, giving the Centre some ability to exercise control), might achieve results.²¹ However on occasions confrontation was avoided by allowing local authorities to ignore central policy directives and continue with local practice. However, as will be argued in this thesis, in Axminster the Centre and its Inspectors were more likely to use criticism and persuasion to secure compliance.

Reasons for adopting a conciliatory approach varied. Philosophically, Davis argues, there were objections to greater central intervention due to views based on, for example, beliefs that central power and function should be limited, that centralism was 'un-English', and that an unelected central authority had less legitimacy than those locally elected. He concludes there was relatively little desire to expand the central sphere of interest until the 1890s, beyond the enforcement of minimum standards in areas of social policy.²² There were also practical advantages in this approach, as Daunton suggests. Local control was relatively inexpensive and it also allowed the state to avoid responsibility for contentious issues.²³ In addition central authorities did not always have either the resources or enforcement powers to achieve compliance. The central Inspectorates are a good example of this, as historians have questioned the importance and effectiveness of Inspectorates generally, suggesting that many were under-staffed, lacked resources, expertise and effective enforcement powers.²⁴ This view will be explored further later in this thesis in relation to the Poor Law/Local Government Board Inspectorate.

4. A Revised Approach to Administration Under the New Poor Law: Context, Organisational Structures and Priorities

The NPL was developed and shaped in this wider landscape of social reform and the development of the state. As it was implemented, new laws, standards, practices and values confronted established processes and traditions for managing poverty and pauperism.

²⁰ Bellamy, *Central-Local Relations*, p. 13; Laybourn, *Evolution of British Social Policy*, p. 135.

²¹ Daunton, 'Introduction', in *Cambridge Urban History*, ed. by Daunton, III, pp. 14-15.

²² Davis, 'Central Government', in *Cambridge Urban History*, ed. by Daunton, III, pp. 263-68.

²³ Daunton, 'Introduction', in *Cambridge Urban History*, ed. by Daunton, III, p. 15.

²⁴ Oliver MacDonagh, 'Emigration and the State, 1833-55: An Essay in Administrative History', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5 (1955), 133-59; P.W.J. Bartrip, 'British Government Inspection, 1832-1875: Some Observations', *Historical Journal*, 25 (1982), 605-26 (pp. 605, 626); P.W.J. Bartrip and P.T. Fenn, 'The Evolution of Regulatory Style in the Nineteenth Century British Factory Inspectorate', *Journal of Law and Society*, 10 (1983), 201-22; Anthony Brundage, *The English Poor Laws, 1700-1930* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), p. 71; Michael Moran, *The British Regulatory State High Modernism and Hyper-Innovation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 46.

By 1834 many of the major features of the OPL had been in place for over two centuries, having been consolidated into legislation since 1601. As such the principles of what David Englander describes as a 'legal, compulsory, secular national system of relief' had become ingrained as the culture of local relief administration in many localities.²⁵ As will be seen in this thesis, the ideas and ethos of the OPL continued to influence local approaches in Axminster even at the end of the nineteenth century.

The administrative unit under the OPL was small-scale, with each parish responsible for providing relief and work for those of their inhabitants so entitled. Funding was also parish-based, drawing on a compulsory poor rate on property, set by Overseers of the Poor who were appointed by the local JPs. The availability of relief was closely linked to settlement following the 1662 Settlement Act, which provided that any newcomers who might become chargeable be removed to their parish of legal settlement. Relief provision, either indoor, or by out-relief could be flexible and variable and included alms-houses (for the old/infirm), apprenticeships (for children), work (for the able-bodied), or punishment (for those deemed indolent). Types of out-relief could be wide-ranging and included payments to the old, infirm, or sick, support for orphans or illegitimate children, medical bills, and grants for clothing, food or fuel. From the mid-eighteenth-century wage support was increasingly provided. However, although this provision was strong in theory, in practice it was patchy, depending on factors such as local wealth and commitment to those in need.²⁶

By the early nineteenth century, however, this comprehensive coverage had become increasingly problematic as both demand and costs rose. Increasing levels of poor relief in rural areas, exacerbated by factors such as population growth, economic cycles and the absence of employment opportunities that had reduced both wages and living standards, led to insistent calls for change. These demands were driven by what was seen amongst the propertied classes as escalating, uncontrolled and unsustainable costs for ratepayers. For example, in 1830 the poor rate accounted for one fifth of national expenditure.²⁷ After lengthy investigation, the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act was enacted, extensively amending rather than replacing the existing system.

As is well documented, the NPL sought to address perceived deficiencies in the older system using utilitarian ideas. It sought to impose order, discipline and a more uniform approach into local government through more central control and a reduction in flexibility, all aimed at reducing costs. The design and development of the NPL as well as its local implementation was coordinated by a

²⁵ David Englander, *Poverty and Poor Law Reform in Britain: From Chadwick to Booth, 1834-1914* (Harlow: Longman, 1998), p. 2.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3, 9-13.

new central authority, the Poor Law Commission which introduced a new national system of central control and intervention. The PLC grouped parishes into Poor Law Unions which were each to support a workhouse. Central supervision was to be undertaken by centrally employed Assistant Commissioners (who later became Poor Law Inspectors) who were to supervise uniform standards and centrally provided rules and regulation. At a local level Poor Law Unions and Boards of Guardians formed a new local bureaucratic structure, partly superimposed on the existing organisation and reporting to the new central authority. Guardians of the Poor, both locally elected (on a property ownership franchise) or ex-officio JPs supervised their Union, assisted by a new body of centrally ordered roles such as Union Clerks and Relieving Officers. Although there were some exceptions, in general this created a new country-wide uniformity of operation.²⁸ Over time policy was subject to some amendment as Unions were given additional responsibilities and became the Central Authorities' vehicle for local government. However some aspects of the systems in place under the OPL remained until the later nineteenth-century and beyond, for example parish rather than Union funding lasted until the 1860s and settlement, although amended, was finally fully abolished in 1948.²⁹

The PLC, a new agency of government and part of the mid-century movement towards professional administration was initially responsible for central administration.³⁰ The Commission evolved into the Poor Law Board (PLB) in 1847 and was in turn absorbed into the Local Government Board in 1871. Although the LGB had wider responsibilities and was nominally more powerful than its predecessor, poor law administration remained its main function. Duties comprised, primarily, delegated legislation via Orders and Regulations, some policing powers (such as workhouse inspection, handling complaints, approving appointments and auditing accounts), a jurisdictional role in arbitrating some disputes and a public accountability role which included the publication of Annual Returns.³¹ The range of statutory duties entrusted to the Board brought it into frequent contact with local authorities creating an environment where tensions could thrive.

As Bellamy has demonstrated the structure and organisation of the LGB brings into focus the highly centralised decision-making process and the high workload of the senior personnel. Although there were minor reorganisations in the period to 1900 with a gradual trend towards specialisation, the LGB's initial structure was typical of the mid-Victorian civil service. In between 1876-1885, for example, it comprised the President, Secretary, Parliamentary Secretary, Legal Advisor and four

²⁸ Philip Harling, 'The Power of Persuasion: Central Authority, Local Bureaucracy and the New Poor Law', *English Historical Review*, 107 (1992), 30-53.

²⁹ *Statute Law Revision Act 1948* (11 & 12 Geo 6 c. 62) <<https://uk.westlaw.com/>> [accessed 16 July 2023]

³⁰ Harold Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society 1780-1880* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), p. 123.

³¹ Bellamy, *Central-Local Relations*, pp. 127, 134-37; Englander, *Poverty and Poor Law Reform*, p. 16.

Assistant Secretaries, one of whom specialised in Poor Law cases. Central technical and clerical staff provided support. The latter provided support for the Secretariat who were responsible for the preparation of minutes and recommendations for the President. The field force of General Inspectors (replacing Poor Law Inspectors in the 1871 reorganisation) provided the link between Centre and Unions, providing direction advice and guidance in the localities. Numbers of General Inspectors varied over time, thirteen in 1871, seventeen in 1875, reducing to fourteen in 1892.³²

Assessments of the performance of the LGB by historians such as Bellamy and Roger Davidson tend to be negative and damning. Although Bellamy saw a 'reformist consensus' behind its initial design, her longer-term assessment suggests the LGB became a 'byword for compromise, pragmatism, and conservatism' as its focus was constantly divided between clients and ratepayers.³³ Overworked, staffed by laymen without technical expertise, with a focus on financial discipline, discretion and mediation, and conservative (or reactionary) in approach, the Board had little scope for overall strategy or developing services. Part of the problem lay in the lack of resources or effective controls (other than largely negative financial sanctions such as surcharges). Davidson adds that the Board did not realise its potential, failing to innovate or to fully use its resources such as its collection of statistics or the collective knowledge of its Inspectors.³⁴ This thesis will consider and qualify this view.

Some of the major priorities and issues encountered in managing NPL policy in its early years provide the context for the later challenges faced by Union management that this thesis explores. In practice the new operation took time to develop, encountering both successes and problems. Although initially some localities remained outside the scope of the NPL, by the mid-1860s Union formation was complete, workhouses had been built, and relief policy (especially for out-door able-bodied paupers) refined. Flexible out-door relief was reduced and greater emphasis was placed on the 'Principles of 1834', 'less eligibility' and the workhouse test. Less eligibility required that relief offered to the able-bodied pauper must be inferior to the condition of the poor independent worker. The 'workhouse principle' required that relief for able-bodied paupers and their families was to be provided in the workhouse. In addition, the loss of civil rights, dignity and self-worth created, as Englander argues, a test of need. If the pauper was willing to accept these conditions, it removed the requirement for further investigation into the applicant's situation.³⁵

³² Bellamy, *Central-Local Relations*, pp. 111-48; Englander, *Poverty and Poor Law Reform*, p. 16.

³³ Bellamy, *Central-Local Relations*, p. 233.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 112-55; Roger Davidson, *Whitehall and the Labour Problem in Late-Victorian and Edwardian Britain: A Study in Official Statistics and Social Control* (London: Croom Helm, 1985), pp. 187-91.

³⁵ Englander, *Poverty and Poor Law Reform*, pp. 13-17.

However, at this early stage the Centre had few sanctions to counter determined local resistance to its authority, and the tools available, such as some control on expenditure and the power to block appointments, had limited effectiveness, so that progress in implementation was uneven.

Englander's summary of early reaction to the new Act notes a range of responses. He suggests there was little concern evident in areas such as Cumberland/North Yorkshire where male unemployment was not an issue, and ineffective resistance in the rural South. However, there was 'formidable' opposition in industrial areas of the North and Wales. This opposition was galvanised by a range of local and political interests who disliked central interference and the NPL's utilitarian ethics whilst industrial workers worried about unemployment following downturns in the economic cycle and the prospect of the workhouse.³⁶

Underlying many of the policy challenges was a focus on finance. As a result, initially expenditure fell sharply. Karel Williams' statistics show that relief expenditure of more than £6.3 million in 1833 fell to just over £4.5 million in 1840. With one year's exception, relief expenditure remained at less than £6 million until 1861.³⁷ In the 1860s national expenditure again escalated following increased demand due to the Cotton Famine crisis and a liberalisation in funding available. The latter occurred following the establishment of a property-based and Union-wide rating system under the Irremovability Act (1861) and Union Chargeability Act (1865) which required ratepayers in wealthy parishes to contribute to the costs of poorer parishes.³⁸ The overall cost increases led to a greater ratepayer interest in expenditure and a renewed focus on cost reduction which fed through into national policy.³⁹

Notwithstanding these challenges, a foundation had been laid which supported further developments in central poor law policy in the later Victorian period. These new policies included a more repressive approach to out-relief, a refinement of pauper treatment by category, development of the Poor Law medical infrastructure, further attempts to address long-standing settlement issues, and an expansion of Union responsibilities into areas such as Public Health following the Public Health Acts of 1872 and 1875. These policies and local issues arising therefrom form a focus in later chapters. Central policy on out-relief was one of the most prominent and enduring features of the NPL and became a major source of contention between Centre and locality in Axminster in the later nineteenth century. Out-relief policy was a salient feature of the NPL, the legal basis for which remained largely unaltered until the early twentieth century. Developed and refined between 1836

³⁶ Englander, *Poverty and Poor Law Reform*, pp. 13-17. See also: Laybourn, *Evolution of British Social Policy*, p. 30.

³⁷ Karel Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), pp. 148, 169; Englander, *Poverty and Poor Law Reform*, p. 15.

³⁸ Englander, *Poverty and Poor Law Reform*, p. 21.

³⁹ Mary MacKinnon, 'English Poor Law Policy and the Crusade Against Outrelief', *Journal of Economic History*, 47 (1987), 603-25.

and 1852, the policy was governed by a range of Orders such as the 1845 Outdoor Relief General Prohibitory Order which prescribed the workhouse for all requiring relief but with significant exceptions. This created, as Sidney and Beatrice Webb argued, a 'complicated and anomalous' situation.⁴⁰ Keith Snell notes that, although in theory out-relief for able-bodied paupers and their families was severely restricted, in practice the situation was complicated. The array of central Orders, Circulars, official letters and contradictory decisions on individual cases meant that there were considerable difficulties in enforcement and much scope for challenge, misunderstandings and subversion in the local application of policy.⁴¹

More broadly it is possible to see waves of restrictive and, in comparison, more relaxed application of policy. Attempts at severity post 1834 were followed by relative laxity in the 1860s which contributed to a rise in pauper numbers and expense. In turn this was followed by retrenchment, commonly labelled the 'crusade against out-relief' which lasted until the early 1890s. Subsequently, in the 1890s out-relief regulations were somewhat relaxed for those considered deserving of support.⁴² This changing practice is a key issue for this thesis and is examined in detail in later Chapters.

5. The Western/South-West Inspectorate 1860-1901

The role of the Poor Law/Local Government Board Inspector was not a sinecure. Inspectors generally supervised about fifty Unions, occasionally helped by an Assistant. Notwithstanding the 1871 reorganisation and name change, Inspectors continued to focus on poor law issues; as noted above their major responsibility was to provide direction, advice and guidance to Unions.⁴³ However, the role and impact of individual Inspectors has not attracted much attention from historians, despite their role in implementing and developing the poor law, a gap partly addressed in this thesis. As an introduction, Section 5 focuses on the biographical details of the five Inspectors who served the Western/South-West District between 1860 and 1901 (**Table 1**).

⁴⁰ Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *English Poor Law History: Part II: The Last Hundred Years*, English Local Government Series, 8 and 9, 2 vols ([London]: [Longmans], 1929; repr. London: Cass, 1963), I, p. 149.

⁴¹ K.D.M. Snell, *Parish and Belonging: Community, Identity and Welfare in England and Wales, 1700-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 235-49, 331.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 279.

⁴³ Bellamy, *Central-Local Relations*, pp. 142-55; Englander, *Poverty and Poor Law Reform*, p.16.

Table 2.1: Western/South-Western Inspectors

Inspector	Birth-Death dates	Service as South-West Poor Law/LGB Inspector
Edward Gulson	1794-1874	1847-1868
Colonel Francis Ward	1820-1876	1869-1871
Edmond Wodehouse	1837-1923	1871-1876
Henry Lord Courtenay	1836-1898	1876-1896
Herbert Preston-Thomas	1841-1909	1896-1908

Note: For sources see references for the individual Inspectors below.

Given the significance of their individual role in implementing the poor law their backgrounds, experience and outlook are important to histories of the poor law as relationships between centre and locality were ultimately negotiated by individual Inspectors. These details assist in evaluating their impact as agents of state, as individuals with their own distinctive approaches and the relationship they established with Guardians. Together these contribute key elements of the argument in this thesis. Their characters, personal disposition and relationships shaped the way they operated and their ability to achieve central policy priorities and locally; it also affected their ability to gain the confidence of local Guardians who they were expected to influence, advise and support.⁴⁴

Bellamy suggests that the typical nineteenth century Inspector was upper class and appointed by patronage.⁴⁵ An analysis of the background of the five South-West Inspectors who supervised Axminster between 1860 and 1901, taken from a range of biographical detail referred to below partly corroborates her findings. Inspectors Francis Ward, Edmond Wodehouse, Henry Courtenay and Herbert Preston-Thomas were all sons of Church of England clergymen of varying status, whilst Courtenay was also closely related to the Earls of Devon and was heir to the Earldom at the time of his death. Courtenay's appointment is a good example of patronage as he benefitted from strong connections with the central poor law hierarchy and within Devon. For example, his uncle had been President of the PLB between 1867-8. Gulson was the exception, having a background in trade.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Bellamy, *Central-Local Relations*, pp. 142-50.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 142-45.

⁴⁶ Ward: 'Deaths', *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, 19 January, 1876, p. 8; Wodehouse: 'Social and Personal', *Middlesex Advertiser and County Gazette*, 6 April 1923, p. 6; Courtenay: *A Record of Old Westminsters: A Biographical List ... to 1927*, compiled by G. F. Russell and A. H. Stenning, 2 vols (London, Chiswick Press, 1928) I, pp. 220-22; Preston-Thomas: London, Metropolitan Archives; London Church of England Parish Registers; Reference Number: P84/JN/019, Herbert Preston-Thomas Marriage Record, St John the Evangelist, Ladbrook Grove Parish Marriage Records 1874-1918, p. 33; 'A Friend to the Poor: Death of Mr Preston-Thomas', *Western Times*, 23 December 1909, p. 3; Gulson: 'The Late Edward Gulson', *Western Times*, 4 September 1874, p. 5; 'Obituary Notices, Edward Gulson', *Transactions of the Devonshire Association*, 7 (1875), 1-607 (pp. 51-52).

Inspectors were required to have knowledge of the Poor Law but were not technical experts.⁴⁷ This can be seen in the analysis of our five Inspectors. Gulson and Ward brought considerable life experience to the role. Gulson had been a draper in Coventry before his appointment as an Assistant Poor Law Commissioner in 1834, aged 40, whilst Colonel Ward was a veteran of the Crimean war prior to becoming a Poor Law Inspector in the mid-1860s.⁴⁸ Wodehouse, Courtenay and Preston-Thomas meanwhile appear to have spent virtually all their careers in the Civil Service. Both Wodehouse and Courtenay were barristers, whilst Preston-Thomas joined the Civil Service straight from public school, spending much of his career in the LGB's Medical Department.⁴⁹

By the 1860s Gulson could be said to epitomise the General Inspectorate of mid-Victorian England as described by Bellamy. A highly experienced and pragmatic Inspector, Gulson was practiced in managing the limitations of the role, having been an Assistant Commissioner/Poor Law Inspector since 1834 and based in the Western/South-West area since 1847. He was an early and continuing advocate of NPL philosophy with roles that had included the creation of the first NPL Union in Abingdon in 1835 and the introduction of NPL administration in Lincolnshire and Ireland. As this thesis shows, Gulson adopted the usual approach adopted by Inspectors when seeking to keep central and local interests in balance: using personal influence, diplomacy and mediation but ultimately constrained by limited powers of enforcement which allowed Unions to exercise considerable independence.⁵⁰ However by the later 1860s old age and ill health limited his ability in a role which required considerable physical stamina.⁵¹

In contrast, Gulson's successor, Colonel Ward, was a relatively new Inspector, first appointed in 1867, transferring from East Anglia in early 1869. He was the first of a new generation of Inspectors in the Western/South-West area, although his appointment was short-lived.⁵² In early 1871 Ward was dismissed by the PLB after they expressed 'extreme dissatisfaction' with his conduct, discussed further in Chapter 5. His dismissal was unusual and can probably be explained by illness: he was admitted to an Asylum in July 1871. Here his initial case notes commented that he was 'dismissed ...

⁴⁷ Bellamy, *Central-Local Relations*, pp. 142-46.

⁴⁸ Gulson: 'Gulson', *Western Times*, 4 September 1874, p. 5; Ward: 'Royal Artillery', *Morning Herald*, 5 September 1857, p. 3.

⁴⁹ Herbert Preston-Thomas, *The Work and Play of a Government Inspector* (Edinburgh: Blackwood and Sons, 1909), pp. 1-2, 47.

⁵⁰ Bellamy, *Central-Local Relations*, pp. 142-54.

⁵¹ 'Gulson', *Western Times*, 4 September 1874, p. 5; 'Gulson', *Trans. Devonshire Association*, pp. 51-52; Bellamy, *Central-Local Relations*, p. 147.

⁵² UKPP, 'Return of Number of Inspectors, Sub-Inspectors and Assistant Inspectors in ... Poor Law Unions ...', (1871 (499)), p. 14.

for insubordination and mistakes – it would seem arising from his malady'.⁵³ The pressured work of the Inspectorate and the range of attributes required to be successful, including physical stamina, legal and moral standing, and the ability to manage around fifty Unions over a wide area, found Ward wanting.⁵⁴ This was particularly unfortunate for the PLB, as ineffectual supervision allowed his Unions a high degree of autonomy at a time when new challenges from the Centre were increasing. This enabled Unions such as Axminster to become accustomed to a level of independence in decision making.

Edmond Wodehouse was also relatively inexperienced when appointed as Local Government Board Inspector for the South-West in mid-1871, as this was his first formal posting in the role. He remained in the area until his transfer in early 1876. An ambitious and ultimately highly successful civil servant, his early career was spent as a Poor Law Schools Inspector. His views on how relief practice should develop chimed with the increasingly harsh approach of the Centre and were coupled with drive and a desire to develop policy, evident in his well-received report into the management of out-relief in seventy southern Unions (explored in detail in Chapter 5).⁵⁵ Ambition set Wodehouse apart from the norm, as the Local Government Inspectorate was not generally a career posting.⁵⁶ By the 1890s he had become an Assistant Secretary of the LGB and an Inland Revenue Commissioner and by the time of his death he was a Companion of the Order of the Bath.⁵⁷ As will be seen in later chapters Wodehouse's ideas and methods had a significant impact, both on national policy and locally, as he adopted an inquisitorial and often adversarial approach, especially in Guardian meetings, where his grasp of detail put sustained pressure on the Guardians. Wodehouse also differed from his predecessors in his focus on the education of Union Boards, the provision of detailed reports, and a focus on comparative statistics (see Chapter 5). This willingness to openly challenge and criticise the practice of Unions under his supervision differed from the

⁵³ Ward remained in the Manor House Asylum from 1871 until his death in 1876. Medical notes suggest he was suffering from General Paralysis of the Insane. London, Wellcome Library, MS.5725, Manor House Asylum, 'Case Book, Male and Female Patients, 1870-1884', pp. 60-61, 63, 70-71, 116-17, 157, Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) <<https://wellcomecollection.org/works>>. Correspondence regarding potential dismissal: TNA: MH 32/103: Colonel T. B. Ward, correspondence and papers related to the Eastern District and South Western District ... , 1868-1874, 11276/A/1871, PLB to Ward, 15 March 1871; 12346/1871, Ward to PLB, 18 March 1871; 15672/A/1871, PLB to Ward suggesting resignation rather than dismissal, [undated] draft April 1871.

⁵⁴ Bellamy, *Central-Local Relations*, pp. 142-48.

⁵⁵ UKPP, 'Out-Door Relief. Report of Edmond H. Wodehouse Esq., Poor Law Inspector to the Right Hon. James Stansfield, M.P., on Out-Door Relief in Seventy Unions in the Counties of Berks, Cornwall, Devon, Dorset, Gloucester, Kent, Somerset, Southampton, Surrey, Sussex and Wilts, 23 June 1871. Appendix B, No. 29, First Report of the Local Government Board, 1871-72', (1872 (C.516)), pp. 88-215.

⁵⁶ Bellamy, *Central-Local Relations*, p. 145.

⁵⁷ UKPP, 'Return of Number of Inspectors in ... Poor Law Unions ...', (1871 (499)), p. 14; *Post Office London Directory for 1890* (London: Kelly, 1890), p. 1642; Joseph Foster, *Oxford Men and Their Colleges* (Oxford: Parker, 1893) pp. 421-422; London, Principal Probate Registry, *Calendar of the Grants of Probate and Letters of Administration*, 1923, 'Edmond Wodehouse', p. 364.

conventional model of the long-serving Inspector where building local relationships and personal influence and persuasion were favoured.⁵⁸

The appointment of Henry Courtenay (later Lord Courtenay) as South-West Inspector between 1876-1896 heralded a further change in direction in local Poor Law policy, Union management and central-local relationships. This is explored primarily in Chapter 7. Courtenay's approach and impact contrasted sharply with that of his more abrasive, ideological and ambitious predecessor. Central-local relationships during his tenure were more akin to the approach that Bellamy described as being the usual one adopted by Inspectors, as his oversight was low key, more conciliatory and persuasive.⁵⁹ Ultimately, as will be argued, this allowed localism to thrive in Axminster. Courtenay benefitted from strong connections within Devon. For example, his family ties with the Devon-based Earls of Devon may have given him a head start in his dealings with South-Western Guardians, especially given the strength of local attachment in the Devon area. Courtenay's approach to Poor Law policy and central-local relationships can be seen in the response to his death in 1898. As an example his obituary in *The Western Times* (even allowing for customary effusiveness) summed up local Union views. It noted his 'zeal in service ... cordial relations with local bodies...' and in relation to his approach to policy a

'spirit ... not so much for reform of the Poor Laws as their being carried out with due regard for the wants of the time, as well as to the feelings of those who were the subjects of those laws. He advocated always a humane and progressive policy'.⁶⁰

The appointment of Herbert Preston-Thomas as South-West Inspector following Courtenay's retirement in 1896 had a long-term impact on relief practice on his new District as he was determined to effect changes.⁶¹ At the time of this appointment Preston-Thomas was a highly experienced civil servant with a career stretching back to 1859 mainly spent in the LGB's Medical Department. However, according to his autobiography, he had developed a personal interest in pauper management and poor law administration; he had been an active member of the Charity Organisation Society, met poor people as a rent collector, translated a major work on the English Poor Law from German into English and had personally examined how German poverty was handled in Elberfeld.⁶² The Elberfeld system was much admired in England as it achieved a considerable reduction in numbers and costs of those receiving relief. It accomplished this through close

⁵⁸ Bellamy, *Central-Local Relations*, pp. 142-55.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 142-55.

⁶⁰ 'Death of Lord Courtenay', *Western Times*, 28 May 1898, p. 4.

⁶¹ Preston-Thomas, *Work and Play*, pp. 250, 266.

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 204-06, 119-27.

management based on very small relief areas, each containing a few pauper families and supervised by volunteer visitors, with fixed payments and conditions in which relief was available accompanied by bi-weekly review.⁶³ Preston-Thomas's interest in the Poor Law ultimately resulted in a late career change. His autobiography states that he was happy to move into poor law administration as it provided opportunities to work more directly with people and with poor law management. His first experience as an Inspector occurred from 1894 in East Anglia where there was a high level of pauperism.⁶⁴ He welcomed his move to the South-West as he claimed that it provided a great opportunity to make changes, considering that previously there had been no advice to Guardians on 'the badness of their administration or the extent of pauperism', implicitly criticising both Courtenay and the LGB.⁶⁵ Preston-Thomas's well-defined views were in tune with the LGB and current thinking on social policy, incorporating ideas on differentiated treatment for categories of pauper and better medical facilities.⁶⁶ These views, his approach and impact are examined in more depth in Chapter 8. His lengthy reports and circulars for both the LGB and his Unions were clearly articulated and set out his beliefs and assessments using skills honed as a leader writer for *The Morning Post*.⁶⁷

Collectively the Inspectorate played a pivotal role in Poor Law governance. Yet their outlook and response also reflected the changing wider system of governance, as discussed above. Over time, as this thesis will argue, a tolerance of localism evolved into a more distanced approach, critical of local exemptions, with increasing demands for improvements in practices made. As a group whilst there are similarities in their background for example, the difference in approach of the individuals is important. It illustrates that the potential impact of central policy on local practice, even at the end of the nineteenth century was heavily influenced by the personal approach.

6. Conclusion

As this chapter shows the poor law was developed and was, in part, a response to rapid destabilising changes in economy and society that had varying impacts on localities. These localities had, over time, established policies and practices for managing poverty aligned to their local economy and the local environment. This chapter demonstrates that central-local tension in Union management, a continuing theme of this thesis, could both develop and persist in the later nineteenth century. Although this context was regionally differentiated, it challenged central approaches on the role of

⁶³ Ibid., pp. 119-27.

⁶⁴ Ibid., pp. 233, 223-50.

⁶⁵ Ibid., pp. 250, 266.

⁶⁶ Ibid., pp. 119-20, 223-50, 266-93, 321-34, 344-65.

⁶⁷ Ibid., pp. 34-35, 47.

the administrative state and social policy, creating an environment which stimulated change in central poor law policy.

Potential for tension and dispute between Centre and locality was exacerbated by the impact of a developing national poor law authority, newly imposed in 1834 on existing local authorities which had traditionally managed relief with little interference. As the responsibilities of Poor Law Unions grew as vehicles for local government, the increasing imposition of bureaucratic methods, interventions, standardisation and reporting highlighted the increasing reach of centralisation and the potential for local resistance.

Alongside the imposed structural changes, developments in policy priorities at a central level, and increasing national standards in areas such as health and welfare supported greater levels of central intervention in local government, creating further openings for contest between Centre and localities. However, a lack of tools to enforce the growing demands limited the ability of the Centre to enforce its policies. This mismatch in the balance of power between Centre and locality is explored in more depth in later chapters using Axminster Union as a case study. Contest occurred in various spheres, including relief policy, medical services and the ability of local Unions to determine and follow their own priorities and shows the impact of continuing localism.

The role and varying approaches of the Poor Law Inspectorate forms an important element in this thesis, linking the Centre with locality. Described by the Webbs as the 'eyes and ears and fingers of the Ministry', they were important in influencing the direction of central policy, in seeking its implementation locally, and in acting as a centralising force.⁶⁸ The brief biographies above demonstrate how the approach varied by individual, reflecting both national priorities and their personal focus at the time. The impact of each is explored in later chapters considering their significant but differing influence on local practice and, for some, on national policy.

The following two chapters, Chapters 3 and 4 investigate the Axminster environment to provide a greater understanding of the local approach, considering the area's extensive poverty and pauperism, its social and economic background and its Poor Law governance.

⁶⁸ Webb and Webb, *Poor Law History*, I, pp. 206-10 (quotation, p. 206).

Chapter 3: The Economic, Social and Demographic Context of Poverty in Axminster Union

1. Introduction

This chapter investigates the background to Axminster Union's high level of pauperism between the 1860s and 1901, which subsequently made it a problem Union for the Central Poor Law Authorities. It explores the root causes of the high levels of local poverty, focussing primarily on economic, social and demographic factors, using a variety of secondary and primary sources including government reports and official poor law statistics. In doing so, it demonstrates that although poverty was high, this was not in itself unusual for a rural Union on the borders of Devon/Dorset/Somerset, raising questions about why Axminster was considered a problem Union.

Poverty and pauperism are not interchangeable terms. Poverty arose from a range of social and economic factors, often seen as inevitable in the nineteenth century. However, poor people who took the extra step of applying for and being accepted for assistance became paupers, to which could be attached suggestions of moral failings.¹ This distinction is important not least because data on levels of poverty is not readily available, whereas statistics on pauperism are extensive. The chapter uses poor law statistics to partly fill the gap, although the imperfect match in meanings between poverty and pauperism and caveats on data quality discussed in Chapter 1 must be borne in mind. The distinction in Union Returns to the Centre between the 'able-bodied' (in essence those able to earn something, their families and the temporarily sick or disabled) and the 'not-able-bodied' provide an indication of scale and proportion between various categories of pauper. The Poor Law Authorities classification of the 'not-able-bodied' encompassed elderly, chronically sick and disabled people (and the families of adults so categorised) and lone children without parents in the workhouse. However, as Karel Williams notes, distinguishing within these sub-groups is challenging for historians as data was usually aggregated. For example, separate information on the elderly (other than those in the workhouse) only begins to emerge in the 1890s.²

The chapter argues that many of the reasons for extensive poverty in the Axminster area were outside the control of local poor law managers. The chapter concludes that there was deep-seated economic stagnation and depopulation in the Union area throughout the period 1860-1901, accompanied by two phases of very high levels of poverty and pauperism which attracted central attention, firstly in the 1870s and secondly in the 1890s. The exceptionally high level of pauperism

¹ José Harris, *Private Lives, Public Spirit: Britain 1870-1914* (London: Penguin, 1994), pp. 237-41, 249, 252-54.

² Karel Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), pp. 202-03.

in the 1870s was caused by poverty driven by local economic depression and a deindustrialised rural economy. Although this type of poverty continued, small, gradual improvements for working people in the Union area reduced the impact from the 1880s onwards. By the 1890s the long-term effects of widespread migration and depopulation became the dominant issue, resulting in a population skewed towards the elderly who often lacked income or family support. These factors, when combined with individual circumstances or misfortune arising from issues such as health, created extensive poverty in the area.

The following sections of this chapter explore three causes of poverty which were largely beyond the control of the local Guardians to explain the shifts and trends in local pauperism. Firstly, the difficult local economy, secondly the impact of structural demographic issues arising from depopulation and thirdly, the role of discrete factors such as underlying health issues affecting the individual. The final section of Chapter 3 provides a comparative overview of pauperism to explain why the Centre was so concerned about the problem in Axminster.

The chapter concludes that the factors causing Axminster' poverty and pauperism were not exceptional and are insufficient alone to explain the extent of the Union's pauperism or the criticism it attracted from the Centre. The discussion in Chapter 3 sets the scene for the investigation in later chapters which investigate the arguments favoured by the Poor Law Authorities in explaining high levels of pauperism in Axminster – the role of local culture, society and governance including an adherence to older forms of management reminiscent of the Old Poor Law and the failure to adopt the principles of 1834 or practices favoured by the Centre.

2. Causes and Types of Poverty in Axminster Union: Rural Stagnation and Agricultural Recession

Nineteenth-century poverty and pauperism in Axminster Union was shaped by a range of national and regional factors, including deindustrialisation and economic stagnation. As noted in Chapter 2, many parts of rural southern England suffered in the agricultural recession of the later nineteenth century. This had a direct impact on rural poverty, reducing employment opportunities and wage levels. This picture is well explained by historians including Keith Snell and Martin Daunt who argue that by the mid-nineteenth century there was a clearly recognised economic divide between the poorly paid de-industrialised rural south and higher wages available in the industrial north. Gordon Mingay goes further, arguing that those dependent on poor relief were 'anchored' in their

parishes by the settlement law.³ Both Peter Perry and Michael Thompson noted that nationally the agricultural sector was subject to great regional variation, dependent on locality, size of landholding, type of agriculture practised and the structure of ownership and tenure. This disparity affected the degree of agricultural recession experienced. However, even Thompson, who argues that there was no general agricultural depression between the 1870s and 1890s accepted that there were extensive difficulties experienced by many farmers in the 1880s.⁴ From the perspective of the labourer the recession affected employment opportunities, wage rates and attitudes towards employment.⁵ In Axminster, the situation was exacerbated by the character of the local agricultural economy which resulted in low wages.

2.1 The Local Economic Context: Decline, Stagnation, Agricultural Recession and a Limited Revival

Economic decline in the Axminster Union area was, in many ways, typical of that found in rural southern England though the impact of deindustrialisation in the area was particularly severe. Manufacturing had played a considerable part in both creating local prosperity and in mitigating poverty for families in the years before the NPL. Since the sixteenth century Devon had had a substantial well-established woollen cloth industry based in towns and villages which employed many women and children. From the mid-to-late eighteenth century this slowly declined with centres of production moving north as industrialisation gathered pace. Axminster had diversified into the carpet industry in the mid-eighteenth century partly to counter the decline in textile production and trade, but the business became bankrupt in 1835, following a series of misfortunes.⁶ As Mingay has demonstrated generally, the period after 1840 saw the final disappearance of small, rural factories and flax mills along with other residual handcrafts.⁷ This was also found in the towns and villages of the Union area as small-scale manufacture such as paper and shoelace making, struggled to compete with mass production in the manufacturing districts of the North and the Midlands. By the mid-nineteenth century only a remnant of industry remained. Explored by

³ K.D.M. Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor: Social Change and Agrarian England, 1660-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 1; Martin Daunton, *Wealth and Welfare: An Economic and Social History of Britain, 1851-1951* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 40; G. E. Mingay, *Rural Life in Victorian England*, rev. edn (Stroud: Sutton, 1998), p. 7.

⁴ See the debate on the scope and extent of agricultural depression or more limited recession between P. J. Perry and F.M.L. Thompson outlined in Chapter 2. P. J. Perry, 'Editor's Introduction', in *British Agriculture 1875-1914*, ed. by P. J. Perry (London: Methuen, 1973), pp. xi-xliv; P. J. Perry, *British Farming in the Great Depression 1870-1914: An Historical Geography* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1974); F. M. L. Thompson, 'An Anatomy of English Agriculture, 1870-1914', in *Land, Labour and Agriculture, 1700-1914*, ed. by B. A. Holderness and Michael Turner (London: Hambledon Press, 1991), pp. 211-40.

⁵ Thompson, 'Anatomy of English Agriculture', pp. 214-18.

⁶ George P. R. Pulman, *The Book of the Axe*, 4th edn ([n.p]: [n.pub.], 1875; repr. Bath: Kingsmead Reprints, 1975), pp. 690-91; William White, *History, Gazetteer and Directory of the County of Devon*, 2nd edn (Sheffield: White, 1878-79), p. 116.

⁷ Mingay, *Rural Life*, pp. 106-26.

Howard Yallop amongst others, hand-made Honiton lace was the only textile industry to survive after its brief mid-century revival, following elite patronage which included support from Queen Victoria. This industry was itself in terminal decline after 1860, as hand production was replaced by machine-made work manufactured elsewhere and otherwise unable to adapt to changing fashions.⁸ Other long-established Devonshire industries noted by William Hoskins and David Parker, such as fishing and quarrying remained active but these had limited significance on employment in the Union area.⁹

Old-established market centres such as Axminster also suffered mid-century decline further limiting prosperity and employment opportunities. Buoyant trading conditions in the late eighteenth century noted in the *Universal British Directory* gave way to stagnation and decline by the mid-nineteenth century.¹⁰ Hoskins argued that by the 1860s inland towns in Devon struggled economically through inaccessibility and a loss of purpose after railways arrived in the county.¹¹ Evidence provided by local directories supports this contention. With the benefit of hindsight in 1893 *Kelly's Directory* commented that Axminster's decline in prosperity was dated fairly precisely to 1843 when a distant rail terminus opened on the Bristol-Exeter line severely curtailing the town's coaching industry, as trade diverted to the railway.¹² Local directories in 1859 and 1866 highlighted difficulties of access to the Union area, loss of trade and industry across the region and the demise of the coaching industry, although with hopes of revival from new rail access. Although local fairs and markets survived, the latter were much diminished.¹³

The town of Axminster itself saw a limited economic revival after 1860 when a station opened on the new London-Exeter route and the town became a base for professional and administrative services. *The Post Office Directory* in 1866 suggested the situation was beginning to improve as 'business is somewhat revived, judging from the increase in rents and the rapid filling of untenanted houses, of which there were a considerable number'.¹⁴ However investment remained limited; for example, an 1899 Government report was scathing noting numerous decaying properties in the

⁸ H. J. Yallop, *The History of the Honiton Lace Industry* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1992), pp. 122-25, 157-84; David Parker, *Early Victorian Devon 1830-1860: An Age of Optimism and Opulence* (Wellington: Halsgrove, 2017), pp. 44, 90.

⁹ W.G. Hoskins, *Devon* ([n.p.]: Collins, 1954; repr. Chichester: Phillimore, 2003), p. 66; Parker, *Early Victorian Devon*, pp. 87-90.

¹⁰ *The Universal British Directory of Trade, Commerce, and Manufacture*, 5 vols (London: Patentees, 1793-1798), II, pp. 76-79; *Universal British Directory*, v, Appendix, pp. 108-10.

¹¹ Hoskins, *Devon*, pp. 120-22.

¹² *Kelly's Directory of Devonshire & Cornwall* (London: Kelly, 1893), p. 33; Mingay, *Rural Life*, pp. 3, 114, 175; Parker, *Early Victorian Devon*, pp. 13, 22.

¹³ For example: *Post Office Directory of Devonshire*, ed. by E. R. Kelly (London: Kelly, 1866), Axminster pp. 706-09, Colyton pp. 768-69, Seaton pp. 976-77, Stockland pp. 989-90, Uplyme pp. 1052-53; *Post Office Directory of Dorsetshire* (London: Kelly, 1859), Lyme Regis pp. 628-29.

¹⁴ *Post Office Directory Devonshire*, 1866, Axminster pp. 706-09, Colyton pp. 768-69, Seaton pp. 976-77, Stockland pp. 989-90, Uplyme, pp. 1052-53.

town.¹⁵ Longer term, as elsewhere, the railway gradually improved trading prospects both for tourism and in speedy transport for dairy products which helped to reduce the impact of the agricultural recession. *Kelly's* in 1893 noted, somewhat cautiously, that business was 'somewhat revived' due to the presence of the railway.¹⁶ However, distance from major population centres continued to hamper development. The nearest large centre of population, Exeter, was twenty-five miles distant, too far to exert a significant economic influence or provide employment. Ultimately, as Greg Finch has argued, in Axminster, as elsewhere in Devon, the railway provided a means of exit.¹⁷

Towards the end of the century a gradual revival in some parts of the Union created a more nuanced picture for growth and employment opportunities. New small-scale industry such as two tooth and nail brush-making firms were established in Axminster town by 1880. *Kelly's* in 1893 noted that one of these firms employed more than 100 people, mainly women.¹⁸ In addition two of the Union's seaside towns developed into urban centres. Facilitated by rail transport links, 'watering places' such as Seaton and Lyme Regis became attractive to summer visitors, invalids and to more permanent residents seeking a healthier climate, a trend noted by Parker and Hoskins.¹⁹ *Kelly's* (1893) advised that Seaton was 'much frequented in the summer months ... and has greatly improved in the last few years'.²⁰ Although small compared with some Devon resorts, the coastal towns thus became relatively more prosperous, changing the inter-parish dynamic, and reducing the dominance previously enjoyed by the older towns, as will be explored in Chapter 4. By the turn of the century these changes and the prospect of a new light railway to Lyme Regis improved the economic outlook, although immediate opportunities remained limited.²¹

The economic difficulties experienced in the period between 1860 and 1890, and the decline of manufacturing in the region, increased the reliance on agriculture in the Axminster Union area. However, the way agriculture was organised exacerbated the attendant problems of poverty. Agricultural history in Devon has attracted relatively little attention but there are several salient points which have been explored by Paul Brassley. He argues that Devon had long been noted for its distinctive farming practices, with few big estates and many small farms occupied by tenants. The

¹⁵ UKPP, 'Local Government Board: Supplement to Twenty ninth Annual Report, containing Report of Medical Officer, 1899-1900, Appendix A, No. 6', (1900 (Cd.299)), pp. 39-40.

¹⁶ *Kelly's Devonshire*, 1893, p. 33.

¹⁷ Greg Finch, 'Devon's Farm Labourers in the Victorian Period: The Impact of Economic Change', *Report of the Transactions of the Devonshire Association for the Advancement of Science*, 119 (1987), 85-100 (pp. 92-93).

¹⁸ *Kelly's Devonshire*, 1893, p.33; Geoffrey Chapman, *A History of Axminster to 1910* (Honiton: Marwood Publications, 1998), p. 157.

¹⁹ Parker, *Early Victorian Devon*, pp 102, 106-110; Hoskins, *Devon*, p. 67.

²⁰ *Kelly's Devonshire*, 1893, p. 555.

²¹ See directory entries above.

small-scale nature of Devon farming and limited investment distinguished it from areas which had modernised during the 'high farming' period of the mid-Victorian 'golden age'. This prosperity had generally passed Devon by, although by the later nineteenth-century fourteen-year leases had increasingly replaced the archaic leases for lives which had disincentivised improvements.²² In some respects the agricultural recession bit less deeply in the West of England because, having failed to reach the heights of prosperity, it had less far to fall. However, this was a relative position and as Hoskins argued, difficulties in agriculture led to chronic and extensive poverty in Devon.²³ Both Perry's and Thompson's analysis presents a somewhat mixed picture of later nineteenth century farming in Devon, noting that the county's farmers were not amongst the worst affected. Perry suggests that the county suffered fewer bankruptcies than most in 1881-83 and 1891-93, whilst Thompson finds that farm outputs in Devon were slightly below the national average between 1873 and 1894. However Perry argues that farmer's negative perceptions could have been coloured by increasing rates of bankruptcy between the 1870s and 1880s and Thompson suggests Devon suffered a negative shift in farmers' share of available income, as rents and labourers employed, for example, fell more slowly than outputs between 1873 and 1911.²⁴ Generally, farming in East Devon, including the Union area, became increasingly pastoral, as this type of agriculture was suited to the landscape and by focussing on dairy farming and utilising speedy transport to urban centres via the rail network, the area avoided the worst of the problems found in grain growing areas.

This gradual structural change in farming practice was accompanied by a reduction in levels of employment for men, women and children after 1851. Agricultural employment rates in Devon fell more rapidly than nationally, although as Finch notes the proportion of the local workforce employed in agriculture remained considerably above the national average.²⁵ Compared with Eastern England most West Country farms including Axminster employed fewer labourers, and the gang system, day labour and seasonal employment were much less prevalent than in the corn-growing areas.²⁶

²² Paul Brassley, 'Devon Farming in the 19th Century', in *Shedding More Light on Victorian Dartmoor* (Parke, Bovey Tracey Dartmoor Moor than Meets the Eye, Dartmoor through the Ages, ?2017), 1-22
http://www.moorthanmeetstheeye.org/data/assets/pdf_file/0011/914780/2017.02.21-PB-Victorian-agriculture-in-Devon-talk.pdf [accessed 18 May 2023]

²³ Hoskins, *Devon*, pp. 99-101.

²⁴ P. J. Perry, 'Where was Great Agricultural Depression? A Geography of Agricultural Bankruptcy in Late Victorian England and Wales', in *British Agriculture 1875-1914*, ed. by P. J. Perry (London: Methuen, 1973), pp. 129-48 (133-48); Thompson, *Anatomy of English Agriculture*, pp. 236-38.

²⁵ Finch, 'Devon's Farm Labourers', p. 98; Alun Howkins, *Reshaping Rural England: A Social History 1850-1925* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 8, 11, 12.

²⁶ Finch, 'Devon's Farm Labourers', pp. 87-88; Howkins, *Reshaping Rural England*, pp. 106-08.

2.2 The Impact of a Low Wage Economy on Poverty

Overall, however, for much of the period between 1860 and 1901, the Axminster Union area was blighted by a low wage economy, made worse by the loss of female and child earnings. The very gradual increase in male earnings from farm work after 1880, slightly better employment opportunities arising partly from depopulation, discussed in Section 3, reduced the absolute numbers of the working aged in extreme poverty. Nevertheless, poorly paid agricultural occupations were a major cause of this poverty, especially between 1860 and 1880, before the wage increases resulting from the reduction in the agricultural labour force had an impact. The relative isolation of Axminster, and as Mingay suggests, a lack of alternative employment opportunities in much of rural southern England, exacerbated the problem.²⁷

The position in the Axminster district was particularly stark. In 1871, 46% of adult males were employed in agriculture.²⁸ Agricultural labourers' wages in Devon, as Finch notes, were substantially below national levels until the late 1860s.²⁹ In 1873 Axminster's average male agricultural earnings, at 9/- per week, were the lowest in a sample of South-West Unions.³⁰ Wage rates were kept down through payments in kind, such as cider and (often poor quality), tied cottages and, it appears, in the early 1870s, through 'aid-in-wages' payments, evidenced by press complaints/central reports, explored in Chapters 5 and 6.³¹

Whilst the problem of agricultural poverty was frequently aired in the local press in the early 1870s, it appears to have provoked little protest by workers within the Union. Agricultural workers in surrounding areas supported well-attended public protest meetings which challenged pay, under-employment, working conditions and sought redress through Unionisation. Axminster's lack of protest was a reflection in part of the nature of agricultural work in the immediate locality and the relationships established between employer and worker.³² In contrast with neighbouring areas where estates were often large, in the Axminster Union area direct, small-scale employment rather than large hiring fairs limited congregations of workers, creating longer-term employment patterns. This pattern of employment also cultivated a direct relationship between employer and employee as argued by Howard Newby, evidenced locally in awards to labourers for long service or for bringing

²⁷ Mingay, *Rural Life*, p. 73.

²⁸ UKPP, 'Census of England and Wales, 1871 Volume III. (Population Abstracts; Age, Civil Condition, Occupations and Birth Places)', (1873 (C.872)), pp. 262-63.

²⁹ Finch, 'Devon's Farm Labourers', pp. 85, 89.

³⁰ UKPP, 'Returns of Average Rate of Weekly Earnings of Agricultural Labourers in Unions of England and Wales, 1872', (1873 (358)), pp. 6-8.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

³² See for example 'Yeovil, Agricultural Labourers' Union', *Western Gazette*, 13 December 1872, p. 7.

up large families without recourse to parish assistance.³³ In addition it seems likely that excess population in the Axminster area chose to migrate rather than remaining to swell the ranks of the working poor. Together these factors may have blunted the need to agitate for improvement.

Over time the flight from the field had an increasing impact on productivity. From the later 1870s onwards, it became more difficult to obtain and retain workers, due to depopulation and the increasing awareness and availability of alternative sources of employment either locally or through migration. This led to a gradual improvement in wages and conditions for male labourers in Devon. By 1900 Devon farm labourer wage rates had improved to almost the national average.³⁴ As a result, as this thesis demonstrates, male wages and reliance on employment supplements such as tied housing receded as an issue which demanded attention from the Axminster's Guardians. In 1895 for example, Axminster Guardians advised the LGB that 'there was no exceptional distress from want of employment'.³⁵

However, whilst the situation for poor male workers improved slightly, female poverty due to low wages and lack of employment was a continuing issue for individuals and households. Despite the limitations of census data, given the under-reporting of women's work in the later nineteenth century, it remains clear that female employment opportunities in the Axminster area were increasingly limited.³⁶ By the 1870s there were few opportunities for women in the Axminster area, other than in the residual textile industry where wages for making or mending lace were reduced to a pittance.³⁷ The 1861 Census reveals that 25% of women were employed in the textile industry, but by 1881 this had fallen to approximately 15% (an over-estimate as the 15% figure included textile dealers). In addition, there had been a rapid decline in agricultural employment for women. Parker provides evidence that in 1843 women formed between one third and a half of the outdoor agricultural workforce in Devon, but by the late 1860s agricultural employment for women was dying away.³⁸ Axminster Poor Law Union Registration district's 1861 Census noted that 11% of women were employed in agriculture but by 1881 this had fallen to 2%. It appears that women disappeared from the local workforce altogether according to the records; in 1881 over 50% women

³³ Howard Newby, *Country Life: A Social History of Rural England* (London: Cardinal, 1988) p. 141; 'Stockland and Dalwood Ploughing and Labourers' Friendly Society', *Pulman's Weekly News and Advertiser*, 26 October 1875, pp. 2-3.

³⁴ Brassley, 'Devon Farming', pp. 8-9; Finch, 'Devon's Farm Labourers', pp. 85-100.

³⁵ UKPP, 'Select Committee on Distress from Want of Employment: Second Report, Appendix' (1895 (253)), p. 29.

³⁶ Edward Higgs, *Making Sense of the Census Revisited: Census Records for England and Wales 1801-1901*, (London: University of London Institute of Historical Research, 2005), pp. 108-10; Nicola Verdon, *Rural Women Workers in Nineteenth-Century England: Gender, Work and Wages* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2002), pp. 31-33, 73-75, 117-19, 197; Nicola Verdon, *Working the Land: A History of the Farmworker in England from 1850 to the Present Day* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 90.

³⁷ UKPP, '1871 Census, Vol. III.', (1873 (C.872)), p. 263.

³⁸ Parker, *Early Victorian Devon*, p. 81; Brassley, 'Devon Farming', p. 8.

either had an unknown or an unspecified occupation.³⁹ Whilst the 1881 census data is probably an underestimate as the data does not record casual or seasonal work, these findings for Axminster accord with both contemporary perceptions and historians' views generally. Nicola Verdon, for example, estimates that numbers of female farm servants/labourers fell by 25% between 1851-1871 and by more than 30% between 1881-1901.⁴⁰

Verdon's examination of the rural female workforce nationally highlights the extensive reduction in female participation, as found in Axminster, and argues that complex and diverse patterns of employment existed both locally and regionally, driven in part by local economic factors, but she also focusses on the importance of changing attitudes to women's work.⁴¹ A combination of economic and cultural changes made female participation in many farming pursuits less acceptable or economically essential.⁴² Verdon notes that the traditional view, as set out in official Government Reports attributed falling participation to a combination of supply and demand for labour due to changing agricultural practices, migration and rising real wages for men which allowed married women to withdraw from the labour force. These factors operated alongside a growing reluctance exhibited by women (and their families) to allow girls to participate in arduous, low paid and often low status agricultural work, preferring them to undertake domestic service or shop work where possible.⁴³ Verdon qualifies this view, arguing that these factors should not be overstated. She suggests that official Reports reflected an increasing dominant middle-class male breadwinner/female dependent model and Trade Union views that male wages should not be undercut. Instead she emphasises the continuing demand for casual labour, which was not reported in the census, alongside elements such as economic need, local custom, individual interest, enjoyment or local economic demand for women workers.⁴⁴

However it is difficult to assess how far changing attitudes rather than adverse economic factors caused the reduction in women's participation in Axminster's workforce, given the limited census

³⁹ Data provided through <www.VisionofBritain.org.uk> and uses historical material which is copyright of the Great Britain Historical GIS project and the University of Portsmouth. Percentages derived from: GB Historical GIS / University of Portsmouth, Axminster PLU/RegD through time | Industry Statistics | David Allan Gatley Persons aged 20 and over by Sex and 1861 Occupational Order, *A Vision of Britain through Time* <http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10005590/cube/OCC_ORD1861_OVER20> [accessed 28 June 2023], Axminster PLU/RegD through time | Industry Statistics | Kevin Schurer Matthew Woollard Occupation data classified into the 24 1881 Orders; plus sex, *A Vision of Britain through Time* <http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10005590/cube/OCC_ORDER1881> [accessed 28 June 2023].

⁴⁰ Verdon, *Working the Land*, pp. 10, 57.

⁴¹ Verdon, *Rural Women*; Verdon, *Working the Land*; Nicola Verdon, 'Skill, Status and the Agricultural Workforce in Victorian England', *History*, 104.363, (2019) 829-50 (pp. 836-37).

⁴² Karen Sayer, *Women of the Fields: Representations of Rural Women in the Nineteenth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), pp. 172-80.

⁴³ Verdon, *Working the Land*, pp. 110-11.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 110-13.

data and lack of written evidence of views and approaches to work; consequently attitudes have to be assessed on the balance of probability from the limited data and information available. Adverse economic conditions played a significant role in the change, as explored earlier in this chapter, and whilst there does not seem to be hostility to women's employment overall in the Union area, it is probable that changing attitudes contributed to the reduction, especially in relation to farming occupations. It seems likely that increasing male wages allowed some women to opt out of the local workforce, and census data suggests an increasing number worked in domestic service or sought other opportunities via migration.⁴⁵ However, as Verdon argues, some female employment may be under-reported in official Reports; for example it seems likely that some dairy work continued in response to local economic needs, given the sector's importance to the local economy, as did casual or seasonal work, all unrecorded in the census. In addition by the late nineteenth century there was limited, small scale industrial employment available in Axminster's brush factories. Nevertheless it seems clear that opportunities for women were limited and where available were poorly paid.

Family incomes were further reduced by the loss of children's earnings following the passing of the Education Acts in the 1870s. Complaints by Devon labourers about the cost of school fees and loss of child earnings were highlighted in a Report into Agriculture in 1882 which noted that some respondents said they could no longer afford benefit club subscriptions. Axminster would probably have been severely affected by this as the Union area had been noted in the Royal Commission on Agriculture 1882, as having a high level of child employment.⁴⁶

Overall, the gradual improvement in local economic conditions, levels of trade, new industry in for example the seaside towns, the brush factories, or railways, alleviated the worst of the situation for working-aged poor people from the 1880s onwards. Consequently, working-age poverty, although enduring, became less prominent as a management problem for Axminster's Guardians. At the same time the long-term impact of migration and depopulation began to take effect, impacting on productivity and business opportunities, reducing wealth in the area and creating a second wave of poverty that affected the elderly in particular.

⁴⁵ GB Historical GIS / University of Portsmouth, Axminster RegD/PLU through time | Statistics |, *A Vision of Britain through Time*. Copyright Great Britain Historical GIS Project and University of Portsmouth <https://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10005590/cube/OCC_ORD1861_OVER20> [Date accessed: 9th April 2024]; GB Historical GIS / University of Portsmouth, Axminster RegD/PLU through time | Statistics |, *A Vision of Britain through Time*. Copyright Great Britain Historical GIS Project and University of Portsmouth <https://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10005590/cube/OCC_ORDER1881> [Date accessed: 9th April 2024]

⁴⁶ UKPP, 'Royal Commission on Agriculture. Reports of the Assistant Commissioners. Southern district of England. Report by Mr. Little on Devon, Cornwall, Dorset and Somerset, (with summary of previous reports)', (1882 (C.3775-I, C.3375-II, C.3375-III, C.3375-IV, C.3375-V, C.3375-VI)), p. 21.

3. Demographic Strain: Migration and Depopulation

The persistent low wage economy and the lack of alternative employment opportunities resulted in sustained migration from the Axminster area throughout much of the nineteenth century. The resulting depopulation led to structural changes in the Union's demographic profile which had both positive and negative consequences for local poverty and its management. Although migration and demographic change played a part in improving the economic situation of working-aged men who remained in the area, it also contributed to a second peak in pauper numbers in the 1890s, through the emergence of a population skewed towards the elderly, who suffered from both low income and fewer family members able to care for them, creating a level of poverty that was endemic and entrenched. Sustained migration may also have had an impact on the range of skills available to help manage the Union, as local 'elite' families also left the area.

3.1 Context: A Growing Problem

The long-term demographic pressures which fuelled extensive out-migration from the Union area lasted until the very end of the nineteenth century. The scale of depopulation mirrors findings elsewhere in England and Wales. Perry, Thompson and Alun Howkins for example all highlight the declining agricultural population from the 1850s onwards which was both caused and exacerbated by the challenges encountered in late nineteenth century farming. Although Perry and Thompson disagreed on whether these difficulties resulted in depression or recession for the agricultural sector (see Chapter 2 and Section 2 above), they largely agreed that the impact was felt mainly by farmers and landowners rather than labourers. Despite increasing wages for those labourers who remained working the land, rural migration continued, with reductions in the labourer population occurring through a largely voluntary exodus and driven by, for example, better opportunities and living conditions available elsewhere, rather than unemployment.⁴⁷ Howkins suggests that in England and Wales numbers of labourers fell by one third between 1870 and 1900, whilst the number of farmers reduced by nearly a quarter, although the latter figure is caveated as to accuracy due to changing counting methodology and imprecise occupational self-descriptions.⁴⁸ Hoskins notes that Devon's extensive migration, from rural areas especially, had become established even earlier, by the 1820s. Finch's analysis also notes ongoing reductions, arguing that the population in rural Devon fell by over 26% between 1841 and 1911.⁴⁹ Axminster Union's population suffered a similar decline falling by approximately 24% between 1841 and 1901 with outlying, isolated parishes most affected. For

⁴⁷ Perry, *British Farming*, pp. 126-31; Thompson, 'Anatomy of English Agriculture', pp. 214-18.

⁴⁸ Howkins, *Reshaping Rural England*, pp. 171-72. See also: Thompson, 'Anatomy of English Agriculture', p. 214.

⁴⁹ Hoskins, *Devon*, pp. 173-5; Finch, 'Devon's Farm Labourers', pp. 93-95.

example, the population of Stockland fell by nearly 42% between 1841 and 1901.⁵⁰ Concern about rural depopulation in Axminster was raised in Parliament. Frederick Knight, MP for Worcestershire Western speaking in a Committee Stage debate on the Union Chargeability Bill in 1865 commented:

Since the commencement of the New Poor Law there had been a most extraordinary shifting of the population of England. It arose from two causes—the refusal of out-door relief to able-bodied persons, and cheap railway transport.

Knight noted that this situation particularly affected the West of England and he named Axminster and the adjoining town of Honiton amongst a long list of towns affected by the loss of houses and population between the census years of 1841 and 1851, with a similar situation found in surrounding small agricultural parishes.⁵¹

Statistical evidence drawn from the census supports the view that there was a culture of migration in the Axminster area over an extended period, as substantial numbers of young men and women left after the age of fifteen. Dudley Baines explores the idea of ‘chain migration’ suggesting that once established in an area emigration would continue, as information fed back encouraged others to leave.⁵² As elsewhere, migration (or emigration) was driven by ‘push’ factors such as over-population, low wages, limited types of employment, rural isolation and poor living conditions and ‘pull’ factors which included a growing knowledge of better opportunities. The appeal of urban areas was fuelled by improved education, information networks and good transport links to centres such as London and Bristol. Emigration was more extensive in Western England than in many other areas; Baines estimates that 14% of all emigration between 1860 and 1900 came from five western/south-west counties.⁵³ In Axminster, the stresses of the NPL combined with limited opportunities for business and work, amplified the drift away from the area in the mid-to late nineteenth century through migration networks established from the 1820s onwards.

Population decline in Axminster was accompanied by structural changes in the population with wide-ranging social and economic consequences. Population trees in **Figure 3.1**, drawn from census data for the Axminster Union area, and summarised in **Appendix A3.2** demonstrate the level of both out-migration and low mortality. 1881 is used as an example, but all censuses between 1861 and

⁵⁰ GB Historical GIS / University of Portsmouth, Stockland CP/AP through time | Population Statistics | Total Population, *A Vision of Britain through Time*. Copyright Great Britain Historical GIS Project and University of Portsmouth University of Portsmouth <http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10469200/cube/TOT_POP> [accessed 1 May 2019]; see Appendix 3 for Axminster population data and change over time.

⁵¹ Hansard, ‘Union Chargeability Bill [Bill 31]’, (HC Committee Debate 11 May 1865, 179 (cc.165-66)).

⁵² Dudley Baines, *Migration in a Mature Economy: Emigration and Internal Migration in England and Wales, 1861-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 142.

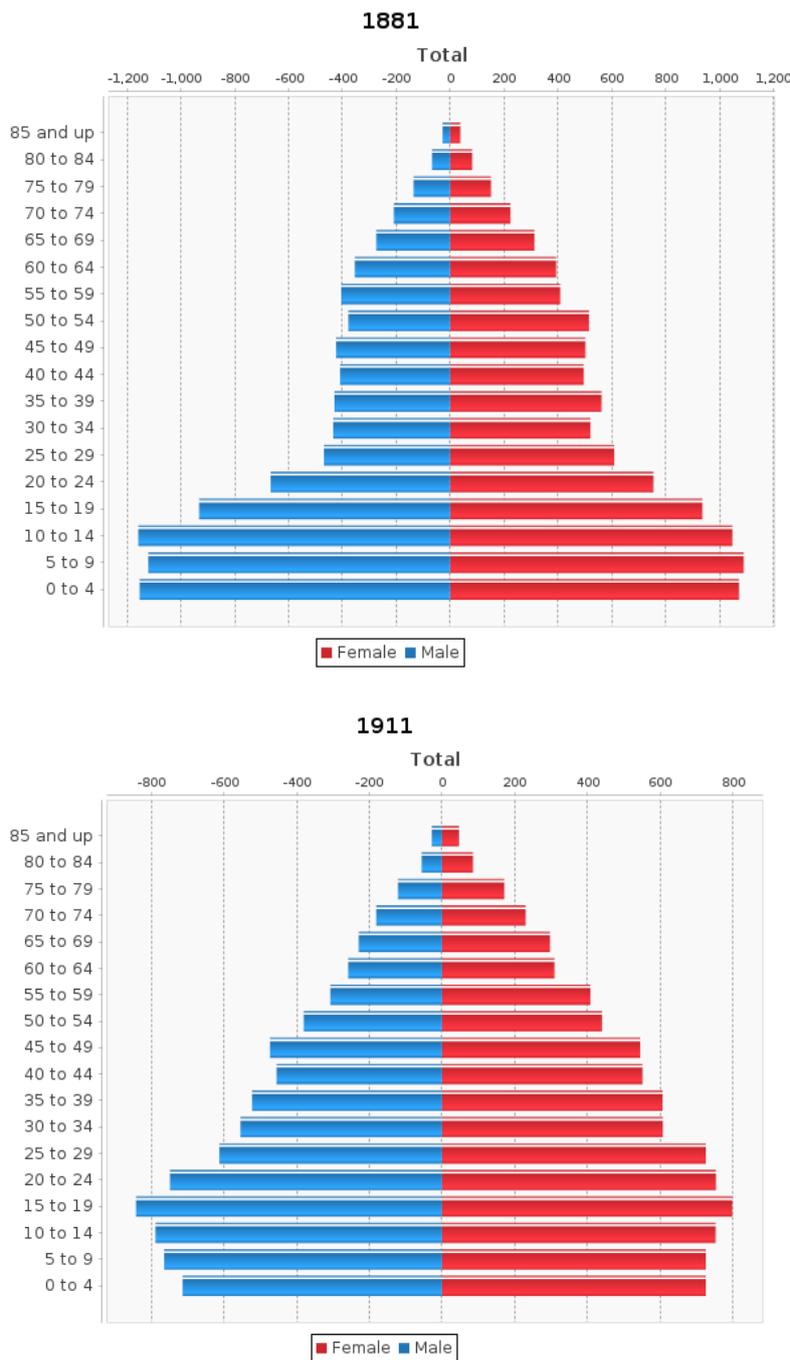
⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

1901 exhibit similar tendencies: an uneven distribution between men and women, with a relatively smaller proportion of working-aged men and the significant loss of male population between the ages of 15 and 29. The remaining population was long-lived. The significance of the high proportion of elderly people in the local population is discussed below because, as Mary MacKinnon demonstrates, old age was a major contributor to high rates of poverty and pauperism and additionally put pressure on the poor rates.⁵⁴ There was less hollowing out of the female population, which until old age outnumbered men. High numbers of children until the end of the century indicate that large families continued to be the norm. The chart for 1911 is included as a comparison to show a return to a more normal distribution (although the lower number of children is somewhat unusual), following a wave of immigration, potentially creating an environment better able to provide local family support for the elderly. Data from 'A Vision of Britain Through Time' website demonstrates that Axminster's surrounding Unions were similarly affected.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Mary MacKinnon, 'English Poor Law Policy and the Crusade Against Outrelief', *Journal of Economic History*, 47 (1987), 603-25; Mary MacKinnon, 'Poor Law Policy, Unemployment and Pauperism', *Explorations in Economic History*, 23 (1986), 299-336, (pp. 303, 307); Mary MacKinnon, 'The Use and Misuse of Poor Law Statistics, 1857 to 1912', *Historical Methods*, 21 (1988), 5-19, (pp. 9-11).

⁵⁵ GB Historical GIS / University of Portsmouth, Honiton PLU/RegD through time | Population Statistics | Age and Sex Structure to age 85 and up, *A Vision of Britain through Time*. Copyright Great Britain Historical GIS Project and University of Portsmouth <http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10005413/cube/AGESEX_85UP> [accessed: 2 April 2018]; Beaminster PLU/RegD through time | Population Statistics | Age and Sex Structure to age 85 and up, *A Vision of Britain through Time*, <http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10030134/cube/AGESEX_85UP> [accessed: 2 April 2018]; Chard PLU/RegD through time | Population Statistics | Age and Sex Structure to age 85 and up, *A Vision of Britain through Time*, <http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10030249/cube/AGESEX_85UP> [accessed 2 April 2018]; Bridport PLU/RegD through time | Population Statistics | Age and Sex Structure to age 85 and up, *A Vision of Britain through Time*, <http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10005644/cube/AGESEX_85UP> [accessed 2 April 2018]

Figure 3.1: Population Trees - Axminster Union Age 0-85 and Up



Source: GB Historical GIS / University of Portsmouth, Axminster PLU/RegD through time | Population Statistics | Age and Sex Structure data in 5-year bands to age 100, *A Vision of Britain through Time*. [Copyright Great Britain Historical GIS Project and University of Portsmouth <http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10005590/cube/AGESEX_85UP>](http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10005590/cube/AGESEX_85UP) [accessed 8 December 2022]; University of Portsmouth, Axminster PLU/RegD through time | Population Statistics | Males and Females, *A Vision of Britain through Time*. [Copyright Great Britain Historical GIS Project and University of Portsmouth <http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10005590/cube/GENDER>](http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10005590/cube/GENDER) [accessed 8 December 2022]

3.2 The Social Consequences of Demographic Change

The changing demographic profile in Axminster Union had significant consequences for local poverty with many of the trends found in Axminster supporting Baines' general findings on emigration and internal migration: until the last quarter of the nineteenth century those migrating tended to be young, dynamic and economically active people, so that the direct impact on numbers of working-aged poor families and paupers was limited until that time.⁵⁶ However, sustained loss of this group without inward migration had profound negative economic and social consequences. The loss of workers and entrepreneurs and their contribution to local government rates, to employment creation, or to provide support for their families had a significant impact in areas experiencing outward migration. In addition there was a loss of dynamism needed to address the problems of poverty and pauperism (taken forward in Chapter 4) and a perception, noted by Mingay, that by 1900 those tending to remain were 'the unskilled and the unambitious, the men with large families and the old', a perception echoed by Howard Newby.⁵⁷ Both Mingay and Snell suggest that settlement restrictions trapped or induced poor people who married young and had large families to remain in the area.⁵⁸

In Axminster, this translated into an increasingly large number of elderly poor people, both in absolute terms and as a percentage of the total. This was the most important demographic change experienced in the Union area between 1860 and 1901. As discussed in Section 4 below the number of elderly people was always substantial, but there is no obvious date when old age became the most significant cause of poverty and pauperism in the area. **Figure 3.2** shows that the number of pauper children fell below adults by 1881 so it seems likely that old age poverty was increasing by that time, becoming a dominant issue in the 1890s. Longevity, lack of income, savings or family support and infirmity all contributed to this. Here, outward migration was a factor; family ties may have been broken, with sons who had left the area less able (or likely?) to provide family support for elderly parents.

In order to alleviate the problem of lack of income, many of the elderly would have received relief payments (effectively a small pension) from their Poor Law Union. David Thomson's national research into welfare provision in old age argues that there was a long-standing community duty to provide continuing relief payments, rather than financial support being a family responsibility. He

⁵⁶ Baines, *Migration Mature Economy*, pp. 74-75, 88, 216.

⁵⁷ Mingay, *Rural Life*, p.14; Newby, *Country Life*, p. 136.

⁵⁸ Mingay, *Rural Life*, p. 13, Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor*, p. 334.

suggests that before 1870 between one half to two thirds of the elderly population received this small 'pension', which usually continued until death. Thomson argues that there was a regional variation in approach with 'pension' payments being more common in rural areas and in the small towns of southern and eastern England rather than in urban areas or the North and West. However he contends that increasingly in the 'crusade era', public assistance reduced and greater financial demands were made of families, with public spending reduced by one third between 1870 and 1890.⁵⁹ Thomson's views, discussed further in Chapter 8, have been challenged by historians such as Pat Thane who, whilst acknowledging that many elderly people received some relief from the Poor Law, suggests this was very limited and that families would be expected to help.⁶⁰ Axminster Guardians' approach to relief in old age is explored in Chapter 8 and tends to support Thomson's findings.

Table 3.1 illustrates the structural change in the population, demonstrating the accelerating proportion of elderly people in the population after 1881 which affected both sexes. By 1891 over 9% of the population was aged 65 or over.

Table 3.1: Elderly Men and Women as a Percentage of Total Population of Axminster Union

Year	% Men Aged 65 and Over	% Women Aged 65 and Over	% Population aged 65 and Over
1861	7.0	7.6	7.3
1871	7.4	7.7	7.6
1881	7.9	8.3	8.1
1891	9.1	9.3	9.2
1901	9.0	9.8	9.4

Note: Percentages calculated from sources noted in Appendix A3.2.

Source: Population statistics from Axminster PLU Census area 1861-1901, (see Appendix A3.2 for full details).

This proportion of elderly people was not exceptional however, as other areas of rural England and Wales were also affected. The *Vision of Britain* website illustrates this, showing for example that in 1891 many areas in East Anglia, rural Wales and much of the West of England had high proportions of elderly people but Axminster's level, at over 8% was one of the highest.⁶¹

⁵⁹ David Thomson, 'The Welfare of the Elderly in the Past: A Family or Community Responsibility', in *Life, Death and the Elderly: Historical Perspectives*, ed by Margaret Pelling and Richard M. Smith (London: Routledge, 1994, pp. 194-221 (pp. 202-4, 217). See also David Thomson, 'I Am Not My Father's Keeper': Families and the Elderly in Nineteenth Century England', *Law and History Review*, 2 (1984), 265-86; David Thomson, 'Welfare and the Historians', in *The World We Have Gained: Histories of Population and Social Structure*, ed. by Lloyd Bonfield, Richard M. Smith and Keith Wrightson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp. 355-78.

⁶⁰ Pat Thane, *Old Age in English History: Past Experiences, Present Issues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 171-72.

⁶¹ GB Historical GIS Project (2003-23), 'Great Britain Historical GIS'. University of Portsmouth, Statistical Atlas, Population, Percentage aged over 65 1891, *A Vision of Britain through Time*. Copyright Great Britain Historical GIS Project and University of Portsmouth <http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/atlas/map/R_AGE_65_up/PR_DIST/1891> [accessed 19 May 2023].

Despite the comments above regarding the payment of relief for the elderly, in the absence of well-funded old age pensions many elderly people were very poor once they were no longer able to work. The challenge the elderly faced in providing income for themselves can be seen in the wide variety of sources of income mentioned in Axminster's Return made to the 'Aged Deserving Poor Committee' in 1899.⁶² This Return relating to elderly people with a weekly income under 10/- but not receiving poor relief echoes the findings of Barry Reay and Lynn Hollen Lees on the importance of the 'economy of makeshifts' for elderly poor people, a concept discussed in Section 2.4.1 of Chapter 1's Literature Review.⁶³ In Axminster, of those aged 65 and over, 70% of men and 30% women advised they received payments from earnings or pension from a former employer, whilst just over 40% (men) and 50% women received assistance from family, relations or friends. Other income streams for both men and women included benefit/friendly societies, investments or property, but generally only a small number, 10% or fewer claimed income from these sources. The one exception to this related to investment/property income for women where more than 20% claimed to receive income from this source.⁶⁴

Longevity contributed to high levels of poverty. By the turn of the century the elderly comprised the largest share of Axminster's pauper body, and as a Return of elderly people receiving relief in 1903 shows, the likelihood of needing assistance increased with age. In 1903 nearly 27% of Axminster's population aged 65 and over received poor relief, rising to 40% by age 75 and over.⁶⁵ This figure for paupers within the 65 and over cohort is considerably higher than the national figure of 18.6% found by Williams, using the same Return, although less than was found at the end of the nineteenth century in Norfolk where Anne Digby found paupers comprised over 30% of those aged 65 or more.⁶⁶ The problem was endemic in the East Devon/West Dorset area as two Unions adjacent to Axminster reported similar high levels of pauperism amongst those aged 65 or more when

⁶² UKPP, 'Report of Departmental Committee on Financial Aspects of Proposals by Select Committee of 1899 about Aged Deserving Poor; Appendices, (1900 (Cd.67)), pp. 12-38.

⁶³ Barry Reay, *Rural Englands: Labouring Lives in the Nineteenth Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 81-85; Lynn Hollen Lees, *The Solidarities of Strangers: The English Poor Laws and the People, 1700-1948* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 170. See also *The Poor in England 1700-1850: An Economy of Makeshifts*, ed. by Steven King and Alannah Tomkins (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), which although focussed primarily on the Old Poor Law era, explores the continuing role of the 'economy of makeshifts' in depth.

⁶⁴ Percentages derived from statistics in UKPP, 'Committee ... Aged Deserving Poor...', Appendix II', (1900 (Cd.67)), pp. 24-27.

⁶⁵ Axminster data calculated from: GB Historical GIS / University of Portsmouth, Axminster RegD/PLU through time | Population Statistics | Age & Sex Structure to age 85 & up, *A Vision of Britain through Time*. [Copyright Great Britain Historical GIS Project and University of Portsmouth <https://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10005590/cube/AGESEX_85UP>](https://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10005590/cube/AGESEX_85UP) [accessed 29 April 2024] and UKPP, 'Boards of Guardians (Persons in Receipt of Relief)', (1904 (113)), p. 92.

⁶⁶ Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty*, p. 206; Anne Digby, *Pauper Palaces* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 161.

compared with all paupers aged sixteen and over: Axminster recorded 68% compared with 65% in Honiton and 72% in Bridport.⁶⁷

4. Axminster Union: Individual Poverty

As outlined above, the social and economic circumstances in Axminster, meant that individuals were less able to cope with life-events and misfortune that prevented them from working. Section 4 shifts the focus from general social and economic factors as a cause of poverty in order to briefly explore the role of discrete circumstances which could cause poverty but also tip an individual into needing assistance from the Poor Law Authorities. These circumstances included a lack of funds (income or savings), health related matters such as illness, accident, physical and mental incapacity, or age and care related factors, together with family misfortune including the loss of a breadwinner and external crises including severe weather or epidemics and social or lifestyle factors.

Axminster Union area was relatively healthy, as evidenced in reports from a local Medical Officer of Health in the 1880s.⁶⁸ However, although widespread sickness does not appear to be a significant cause of poverty, conversely, good health contributed to poverty through the longevity of the infirm. There is no evidence that a high level of alcohol consumption was a problem, despite suspicions raised by the Centre and the temperance movement, though in the 1860s and 1870s agricultural wages were supplemented by allowances of cider. The position regarding temporary illness is nuanced. Again there is no indication that the area was exceptionally affected by epidemics and whilst temporary sickness or disablement could have a catastrophic impact for individuals, temporary distress could be mitigated by poor relief or charity, and it would appear in the early 1870s at least through wages supplements, as discussed in Chapters 5 and 6. Many of the Union's parishes had established charitable clubs, providing assistance benefits. Axminster parish for example had separate clubs for men and women, dating back to 1763 and 1766 respectively which provided, according to Pulman, 'sick, funeral and old age pay, for a merely nominal subscription'.⁶⁹

Whilst noting the caveats on poor law statistics mentioned in Chapter 1, the annual 'Day Rate Return on Pauper Numbers' provides a useful benchmark on the scale of extreme poverty. The data from Axminster, from which many of the tables in this chapter are derived is set out in **Appendix 2**. Although absolute numbers fell over time, Axminster's pauper population was nearly twice the national average between the 1860s and 1880s and exceeded that figure in 1891 and 1901 (see

⁶⁷ UKPP, 'Boards of Guardians (Persons in Receipt of Relief)', (1904 (113)), pp. 92-93.

⁶⁸ For example: TNA: MH 12/2115, Axminster Correspondence, July 1886-December 1888, 13614/1888, Dr O'Brien, Axminster Medical Officer of Health, 1887 Report to the LGB on Axminster's Northern Sanitary District, 7 February 1888.

⁶⁹ *Post Office Directory Devonshire, 1866*, p. 707; Pulman, *Book of the Axe*, p. 622.

Table 3.2). However over time there were changes in the composition of the pauper population. **Figure 3.2** illustrates the reduction in overall numbers and the changing proportions in categories of poor people who became paupers. Ignoring the small numbers of non-settled vagrants, numbers of ‘lunatics’ remained fairly constant whilst numbers of ‘ordinary’ men, women and children decreased overall after 1871, the high point of pauper numbers between 1860 and 1901.

Table 3.2: Percentage of Paupers in Population: Axminster Union and England and Wales

	1861	1871	1881	1891	1901
Axminster Union %	7.46	8.20	5.75	6.73	5.59
National (England and Wales) %	4.48	4.82	3.15	2.71	2.5

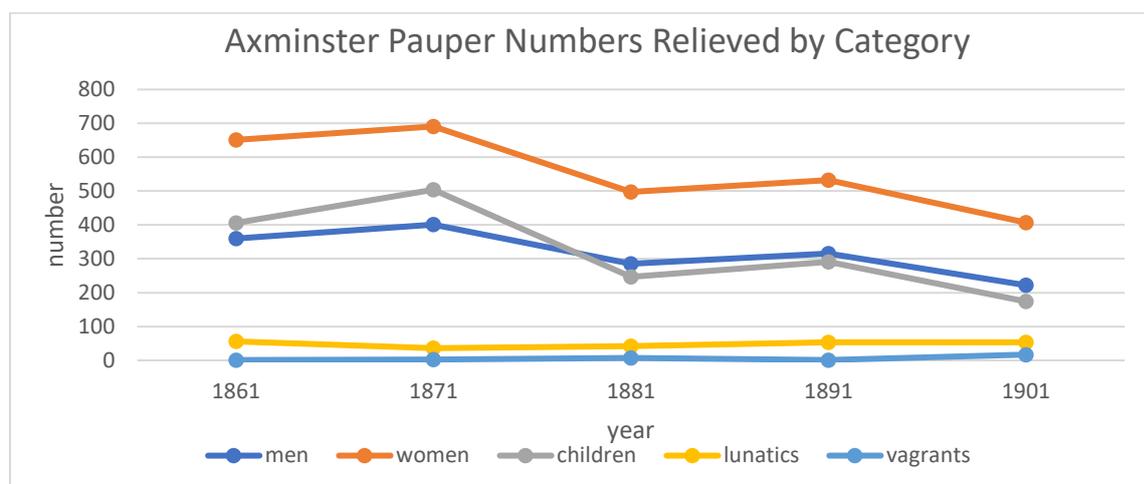
Note: Calculated from numbers of paupers relieved on 1st January, Axminster Union and England and Wales.

Source: UKPP, Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January, 1861-1891; Pauperism (England and Wales). (Half-yearly Statements) 1901. (See Appendices A2.2 and A2.5 for full details).

There is no specific evidence that the needs of those described as ‘lunatics’ were an exceptional cause of local poverty. Numbers of ‘lunatic’ paupers in Axminster remained stable over time as seen in **Figure 3.2**. Similarly, levels of child poverty as illustrated in the pauperism figures in **Figure 3.2** were high. The issue of child poverty was exacerbated, especially in the early years of this study by social reasons such as large families, single parents and bereavement. Until the end of the century the Union relieved large numbers of children who were orphaned, deserted or otherwise lone children as evidenced in workhouse numbers. Records do not indicate whether this was a temporary expedient by families as found by Lydia Murdoch, or a long-term issue.⁷⁰ However, this poverty did not attract negative attention from the authorities, especially as numbers fell dramatically over time.

⁷⁰ Lydia Murdoch, *Imagined Orphans: Poor Families, Child Welfare, and Contested Citizenship in London* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006).

Figure 3.2: Axminster Pauper Numbers Relieved by Category



Note: Numbers of paupers relieved on 1st January each year. Paupers categorised as ‘lunatics’ or vagrants are excluded from the general categories of men, women and children.

Source: UKPP, Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January, 1861-1891; Pauperism (England and Wales). (Half-yearly Statements), 1901. (See Appendices A2.2 and A2.5 for full details).

Instead, the majority of paupers relieved in Axminster between 1860 and 1901 were classified as the ‘not-able-bodied’ as shown in the snapshot in **Table 3.3** which illustrates the percentage of adult ‘not-able-bodied’ paupers in comparison with national figures. At first sight (and in apparent contradiction to the comments above) it appears Axminster had an exceptionally high proportion of ‘not-able-bodied’ paupers, averaging over 60% between 1861 and 1901 compared with 45% found in Williams’ national data for the same period.⁷¹ However, this figure includes the extensive elderly population in Axminster Union which, as MacKinnon’s research demonstrates, comprised the majority of those defined as ‘not-able-bodied’.⁷² The growing percentage of ‘not-able-bodied’ paupers in Axminster (explored further in Chapter 8) supports MacKinnon’s findings that rising numbers people over sixty became paupers.⁷³

⁷¹ Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty*, pp. 204-05.

⁷² MacKinnon, ‘Poor Law Policy’, 299-336 (pp. 303, 307); MacKinnon, ‘Poor Law Statistics’, 5-19 (pp. 8-10).

⁷³ MacKinnon, ‘Poor Law Statistics’, 5-19 (pp. 6, 9-11).

Table 3.3: Axminster’s ‘Not-Able-Bodied’ Relief for Adults

Year (1 January)	Axminster ‘not-able-bodied’ adults as a percentage of all paupers	National figures ‘not-able-bodied’ adults as a percentage of all paupers
1861	59.0	43.0
1871	54.7	41.6
1881	65.2	44.1
1891	63.9	46.8
1901	64.5	48.7

Note: Axminster’s data calculated from numbers of paupers relieved on 1st January.

Source: Axminster: UKPP, Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January, 1861-1891; Pauperism (England and Wales). (Half-yearly Statements), 1901. (See Appendices A2.2 and A2.5 for full details).

5. Axminster Union: A Context of Pauperism

The local context of poverty in Axminster translated into very high levels of pauperism compared with national figures but the Union area was not exceptional compared to surrounding Unions, as many rural Unions in Devon, Dorset and other rural areas were all affected by high levels of poverty in the later nineteenth century. However, at two points - the early 1870s and later 1890s - Axminster became a focus for central attention and criticism focussed on poor law management as a cause of high levels of pauperism, fuelling perceptions of exceptional levels of pauperism in the Union. Local Government Inspector Wodehouse criticised Axminster as one of three Devon Unions (along with nearby Tiverton and Honiton) for its very high levels of pauperism which he linked to local poor law practices and the use of out-relief. He noted that 8.4% of Axminster’s population were paupers, although less than 8% were relieved in the workhouse and 85% of its expenditure went on out-relief.⁷⁴ After a period of relative quiescence in the 1880s Axminster again attracted attention in the 1890s when Inspector Preston-Thomas criticised Axminster for its ‘extraordinary’ level of pauperism in 1899. Once again Axminster was not alone in this; in 1900 Preston-Thomas commented that the West of England was ‘extraordinarily andunnecessarily’ pauperised.⁷⁵ Chapters 5 and 8 explore this criticism in depth.

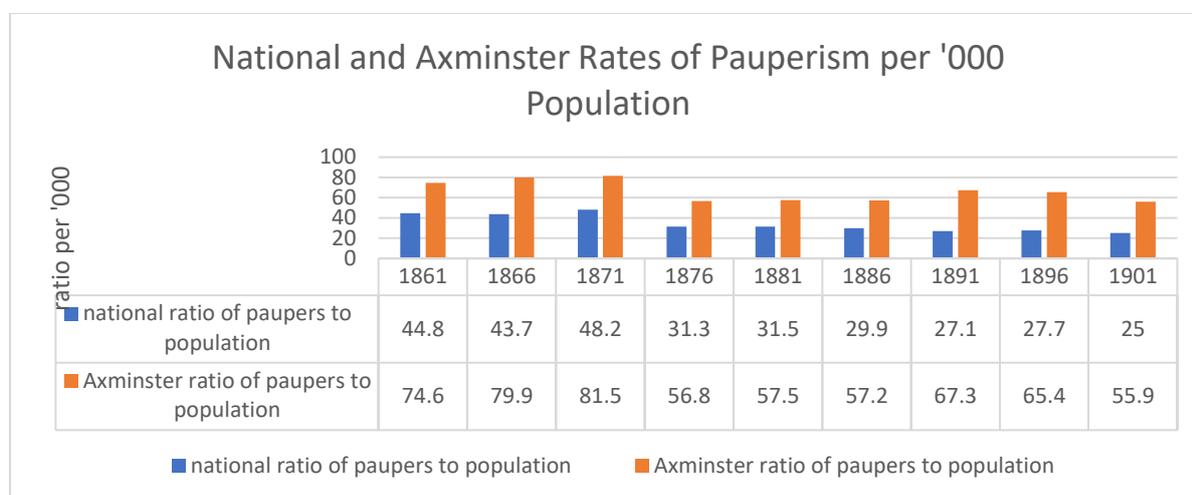
Figure 3.3 illustrates why the Central Authorities were so concerned. Axminster’s rate of pauperism always greatly exceeded national rates between 1861-1901. There was a limited following of national trends, especially in 1876, 1886 and 1901. Importantly, points of divergence occurred in

⁷⁴ UKPP, ‘Out-Door Relief. Report of Edmond H. Wodehouse Esq., Poor Law Inspector to the Right Hon. James Stansfield, M.P., on Out-Door Relief in Seventy Unions in the Counties of Berks, Cornwall, Devon, Dorset, Gloucester, Kent, Somerset, Southampton, Surrey, Sussex and Wilts, 23 June 1871. Appendix B, No. 29, First Report of the Local Government Board, 1871-72’, (1872 (C.516)), p. 96.

⁷⁵ UKPP, ‘Twenty-eighth Annual Report of the Local Government Board, 1898-99, Appendix B’, (1899 (C.9444)), p. 130; ‘Twenty-ninth Annual Report of the Local Government Board, 1899-1900, Appendix B’, (1900 (Cd.292)), pp 103-05.

1866, 1871 and in the 1890s, when Axminster's pauperism worsened compared with the national picture.

Figure 3.3: National and Axminster Rates of Pauperism Compared to Population



Sources: UKPP, Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January, 1861-1891; Pauperism (England and Wales). (Half-yearly Statements), 1901. (See Appendices A2.2 and A2.5 for full details).

The state of Axminster's pauperism is further illustrated when set in local context. As demonstrated above, extensive pauperism existed in the Axminster area throughout much of the nineteenth century, although this continuity hid significant changes in the demographic profile of paupers. In 1803 16.5% of Axminster Hundred's population were paupers.⁷⁶ This proportion is similar to that found by Williams in his analysis of Government Returns for what he described as a group of agricultural counties, but higher than the rates found for Devon or for England and Wales overall. As was usual at the time, the vast majority, over 80%, of Axminster's paupers were able-bodied.⁷⁷ Axminster Guardians evidently anticipated a high degree of pauperism after 1834, as their workhouse was built to accommodate over 400 paupers, one of the largest in Devon, despite the Union's relatively small population.⁷⁸ High levels continued into the 1850s. A Return of the number

⁷⁶ Axminster Hundred was similar though not contiguous with the Union area.

⁷⁷ Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty*, pp 147, 149-50; Percentages calculated from UKPP, 'Abstract of Answers and Returns under Act for procuring Returns relative to Expense and Maintenance of Poor in England', (1803-04 (175)), pp. 98-99, 114-15; 'Abstract of Answers and Returns under Act for taking Account of Population of Great Britain (Enumeration Abstract), 1801', (1801-02 (9)), pp. 66, 80, 90.

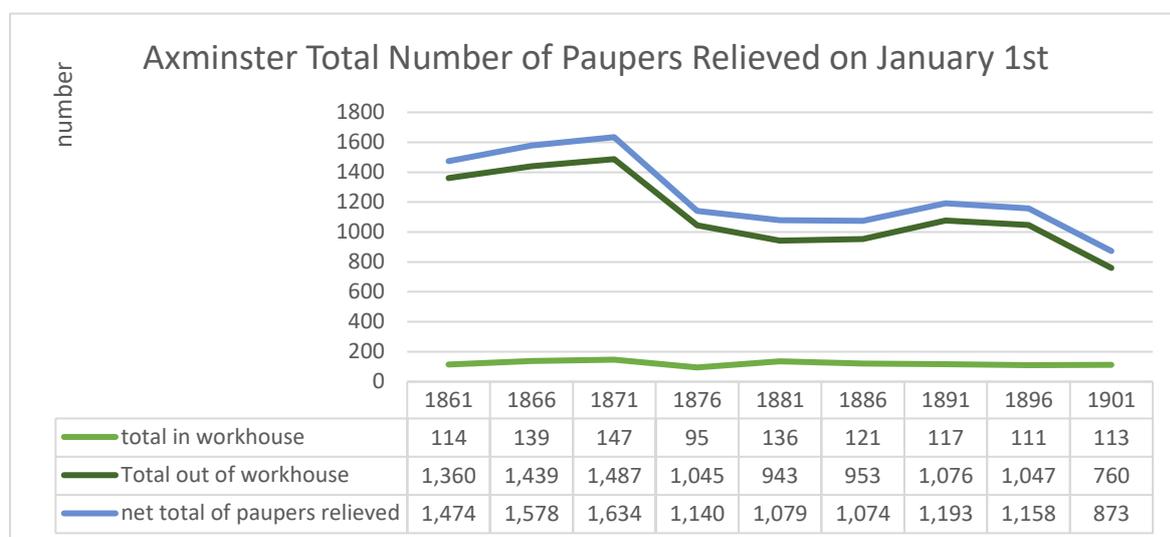
Questions of data accuracy need to be borne in mind - see Matthew Woollard, 'The Causes and Effects of Error Correction in the Population Totals of the 1801 Census of England and Wales', *Local Population Studies*, 81 (2008), 84-93.

⁷⁸ Axminster workhouse could accommodate 433 paupers. Axminster had the 6th biggest workhouse in Devon, but fourteen of the twenty Unions had a higher population. Axminster's population was 20,296. All those with bigger workhouses had populations over 32k. Adjacent Honiton had a population of 23,793 but workhouse accommodation for 250 people. UKPP, 'Returns of Population of every Union and Parish in England, Scotland and Ireland showing the Amount of Workhouse Accommodation, 1854', (1854-55 (524)), p. 3.

of paupers relieved in 1851 showed that 16% of Axminster’s population were paupers, compared with a rate in Devon 9.4% and 9.45% in England and Wales.⁷⁹

As can be seen in **Figure 3.4**, after reaching a high point in the early 1870s, pauper numbers fell. The fall in the numbers receiving out-relief was most dramatic, almost halving between 1871 and 1901, whilst the numbers in the workhouse remained fairly constant. The reduction can be partly explained by the changes outlined above and to a degree by revisions in policy discussed later in this thesis.

Figure 3.4: Axminster Paupers 1861-1901



Note: Based on 1 January Return of Pauper Numbers.

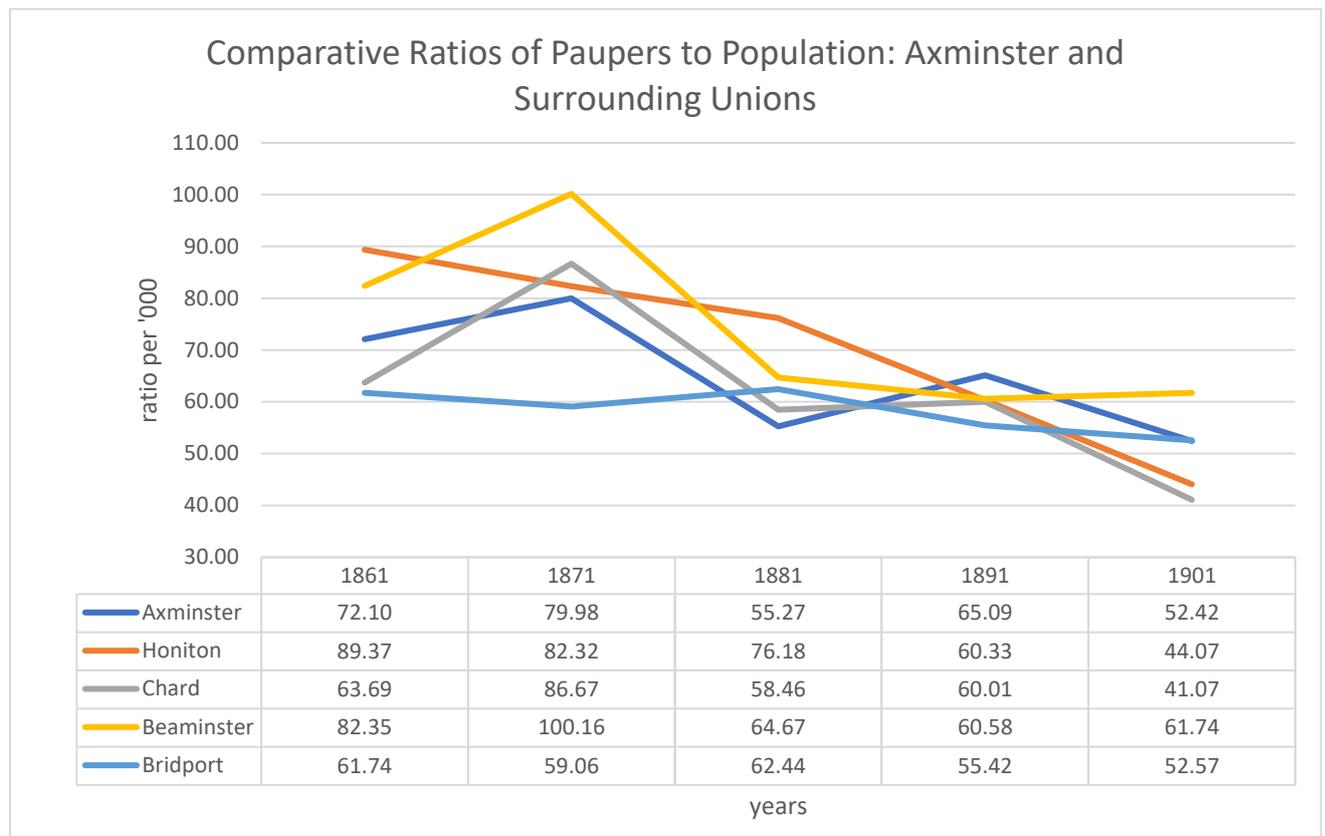
Source: ‘UKPP, Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January, 1861-1896’; ‘Pauperism (England and Wales). (Half-yearly Statements), 1901’. (See Appendices A2.2 and A2.5 for full details).

Pauperism was also endemic in the local area. The four Unions which surrounded Axminster also had very high levels of pauperism as can be seen in **Figure 3.5**. A Local Government report of 1892 found that Axminster and three of its surrounding Unions occupied position three to six in the list of most pauperised Unions in England and Wales.⁸⁰ If Axminster was at first no worse than its neighbours, its position deteriorated after 1886 and it had the highest level of pauperism amongst the five Unions in 1891 as shown in **Figure 3.5**.

⁷⁹ Data calculated from: UKPP, ‘Return of the Number of Paupers receiving In-door and Out-door Relief in Unions in England and Wales, 1849-1851’, (1852 (583)), pp. 4, 6; Return of Population, 1854, p. 3.

⁸⁰ UKPP, ‘Twenty-second Annual Report of the Local Government Board, 1892-93’, (1893-94 (C.7180)), p. xlviii.

Figure 3.5: Comparative Rates of Pauperism in Axminster and Surrounding Unions 1861-1901



Note: Calculated from 1st January Return of pauper numbers for Axminster and its adjacent Unions.
Source: UKPP, ‘Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January: 1860 and 1861’, (1860 (383B.I)), pp. 36-39; ‘Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January: 1870 and 1871’, (1871 (140B)), pp. 30-3; ‘Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January: 1880 and 1881’, (1881 (60B)), pp. 24-27; ‘Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January: 1890 and 1891’, (1890-91 (130B)), pp. 24-27; ‘Pauperism (England and Wales), (Half-yearly Statements)’, (1901 (73)), pp. 28-31.

Overall, as Section 5 has shown, Axminster’s pauperism was long-standing, extensive and endemic. Other local Unions were similarly affected and over time levels of pauperism in Axminster and all four of its surrounding Unions fell between 1861 and 1901. The rate of decline varied between Unions as seen in **Figure 3.5**, which suggests that this was due to a range of factors, not limited to economy and demography.

6. Conclusion

This contextual chapter focussed on structural causes of poverty in Axminster Union to contribute a background understanding of issues faced by the Union. Economy, demography and poverty in the West Country (and East Devon specifically) has not been extensively studied and therefore, the context of poverty in the area is little understood. Although Brassley and Hoskins identified the distinctive agricultural practices and fading industry in Devon as a cause of poverty in general terms,

this chapter has shown in greater detail that the Axminster Union area had some of the highest levels of poverty in the region, continuing throughout the period 1860-1901.⁸¹

A close analysis has revealed that although the management practices of the Axminster Guardians attracted censure for providing extensive poor relief and thus exacerbating pauperism, the high level of poverty in the area was in large part beyond the Guardians control. As elsewhere, the universal issues of poor health and other social issues caused poverty but Axminster was not exceptionally affected and broader assessment reveals that Axminster was not an unhealthy area. The two phases of very high pauperism which attracted attention from the Poor Law Authorities had different root causes. Pauperism in the 1870s was dominated by rural working age poverty, but by the 1890s the focus shifted to the elderly.

Poverty in the early 1870s was severely affected by rural stagnation and depression which mainly affected working aged people and their families. The economy of the Axminster area was undermined by deindustrialisation and a small-scale farming industry which lacked investment. This in turn helped perpetuate a low wage economy, especially for men working in the dominant agricultural industry between 1860-1880. In addition, over time employment opportunities for women were increasingly restricted and low paid. Working-aged poverty was exacerbated by a lack of alternative employment opportunities, a high level of low paid child employment in years prior to the Education Act (1870) (and loss of income subsequently), and poor housing conditions.⁸²

Although working-aged poverty continued throughout the period 1860-1901, from the early 1880s onwards, it became less prominent as a problem of pauperism. This was due to a range of reasons, but mainly because the impact of migration led to increased wages for those in employment.

Although the universal issue of poverty amongst the elderly was a continuing issue in the Axminster Union area, the second wave of pauperism which became dominant in the 1890s was caused by the increasing percentage of impoverished elderly inhabitants. Along with problems associated with age and infirmity, poverty for this group was exacerbated by a lack of funds in the absence of pensions or savings and in some cases by a lack of family support. This changing demography of the area resulted from long-term out-migration which was not balanced by inward migration. Evidence from Axminster suggests that migration was part of a wave of extensive migration from the West Country due to economic factors, such as those noted above.

⁸¹ Brassley, 'Devon Farming', pp. 1-22; Hoskins, *Devon*, p. 101.

⁸² *Elementary Education Act 1870* (33 & 34 Vict. c. 75) <<https://uk.westlaw.com/>> [accessed 18 July 2023]

Taking a broader view and putting these findings into context, MacKinnon's work on poor law policy and poverty demonstrates how adverse economic trends and changes in demography interacted to impact on levels of poverty and pauperism, which in turn resulted in high local poor rates, and ultimately contributed to the changing direction of central poor law policy and local practice from the 1860s onwards.⁸³ MacKinnon's statistical focus highlights regional diversity, with Southern England having higher levels of pauperism than the North due to low economic growth and declining population and despite the area being relatively unaffected by trade cycle downturns (such as the 1860s crisis caused by the cotton famine).⁸⁴ However, importantly she argues that poor people with the lowest real incomes did not benefit from rising incomes and living standards which were generally noted as occurring after 1870, and also that the elderly comprised the majority of paupers described as the 'not-able-bodied', thereby uncovering the extent of poverty and relief for the elderly aged over sixty.⁸⁵ Her findings accord with those for Axminster. The Union area suffered extensive depopulation and low economic growth and its population comprised high numbers of long-lived elderly people with very low real incomes once they were no longer working, alongside a low wage economy for many of the working aged population, thus fuelling the numbers needing poor relief. These factors worked in conjunction with each other to contribute to the increase in poor rates experienced in the Union area.

Finally, whilst poverty in the Axminster Union area was at times some of the worst in Devon the Union was not exceptional in this. Surrounding Unions in rural Devon/Dorset, along with many other rural and peripheral areas, also had high levels of poverty at this time. Indeed at the turn of the twentieth century the local Inspector believed that there was nothing exceptional in the Axminster Union area to cause the high levels of pauperism.⁸⁶ Consequently, rural poverty and local demography alone are insufficient to explain either the levels of pauperism or the criticism which the Union attracted from the Central Authorities. For answers to this, it is necessary to consider the local culture and approach to poor law management. How local did attitudes and actions impact on poverty, pauperism and local management more widely and how did they diverge from those of the central authorities? What was the impact of central-local relations?

⁸³ MacKinnon, 'English Poor Law Policy', 603-25; MacKinnon, 'Poor Law Policy', 299-336; MacKinnon, 'Poor Law Statistics', 5-19; Mary MacKinnon, 'Poverty and Policy: The English Poor Law, 1860-1910', *Journal of Economic History*, 46 (1986), 500-02.

⁸⁴ MacKinnon, 'Poor Law Policy', 299-336.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 299-336; MacKinnon, 'Poor Law Statistics', 5-19 (pp. 6, 9-11).

⁸⁶ UKPP, 'Twenty-ninth LGB Report', pp 103-05.

Chapter 4: Shaping the Local Response to Poverty and Poor Law Management: Guardians, Local Opinion and Localism

1. Introduction

A major focus for this thesis is how local Guardians influenced poor law policy and practice in the period 1860-1901. Guardians performed an important management function, standing between major poor law stakeholders: the Central Poor Law Authorities, local paupers, ratepayers and other inhabitants. These parties all had their own interests and perspectives and potentially pulled in different directions. Consequently, an understanding of the Guardians' perspective on the NPL is essential, especially in the light of Chapter 3's conclusion. Chapter 3 found that although the structural causes of Axminster's poverty and pauperism were severe, they were insufficient alone to explain the extent of pauperism and challenges encountered in Union administration. As this suggests, ultimately levels of pauperism were influenced by the approach and ethos of the local Guardians which was itself informed by local traditions and practice in poor law management.

Consequently Chapter 4 has a dual focus, firstly, introducing the Axminster Guardians as local managers of the poor law, considering their role, backgrounds and networks. Secondly it investigates the importance of local values and culture on poor law priorities and decision making, introducing the hypothesis that despite differences in their socio-economic backgrounds and in their outlook, Axminster Guardians shared a commitment to localism, the idea that local people knew better than Central Poor Law Authorities how to administer poor relief. An exploration of this localism provides an insight into why local autonomy was so embedded, valued and slow to change in Axminster, the impact of which on local poor law practice is explored in later chapters.

As argued in Chapter 1, until recently there has been little focus on the study of Guardians and their role in poor law management. In general historians have followed Sidney and Beatrice Webbs' negative assessment regarding the make-up and 'quality' of local boards as generally poor and inefficient.¹ More recently Steven King, Alysa Levene and Karen Rothery have identified the importance of Guardians in poor law history.² King, for example has called for more research into the character and composition of Boards, their influence on policy and practice, the importance of personality, and the nature and locus of power alongside spatial variability in policy and practice.³

¹ Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *English Poor Law History: Part II: The Last Hundred Years*, English Local Government Series, 8 and 9, 2 vols ([London]: [Longmans], 1929; repr. London: Cass, 1963), I, pp. 228-30.

² Steven King, 'Thinking and Rethinking the New Poor Law', *Local Population Studies*, 99 (2017), 5-19; Alysa Levene, 'The Future of Welfare History: The Local Perspective', *Local Population Studies*, 100 (2018), 33-42; Karen Rothery, 'Who Do They Think They Are?' An Analysis of the Boards of Guardians in Hertfordshire', *Local Population Studies*, 99 (2017), 20-30.

³ King, 'Thinking and Rethinking the New Poor Law', pp. 13-18.

Rothery and Geoff Hooker, for example, have started to address these questions. Rothery's study of Hertfordshire in the early years of the New Poor Law emphasises the often-neglected importance of Guardians in the administration of the NPL. She also notes significant and continuing elite participation within Guardian Boards and the impact of personality on poor law management, highlighting diversity in decision-making.⁴ Hooker's study of the Welsh Union of Llandilofawr, in contrast, found that power was vested solely in elected Guardians and a continuing element of 'belonging' at parish level shaping policy. Whilst elements of these conclusions mirror findings in Axminster, there are significant differences which will be outlined here and in later chapters.⁵

Localism, described by E.P. Hennock as the 'local provision of local wants, locally identified', exerted a powerful influence on local poor law practice during the nineteenth century.⁶ Keith Snell's *Parish and Belonging* demonstrates the continuing relevance of local attachment suggesting that belonging was 'socially, culturally and legally constructed' but also 'complex, subjective and culturally ingrained, based on different and often rival criteria, and intermeshed with administrative systems'.⁷ He highlights the persistence of localism into the twentieth century, despite a gradual move towards 'delocalisation' in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.⁸ As explored in this thesis, Axminster's localism applied at a wider geographical area than parish level, and was deeply embedded so that 'delocalisation' was very slow to take root.

Axminster Guardians' ingrained localism is relatively difficult to demonstrate. It was a way of thinking in which shared values were so assumed that they were not recorded and therefore not easily captured in the archive. Much of the evidence for localism emanates from behaviours and action (or inaction) recorded in response to challenges the Guardians faced, rather than what was said (or thought) in the course of poor law business. This relative lack of explanation for their actions contrasts with the situation found when discussing the approaches taken by Inspectors; overall Inspectors were eager to set out their thinking. To address this challenge Chapter 4 is organised so that Section 2 draws together demographics and data on the social composition of the Guardian Board, together with a deeper investigation into the background and outlook of key individuals, arguing that an over-arching localism, despite some differences of opinion and approach and sometimes fractious relationships, was the main influence on their decision-making. Section 3

⁴ Karen Rothery, 'The Implementation and Administration of the New Poor Law in Hertfordshire c.1830-1847' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Hertfordshire, 2017), pp. ii, 135-37, 148-49, 169, 173, 313-14.

⁵ Geoff Hooker, 'Llandilofawr Poor Law Union 1836-1886: The Most Difficult Union in Wales' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Leicester, 2013).

⁶ E.P. Hennock, 'Central/Local Government Relations in England: An Outline 1800-1950', *Urban History*, 9 (1982), 38-49 (pp. 38-39).

⁷ K.D.M. Snell, *Parish and Belonging: Community, Identity and Welfare in England and Wales, 1700-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 25, 496.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 1-27.

shows how this attitude and approach was a product of Axminster's political and social composition and power structures. Later chapters explore this further, showing in greater detail through case studies how localism shaped the approach to poor law and Union management in Axminster.

A variety of sources provide evidence for this chapter, including Guardian election Returns, Union Minutes, census information, trade directories and local histories. This information has been used to build and interrogate a database of Guardians for the period 1860-1901, which includes all elected Guardians who served Axminster Union, detailing the individuals' role, length of service and background and occupations (where known). The combination of resources facilitated a detailed analysis of the Guardian body, providing insights into its changing composition and characteristics. This method helped to overcome the obscurity of Axminster Guardians as invariably the individuals involved had a low profile and detail on them was limited. Despite this, some difficulties remained, such as identifying different individuals with the same or similar names.

Overall, the chapter provides context, explanation and evidence of the forces at work in shaping Axminster's ethos of localism which in turn shaped attitudes to the Poor Law. In conjunction with the two previous chapters the analysis here builds a picture of why the Union was out of step with the Central Authority and continued to experience high levels of poverty and pauperism. As later chapters demonstrate, this culture and approach was deeply entrenched and slow to change.

2. Axminster's Guardian Board: Composition and how Guardians Work Together

As Chapter 2 outlined, Boards of Guardians formed a new voluntary layer of local governance introduced after the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act, situated within a wider framework of Poor Law Administration and central supervision. Each Board comprised both elected and ex-officio members. The ex-officios comprised Justices of the Peace (JPs) who became Guardians by virtue of their position and residence in the Union area. They were the only non-elected category eligible for representation on the Board until removed following the 1894 Local Government Act.⁹ Guardians, standing between Centre, ratepayers and paupers played a crucial role in determining how the NPL was interpreted and actioned locally and held wide-ranging and increasing responsibilities during the nineteenth century. They forged a new path in local administration, sometimes superimposed upon or replacing older local processes and organisations and at others required to take up unprecedented new responsibilities. Over time the Guardian role grew in importance as Unions became the basis for local government outside municipal areas, reporting to a Central Authority

⁹ Webb and Webb, *Poor Law History*, I, pp. 119, 229, 232.

which sought greater consistency and uniformity of operation.¹⁰ As will be seen later in this thesis this created an environment for contest when views differed.

From 1861, until local government reorganisation in January 1895, the eighteen parishes in Axminster Union (shown on the Map in **Appendix A1.2**) were governed by a Guardian Board comprising thirty-one elected and a small number of active ex-officio Guardians. The three larger town parishes, Axminster, Colyton and Lyme Regis elected three Guardians each, the seven larger villages two and the eight small villages one each. The 1895 local government restructure had a substantial impact on Axminster Union, the impact of which is explored in depth in Chapter 8. Two parishes transferred to adjoining Unions and several other parishes merged or demerged. In thirteen of those remaining, Guardians assumed the responsibilities of Rural District Councillors alongside their Guardian roles, whilst two parishes, Seaton and Lyme Regis, became urban districts and returned separately elected Guardians to undertake poor law responsibilities. At the same time the number of Guardians/RDC councillors increased to thirty-three, increasing representation for the larger towns. The expanded remit of the Guardians/Councillors, along with a widened electorate and increased capacity to stand for election altered the composition of the Guardian body, explored further below.

2.1 Social Composition of the Guardian Body

What sort of people became Guardians? An analysis of the social demography of the Guardian body and the characteristics of people who undertook the role is acknowledged by historians as important in understanding their approach to Union management. The study by Bill Forsythe, Joseph Melling and Richard Adair of the Devon County Lunatic Asylum suggested that Axminster's Guardians were mainly yeomen and small manufacturers lacking 'social and political prestige'.¹¹ Their analysis echoes the Webbs' generally accepted, sweeping assessment of the status and calibre of Guardians. The Webbs argued that working Boards were composed of rural farmers and urban shopkeepers with little involvement from the elite classes.¹² However, an evaluation of Axminster's Guardians discussed below suggests that a more nuanced assessment is needed.

That said, an initial appraisal of the occupations of Axminster's elected Guardians in **Table 4.1** highlights that farmers/yeoman from smaller rural villages formed the most numerous category in each census year until 1901, comprising approximately two thirds of all Guardians until the mid-

¹⁰ Webb and Webb, *Poor Law History*, I, pp. 226-28.

¹¹ Bill Forsythe, Joseph Melling, and Richard Adair, 'The New Poor Law and the County Pauper Lunatic Asylum – The Devon Experience 1834-1884', *Social History of Medicine*, 9 (1996), p. 346.

¹² Webb and Webb, *Poor Law History*, I, pp. 228-30.

1890s. The remaining places, as detailed in **Appendix A4.1**, were taken by Guardians drawn from the clergy and commercial (mainly trades related to agriculture) and professional (mainly legal) occupations, changing in numbers and proportions over time. Participation in Guardianship by the upper ranks of local society in Axminster was limited to the ex-officio JPs and a very few elected minor gentry (Axminster's Chairman John Bently was one of these). Throughout the whole period 1860-1901 there is no evidence of any involvement of the upper classes of society such as nobility, MPs, or significant involvement of 'county' elites (Chairman George Cartwright is one possible exception). The significance of this absence is discussed in the following sections of this chapter. However as will be seen below the 'local elite' comprising JPs and a few local gentry played an important part in Union management.

Local Government reorganisation in 1895 resulted in an immediate and continuing reduction in the farming interest, a reintroduction of working lawyer Guardians and an expansion of retail, trade, manufacture and clergy interests. This very different Board resulted from the combination of a widened electorate, a greater range of candidates and responsibilities which extended in most cases beyond purely poor law matters: Guardians/Councillors now included women, no ex-officios but a smattering of the 'local elite' who stood for election. The impact of these changes is explored in later chapters.

Table 4.1: Occupations of Axminster’s Elected Guardians – by Number (Percentage) in Census Years 1861-1901

Occupation Category	1861	1871	1881	1891	1901
Gentry	1 (3%)	3 (9%)	1 (3%)	2 (6%)	0 (0%)
Agriculture	19 (61%)	21 (66%)	20 (64%)	22 (71%)	13 (39%)
Clergy	2 (6%)	0 (0%)	3 (10%)	2 (6%)	5 (15%)
Landowner	0 (0%)	2 (6%)	2 (6%)	1 (3%)	0 (0%)
Professional	3 (10%)	1 (3%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4 (12%)
Retail, Trade and Manufacturer	5 (16%)	2 (6%)	4 (13%)	3 (10%)	9 (28%)
Other	0 (0%)	1 (3%)	1 (3%)	1 (3%)	1 (3%)
Unknown	1 (3%)	2 (6%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (3%)
Total number of ‘working’ Guardians	32	32	31	31	33

Note: Guardians’ occupations are based on their self-description in the appropriate census, using judgement for retired Guardians and those with multiple occupations. Landowners are usually retired farmers, distinguishing them from gentry. The total number of Guardians in 1861 and 1871 includes the ex-officio Chairman, otherwise the table excludes ex-officios. After 1871 all formal positions were held by elected Guardians.

Source: *Census Returns for England and Wales*, (1861-1901). (See Appendix A4.1 and Bibliography for full details).

Guardianship entailed considerable financial and social responsibilities and any Board required a degree of competence and commitment to be successful. The profile of Axminster Guardians suggests they brought considerable life and practical experience to the role. For example, most had business interests and many were employers, although usually small-scale. Nearly all were middle-aged men or older with a mean age rising marginally from 46.9 in 1861 to 51.5 in 1901, (women were first elected in 1895).¹³ Many Guardians built up considerable experience on the Board through long service; twenty-nine Guardians provided ten or more years’ service between 1860 and 1901 with an average service in that period of nearly fifteen years.¹⁴ As this service (especially amongst farmers) was often in blocks of years rather than a continuous period it suggests an element of local coordination and organisation in sharing roles and accepting duties on behalf of the parish. Longevity of service suggests serving as a Guardian was valued and valuable but may also indicate there was little competition for the role; very few Guardians served for a single year. Active

¹³ Census Returns for England and Wales, (1861-1901) for Axminster Union area. See Appendix A4.1 and Bibliography for details.

¹⁴ DHC, Axminster Poor Law Union, PLU/Axminster/9-19, Axminster Guardians’ Minute Books, 1857-1903.

participation as a Guardian depended on meeting attendance and serving on Union Committees.¹⁵ Evidence from Axminster suggests attendance was generally good. From 1872 the local press listed attendees and from the later 1870s onwards yearly summaries were provided. As an example, twenty-six meetings were held in 1878-1879. Nine of the twenty-nine elected guardians listed (including the Chairman and Vice-Chairmen) attended twenty or more meetings, and nineteen half or more. There is no occupational pattern in non-attendance.¹⁶ The publication enabled ratepayers to see who was conscientious, but it is unclear whether a poor level of commitment raised concerns.

Following changes in electorate, eligibility and remit of the Guardian body, three women were elected RDC Councillor/Guardians in 1895 and two in the subsequent 1898 election. Two had strong connections with the clergy, and one was the wife of a businessman. All became members of the Union Visiting Committee, although it is unclear whether this membership was directed or by choice. None were on committees managing finance and none stood for election in 1901, but some then joined a new Women's Visiting Committee at the invitation of the Guardians.¹⁷ King's exploration of the work of female Guardians in Bolton found that there was little deep-rooted prejudice to the work of the new female Guardians on the grounds of gender and that women Guardians participated in full.¹⁸ The small amount of evidence highlighted here suggests King's conclusions hold for Axminster, but it also suggests that their power and sphere of influence was limited and circumscribed.

2.2 Working Together: The Power of Interest Groups

Sub-section 2.2 explores how Axminster's Guardians worked together, investigating formal and informal power structures and the potential impact of different groups within Axminster's Guardian body, whilst Sub-section 2.3 focusses on the role of individuals. As King argues, understanding where power rested and whether or how it changed provides a valuable insight into developing policy and practice and the direction of Union management.¹⁹ The literature reveals a range of findings in this respect. For example the question of the influence of the 'patrician elite' in Union

¹⁵ Active participation is rather subjective but here is used as a combination of length of service and levels of attendance. Rothery suggest 4 years or more service and attendance at half meetings. Rothery, "Who Do They Think They Are?", p. 29.

¹⁶ 'Axminster Board of Guardians', *Pulman's Weekly News and Advertiser*, 18 March 1879, p. 7.

¹⁷ DHC, Axminster Poor Law Union, PLU/Axminster/17, Axminster Guardians' Minute Book 1895-1897, Minutes, 10 January 1895, pp. 1-6; DHC, Axminster Poor Law Union, PLU/Axminster/18, Axminster Guardians' Minute Book 1897-1900, Minutes, 28 April 1898, pp. 52-54; DHC, Axminster Poor Law Union, PLU/Axminster/19, Axminster Guardians' Minute Book 1900-1903, Minutes, 25 April 1901, pp. 60-63; 'Ann Bucknole' (1891) *Census Return for Axminster, Devon*. TNA: RG 12/1667, f.15, p. 21; 'Agnes Elton' (1871) *Census Returns for Whitestaunton, Somerset*. TNA: RG 10/2404 f.97, p. 1; 'Madelina Woodcock' (1891), *Census Return for Chardstock, Dorset*. RG 12/1668, f.27, p. 5.

¹⁸ Steven King, "'We Might Be Trusted': Female Poor Law Guardians and the Development of the New Poor Law: The Case of Bolton, England, 1880-1906", *International Review of Social History*, 49 (2004), 27-46; Steven King, *Women, Welfare and Local Politics 1880-1920: 'We Might Be Trusted'* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2006).

¹⁹ King, 'Thinking and Rethinking the New Poor Law', pp. 15-16.

management has been widely debated. The Webbs' suggested that the upper-class elite, (including ex-officio JPs) showed little interest in local NPL management after an initial burst of enthusiasm post 1834.²⁰ Rothery contests this view, demonstrating the persistence of elite involvement after 1834 in her sample of Hertfordshire Guardians, whilst Elizabeth Hurren found that a patrician elite which included the 5th Earl Spencer and the MP Albert Pell were able to exercise influence nationally and to dominate the Brixworth Board in the 'crusade' era.²¹ Hooker meanwhile finds a different 'elite' grouping exercising power in Llandilofawr in the first fifty years of the NPL. He argues that the local gentry and ex-officio magistrates took no meaningful role in Union management and that elected farmers, led by a dominant individual controlled the Union.²² Hurren too finds that farmers played an important role shaping 'crusade' policy.²³

Overall the literature suggests considerable diversity in Guardian Boards. The position in Axminster provides yet another perspective, noting the continuing influence of the 'local elite' and the impact of local economic interest and other social groups. In contrast with the studies noted above, whilst there is evidence of groups such as farmers seeking to shape policy in their own interests, they did not dominate decision making overall.

However, as found by Rothery in Hertfordshire, formal power in Axminster's Board of Guardians was concentrated in a small group of Guardians.²⁴ Several positions of formal power derived from the Board structure, most prominent being Chairman, Vice-Chairmen and the two financial committees. The powerful Assessment Committee, which set the poor rate typically involved the Chairman and ex-officio Guardians. In 1879 for example, the twelve-man Assessment Committee included four ex-officios, the Chairman and both Vice chairs, together forming a majority.²⁵ In Axminster the formal power exercised by Chairman and Vice-Chairmen was bolstered by a strong element of continuity. Except for a single year, the Union had only two Chairmen in the period 1860-1901: ex-officio George Cartwright, and the elected John Cox Bently, neither of whom were ever challenged for the position. The position of Vice-Chairman was more often contested. However, most Vice-Chairmen were long serving and the appointment was almost always based on long service and experience.

²⁰ Webb and Webb, *Poor Law History*, I, p. 229.

²¹ Rothery, 'Implementation and Administration of the New Poor Law', p. ii; Rothery, "Who Do They Think They Are?", pp. 20-30; Elizabeth T. Hurren, 'Labourers Are Revolting: Penalising the Poor and a Political Reaction in the Brixworth Union, Northamptonshire, 1875-1885', *Rural History*, 11 (2000), 37-55; Elizabeth T. Hurren, *Protesting about Pauperism: Poverty, Politics and Poor Relief in Late-Victorian England, 1870-1900* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press for the Royal Historical Society, 2007), pp. 108-12, 117.

²² Hooker, Llandilofawr Poor Law Union, p. i.

²³ Hurren, *Protesting about Pauperism*, p. 117.

²⁴ Rothery, "Who Do They Think They Are?", pp. 20-30.

²⁵ DHC, Axminster Poor Law Union, PLU/Axminster/12, Axminster Guardians' Minute Book 1876-1879, Minutes, 24 April 1879, p. 373.

Excluding Bently, the thirteen elected Guardians who became Vice-Chair served over twelve years as Guardians, and over five years as Vice-Chairman (see **Appendix A4.2**). This suggests that knowledge built up over time was highly valued by the Guardians as a body, a point made by Bently when the Centre suggested that the mid-term appointment of Thomas Woolmington to a small parish was unnecessary.²⁶ Importantly, however, as a counterpoint, a range of occupations and interests was represented in the combined leadership roles on the Board. As summarised in **Appendix A4.3**, at least one Vice-Chair always had a non-farming occupation, such as the clergy, professions, gentry, or merchants. These positions were elected yearly suggesting this mix was a deliberate policy.

An evaluation of Axminster's Guardians suggests that a more nuanced assessment on the role of elites is needed than that offered by Forsythe, Melling and Adair or the Webbs.²⁷ There is evidence that Axminster's 'local elite' comprising primarily ex-officio JPs actively took part in Union management until the ex-officio role was abolished by the Local Government Act (1894). Their participation was most pronounced between 1860 and 1871 when the ex-officio Cartwright was Chairman. Subsequently various ex-officios showed a continuing but somewhat detached interest. They were routinely involved in financial aspects such as the Assessment Committee, (presumably to protect their position as ratepayers) and through attendance at Guardian meetings, (particularly evident at significant and crisis moments, such as investigating the fraud perpetrated by a Union Relieving Officer discussed in Chapter 7). Axminster experienced an increase in 'local elite' interest in governance after 1894. The removal of the automatic right of a seat on the Guardian Board for JPs resulted in a flurry of interest in seeking election to the new Rural District Council, a role which encompassed both poor law and wider local matters. In addition after 1894 there was greater involvement in local government by landowning families such as Axminster's William Knight.²⁸

However, this 'local elite' influence should not be overstated; instead, there appears to be a balance of views and a collaborative approach to decision making especially evident in the approach to the Centre for much of the period, despite the fractious relationships of the 1870s, discussed and evidenced in Chapters 5 and 6. There is no evidence that great wealth, power or extensive patronage played a significant role within Axminster's Guardian Board. As highlighted above no

²⁶ TNA: MH 12/2115, Axminster Correspondence, July 1886- December 1888, 46396/1887, Forward, Axminster's Clerk to LGB requesting election, 11 May 1887; 46396/A/1887, LGB to Forward suggesting unnecessary due to size, 31 May 1887; 56285/1887, Forward to LGB, objecting small size should not be an issue, adding that Woolmington was valuable for knowledge of poor people outside his own parish. Axminster also concerned about precedent. LGB concede in attached manuscript note, 9 June 1887.

²⁷ Forsythe, Melling and Adair, 'New Poor Law and County Pauper Lunatic Asylum', p. 346; Webb and Webb, *Poor Law History*, I, p. 229.

²⁸ In 1873 William's father Henry Knight owned nearly 3,000 acres in Axminster. In addition, the Knight family were Lords of Axminster Manor. *England and Wales. (Exclusive of the Metropolis). Return of Owners of Land, 1873*, 2 vols (London: HMSO, 1875), I, Devon, p. 34 <<https://www.ancestry.co.uk>> [accessed 31 December 2022]

peers, high-profile Guardians or those with a direct line to the Centre (as found by Hurren in the celebrity Union of Brixworth) and negligible numbers of the 'county elite' or large landowners, became Guardians in Axminster.²⁹ The occupations of Guardians suggest that the majority emanated from relatively modest backgrounds (see **Appendix A4.1**). It raises the question as to whether they were held back by their lack of 'social and political prestige' as suggested by Forsythe, Melling and Adair.³⁰ This is addressed in later chapters of this thesis. Few elected Guardians were described as gentlemen, although Bently was intermittently identified as such in election Returns or in the census. Alone amongst the parishes, the former parliamentary borough of Lyme Regis routinely chose middle-class non-farmer Guardians such as Robert Hillman, a solicitor who was Vice-Chair in the 1860s (see **Appendices A4.3, A4.4**). Overall this varied involvement of elected Guardians and JPs in Axminster suggests a diversity of Board composition in Axminster similar to that outlined in Rothery's study, rather than following the dominance of elected Guardians found by Hooker in Wales.³¹

Historians have questioned the extent to which individuals and groups used their position as Guardians for their own advantage. King suggests the actions of Guardian Boards represented a 'deliberate and deliberated policy' reflecting increasingly sophisticated economics of welfare.³² Douglas Brown argues that Guardians had considerable freedom in the granting of supply contracts for example.³³ In Axminster this patronage is not overtly evident in supply contracts as these were openly advertised in the local press. However, there was a strong local preference exhibited in most senior staff appointments between the 1870s and 1890s, such as workhouse master, matron, and relieving officers who were of local birth, suggesting that patronage may have played a part.³⁴ Evidence of economic protection and manipulation appears limited, but as explored briefly below, and in the following chapters there is some evidence that Axminster's Guardians acted to protect their financial interests and those of their peers, by providing relief in the form of 'aid in wages' in the 1870s. Overall, being a guardian in Axminster was not financially advantageous; for example Thomas Trott had to resign a produce contract on becoming a Guardian in 1893.³⁵

²⁹ Hurren, *Protesting about Pauperism*.

³⁰ Forsythe, Melling, and Adair, 'New Poor Law and County Pauper Lunatic Asylum', p. 346.

³¹ Rothery, 'Who Do They Think They Are?', 20-30; Hooker, 'Llandilofawr Poor Law Union'.

³² King, 'Thinking and Rethinking the New Poor Law', p. 13.

³³ Douglas H.L. Brown, 'The Caprice of a Local Board of Guardians': Geographies of New Poor Law Procurement in England and Wales', *Business History*, 63 (2021), 225-48.

³⁴ For example see Census, 'Axminster Workhouse' (1881, 1891) *Census Returns for Axminster, Devon*. TNA: RG 11/2127, f.73, p. 5; RG 12/1667, f.123, p.1; Relieving Officer: 'William Halse' (1881) *Census Returns for Musbury, Devon*. TNA: RG 11/2130, f.5, p. 1; Relieving Officer: 'Samuel Griffin' (1891) *Census Returns for Axminster, Devon*. TNA: RG 12/1667, f.9, p. 10.

³⁵ DHC, Axminster Poor Law Union, PLU/Axminster/16, Axminster Guardians' Minute Book 1891-1894, Minutes, 6 April 1893, p. 189.

The large number of farmer Guardians in Axminster before 1895, raises questions about the power of this economic bloc and the extent to which they acted to protect their self-interest in areas such as wage supplements for employees, in gaining contracts for associates, or in reducing rates. Until the changes of 1895, apart from three short periods between 1860 and 1875 farmers, or retired farmers always occupied one of the Vice-Chair positions (**Appendix A4.3**) and over 65% of Guardians serving 10 years or more 1860-1901 were farmers.³⁶ But whilst represented, their interest was not completely dominant on Boards or in Axminster society, as most were small scale farmers and their influence was limited by the balance of other interests. Most farmer Guardians farmed small to medium sized acreages, rising from an average of 192 acres in 1861 to 224 acres in 1881. In 1861 the smallest farm comprised 56 acres, falling to 19 in 1881. Most had few or no employees, relying on family assistance to get work done. The 1861 Census reveals that the mean number of farmer Guardian employees was 4.5 men in 1861 falling to 3.8 in 1881 with fewer than two boys employed in both years. Women were employed on one farm only: two in 1861 and one in 1881.³⁷ However, it does appear that farmers interests were being addressed on the Board even if most evidence is circumstantial. For example, collectively they were not disruptive, suggesting they were satisfied that their interests were protected. Axminster's Guardian Minutes show that farmer Guardians, although often long serving, rarely mention dissatisfaction and focussed on issues affecting their parish such as the specifics on relief cases rather than the Guardians' wider governance role.³⁸ When the Guardian/RDC role changed in 1895 farmer numbers dropped dramatically, losing a Vice-Chair position. Subsequently, only a small number of outlying parishes returned farmers. It seems likely that the changed remit of the RDC meant that working farmers had insufficient time or interest to devote a role that had a wider remit, but further research would be necessary to confirm this.

Looking more widely, whilst **Table 4.1** confirms that neither the Webbs' 'urban shopkeepers' nor Forsythe's 'manufacturers' formed a significant power bloc in Axminster between 1861 and 1891, business occupations combined with middle class, gentry, landowners, professions and clergy comprised at least a third of all Guardians in Axminster at most points between 1860 and 1901 and 35% of all Guardians who served over ten years came from these varied occupations. This acted as a counterpoint to the farming interest and together provided a breadth of experience on Boards. Records from meetings suggest a variety of views were heard especially in the 1870s and later

³⁶ DHC, PLU/Axminster/9-19, Axminster Guardians' Minute Books, 1857-1903.

³⁷ Where no boys or women mentioned as employees the Return was counted as nil; women employed on one farm only. *Census Returns for England and Wales*, Axminster Union Area (1861, 1881), (See Appendix A4.1 and Bibliography for full details).

³⁸ DHC, Axminster Poor Law Union, PLU/Axminster/10-19, Axminster Guardians' Minute Books 1865-1903.

1890s, points of change in the Union's outlook. There is little evidence that larger, richer town parishes such as Axminster, Colyton or Lyme Regis, with more Guardians dominated Union business through forming power bases or exercising greater power or influence. Over time the positions of Chair and Vice-Chairs gravitated away from the more populous centres such as Axminster, Lyme Regis and Colyton. In the 1860s senior positions were held primarily by Guardians from these towns but after 1880 all the positions were in the hands of Guardians from village parishes, with Vice-Chair Reverend Curgenvin representing the smallest of all, Rousdon, with only 44 residents in 1881. Overall therefore, and in contrast with the findings of other historians, there is no evidence of 'elite' dominance in Axminster, and although farmers were usually numerous, they did not dominate the Union and decisions recorded in the Minutes do not appear to benefit solely one group.

2.3 Working Together: The Influence of Key Individual Guardians

Given the limited influence of 'power blocs', the influence of individuals becomes more significant. This sub-section explores the role of six key individuals as examples of the way those with strong opinions contributed to the shaping of local poor law policy and practice.

A brief comparison of two Chairmen, George Cartwright (1811-1875) and John Cox Bently, (1823-1909) shows how their background and motivation informed their actions during their time in office, highlighting points of similarity and difference which had an impact on their approach to poor law management.³⁹ Cartwright was Chairman prior to 1860 and with the exception of one year (1864-65) remained in office until 1871. Bently was then Chairman until his death in 1909 (see **Appendix A4.4**). Both were 'gentry' and so in essence members of the 'local elite' although of a differing status, as Cartwright, unlike Bently, had 'county' connections. The Minutes suggest that both were well thought of, hardly ever subject to personal criticism and never opposed as Chair in yearly elections, or (in the case of Bently) for election in his parish. Cartwright, a former naval officer was not of local birth.⁴⁰ His grandfather was the notable industrialist Edmund Cartwright (of power loom fame) and great-uncle John Cartwright an early radical political reformer, (although there is no indication that Cartwright shared these beliefs).⁴¹ His approach to poor law management and pressure from Inspectors, as seen in Chapter 5, appears to be one of accommodation and

³⁹ 'Deaths, George Cartwright', *Blandford and Wimborne Telegram*, 12 November 1875, p. 9; 'Death of Mr J. C. Bently. A well-known figure passes away', *Chard and Ilminster News*, 12 June 1909, p. 3. Years of service set out in Appendix A4.2 and A4.3.

⁴⁰ 'George Cartwright' (1851) *Census Returns for Lyme Regis, Dorset*. TNA: HO 107/1862, f.38, p. 26.

⁴¹ David Hunt, 'Cartwright, Edmund (1743–1823), Church of England Clergyman and Inventor of a Power Loom', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), <<https://doi-org.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/10.1093/ref:odnb/4813>>; Rory T. Cornish, 'Cartwright, John (1740–1824), Political Reformer', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), <<https://doi-org.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/10.1093/ref:odnb/4817>>

moderation: he retained good relationships with the Centre as well as in the locality and during his chairmanship there was no evidence of the overt localism that characterised Bently. Bently's gentry ancestry was firmly based in the immediate area. Whilst he described himself as a gentleman on Guardian election notices, the census reveals him to be a relatively small landowner/farmer and a bachelor, living with his brother and a disabled stepsister.⁴² It appears this background fostered a strong local focus in Bently's outlook. It meant he had the time and means to devote to his interests, two of which were the poor people of the area and managing the Union. Bently's ethos was rooted in paternalism. On his death in 1909 his obituaries noted that he developed an extensive knowledge of local poor people which meant he knew personally or knew of those who sought relief. He also had a considerable interest in assisting them beyond the constraints of the Poor Law, for example, acting as secretary of the local Agricultural Benevolent Society. Making an allowance for the effusiveness of an obituary, *Chard and Ilminster News* summarised Bently's approach as follows:

Of a kind disposition and cheery manner, [he] took a keen interest in all movements that tended to promote the well-being of those - especially the poorer classes - among whom he resided. At Christmas time the poor people of Chardstock always received appreciable gifts from his hands. A man of strict integrity; a man whose word was his bond, he will be greatly missed... At the meetings of the Guardians and District Council Mr Bently was not an "easy going" chairman, but rather held sway in no uncertain manner, upheld decorum in debate, and was a stickler for adhering to the standing orders. In politics he was a staunch Conservative.⁴³

Bently's defining characteristics in his approach to poor law management, as will be seen in later chapters, was a determined localism, anti-centralism and paternalism. As new national approaches to local governance emerged at the end of the nineteenth century based more on bureaucratic and impersonal knowledge, this older-fashioned paternalism became increasingly out of date. However under Bently's leadership and influence it persisted in Axminster's poor law management long after what David Roberts believed was the highwater mark of rural paternalism in the mid-nineteenth century.⁴⁴

⁴² For example 'John Bently', (1891, 1901), *Census Returns for Chardstock*. TNA: RG 12/1668 f.28, p. 8; RG 13/2018, f.18, p. 1.

⁴³ 'Death of Mr J. C. Bently', *Chard and Ilminster News*, 12 June 1909, p. 3. See also: 'The Late Mr J. C. Bently. Axminster Guardians' Sympathy', *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 11 June 1909, p. 15; 'An Axminster Worthy', *Western Times*, 18 June 1909, p. 6.

⁴⁴ David Roberts, *Paternalism in Early Victorian England* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1979), pp. 1-10, 136-39, 223-29, 256-58, 269-78.

Despite differences in background, both Cartwright and Bently regarded public service as important and combined their work as Guardians with other civic roles. Cartwright held many public roles over a long period, serving as magistrate, churchwarden, sometime Mayor of Lyme Regis alongside his role as a Deputy Lieutenant of Dorset.⁴⁵ However his participation in the Axminster Board fell away following a second marriage and declining health, whereas Bently, until his later years was assiduous in attendance which allowed him over time to dominate proceedings.⁴⁶ In Bently's case it seems public service played a central role in his way of life. He had been a Guardian for thirty-seven years by 1901, mostly as Chairman and remained as Chair until his death (attributed to 'senile decay') in 1909. He also became Chairman of the Rural District Council and ultimately a JP himself by virtue of that office.⁴⁷

Whilst the contribution of most Guardians remained relatively low key, over the period 1860-1901 a few individual Guardians stand out, whether causing tension by challenging the local consensus (John Mitchell and James Boon in the 1870s and James Coate in the 1880s and 1890s) or as an organisational innovator (William Knight in the 1890s). Their individual impact on local practice is discussed in later chapters, but it is worth noting here that all were non-farmers. Mitchell, Boon and Coate all had successful commercial business backgrounds which probably contributed to their independent and outspoken attitudes. Both Mitchell and Coate had local origins and modest backgrounds, subsequently making their fortunes in London, Mitchell as a builder and Coate as a brush maker. Both returned to the Union area, Mitchell in retirement in the 1860s, and Coate to establish his brush-making business in Axminster which was in business by 1880 and ultimately employed more than one hundred staff.⁴⁸ Newspaper reports show that both they and Boon had very powerful personalities were outspoken and did not mind challenging the Board. After both Boon and Mitchell left the Guardian body intra-guardian relationships became more cordial. Coate had wide ranging interests including a strong support of Conservatism but as his obituary noted, 'he was always outspoken', had 'moods which were sometimes misunderstood' and disrupted the consensus of the late 1880s-1890s Board.⁴⁹ Although elderly when he became a Guardian, he openly championed new ideas, for example, attending a Poor Law conference at his own expense.⁵⁰ However he could not accept failure, for example in 1889 he caused disruption by challenging his

⁴⁵ 'George Cartwright', Census 1851; 'Commissions signed by the Lord Lieutenant of ... Dorset', *London Gazette*, 21407, 1 February 1853, p. 263.

⁴⁶ DHC: PLU/Axminster/9-21, Axminster Guardians' Minute Books 1857-1909.

⁴⁷ 'Death of Mr. J.C. Bently ...', *Chard and Ilminster News*, 12 June 1909, p. 3.

⁴⁸ 'John Mitchell' (1851) *Census Returns for Chelsea, Middlesex*. TNA: HO 107/1474, f.309, p. 44, (1861) *Census Returns for Willesden, Middlesex*, RG 9/785, f.66, p. 1; 'James Coate' (1861) *Census Returns for Westminster St. Anne, Middlesex*. RG 9/176, f.23, p. 51; Geoffrey Chapman, *A History of Axminster to 1910* (Honiton: Marwood Publications, 1998), p. 157.

⁴⁹ 'Death of Mr Coate, of Axminster', *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette* 17 January 1907, p. 3.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 17 January 1907, p. 3.

failure to secure election to the Guardian Board (without success).⁵¹ Knight, a solicitor, and a Guardian in the later 1890s differed from the challengers in that he was part of Axminster's 'local elite', son of the owner of Axminster Manor and one of the largest landowners in Axminster parish.⁵² He worked alongside the Union's leadership to achieve change and innovation as will be seen in Chapter 8.

Mitchell was the most outspoken and disruptive of these Guardians, and so an understanding of his background is useful. After his return from London, Mitchell described himself as a gentleman and magistrate and he was an elected Guardian for Lyme Regis between 1870 and 1878. Politically he was a radical, sharing a platform with the agricultural trade unionists Joseph Arch and George Mitchell in several mass protests in the early 1870s. Unusually amongst Axminster Guardians, Mitchell frequently articulated his views on the Poor Law and exhibited hostility towards Axminster Guardians' relief policy and financial management for example as will be seen in Chapters 5 and 6.⁵³ Mitchell died unexpectedly in 1877. Bently's acknowledgement of this in the Minutes was circumspect: 'they [the Guardians] must all have appreciated his outspoken conduct and although he had his peculiarities they doubtless ... regretted his sudden decease'.⁵⁴ The Guardian body was more challenging towards the Centre when he was in office, suggesting Mitchell was able to influence its direction, as will be seen in Chapters 5 and 6.

In conclusion, when surveying the characteristics of the Guardians as a Board in Section 2 there is little evidence in the Minutes of sectional interests (other than farming to a limited extent) or group affiliations holding an over-riding influence in decision-making, though several individuals with strong opinions did contribute to the shape of local poor law politics. In addition, a close reading of the Guardian Minutes does not reveal any significant collective influence on policy arising from party politics, temperance, religious affiliation (despite the increased presence of the clergy after the mid-1870s), social status or (latterly) gender. Although evidence is somewhat patchy, the one element which linked them overall, although expressed in different ways, was an over-riding localism which did not change significantly over time. This is explored in Section 3.

⁵¹ 'Axminster Board of Guardians', *Chard and Ilminster News*, 11 May 1889, p.5; 'Axminster', *Chard and Ilminster News*, 25 May 1889, p. 5.

⁵² *Kelly's Directory of Devonshire* (London: Kelly, 1889), pp. 32-36; *Kelly's Directory of Devonshire and Cornwall* (London: Kelly, 1902), p. 41.

⁵³ DHC, PLU/Axminster/12, Minutes, 3 February 1876 p. 12, 17 February 1876, p. 17, 2 March 1876, p. 21; 'ABG', *Chard and Ilminster News*, 5 February 1876, p. 3, 19 February 1876, p. 3, 4 March 1876, p. 3.

⁵⁴ DHC, PLU/Axminster/12, Minutes, 6 December 1877, p. 214.

3. The Axminster Area's Culture and Outlook: An Over-Arching Localism

Section 3 makes the case that localism, rooted in a strong sense of local priority formed the basis of Axminster's approach to poor law management. This localism was a product of the interconnectedness of local people, the geographic situation, the influence of middling ranks of society, and a view that local governance was working well and did not need central interference or to change. Axminster's Guardians' attitude and approach was a product of Axminster's political and social composition and power structures, which in turn informed a determined localism, an approach which encapsulated the belief that local people knew better than Central Poor Law Authorities how to administer poor relief. This hypothesis is explored in the following chapters.

Localism is pertinent to the management of Axminster Union because it set the Union on a collision course with national poor law policy. The Union's approach was increasingly at odds with latest thinking on social and poor law policy and practice, which emphasised greater uniformity in the delivery of services and pushed for common standards in provision, for example in the delivery of medical services through poor law institutions. Axminster's localism was more than a provincial chauvinism, being grounded in a coherent set of values based on long standing community knowledge, history and social relations. These values contrasted with the increasing importance attached to bureaucratic knowledge in national policy. The Union's ethos of localism encompassed a local version of a 'moral economy' and paternalism and comprised, until it started to give way in the 1890s, an acceptance of rights for locally settled poor people to relief and a right of ratepayers to economy, with individual consideration of applications and continuing out-relief for settled claimants. Otherwise economy was prioritised, in areas such as relief provided for vagrants, workhouse conditions and medical 'extras'.⁵⁵

3.1 A Context of Entrenched Localism

The background context of local society and governance in Axminster contributes towards understanding the local approach to poor law management. Although difficult to evidence in concrete terms, the local culture in the Union area provides a sense of the underlying local

⁵⁵ As discussed in Chapter 1, the concept of 'moral economy' explored by E. P. Thompson in an eighteenth century context, focussed on poor peoples' rights of access and entitlement to 'necessities' and included the element of protest against the practices of authorities in defence of these rights. Subsequent research by historians such as Lynn Hollen Lees and Keith Snell broadens the general definition to include customary rights, parish settlement, belonging and rights to poor relief and the Poor Law generally in the nineteenth century. E. P. Thompson, 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century', *Past & Present*, 50 (1971), 76-136; E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (London, Penguin, 1993, pp 259-352; Lynn Hollen Lees, *The Solidarities of Strangers: The English Poor Laws and the People, 1700-1948* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 74-81; K.D.M. Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor: Social Change and Agrarian England, 1660-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, p. 112; K.D.M. Snell, *Parish and Belonging: Community, Identity and Welfare in England and Wales, 1700-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 132.

perspective towards the NPL, centralisation and local governance. Entrenched localism was largely shaped by influences such as the nature of local society, its economic fortunes, geography, history, background in local government and frequent administrative change. This created an environment where autonomy was intrinsically valued and tenaciously retained in a reaction to destabilising change, bolstered particularly before the 1880s, by an anti-centrist local press.

The culture of independence in local governance was reinforced by the area's understanding of its local history and traditions. George Pulman, an unwavering advocate of localism produced a comprehensive local history, *The Book of the Axe*, which was in its 4th edition by the 1870s.⁵⁶ This promoted the local traditions of the area, its ancient royal and monastic antecedents in Axminster, and its background in religious non-conformist dissent and rebellion. These histories were well known and recited in local trade directories and informed a strong sense of local separatism.

A strong local attachment was also fostered by local social leaders who comprised the 'middling ranks' of local society. This group were important because, in line with the discussion in Section 2, there were few very large landowners or grandees exercising influence in the towns or in most of the rural parishes. Where the upper ranks did exist, they were largely absent or low profile and there is no evidence that they objected to the local approach taken by the Guardians.⁵⁷ As an example, for several centuries Axminster's Lord of the Manor had been an absentee landlord managing the Manor hands-off as a Catholic (in a strongly Protestant area), so that the extensive holdings had been run by stewards. For much of the mid-nineteenth century this absence of a local landlord powerbase became even more pronounced, as following sale by the Petre Estate the ownership of the Manor was disputed in Chancery.⁵⁸ In the resulting stasis residual manorial influence decayed. Consequently 'middling rank' ratepayers, a mixture of smaller landowners, farmers, middle-class professionals and tradesmen, had a substantial influence on how the area was governed. Many of these people had deep roots in the area and ties of relationship, even if distant, which created a strong local attachment and perspective.

The extent of local focus can be seen in the relationships and networks established within the Union organisation and more widely in the area. There appears to have been a strong element of connection between Guardians and the local inhabitants creating a community of interest, which

⁵⁶ George P. R. Pulman, *The Book of the Axe*, 4th edn ([n.p.]: [n.pub.], 1875; repr. Bath: Kingsmead Reprints, 1975).

⁵⁷ The 1873 Return of Owners of Land noted 6 landowners with addresses in the Union area holding more than 1000 acres, the largest of which, held by Henry Knight of Axminster was less than 3000 acres. *England, Return of Owners of Land, 1873*, I, Devon, p. 34 <<https://www.ancestry.co.uk>> [accessed 31 December 2022]

⁵⁸ The Essex based Petre Estate owned the extensive lands of Axminster Manor from the early seventeenth century until it began to be broken up in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The question of ownership was finally settled in 1872. Chapman, *A History of Axminster*, pp 38-39, 139.

may be partly explained by the local origins of most of the Guardians. The census reveals that approximately 50% of Guardians in all census years were born within the Union area and many of the rest were born in surrounding Counties of Devon, Dorset and Somerset (averaging nearly 90%) as shown in **Table 4.2**.

Table 4.2: Birthplaces of Elected Guardians

Year	Born within the Union area	Elsewhere in Devon, Dorset, Somerset	Further Afield	Guardians not Identified in Census or Unknown
1861	16	8	4	2
1871	18	9	2	2
1881	12	15	4	0
1891	16	14	1	0
1901	16	15	1	1

Source: Census Returns for England and Wales, (1861-1901). (See Appendix A4.1 and Bibliography for full details).

Many of the individuals associated with the Union were related (if only remotely) or otherwise strongly linked to each other. In the 1870s, for example, Vice-Chair Charles Ewens was the brother-in-law of Axminster's critic, newspaper editor Pulman. Bond's replacement as clerk, William Forward was his nephew.⁵⁹ As noted above many senior staff were of local origin until the 1890s. However, there is no strong evidence of dynastic succession within the Guardian body in contrast to the situation noted by King in Wales. For example, none of people discussed in this chapter were succeeded by a second generation of Guardians from within their families.⁶⁰ The fine line between personal success and adversity necessitating poor law support would have been very evident. In an area with limited inward migration, many people were related, if only distantly, and both Guardians and ratepayers would be aware of friends, colleagues and family members who through personal disaster such as insanity, ill health or old age had become paupers. Although difficult to quantify, the impact of this context alongside the continuing difficult economy and extensive outward migration explored the previous chapters, may have contributed to a lack of dynamism necessary to shake up the established view. It is notable, for example, that Mitchell and Coate who returned to the area in later life were two of the most dynamic Guardians and had some of the most impact on Union management.

⁵⁹ For example see family trees on George Philip Rigney Pulman (1819-1880), Charles Henry Ewens (1825-1883), Charles William Bond (1828-1872), William Forward (1844-1908), <<https://www.ancestry.co.uk>>, [accessed 17 July 2023]

⁶⁰ King, 'Thinking and Rethinking the New Poor Law', pp. 15-16.

3.2 Local Governance and Self-Help: The Background to Localism Under Threat

The way local governance had developed and operated in the area created an environment which nurtured continued resistance to any form of centralisation or interference. The absence of strong elite power bases over a very long period created robust parish-based organisations of self-government so that the area had become used to running its own affairs. In Axminster parish for example, local government had been in the hands of a Vestry which Geoffrey Chapman described as being governed by ratepayers.⁶¹ By the early nineteenth century the Union area had a well-developed infrastructure for relief management under the OPL, with many parishes having their own poor houses. Individual self-help was strongly encouraged via thriving clubs which provided sick relief. Axminster, for example, had both men's and women's clubs which dated back to the eighteenth century.⁶² Some large local charities (especially in the older established towns) provided benefits which could be generous. Jean Robin's exploration of the role of Colyton's feofees in poverty relief is an example of this. She highlights the range of assistance available which was focussed on providing assistance to trades/craftsmen outside of the poor law, through making contributions to tools of trade or through providing provisions in bad weather. Other payments to poor people who were not paupers included a Christmas bonus and provision of seed potatoes, provided on a *per capita* basis which Robin argues was an early form of family allowance. Robin found that in the 1860s feofees payments averaged about 20% of Colyton's poor rate, a considerable sum given that Colyton was one of the three largest parishes in Axminster Union, and one of its highest contributors to the poor rate.⁶³

Against this settled background, the introduction of a range of new institutions from the 1830s onwards across a wide range of political and administrative functions created challenge to local autonomy. Some changes enhanced local status, such as Axminster town becoming a centre for local police in the 1860s, a Registration District and base for local courts.⁶⁴ Others, such as those associated with the NPL, removed an element of local control and were unwelcome (see the discussion on Pulman below). Numerous local administrative amendments challenged a deep-seated sense of belonging and identity, disturbing the equilibrium. For example, county boundary changes affected several parishes in the 1840s and 1890s as they swapped between Devon and Dorset (and vice-versa). Added to this, discussed later in this thesis, there was considerable change (and threat of change) to the entity of the Union itself in the 1890s (see **Appendix 6**). All together

⁶¹ Chapman, *A History of Axminster*, pp. 90-97, 162-75.

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 159-60.

⁶³ Jean Robin, 'The Relief of Poverty in Mid Nineteenth-Century Colyton', *Rural History*, 1 (1990), 193-218 (pp. 211, 214-15).

⁶⁴ Chapman, *A History of Axminster*, pp.154, 162-75; *Post Office Directory of Devonshire*, ed. by E. R. Kelly (London: Kelly, 1866), p. 708.

this disconcerting situation contributed to the creation of an environment where locals sought to retain control and resist centralisation.

The views expressed by George Pulman, the proprietor and editor of the independently aligned *Pulman's Weekly News* in the 1860s and 1870s and at the time the main weekly local newspaper in much of the locality, provides an exemplar of the strong localism evident in the Union area.⁶⁵ Until the sale of the paper in 1878, the newspaper was the voice of radical localism. Axminster born, Pulman had many talents and interests: author (his works, as noted above included a substantial local history of the Axe Valley), prize winner at the 1851 Great Exhibition, sometime Poor Law Guardian in a neighbouring Union, alongside newspaper ownership and editing.⁶⁶ After his death in 1880 his epitaph on one of the largest memorials in Axminster cemetery, funded by his 'many friends' recorded his impact in promoting local subjects and his role as a campaigning newspaper editor. It included the statement: 'Editor for twenty years ... of a local newspaper remarkable for its advocacy of freedom and for its true English spirit'.⁶⁷ Pulman's writings provide evidence that his approach and politics were typical of what William Lubenow called a 'historical perspective on society'. Lubenow identified holders of this perspective as wanting to re-establish local government enshrined in tradition and Common Law, admiring paternalism and deference and in opposition to centralisation, with views based in 'passionate feeling rather than reasoned judgement'.⁶⁸ Pulman was vehemently opposed to the NPL and the increasing reach of central Government. He exhibited strong and unchanging paternalist views on the treatment of poor people, based on the principles of the Old Poor Law and championed local power and accountability. For example, in 1865 his complaints included the tyrannical central police (10 January), the diversion of rates from paupers to officials and local power to the central state (17 January), 'Despotism under the specious name of Liberalism' (28 March), the secrecy of Unions Boards (repeating support for open meetings which he expressed as far back as 1860) (16 May) and red tape coupled with the need for self-government (12 December).⁶⁹ Despite his criticism Pulman had close connections with the Guardian Board and despite his attacks Axminster continued to use his paper to advertise contracts. Chapter 5 explores the influence of his ideas which will suggest these had a considerable impact on attitudes the management of pauperism in the 1870s as his views increased pressure on the Guardians to

⁶⁵ *Pulman's; Newspaper Press Directory* (London: Mitchell, 1875), pp. 53, 183.

⁶⁶ W.P. Courtney and Ian Maxted, 'Pulman, George Philip Rigney (1819–1880), Antiquary', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/22885>>; 'Axminster, The late Mr G.P.R. Pulman', *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 13 February 1880, p. 7.

⁶⁷ Gravestone, Axminster Cemetery.

⁶⁸ William C. Lubenow, *The Politics of Government Growth: Early Victorian Attitudes Towards State Intervention 1833-1848* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles 1971), pp. 183-85.

⁶⁹ 'Editorial', *Pulman's*, 10 January 1865, p. 2, 17 January 1865, p. 2, 28 March 1865, p. 2, 16 May 1865, p. 2, 12 December 1865, p. 2.

challenge the Centre. After his sale of the newspaper, editorials became increasingly neutral and poor law matters faded from prominence. Over time it moved towards support of conservatism.⁷⁰

Overall, both ratepayers and poor people expressed little dissatisfaction with the way the Union was run. Despite newspaper editor Pulman's attempts to cause dissent in the 1870s, there was little ratepayer challenge or party-political interest and little evidence of a desire for change until the mid-1890s. Contested Guardian elections were infrequent and usually limited to the town parishes. Where disagreement or conflict with local inhabitants occurred, it tended to result from the Guardians' newer responsibilities and their reluctance to adopt a more modern outward-looking approach to social policy, new ideas and centrally promoted services in public health for example, discussed in Chapter 7. It is possible that the local approach largely neutralised wider political dissent amongst poorer inhabitants. As will be discussed in Chapter 5, there is little evidence of conflict with Guardians or local employers. Devon was on the edge of the 1870s 'Revolt of the Field' and considered in conjunction with the limited impact of agricultural trade unionism in a Union area bedevilled by very low agricultural wages and limited employment opportunities, the absence of major dissent remains a puzzle.⁷¹ This absence is a marked contrast with the findings by historians such as Alun Howkins and Howard Newby who found changing and deteriorating rural social relationships in mid-late Victorian England informed radical protest movements.⁷²

4. Conclusion

In conjunction with the two previous chapters Chapter 4 provides contextual background for understanding why Axminster Union was so often out of step with central policy initiatives and continued to experience high levels of poverty and pauperism. It explores the nature of the local Guardian body, how the Guardians worked together and the over-arching ethos of localism, arguing that the local approach was a product of power structures and dynamics within Axminster and the limited links, to wider political networks.

The nature and role of Axminster's Guardian body provides context and understanding of the newly imposed layer of poor law administration in 1834 which had increasing responsibilities in local government in the later nineteenth century. Guardian Boards stood in a difficult position, serving local interests but also providing a vehicle for central intervention. As such and as recent literature

⁷⁰ *Newspaper Press Directory* (London: Mitchell, 1875), pp. 53, 183; *Newspaper Press Directory* (London: Mitchell, 1899), p. 172.

⁷¹ Rollo Arnold, *The Farthest Promised Land - English Villagers, New Zealand Immigrants of the 1870s* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1981), p. 211; Newby, *Country Life*, pp. 53, 78, 122-33, 141.

⁷² Alun Howkins, *Reshaping Rural England: A Social History 1850-1925* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 3; 138, 156, 174 185-88; Newby, *Country Life*, pp. 78-79, 122-33.

demonstrates there is a need to know more of these often-shadowy middlemen, critical in mediating between the centre and the local but, until recently, dismissed or ignored.⁷³ This thesis shows in the following chapters that Guardians were decisive at both a collective and individual level, setting and reflecting local poor law culture and thus influencing how the law was interpreted and implemented locally. The social and economic background of Axminster's Guardians demonstrates that the Board comprised a combination of local rather than national elites, farmers, clergy, professionals and commercial/business occupations, the proportions of which varied over time. Although farmers comprised the most numerous category until 1895, they were not vociferous, nor overly dominant. Overall, there is a strong element of continuity and consensus with occasional disputes breaking out which were especially challenging in the 1870s, as explored in later chapters.

An examination of Axminster's Board at a micro-level makes clear that local power bases and the collective outlook of the Guardian body were important in shaping the Board's approach to the poor law alongside the role of individuals in determining its direction. The formal power and individual approach of Chairmen Cartwright and Bently set the tone over the period covered by this thesis, whilst critical and questioning individuals such as Mitchell added grit and challenge, aimed variously at targets within the Union or towards the Centre. Overall power within the Guardian body was shared and distributed between interest groups, although from the early 1870s onwards mostly lay with elected Guardians. As later chapters show, 'local elite' power largely provided a contributory oversight, focused on finance and crisis management. Although not explicit, the economic interest of farmers was protected through numbers and (usually) through a Vice Chair position until organizational changes in 1895. These interests were leavened and mediated by the influence of a bloc of Guardians with non-farming, non-elite backgrounds such as the Clergy, so that overall a community of interest was largely maintained between Guardians, ratepayers and the poor of the area.

This chapter explored reasons why the ethos of localism was so deeply embedded and for the most part generally accepted amongst residents of the area, including ratepayers and poor people. Self-contained and inward looking, Axminster's localism derived largely from a local context rooted in traditional values, which harked back to the 'Old Poor Law' rather than from the influence of individuals, developing political thought or overriding collective affiliations, and was relatively unchallenged because of the limited nature of wider political networks. A society used to managing

⁷³ King, 'Thinking and Rethinking the New Poor Law', pp. 5-19; Rothery, "Who Do They Think They Are?", pp. 20-30; Webb and Webb, *Poor Law History*, I, pp. 228-30.

its own affairs, with a well-developed relief ethos and systems of local support found newly imposed political and administrative changes a threat and encouraged the Union to go its own way. This negative approach to change was bolstered in the 1860s and 1870s by the persistent anti-centralisation of the dominant local newspaper in the Union area. Axminster's approach towards poor law management was not in itself unusual, especially in the 1860s-1870s but when linked with a continuing desire to manage in their own way, it fell foul of the central authorities' centralising, standardising and growing requirements. Over time Axminster's approach to poor law management became increasingly outdated. The consequences of this approach are explored in the second half of this thesis.

Chapter 5: Managing Policy and Practice: The Challenge to Relief Practice in the later 1860s and 1870s

1. Introduction

This chapter investigates Axminster's approach to Poor Law management in the later 1860s and early 1870s, exploring how it came to prominence in Government Reports on the Poor Law as an example of poor practice, as central and local ideas on approaches to relief management diverged. In so doing, this chapter shifts focus of enquiry to the Centre and central-local relations. In the process it contends with key historical debates and responds to calls from scholars such as Lynn Hollen Lees, Steven King and Elizabeth Hurren for research into how the local poor law operated, with its complex and diverse local policies and practice.¹ Chapter 1's literature review highlighted the need for a better understanding of the Poor Law in the late nineteenth century and as the chapter demonstrated, the study of 'crusade era' policies remains important given differing views as to their place in New Poor Law history. Whilst Karel Williams, for example, argues that the 'crusade' was a new initiative which incorporated welfare retrenchment, George Boyer, writing in 2019 strongly supports Michael Rose's contention that the deterrent Poor Law was finally created in the 1860s-1870s, rather than 1834. Boyer further suggests that insufficient attention has been given to this social welfare policy in the 1870s.² This thesis suggests that both elements hold true, in that central policies reflected the ideas of 1834, with, for example, an increased focus on the workhouse test, but more extreme 'crusading' policies and methods were new.

Crusade era initiatives discussed in the literature bring recalcitrant Unions such as Axminster into focus. Axminster's defence of its traditional way of working set it on a collision course with the Central Poor Law Authorities, an examination of which reveals much about the way the NPL worked on the ground and the impact of local practices on central policy development. This chapter establishes the early 1870s as the point when Axminster's approach to relief policy came to national attention, establishing the Union as an example of poor practice in the eyes of the Centre and a representation of resistance to central oversight. The chapter adds to debates concerning the

¹ Lynn Hollen Lees, *The Solidarities of Strangers: The English Poor Laws and the People, 1700-1948* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 9; Steven King, *Poverty and Welfare in England, 1700-1850: A Regional Perspective* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 4, 250-51; Elizabeth T. Hurren, *Protesting about Pauperism: Poverty, Politics and Poor Relief in Late-Victorian England, 1870-1900* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press for the Royal Historical Society, 2007), pp. 261-62.

² Karel Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), pp. 91-107; George R. Boyer, *The Winding Road to the Welfare State: Economic Insecurity and Social Welfare Policy in Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), p. 25; Michael E. Rose, 'The Crisis of Poor Relief in England 1860-1890', in *The Emergence of the Welfare State in Britain and Germany 1850-1950*, ed. by W. J. Mommsen with Wolfgang Mock (London: Croom Helm, 1981), pp. 50-70 (p. 52).

development of local government: it argues that the clash between an impersonal central bureaucracy and an older, locally entrenched paternalistic governance structure shaped the practices of both. It draws attention to the importance of local investigations by Inspectors in developing national policy and the role of key individuals and relationships in local practice. On the one hand, the chapter demonstrates the importance Axminster placed on maintaining local control and the also impact of the local ethos and paternalism on poor law management. On the other, it shows the growing influence of central authorities and their ideas in localities. Overall, the chapter demonstrates the developing reach and power of central government in social policy, which informed the contemporary argument that Axminster Union failed by refusing to adapt to new ways of working, arguments that are explored in later chapters.

This chapter weaves together developing central policy and its challenge to local practice by focussing on central-local relationships and the impact of a major investigation and Report into outdoor relief by the Centre's Inspector Wodehouse. Section 2 outlines developing central policy and then sets the context for the dispute between the Centre and Axminster in the 1860s and early 1870s, emphasising the role of interaction between the Centre and local Guardians and the impact of key individuals such as Inspector Gulson and Guardian John Bently. Section 3 explores how Axminster became noted as a problem in Inspector Edmond Wodehouse's investigation into relief practice and compares Axminster's practice with that of other Unions. After a brief consideration of the national impact of Wodehouse's investigation and further repressive policies in Section 4, Section 5 explores Axminster's response to the ideas and tactics of Wodehouse as their Inspector.

2. Local Poor Law Management in the 1860s and Early 1870s

2.1 The National Context

As introduced in Chapter 2 a national reappraisal of relief policy followed what Rose describes as a 'crisis' in the NPL in the 1860s.³ This crisis, precipitated by rising pauper numbers and costs was caused by changes in society and wider economic factors and the subsequent change of direction has been widely recognised by historians including David Englander, Mary MacKinnon and Elizabeth Hurren.⁴ The crisis led to a change of attitudes from upper and middle-class ratepayers towards pauperism, its management and funding. In rural England, the beginnings of a breakdown of customary expectations between landowners, farmers and labourers became evident as the challenge from agricultural trade unionism and the threat of wage demands from labourers was met

³ Rose, 'Crisis of Poor Relief', pp. 50-70.

⁴ David Englander, *Poverty and Poor Law Reform in Britain: From Chadwick to Booth, 1834-1914* (Harlow: Longman, 1998), pp. 19-30; Mary MacKinnon, 'English Poor Law Policy and the Crusade Against Outrelief', *Journal of Economic History*, 47 (1987), 603-25; Hurren, *Protesting about Pauperism*, pp. 101-02, 113-21, 125-27, 136-43.

with reduced paternalist support for poor people from employers and ratepayers.⁵ In addition economic problems such as the Cotton Famine placed a severe financial strain on the NPL, especially in urban areas. Both issues had consequences for developing national policy. Actions taken to alleviate financial problems and improve administration such as the Irremoveability Act (1861) and Union Chargeability Act (1865) spread the expense of pauperism into richer middle-class parishes. Costs which had previously been parish-based were now Union-wide, bringing relief policy more sharply into focus amongst ratepayers. MacKinnon highlights that this visibility of costs contributed to demands that relief policy should be revised, whilst increased funding in some localities meant more money became available to develop workhouse facilities, increasing the potential use of in-relief.⁶ Boyer notes the middle-class belief that Poor Law principles were inadequately enforced in northern industrial cities and working class areas of London.⁷ The concern about a lack of enforcement also applied in southern England, leading to a detailed examination of out-relief practice by Poor Law Inspector Wodehouse in his 1871 'Report ... on Out-Door Relief in Seventy Unions in the Counties of Berks, Cornwall, Devon, Dorset, Gloucester, Kent, Somerset, Southampton, Surrey, Sussex and Wilts[hire]' discussed later in this chapter.⁸

Changing attitudes to the NPL were accompanied by a wide-ranging critical examination of charity and its relationship with the Poor Law. Charitable assistance for poor people was increasingly seen as indiscriminate and harmful leading to a reduction in the desirable attribute of self-reliance.⁹ The Centre's 1869 'Goschen Minute', often highlighted by historians as the forerunner of the 'crusade against out-relief', set out the changing approach. Poor Law Board President George Goschen emphasised the role of the mixed economy of welfare, distinguishing charity from poor relief: charity should assist those in danger of becoming destitute, whilst the Poor Law should provide for paupers. 'Aid in wages' should be avoided due to expense.¹⁰ The role of coordinating charity was taken forward by the Charity Organisation Society (COS) which aimed to both co-ordinate and rationalise distribution of aid, by creating a national network and through using a 'scientific' case work approach to provide assistance only to those found to be deserving, whilst co-operating and coordinating their work with the Poor Law Authorities. However, as noted in Chapter 1's literature

⁵ Alun Howkins, *Reshaping Rural England: A Social History 1850-1925* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 174-94; Hurren, *Protesting about Pauperism*, pp. 116-17; K.D.M. Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor: Social Change and Agrarian England, 1660-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 386-87.

⁶ MacKinnon, 'English Poor Law Policy', pp. 603-25.

⁷ Boyer, *Winding Road*, p. 75.

⁸ UKPP, 'Out-Door Relief. Report of Edmond H. Wodehouse Esq., Poor Law Inspector to the Right Hon. James Stansfield, M.P., on Out-Door Relief in Seventy Unions in the Counties of Berks, Cornwall, Devon, Dorset, Gloucester, Kent, Somerset, Southampton, Surrey, Sussex and Wilts, 23 June 1871. Appendix B, No. 29, First Report of the Local Government Board, 1871-72', (1872 (C.516)), pp. 88-215 [hereinafter 'Wodehouse Report, First LGB Report'].

⁹ Englander, *Poverty and Poor Law Reform*, pp. 21-24.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 104-05.

review, in practical terms the Society achieved very little, although it was successful in maintaining a high profile and influence with the Poor Law Authorities.¹¹

Between 1861 and 1870 the ratio of out-door paupers to population rose nationally from 1/27 to 1/25, further fuelling concerns about the levels and costs of pauperism and the quality of out-relief administration.¹² Together these concerns resulted in a gradual change towards more central repressive relief policy from the later 1860s onwards. For example an 1868 Circular invited Guardians to consider whether suggestions on improved procedures could be implemented, whilst stressing the interests of both poor people and ratepayers.¹³ Annual PLB/LGB Reports from 1869 onwards demonstrate hardening attitudes towards relief and a greater focus on costs.¹⁴ The 1870 Report noted the need for humane treatment of paupers and noted the common misapprehension that able-bodied adults received out-relief through 'want of work' because most able-bodied relief was for temporary sickness. However the Board also commented that previous legal and administrative changes may have made out-relief a too attractive proposition.¹⁵

Steven King's research into English medical welfare under the Old Poor Law underscores that sickness was indeed a continuing issue for the Poor Law Authorities. His investigations suggest that in the final years of the OPL sickness was 'ubiquitous', with medical relief absorbing nearly 30% of relief budgets in the 1820s.¹⁶ He argues that sickness and medical costs were 'core' elements of Poor Law welfare, always well-funded and either continued or rapidly re-emerged under the New Poor Law.¹⁷ Rising levels of outdoor pauperism led, by the mid-late 1860s to increased attention on the costs of temporary relief caused by sickness, as this was viewed as one of the elements which could be addressed by improved administration.

The question of out-relief was analysed again in the following year, concluding that cutting numbers of paupers and 'deterrent measures generally' were ways to reduce costs and pauperism, a theme

¹¹ Robert Humphreys demonstrates that the COS had a very limited practical impact despite its high public profile and was much disliked by poor people by local charities with whom it was supposed to work and by potential contributors and supporters, due to its highhanded approach. Such success as it achieved was mainly in London and its focus and reach was otherwise on urban rather than rural areas. Robert Humphreys, *Sin, Organized Charity and the Poor Law in Victorian England* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1995). See also Boyer, *Winding Road*, pp. 78-79, 84-85, 124-25; Englander, *Poverty and Poor Law Reform*, pp. 21-22; Hurren, *Protesting About Pauperism*, pp. 60-73; Lees, *Solidarities of Strangers*, pp. 269-74.

¹² UKPP, 'Out-door Relief. Circular from the Local Government Board to the Poor Law Inspectors, 2 December 1871. Appendix A, No.20', First Report of the Local Government Board, 1871-72', (1872 (C.516)), pp. 63-68 (p. 64) [hereinafter the 'Fleming Circular', First LGB Report].

¹³ UKPP, Outdoor Relief. 'Circular letter from the Poor Law Board to Boards of Guardians, 9 December 1868, Twenty-first Annual Report of the Poor Law Board, 1868-69, Appendix A, No. 15', (1868-69 (4197)), pp. 77-78.

¹⁴ UKPP, 'Twenty-first PLB Report', pp. 12-14.

¹⁵ UKPP, 'Twenty-second Annual Report of the Poor Law Board, 1869-70', (1870 (C.123)), pp. ix-xi, xvi, xviii-xx.

¹⁶ Steven King, *Sickness, Medical Welfare and the English Poor 1750-1834* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), pp. 13-14, 56, 115, 140, 321, 332.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 332.

that was repeated in 1872.¹⁸ From 1870 onwards able-bodied pauperism statistics featured in the annual reports and in 1871 a circular issued by Henry Fleming, Secretary to the PLB (the 'Fleming Circular') further tightened out-relief practice and sought greater uniformity.¹⁹ Research which fed into this circular is explored in depth later in this chapter.

Overall, the revised attitudes and rising costs helped to create an environment which was less accommodating towards pauperism, culminating in the 'crusade'. A more bureaucratic national approach and developing deterrent policies challenged practice in Unions such as Axminster where the ethos of paternalism, an accepted system of authority with strong social bindings underpinned by knowledge of local poor people and understandings of acceptable practice, still held sway.

2.2 Stability and Change: Central-Local Relationships and the Local Poor Law Environment in the 1860s and Early 1870s

A focus on the approach and relationships established between central and local individuals shows that the roots of Axminster's independent approach to the NPL were in evidence in the 1860s. Axminster's desire for local control was deeply ingrained, although a sound working relationship was maintained with the PLB due to the low key and accommodating stance adopted by central Inspector Gulson and by the Union locally under the chairmanship of George Cartwright. This status quo was subsequently disrupted in the late 1860s and early 1870s by a change in central and local personnel which created a backdrop for subsequent resistance to national out-relief policy, allowing a measure of local self-determination to become established.

Poor law management in Axminster was stable for much of the 1860s, due in part to the role of Edward Gulson, Axminster's Poor Law Inspector until the end of 1868. As explored in Chapter 2, Gulson's background, career and experience meant that he was well-versed in balancing central and local interests and in managing the limitations of the role and its authority. However, by 1868 Gulson was elderly, in poor health and nearing retirement which may have impacted on the level of supervision he was able to provide.²⁰ Cordial central-local relationships were generally maintained between Gulson and Axminster's Guardians partly because the Guardians under Chairman Cartwright were not overly demanding and so did not draw attention to themselves. Axminster's Guardians recalled this good working relationship with respect in 1874, contrasting it with the more difficult relationship with Inspector Wodehouse.²¹ Gulson's opinions appear to have been valued,

¹⁸ UKPP, 'Twenty-second PLB Report', pp. ix- xi, xvi; 'Twenty-third Annual Report of the Poor Law Board, 1870-71', (1871 (C.396)), pp. x, xvii-xviii; 'First Report of the Local Government Board, 1871-72', (1872 (C.516)), pp. xv-xvi.

¹⁹ UKPP, 'Twenty-second PLB Report', p. xxi; 'Twenty-third PLB Report', p. x; 'Fleming Circular, First LGB Report', pp. 63-68.

²⁰ 'The Late Edward Gulson', *Western Times*, 4 September 1874, p. 5; 'Gulson', *Transactions of the Devonshire Association*, 7 (1875), 1-607, (pp. 51-52).

²¹ 'Axminster Board of Guardians', *Pulman's Weekly News and Advertiser*, 24 March 1874, p. 4.

even if his suggestions were not always followed. There are numerous examples where his advice was sought on difficult matters, such as a long-running argument with medical officer Dr Hallett regarding attendance on paupers living in an area with a disputed boundary.²² Gulson often showed support for the Union. When Axminster's handling of a measles epidemic and 'mass destitution' was criticised in *The Times* Gulson advised the PLB he thought the matter overstated.²³ In 1868, following an anonymous complaint to the PLB which described workhouse food as 'pigwash', the doctor as a 'butcher' and demanded the dismissal of Officers and Guardians, Gulson commented 'Axminster workhouse is as well and as carefully managed as any in my district', an opinion borne out by his previous workhouse/Union visit reports, usually twice yearly, which rarely mentioned faults apart from repeated comments that the visitors book was incomplete.²⁴

Despite this, the seeds of local resistance to the Centre were evident in accounts of Axminster's poor law management. Instances where central suggestions were ignored or subject to reluctant acquiescence suggest that by the later 1860s stable relationships were beginning to break down as Axminster pushed at the boundaries of accepted practice. Gulson appears to have become increasingly frustrated with Axminster's recalcitrance. Besides repeated comments regarding the incomplete visitors' book (which never seems to have been acted upon), his frustration with Axminster is also evident in his unsympathetic response to the Guardians' request for out-relief for stone quarry workers laid off due to bad weather. He observed that there was 'plenty of room in the workhouse', noting that, had the PLB agreed to provide out-relief, the men would 'have been on the books for weeks' and others would have been encouraged to claim.²⁵ He was equally unsympathetic to Axminster in the long-running financial challenge from the Centre which took place between 1866 and 1870, where Axminster took no action despite being repeatedly told their accounts were overdrawn. He observed that 'until Guardians are inconvenienced they won't make

²² Extensive correspondence took place between Axminster's Clerk, Charles Bond on behalf of the Guardians and the PLB, seeking advice and assistance between December 1865 and June 1866. Correspondence and annotations on letters include: TNA: MH 12/2106, Axminster Correspondence, 1863-1866, 46596/1865, Bond to PLB outlining Dr Hallett's refusal to attend paupers, 8 December 1865. Further correspondence from Dr Hallett sets out his case in letters: 47989/1865, 18 December 1865; 75/1866, 30 December 1865; 1915/1866, 11 January 1866. 1604/1866, internal PLB notes dated 11-17 January 1866 discuss the issue (attached to letter from Bond dated 10 January 1866). 5192/1888, note from Gulson unsympathetic to Hallett 15 February 1866. 12060/B/1866, Gulson meeting with Hallett, 18 April 1866. The PLB continued to advise Axminster on a recommended response when Hallett succeeded in his legal action for payment. 22336/B/1866, letter PLB to Bond, 14 June 1866.

²³ 'Letter to the Editor of the Times from Matilda Pasley', *The Times*, 28 January 1864, p. 11; TNA: MH 12/2106, 4690/1864, Gulson Report to the PLB, 5 February 1864; 3802(A)/1864, 4803/1864, Axminster Guardians letter to PLB, 6 February 1864; 4690/1864, Annex Gulson Report to PLB, 7 February 1864.

²⁴ TNA: MH 12/2107, Axminster Correspondence, 1867-1868, 805/1868, anonymous letter to PLB received 7 January 1868; Gulson comment in response, 13 January 1868. Example workhouse report: TNA: MH 12/2105, Axminster Correspondence, 1860-1862, 28325/1862, Gulson Report of Axminster Union visit, 25 July 1862.

²⁵ TNA: MH 12/2107, 1575/1868, letter from Bond to PLB, internal PLB discussion on reverse, 11 January 1868; 1575/A/1868, PLB response to Bond, 20 January 1868; 4372/1868, Bond to PLB, 3 February 1868.

sufficient calls'.²⁶ He had previously suggested that the Union's clerk be dismissed for persistent failure to supply Returns of paupers. Although the Centre took no effective action on either matter, eventually Axminster complied with both central requirements.²⁷

Chris Otter suggests the ideal Inspector undertook his work based on the 'principles of consent, cooperation, trust and attentiveness'.²⁸ Gulson is a good example of this type of Inspector, persuading and encouraging good practice, but as explained below this approach had limitations and when it did, as Christine Bellamy notes, the Centre had limited powers of enforcement and those they had were reactive, negative and largely based on financial sanctions.²⁹ Gulson's experience with Axminster highlights the circumscribed nature of central authority, as even in matters of finance, local procrastination could frustrate the Centre. Overall it appears Axminster may have been emboldened by Gulson's loosening grip on supervision. A new central approach and tactics would be required to gain compliance.

Axminster's approach to poor law management and its concern to protect its independence, was consolidated under Gulson's successor, Colonel Ward, appointed in early 1869.³⁰ Compared with Gulson, Ward did not build a relationship with Axminster and the level of supervision diminished over time. For example, he is only recorded as attending one Guardian meeting at Axminster in his two-year tenure, although there are several workhouse reports.³¹ Initially Ward provided a fresh look at Axminster's management with his first report focussed on deficient medical accommodation and workhouse pauper classification.³² As before Axminster took no action. Ward's 1869-70 investigation into Axminster's out-relief practice as part of a wider investigation in Devon is discussed in more depth below. His final report on Axminster in March 1871 raised no concerns but may have been written without a visit.³³ Ward's forced resignation in early 1871 followed the PLB's 'extreme dissatisfaction' with his conduct, highlighting poor decisions, inadequate reports (including failure to visit before writing them) and overclaiming expenses.³⁴ The demands of the role discussed

²⁶ TNA: MH 12/2107, 43258/1867, Audit Report notes third time Axminster overdrawn and states Guardians have been advised twice before and have taken no action, 16 November 1867; 25426/68, Gulson comment, 21 June 1868 noted on Auditors letter to PLB dated 4 June 1868.

²⁷TNA: MH 12/2105, 405356/1860, Gulson advice note to PLB, 1 December 1860.

²⁸ Chris Otter, *The Victorian Eye: A Political History of Light and Vision in Britain, 1800-1910* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 123.

²⁹ Christine Bellamy, *Administering Central-Local Relations 1871-1919: The Local Government Board in its Fiscal and Cultural Context* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), p. 155.

³⁰ See Chapter 2 for Ward's background.

³¹ TNA: MH 12/2108, Axminster Correspondence, 1869-August 1871, 48441/1870 and 14113/1871, example Union Visit Reports by Colonel Ward, 8 September 1870, 21 March 1871.

³² Ibid., 25566/1869, Union Visit Report by Colonel Ward, 20 May 1869.

³³ Ibid., 14113/1871, Union Visit Report by Colonel Ward, 21 March 1871.

³⁴ TNA: MH 32/103, Colonel T. B. Ward, correspondence and papers related to the Eastern District and South Western District ... , 1868-1874, 11276/A/1871, PLB to Ward, 15 March 1871; 12346/1871, Ward to PLB, 18 March 1871, 15672/A/1871, draft letter PLB to Ward, [undated] April 1871.

in Chapter 2 found Ward wanting, enabling Axminster to exercise more latitude in its poor law practices, as indicated in the levels of non-compliance found by Ward's successor.³⁵

After a long period of organisational stability, significant change in organisation and leadership occurred in the early 1870s which challenged precedents and created volatility in Axminster Union. Changes at the Centre noted in Chapter 2 included structural reorganisation, with the LGB replacing the PLB and the employment of a new generation of Poor Law Inspectors. Locally, changes to the leadership of the Guardian body following the election of John Cox Bently as Chairman had a significant impact on local poor law culture. This changing of the guard, both centrally and locally meant that new ways of working needed to be negotiated and created opportunities for influential local individuals to challenge central policies.

The election of Bently as Chairman of Axminster's Board of Guardians in 1871 had a profound long-term effect on the management of the Union as he remained Chairman for thirty eight years until his death in 1909.³⁶ Bently's reputation and approach to Union management, explored in Chapter 4, was characterised by inward-looking localism and paternalism and as evidenced below and in later chapters of this thesis, his election coincided with a change in tone in the Guardian body, moving away from the more consensual and patrician approach of his predecessor Cartwright. Under Bently's leadership the Guardians' focus on the retention of local control and the rejection of central interference increased, a localism which Bently championed throughout his forty-five-year tenure as a Guardian. Initially however, the combination of Bently's inexperience, anti-centralist views, a press hostile to central intervention and challenging Guardians created a fractious environment on the Guardian Board. Axminster's Guardian meetings sometimes appeared out of control (*Pulman's* described one as a 'bear garden' in early 1873).³⁷ The tensions created within the Guardian body when combined with pressure from the press and pressure to change from the Centre ensured that no single approach predominated although there remained a strong anti-centralisation sentiment.

3. Central Challenge to Relief Practice: Axminster Identified as a Problem

3.1 The Growth in Pauperism and the Early Central Policy Response

Local changes in poor law management took place against deep shift in national policy. Rising costs of poor relief, and the limited effectiveness of gentlemanly persuasion in reducing out-relief turned a spotlight onto localities, which resulted in the relief practices of Unions such as Axminster being examined and exposed in centrally commissioned Inspectors' Reports. These Reports, part of the

³⁵ Bellamy, *Central-Local Relations*, pp. 142-56.

³⁶ 'Chardstock, Death of Mr J. C. Bently. A Well-Known Figure passes away', *Chard and Ilminster News*, 12 June 1909, p. 3.

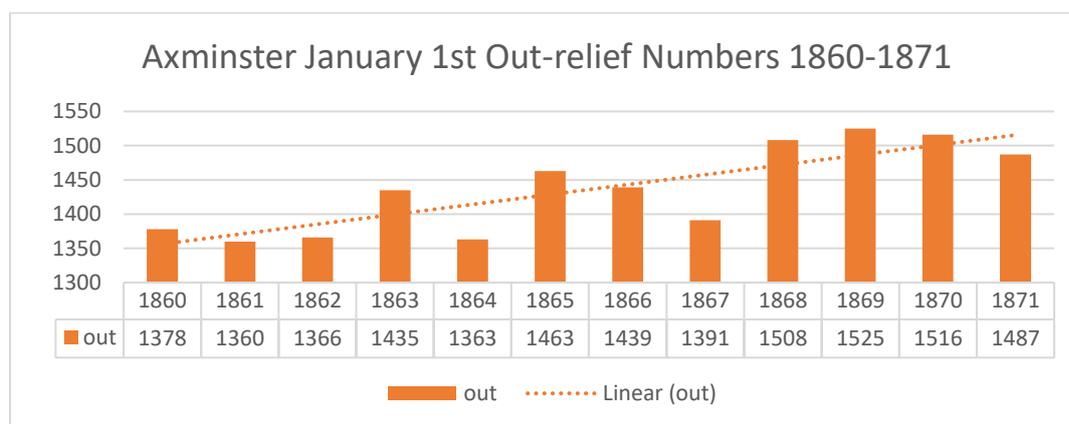
³⁷ 'ABG', *Pulman's*, 28 January 1873, p. 4.

growing bureaucratisation of local Government, played a significant role in the early-mid 1870s in developing the Centre's understanding of issues, influencing relief policy and increasing central participation in local governance. The local enquiries discussed below often underlined deficiencies in poor law management, rather than models of good practice, and were then used to revise central policy. Wodehouse's 1871 Report into out-relief practice in southern England is a good example of this and provides insights into the developing central challenge to paternalistic approaches and sloppy administration. When published, reports also provided a tool to educate and influence Guardians, officialdom and public opinion on central standards of poor law provision.³⁸ The enquiries undertaken initially by Colonel Ward and subsequently in far greater depth by Wodehouse also show how relief practice worked on the ground in Axminster in the early 1870s in comparison with other Unions.

National experience of rising pauper numbers was mirrored in Axminster, but neither Gulson nor Axminster's Guardians focussed on the growing levels of relief in their reporting until the latter part of the 1860s. Local out-relief numbers rose by more than 10% between 1861 and 1870, expanding rapidly after 1867 as seen in **Figure 5.1**. Overall relief costs in Axminster also grew by more than 8% between 1861 and 1869 (**Appendix A2.4**). These increases drew Axminster to the attention of the Centre with the Union becoming the subject of an investigation into out-relief practices commissioned by the PLB in April 1870 because they were concerned at the high levels of pauperism in Devon when compared with national figures.

³⁸ UKPP, 'Wodehouse Report, First LGB Report', pp. 88-215; Edmond H. Wodehouse, *Report on Out-Door Relief in Seventy Unions ...* (London: HMSO, 1872); Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *English Poor Law History: Part II: The Last Hundred Years*, English Local Government Series, 8 and 9, 2 vols ([London]: [Longmans], 1929; repr. London: Cass, 1963), I, pp. 437-40; Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty*, pp. 96-107.

Figure 5.1: Growth and Trend in Axminster's Out-Relief Numbers 1860-1871



Source: UKPP, Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January 1860-1871. (See Appendix A2.4 for full details).

Inspector Ward's Report is an early example of growing central attention. In 1870 the PLB instructed Ward to report 'specifically' on whether the Out-door Relief Prohibitory Order was strictly observed, the adequacy of Relieving Officers' (RO's) supervision, the extent of home visits to paupers and the proportions of relief in money and kind in nine Devon Unions, including Axminster.³⁹ Ward's short Report in June 1870 revealed few obvious deficiencies in Axminster. It noted that Axminster strictly observed the Out-door Relief Prohibitory Order and paid one-fifth of benefits in kind (more than most in the sample). Although pauper visits were limited, some other Unions in the investigation were more circumspect, visiting 'from time to time' or 'as often as circumstances require'. He made a few suggestions for improvement: ROs were allowed too much discretion, areas were too large for proper supervision and regular systems [undefined] were lacking. He commented that Unions told him the main cause of pauperism was extensive sickness and that many deserted wives with children received out-relief.⁴⁰ When the PLB pressed him for further suggestions Ward recommended increasing RO numbers, better defined duties and more pauper visits with diary records presented at meetings.⁴¹

The suggestion that ill health was a major cause of extensive out-relief in Devon lends support to King's argument on the continued centrality of medical welfare in the NPL era. He contends that by the 1840s 'the core health function of the welfare system rapidly resurfaced if indeed it had ever gone away'.⁴² Consequently, outdoor medical relief was an obvious target for cutbacks. Whilst the questions posed by the PLB did not directly confront sickness, the focus on administrative

³⁹ TNA: MH 32/103, 17984/A/1870, letter from the PLB to Ward setting out rationale and remit for the investigation, 21 April 1870.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 27912/1870, letter and enclosure forming Ward's Report, 14 June 1870.

⁴¹ Ibid., Ward's response to further questioning from the PLB, 23 June 1870, noted on reverse of his Report, 14 June 1870.

⁴² King, *Sickness, Medical Welfare*, p. 332.

procedures, home visits and enhanced supervision suggest a growing interest in this area as a target for reductions. This is explored further in Chapter 6 which includes an investigation into how Axminster responded to challenges posed by high levels of medical relief.

It appears that the PLB were dissatisfied with the quality of Ward's Report as the Board wrote directly to the Clerks of Unions in the survey, including Axminster's Charles Bond, seeking 'precise' details on out-relief administration and answers to specific questions: whether applicants for relief generally appeared before Guardians or whether ROs reported cases and whether the workhouse test was applied.⁴³ Axminster's responses illustrate their ambivalence towards central questioning. Bond replied that he was 'instructed to inform you' that applicants appeared 'when able'; when 'not able' the RO reported to Guardians. He also stated that the 'workhouse test is generally applied to able-bodied applicants'.⁴⁴ Bond's responses were somewhat ambiguous; did 'when able' mean 'possible' or 'able-bodied'? And was any ambiguity intentional? Seemingly the PLB found the overall situation unsatisfactory because although the Board advised Parliament that an increase in the number of ROs would allow more precisely targeted assistance, they subsequently asked Wodehouse, one of their new Poor Law Inspectors, to undertake a larger scale investigation.⁴⁵ Wodehouse incorporated the Board's previous queries along with Ward's suggestions in his inquiry.

3.2 The Wodehouse Investigation and Report: Exposing Axminster as a Problem

Wodehouse's regional investigation into out-relief administration in seventy Unions in southern England was important for developing policy nationally and for Axminster, as he selected the Union as an example of poor practice. Intended to inquire into the method by which out-relief was administered across a range of Unions in England, Wodehouse's report dated 23rd of June 1871 illustrates a developing impersonal bureaucratic and statistical approach to policy and national administration making greater use of centralised and organised knowledge to create common standards, a trend recognised by Englander, Mary Poovey and William Lubenow amongst others.⁴⁶ Nationally Wodehouse's investigation made a significant contribution to the development of government policy on out-relief, evident in the 1871 'Fleming Circular' which changed and tightened out-relief practice.⁴⁷ Locally his report is important because it provides a comparative understanding

⁴³ TNA: MH 12/2108, 36339/A/1870, letter from PLB to Bond, 3 August 1870.

⁴⁴ DHC, Axminster Poor Law Union, PLU/Axminster/10, Guardians' Minute Book, 1865-1871, Minutes, 11 August 1870, pp.378-80; TNA: MH 12/2108, 37612/1870, letter from Bond to PLB, 12 August 1870.

⁴⁵ UKPP, 'Twenty-second PLB Report', pp. xxxiii; 'Twenty-third PLB Report', p. xxi. See Chapter 2 for Wodehouse's background.

⁴⁶ UKPP, 'Wodehouse Report, First LGB Report', pp. 88-215; Englander, *Poverty and Poor Law Reform*, pp. 86-87; Mary Poovey, *Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation 1830-1864* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 9-13; William C. Lubenow, *The Politics of Government Growth: Early Victorian Attitudes Towards State Intervention 1833-1848* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles 1971), p. 181.

⁴⁷ UKPP, 'Fleming Circular, First LGB Report', pp. 63-68.

of Axminster's practice and a base line for exploring how this developed subsequently in the 1870s. In addition, as he became Axminster's Inspector, his views of the Union, its Guardians and his outlook had a direct impact on local management. As discussed in Chapter 2 Wodehouse's clearly defined opinions on how relief practice should develop chimed with the increasingly harsh views of the Centre.

Wodehouse's report provides detailed evidence of deficiencies in Axminster's (and others) relief practice discussed below and with further detail in **Appendix 5**. His analysis was comprehensive, methodological, bureaucratic and dispassionate using standardised questions.⁴⁸ He selected Unions to investigate on grounds including exceptionally high, low or recently increased levels of pauperism, size or whether they were 'average specimens' of the area and occasionally because their practice was exceptionally good. He gathered evidence from discussions and observation at Guardian meetings and obtained answers to over thirty standardised questions on local practice, administration and adequacy of supervision. He then sought to use this information to identify local principles and detail on how relief was administered and supervised. Using this data he identified patterns of deficiency and good practice in poor law management. The subsequent report clearly sets out Wodehouse's views on relief practice and ideas for improvement and detailed Union reports also provide a unique insight into Axminster's practice as compared with other Unions just as pressure to revise out-relief practice accelerated.

Using Wodehouse's evidence, it is possible to construct a relief practice journey identifying what he considered to be poor practice. It began, in Wodehouse's view, with the failure, in many cases, to dispassionately investigate the eligibility and circumstances of relief applicants. Guardians did not interview claimants, were overly sympathetic, or, according to Wodehouse 'the house was not often made use of as a test of destitution'.⁴⁹ This failure was compounded by providing the wrong type of relief, allowing deserted wives or widows with illegitimate children out-relief, or occasionally providing employment supplements ('aid in wages') to the able-bodied rather than insisting on the workhouse. The worst of these infringements, he argued, potentially breached Government Orders such as the Outdoor Relief Prohibitory Order.⁵⁰ Wodehouse condemned out-relief payments which focussed on money, rather than providing substantial proportions of relief 'in kind' – a 'self-acting test of destitution' or allowed paupers to retain a proportion of 'club' money in addition to poor relief.⁵¹ Relief 'in aid of earnings' provided to widows and the old to supplement casual earnings was

⁴⁸ UKPP, 'Wodehouse Report, First LGB Report', pp. 88-215.

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 92-93, 96-97, quotation p. 96.

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 90-91, 97-101.

⁵¹ Ibid., pp.94-95, 98, quotation p. 95.

acceptable but 'aid in wages' for the permanently employed was not.⁵² A major failure resulted from Unions reviewing payments infrequently. Some Unions paid relief indefinitely and never undertook a complete review. Payments to widows or the sick without a frequent check on changes in circumstances were frowned upon, as was the failure to seek recovery from relatives liable to contribute. Wodehouse was particularly scathing about this, as well as the failure to apply the workhouse test; he accused Guardians of not doing what they said they did.⁵³ Alongside poor practice, Wodehouse also noted systemic failure. Whilst he acknowledged the value of local knowledge in assessing relief applications, he suggested it was easily subverted as Guardians could easily become an 'advocate of the applicant'.⁵⁴ He noted areas open to fraud, for example in record keeping, or in allowing Relieving Officers wide discretion and in relief delivery.⁵⁵

None of the Unions in the survey exhibited all these failings and a few, such as the 'exceptionally well managed' Farringdon exhibited practice which Wodehouse recommended.⁵⁶ Axminster was, however, one of the Unions specifically castigated and held up as an example of a failing Union.

Wodehouse's visit to Axminster on 6th April 1871 coincided with the last meeting of the Union year and Cartwright's last as Chairman, although both he and Bently, his successor, were absent. The meeting was chaired by John Godden one of the Vice-Chairmen, although one ex-officio attended. Wodehouse questioned the Clerk and the Relieving Officers, which might account for the seemingly naïve answers that informed his poor opinion of Axminster's practice, discussed below.⁵⁷

Wodehouse's Report noted Axminster's practice was weak in several areas.⁵⁸ Primarily, along with two other nearby East Devon Unions, Honiton and Tiverton, Axminster was criticised for failing to make proper use of the workhouse test, despite claiming that they did. Wodehouse focussed on statistical evidence to support his allegations, noting the very high percentage of paupers compared with population: 8.4% in Axminster of whom less than 8% were in the workhouse. He also reported 85% of expenditure was on out-relief. Results for Honiton and Tiverton were similar or even higher. The statistics were sufficiently shocking that reference was made to the poor practice in the 'Fleming Circular' and subsequently on the front page of *The Economist*, but there is no record of the Guardian's response to these statistics in the Minutes.⁵⁹ Axminster was also one of very few Unions

⁵² Ibid., pp. 98-99.

⁵³ Ibid., pp. 90-91, 95-97, 99-101.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 93.

⁵⁵ Ibid., pp. 93-94, 101-02.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 98.

⁵⁷ DHC, PLU/Axminster/10, Minutes, 6 April 1871, p. 428.

⁵⁸ UKPP, 'Wodehouse Report, First LGB Report', pp. 119-20.

⁵⁹ UKPP, 'Fleming Circular, First LGB Report', p. 67; 'The Present Misapplication of Poor Relief', *Economist*, 27 June 1874, p. 773; DHC, PLU/Axminster/10, Minutes, 6 April 1871, pp. 428-30.

that Wodehouse could prove breached Poor Law Orders as he witnessed relief being provided on a case of 'aid in wages'. Wodehouse acknowledged that this was a 'hard case' noting that relief of 1/6^d for childcare was awarded to a man with six children whose wife was in hospital and who couldn't afford to pay for care from his regular wages. He also reported that Axminster admitted providing out-relief to a widow with an illegitimate child.⁶⁰ However there were some areas of good practice in Axminster, found in the answers recorded in the Appendix to his report. Pauper attendance was required on application for relief (**q. iv**), the Guardians generally personally questioned applicants (**q. vii**) and advised they always sought payments from legally liable relatives (**q. xiv**).⁶¹ Elements of Relieving Officer practice such as such as irregular visiting and checking on applicants and paupers were also good (**supplementary question 5, 7 and 9**).⁶²

A comparison of Axminster's practice with that of a sample of Unions in his report reveals that, whilst poor (according to Wodehouse) in some areas, it was in fact no worse than that of many others. **Table 5.1** taken from **Appendix A5.1** compares the responses of Axminster to a selection of the most telling questions with those from a sample of thirty-six of the seventy Unions that Wodehouse visited. The sample includes the five West Country counties in his investigation and Berkshire and Surrey to provide breadth.

⁶⁰ UKPP, 'Wodehouse Report, First LGB Report', pp. 99, 120.

⁶¹ The numbers in bold in the text in Table 5.1 and Appendix 5 correspond with those used by Wodehouse in his report. Wodehouse used roman numerals for his main questions which explored Guardians' out-relief systems and arabic numerals for supplementary questions which covered relief administration and supervision by Relieving Officers.

⁶² UKPP, 'Wodehouse Report, First LGB Report', pp. 119-20; see also Appendix A5.2.

Table 5.1: Responses to Selected Questions for a Sample of 36 (out of 70) Unions in Wodehouse’s Investigation

Questions from Wodehouse’s report, with answers categorised	Number of Unions answering in each category; Axminster's position shaded
i) Revision of relief lists every:	
3months	5
6 months	7
12months	8 including Axminster
Indefinite	15
Other	1
ii) Longest period of relief granted by Guardians?	
3months	6
6 months	8
12months	6
Indefinite	16
v) Is the pauper required to attend along with fresh RO report at every application for relief renewal?	
Yes	27
No	9
ix) What proportion of relief in kind?(max limit noted)	
1/2 -1/4	14
1/5 -1/8	12
1/9-1/20	3
None	6
Not answered	1
xi) What principle do the Guardians generally deal with deserted wives? [often qualified re collusion]	
Workhouse	16
Out-relief	20
xiii) Is relief granted in aid of earnings?	
Widows etc	33
Possible aid in wages	3
xiv) Are guardians careful to make children and other legally liable relatives pay maintenance contributions?	
Yes	22
“profess” they do	7
Not noticeable in practice	7
xv) Are the Outdoor Relief Prohibitory Order or the Regulation Order strictly observed, if not in what instance departed from, and is this frequent?	
Yes	28
Not infringed as far as aware	1
Observed as a general rule	7

Note: Questions follow the numbering of the Wodehouse report, with answers from Unions collated.

Source: UKPP, ‘Wodehouse Report, First LGB Report’, (see Appendix A5.1 for full details).

Axminster's worst practice in comparison with others related to its breach of the Outdoor Relief Orders (**q. xv**), and 'grants of aid-wages' (**q. x**) where few other Unions admitted these practices (only seven out of thirty-six admitted observing the Orders 'as a general rule' and only three were thought to provide 'aid in wages'). Both these practices were heavily criticised by Wodehouse. Axminster's provision of out-relief for deserted wives (**q. xi**) was poor practice but nineteen out of thirty-six in the sample acted similarly. Slack administration, with yearly revision of relief lists (**q. i**), and long-term payments to the sick without review (**q. ii**) were also failings, but over twenty other Unions were in a similar position, or worse. That one fifth of payments were made in kind (**q. ix**) was less than ideal according to Wodehouse, but nine others provided less including the Cornish Unions, and adjacent Honiton provided all relief in money. However, in some areas Axminster's practice was strong, in common with other Unions. Axminster was one of twenty-seven where Guardians always required relief applicants to attend the Union Board for interview (**q. v**) and along with twenty-one others, it advised that it always sought contributions from relatives (**q. xiv**).

A deeper investigation into Axminster's practice using data extracted from Wodehouse's report, to compare two Unions adjoining Axminster (Chard and Honiton), two randomly chosen (Epsom and Farnham) and one, Farringdon, praised by Wodehouse for good practice similarly confirms that Axminster's practice was middling (see **Appendix A5.2**). Both adjacent Unions had practice adjudged worse than Axminster's in areas such as pauper attendance at meetings with Guardians and failing to pursue school attendance (**q. iv** and **q. v**) which occurred in both Unions. As noted above Honiton provided relief in money only, a practice Wodehouse frowned upon, and he was unconvinced that relatives' contributions were sought (**q. xiv**). Chard similarly evidenced poor practice, failing to keep records up to date (**q. viia**) and lacking surprise visits to paupers (**q.5**) which Wodehouse believed could lead to fraud. However in other areas practice in both adjacent Unions was similar or better than Axminster's: Honiton revised relief lists every six months (**q. i**) and both Chard and Honiton strictly observed the Prohibitory Order (**q. xv**). Differences in Axminster's relief practice become more apparent when compared to Unions with better practice. As **Appendix A5.2** shows, Farnham and Farringdon had many practices of which Wodehouse would have approved. Judged against the questions **i-ix** and **x-xv** in the main report and supplementary questions **2-5** and **7-9** (nineteen in total), Farnham and Farringdon employed fourteen and thirteen of the recommended practices respectively. Axminster by comparison used six.

However, an overall evaluation of this data suggests that Axminster may have been unfortunate in the timing of Wodehouse's initial visit, in the cases which came before the Guardians on that day and in how they answered his questions (or how he interpreted the answers). For example

Axminster's response to the question regarding the treatment of deserted wives was recorded as: "Deserted wives" are generally given out-relief; the workhouse is offered if collusion is suspected', whereas Honiton's response was stated more positively: "Deserted wives" are offered the workhouse unless the Guardians are satisfied there is no collusion'. The language of the latter appears to suggest better practice, although in effect practice may have been similar.

The evidence above and in **Appendix 5** shows there was a great variety in practice, and the comparisons show that Axminster's performance was middling: whilst the Union was not one of those such as Farnham or Farringdon that were already adopting Wodehouse's ideas of best practice, it was not the worst. In addition, **Appendix A5.2** shows there are gaps in answers from Farringdon which was otherwise held up as having good practice. No answer is recorded for Farringdon (or Farnham) in response to the question on timely record keeping (**q. viia**) and Farringdon did not answer the question on discretionary relief. This hints that answers which did not suit Wodehouse's argument may have been ignored. The combination of self-reporting and Wodehouse's interpretation of responses may have had a part to play in Axminster becoming a symbol of failure. These factors and the tone of the report rather suggest that Wodehouse formed a negative opinion of Axminster Guardians at an early stage with the Union forming an example of poor practice. In any case any negative reaction was compounded by Axminster's determined resistance to Wodehouse's attempts to encourage amendments to their practice, explored in Section 5 and Chapter 6.

4. Wodehouse's Influence on National Policy and Further Repressive Measures

Wodehouse's report to the LGB made detailed recommendations to reduce pauper numbers and out-relief costs and emphasised the need for greater uniformity in practice, thus making an important contribution to national policy development. It also set up recommendations such as personal attendance of applicants, disinterested assessment of applications, frequent checks on continued eligibility, list revision every 3-6 months, increased use of the workhouse for deserted wives, strict application of the workhouse test and use of the Prohibitory Orders to deter applicants and limit fraud. He favoured providing a 'considerable proportion' of out-relief 'in kind' suggesting this formed a test of destitution, reducing temptation to waste relief on alcohol and thus reducing relief costs. He recommended Guardians should take full account of club money and liable relatives should be made to contribute to both out-relief and workhouse accommodation costs. Supervision of Relieving Officers should increase, and distribution practice tightened. Overall, and setting up a conflict with Axminster, he argued that local out-relief practices founded on the premise that it was

more economical for ratepayers and more humane for paupers should be eliminated on grounds that this increased expense and encouraged destitution.⁶³

Wodehouse's conclusions added to the developing narrative that change in Poor Law policy was necessary, despite improving trends in out-relief costs and numbers seen in the last PLB Report in 1871.⁶⁴ His evidence and several of his suggestions fed into important developments in central out-relief policy in the 1871 'Fleming Circular' to Inspectors and the *First Local Government Board Report* in 1872. His report was later separately published and quoted with approval in *The Economist* under the heading 'The Present Misapplication of Poor Relief'.⁶⁵

The 'Fleming Circular' was a significant steppingstone in developing central policy, positioned between the 'Goschen Minute' and the 'Longley Strategy' and subsequent repressive measures. The 'Fleming Circular' highlighted central anxiety about burgeoning costs which necessitated more rigorous and uniform administration of out-relief for the able-bodied. Although acknowledging pauperism arose from numerous causes, the LGB emphasised costs could be tackled through Guardians' remedying defective administration. Poor practice included too easy access to relief, variations between Unions who adhered strictly to the Law and those who 'more or less' disregarded it and an underuse of the workhouse due to misguided humanity or erroneous ideas on economy. Axminster was named and shamed, along with adjoining Honiton and Tiverton as examples of poor practice. According to the LGB, these Unions provided excessive out-relief, noting, in Axminster's case, 'out of every [£]100 expended on relief during the year ended Lady-day 1869 [£]85....[was] spent upon out-relief'.⁶⁶

Historians have offered varied views on the impact of 'Fleming'. Hurren for example argues that the circular sought to present out-relief in moral terms because Guardians had failed ratepayers through poor administration which, though chiefly a measure seeking greater financial accountability, in practice increased pauperism. She suggests it had an immediate effect on the economy of makeshifts, particularly affecting women who had traditionally been eligible for out-relief.⁶⁷ Boyer meanwhile notes Wodehouse's assertion that fewer than one in ten would accept the workhouse if offered the test, suggesting that although the low level of acceptance was an exaggeration, employing the test resonated with many Guardians as a cost-saving measure.⁶⁸

⁶³ UKPP, 'Wodehouse Report, First LGB Report', pp. 90-103.

⁶⁴ UKPP, 'Twenty-third PLB Report', pp. xvii.

⁶⁵ 'Present Misapplication', *Economist*, 27 June 1874, pp. 773-75; Wodehouse, *Report on Out-Door Relief*.

⁶⁶ UKPP, 'Fleming Circular, First LGB Report', pp. 63-68, quotation p. 67.

⁶⁷ Hurren, *Protesting about Pauperism*, p. 23.

⁶⁸ Boyer, *Winding Road*, p. 85.

Further repressive measures followed. National relief policy became increasingly harsh following ideas developed by LGB Inspector Henry Longley in his 1873 Report, (the Longley Strategy), further challenging Axminster's approach. His deterrent strategy included an extension of the workhouse test alongside an educational strategy of published rules so that poor people understood eligibility, thereby encouraging greater self-reliance.⁶⁹ Longley challenged paternalist ideas that inclined Unions towards leniency for sympathetic, special local cases, by emphasising the use of the workhouse test for all, by limiting the importance of local knowledge of relief applicants, and by suggesting Guardians should make decisions without reports. Out-relief was to be a reward for those who were properly deserving; large categories such as widows and some elderly people now fell outside this criterion. This harsh strategy, rather than 'Fleming' has come to epitomise 'crusading' for historians.⁷⁰ Hurren suggests that Longley built on the perceived limitations of the earlier 'Goschen Minute' and 'Fleming Circular' because they were an insufficient challenge to out-relief.⁷¹ Over time allowances made for adverse circumstances diminished, for example the LGB increasingly frowned upon requests to relax out-relief prohibitions in severe winter weather.⁷² Early success in reducing pauper numbers appears to have encouraged further cutbacks. In 1874, the Board suggested that out-relief for the 'want of work' category should be eliminated.⁷³ Attitudes displayed in the 1875 report were noticeably tougher than those of the late 1860s. Here, the LGB blamed the poor for failing to save, and admonished Guardians for failing to make good use of the workhouse test.⁷⁴

Overall, Wodehouse's ideas, his report based on local practices which included his admonishment of Axminster's poor practice, made a significant contribution to national policy. The report, the policies they supported and the increasingly repressive environment they fostered, form the context in which Wodehouse took up the role of Inspector in Axminster. Section 5 considers the local impact of Wodehouse and how his approach fared in his supervision of Axminster, a Union unsympathetic to his ideas, focussing on relationships and the conflict his approach engendered.

⁶⁹ UKPP, 'Poor Law Administration in London. Report ... by Henry Longley, Local Government Inspector, 7 November 1873, Appendix B. No 14, Third Annual Report of the Local Government Board, 1873-74', (1874 (C.1071)), pp. 136-207.

⁷⁰ Lees, *Solidarities of Strangers*, pp. 261-62; Webb and Webb, *Poor Law History*, I, pp. 437-40; Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty*, pp. 96-102.

⁷¹ Hurren, *Protesting about Pauperism*, pp. 24, 54, 63-64.

⁷² UKPP, 'Fourth Annual Report of the Local Government Board 1874-75', (1875 (C.1328)), p. xvii; 'Fifth Annual Report of the Local Government Board, 1875-76', (1876 (C.1585)), p. xvii.

⁷³ UKPP, 'Third LGB Report', p. xiv.

⁷⁴ UKPP, 'Fourth LGB Report', pp. xviii-xix.

5. The Local impact of Wodehouse: Guardians, Ratepayers and Poor People

Wodehouse was formally appointed as Inspector to the Western Region in mid-1871, managing it until his transfer in early 1876. This appointment ensured that he had the opportunity to take forward his ideas on reducing pauperism. He approached this task with considerable enthusiasm using both trenchant criticism of Unions under his supervision and attempts at persuasion aimed at Guardians and ratepayers. The sustained use of criticism as a means of achieving change differed from the 'more relaxed' approach which Bellamy argued was to be found amongst Inspectors where building relationships, personal influence and persuasion were favoured means of achieving Central aims or Williams' doubts that Central-local relations were adversarial.⁷⁵

The contrast to Union oversight exercised by Wodehouse compared to that of his two predecessors was immediately apparent. A barrister by training, the evidence from his reports suggest his approach was inquisitorial, often critical and especially challenging in meetings, creating a sustained pressure on Guardians over the whole range of poor law management matters with his detailed reports, grasp of detail and use of statistics.⁷⁶ Wodehouse's visits were often preceded or accompanied by evidence from pauper statistics and comparative comments on other Unions, repeatedly highlighting Axminster's high pauperism and relatively poor performance and challenging Axminster's reliance on paternalistic systems and local knowledge base.⁷⁷ However unlike previous Inspectors (or his successors) he benefitted from an assistant, Inspector Dawson, who from 1872 undertook twice yearly Union visits, leaving Wodehouse to attend Guardian meetings yearly, allowing much stronger central oversight.⁷⁸

The Guardians' reaction to Wodehouse's continued criticism of their practice and management was muted, at least in public. There is no record of a specific response to the published criticism of poor performing Unions included in his 1871 Report on out-relief or in the 'Fleming Circular' in the Axminster Minutes. However, the local paper reported that Wodehouse's views were not welcomed in the area and there was a groundswell of anti-central comments in *Pulman's Weekly News*, with a typical example noted below. As will be seen in Chapter 6, Axminster Guardians adopted the approach of deliberately ignoring unwelcome interventions from Wodehouse. His visits were often

⁷⁵ Bellamy, *Central-Local Relations*, pp. 148-150; Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty*, p. 67.

⁷⁶ Wodehouse recognised the limits of statistics in 1874, noting that they were not collected on a uniform basis, which he thought was essential if they were to be truly useful. TNA: MH 32/91, Walter Sendell correspondence Edmond H. Woodhouse, Correspondence and Papers related to the South Western District, ... 1871-79, 31452/1874, Wodehouse Report to LGB, 5 May 1874.

⁷⁷ One in twelve noted in Minutes 1871. DHC, PLU/Axminster/10, Minutes, 6 April 1871, p. 428.

⁷⁸ DHC, Axminster Poor Law Union, PLU/Axminster/11, Axminster Guardians' Minute Book 1871-1876, Axminster Minutes, 12 December 1872, pp. 144-45; Bellamy noted the short-lived increase in Inspector numbers. Bellamy, *Central-Local Relations*, pp. 146-47.

not well attended or received, an indication of the perceived value of his interventions. Of the five meetings recorded between 1871 and 1875, Bently did not attend three. The Guardians postponed his 1873 meeting as inconvenient and less than half the Guardians attended when it finally took place (only three meetings that year had fewer attendees). Press coverage of Wodehouse's 1872 visit and detailed recommendations on cautiously tightening out-relief practice (headed 'Out relief v Union Imprisonment' by Pulman) was comprehensive. It recorded limited Guardian support for his views but noted that one Guardian openly challenged him and argued that Wodehouse's suggestions were 'no good', as they were already local practice. Wodehouse was reported to have responded to such criticism by stating that the Guardians 'had not quite carried out their duties as well ... as stated'.⁷⁹ None of his suggestions were noted in the Guardian Minutes and whilst Axminster agreed to form a committee of the whole Board to consider them, nothing further was recorded.⁸⁰ Wodehouse again addressed out-relief in his 1873 visit, challenging a Guardian who suggested that the Union's pauperism was not 'extravagantly high' with statistics to prove otherwise. He also suggested that adoption of the workhouse test would 'greatly relieve the rates' and that the Guardians could be misled by 'untrustworthy applicants'. He recommended the Guardians consider the ideas promoted by Albert Pell (based in the 'crusading' Union of Brixworth) whose ideas on reform were soon to be published.⁸¹ Whilst covered in the newspaper reports, none of this was recorded in Axminster's Minutes, which simply noted his attendance. His 1874 visit was mentioned in the press but completely omitted from the Minutes.⁸² Wodehouse's approach and failure to build a positive relationship with the Union may well have limited Axminster's willingness to embrace any of his suggestions openly. Though, as will be argued in Chapter 6, some changes were made, often covertly and unacknowledged.

Wodehouse appears to have understood that his messages were often unpopular and had limited impact, and not just in Axminster. There is no record that he returned to the theme of out-relief at Axminster after 1873 or actively promoted the later ideas of Longley. His report to the LGB in November 1873 summarised his findings on his Unions' responses and his latest thinking and ideas on relief policy. He advised that pressure on Unions via Poor Law Conferences and individual visits had had some limited success in promoting change. However local opposition continued either on grounds of principle or because improvements in policy or workhouse infrastructure were required before change could be contemplated. Although Wodehouse supported Pell's Brixworth 'crusading'

⁷⁹ 'ABG', *Pulman's*, 21 May 1872, p. 4.

⁸⁰ DHC, PLU/Axminster/11, Minutes, 16 May 1872, p. 98.

⁸¹ 'ABG', *Pulman's*, 20 May 1873, p. 4.

⁸² DHC, PLU/Axminster/11, Minutes, 15 May 1873, pp. 189-91, 16 April 1874, pp. 272-76, 10 December 1874, pp. 326-29; 'ABG', *Pulman's*, 21 May 1872, p. 4, 20 May 1873, p. 4, 21 April 1874, p. 4, 15 December 1874, p. 4.

ideas and made further suggestions for tightening policy such as quarterly revision of relief lists and smaller Relieving Officer districts he counselled against legislation believing this would attract widespread opposition from Unions opposed to compulsion, including from those that were well-run.⁸³ In Axminster at least there were no further policy initiatives from the Centre on this topic, but, as the following chapters demonstrate, over time further deterrent policy ideas filtered into local practice and challenged the local paternalist approach.

The publication of Wodehouse's report caused some public consternation in the East Devon press with worries aired about rising levels of pauperism and the re-emergence of Old Poor Law practices, suggesting that central concerns were finding an audience.⁸⁴ However the reaction of local ratepayers to the extent of pauperism in the Axminster area was generally low-key, despite Wodehouse's challenge and Pulman's repeated denigration of the Guardians. Nevertheless, press reports of Wodehouse's views and arguments with the Guardians enabled his ideas to reach a wide local audience, giving him a platform: his comments in meetings suggest his target audience was ratepayers, seen for example in his suggestion that a revision in practice would 'relieve the rates'.⁸⁵ In turn, the publication of comparative local statistics in the press created a flow of information which had the potential to put pressure on Guardians because Axminster's high pauper numbers and costs compared unfavourably with many other Unions in Wodehouse's area.⁸⁶ Again, this does not appear to have had an impact in Axminster as there is no evidence of a strong demand from ratepayers for radical change in local practice. There were relatively few complaints about costs or local policy reported in the press. Mitchell's repeated allegations that ratepayers were supporting Guardian farmers through wage support failed to provoke a major protest.⁸⁷ Nor was there a demand to change guardians in the yearly elections; in fact the opposite occurred as seen in in **Table 5.2** below. On average over the period 1861-1881 nearly 33% (10 out of 31) Guardians were replaced each year; but in the period 1872-1876 (the Wodehouse years) this fell to 27%. Once he departed turnover rose to 35%. Whilst it is unclear why this should be, it is possible that potential Guardians were not prepared to take on an unpopular role, challenged by both Centre and in the press.

⁸³ TNA: MH 32/91, 70279/1873, Wodehouse Report to LGB, 8 November 1873.

⁸⁴ 'Pauperism in East Devon', *Western Times*, 18 April 1871, p. 5.

⁸⁵ 'ABG', *Pulman's*, 20 May 1873, p. 4.

⁸⁶ 'Pauperism and Relief in Mr. Wodehouse's District', *Pulman's*, 5 January 1875, p. 2.

⁸⁷ 'Great Meeting of Labourers at Bridport', *Bridport News, and Dorsetshire, Devonshire and Somersetshire Advertiser*, 12 July 1872, p. 4; 'Yeovil, Agricultural Labourers' Union', *Western Gazette*, 13 December 1872, p. 7.

Table 5.2: Turnover of Guardians

Inspector	Election year	mean percentage of new guardians in office
Gulson	1861-1868	33%
Ward	1869-1871	35%
Wodehouse	1872-1876	27%
Courtenay	1877-1880	35%

Source: Axminster Guardians Minute Books. (See Appendix A4.4 for further detail).

Nor is there is direct evidence of a public response to Wodehouse and his agenda by poor people in the Axminster area. Considered in conjunction with the limited impact of agricultural trade unionism in a Union area bedevilled by very low agricultural wages and limited employment opportunities, this remains a puzzle although it is possible that the determined retention of local practices by Guardians largely neutralised dissent. Meetings of agricultural workers (thousands strong) were held in the vicinity in 1872/3 at Bridport and Yeovil for example, but none are reported as taking place in the Axminster Union area, although Axminster's Guardian John Mitchell was a prominent speaker at several events in the wider region and was highly critical of Axminster Guardians and their treatment of poor people. Mitchell claimed to support poor people, farmers and ratepayers, whilst castigating Axminster Guardians, suggesting they acted in their own interests, keeping agricultural labourers' wages low through subsidising pay with poor law payments and deliberately paying low benefits. His suggestion for improvement was to increase wages, thus allowing a reduction in rates. Mitchell even repeated these views in the presence of Assistant Inspector Dawson but none of his allegations were accepted by the Guardians.⁸⁸ Given the level of criticism, the local connection, wide reporting and level of poverty, it is surprising the only response was anger expressed by Axminster Guardians at Mitchell's behaviour. A belated attempt to introduce NALU speakers in Axminster in 1875 was mainly attended by farmers and their supporters rather than agricultural labourers and deteriorated into violence against the speakers. Two Axminster Guardians, James Boon and John Loveridge spoke against NALU, but were largely ignored. The absence of agricultural trade unionism in the Union area contrasts with Hurren's findings, as she suggests its presence in Brixworth was a significant factor in that Union's support for 'crusading', because it facilitated farmer Guardian and rate-payer acceptance of a harsher policy of out-relief.⁸⁹ Its absence in Axminster meant that there was no basis for another potential challenge to the existing ethos or practice in local Poor Law policy.

⁸⁸ 'Great Meeting of Labourers', *Bridport News*, 12 July 1872, p. 4; Yeovil, Agricultural Labourers' Union', *Western Gazette*, 13 December 1872, p. 7; 'Axminster Board of Guardians. A Disturbed Meeting', *Western Times*, 7 February 1873, p. 8.

⁸⁹ Hurren, *Protesting about Pauperism*, pp. 116-17.

6. Conclusion

Chapter 5 has shown that the later 1860s and early 1870s was a major turning point in poor law management in Axminster as this was the period when the Union's relief practice became a conspicuous problem for the Centre. It resulted in public castigation of Axminster as an example of poor management practice in the 'Fleming Circular' to Inspectors and in the First Local Government Board Report to Parliament in 1871. Axminster's apparently negative attitude towards the Centre became apparent, along with the independent mindset of its Guardians and their tendency to ignore central policy advice and direction.

The divergence between central and local Axminster approaches to poor relief exposed in these reports and directives, was exacerbated by the sustained and progressive change in the direction of central policy on out-relief in the late 1860s and early 1870s. An emphasis on deterrence and cost-cutting combined with new bureaucratic, uniform and increasingly disinterested methods of supervision favoured by Inspector Wodehouse impinged on a Union where poor law management was based on local knowledge and consideration of individual cases on their own terms. This chapter has shown that local investigations, particularly that of Wodehouse, had a significant role in the development of bureaucratic and increasingly evidence-based policy and management. However, changes made in national policy in response to perceived deficiencies in local practice and the concomitant stress on uniformity did not take into account the individual local poor law environment and the locally specific causes of poverty which in turn made reforms in Poor Law more difficult in Unions such as Axminster.

As this chapter also demonstrates, the local approach to relief policy was deeply embedded in Axminster. Axminster's ability to exercise an element of autonomy had become established in the 1860s, when limited supervision allowed an independent approach and localism to become established before Wodehouse took charge. Wodehouse's methods played into the hands of opponents to centralism, providing excellent material for Pulman's anti-centralist campaign. In turn, the persistence of local practices and paternalism appear to have neutralised local dissent from ratepayers who were content with the Guardians approach, notwithstanding high levels of poverty and pauperism. That said, the absence of a response from the working poor, given the level of poverty and active trade unionism in other nearby areas remains a puzzle and would need further work to understand it.

Consequently, Wodehouse's attempts to impose a more bureaucratic and increasing uniform approach met with limited success in persuading Axminster's Guardians, rate payers or the local working and poor populations of the benefit of central Poor Law policy. His role as an LGB Inspector

provided Wodehouse with a platform to advocate change amongst Guardians and the wider rate-paying public. His use of publicity and statistics and the press presence at Guardian meetings allowed his views to be presented in depth and gave him an opportunity to persuade ratepayers (and other inhabitants) to change their views. Yet his adversarial approach in an area which had a fierce belief in traditional self-government, local knowledge of its economy, strong social relationships and anti-central sentiment limited his impact because it did not build trust or consensus. However as will be seen in Chapter 6, some ideas resonated and were implemented.

Chapter 6 explores how Axminster responded to the Centre's challenge investigating the practical impact of the 'crusade' on local relief practice. Resistance, some acceptance of central ideas amongst Guardians (often covertly applied) and autonomous measures can all be found as Axminster sought to respond to the changing poor law environment.

Chapter 6: Managing Policy and Practice: Resistance, Autonomy Compliance and Compromise – Axminster’s Response to the ‘Crusade’ Against Out-Relief

1. Introduction

Axminster Guardians’ approach to relief management evolved in the 1870s in response to central policy and a changing social and economic environment. Chapter 6 explores these developments, examining how Axminster Union’s response to pressures from the Centre to change its practice provoked a defence of traditional ways of working in reaction to new national ideas which included the influence of the ‘crusade against out-relief’. In so doing it highlights the role of an enduring localism. Consequently the chapter addresses calls in the literature for more attention to be given to both the ‘crusade’ and to the development and operation local poor law administration.¹

This chapter argues that Axminster’s localism was paramount in decision-making with a determination to employ personal consideration of individual relief applications using elastic local principles and local knowledge, whilst following local priorities in cost cutting. Axminster Guardians’ localism was not articulated in detail, other than in frequently voiced anti-centralism, so has been demonstrated here using evidence from a series of case studies which have been examined to reveal the extent of Axminster’s resistance and compliance with central policy. The evidence reveals patterns in decision-making and the impact of a deeply embedded localism which in the short term sustained high levels of pauperism, although as later chapters will show the longer-term trajectory resulting from this approach set up problems for the future. The evidence also reveals some shifts and gradual adjustments in local practice during the 1870s which, at times, made poor law practice appear chaotic but on deeper reading suggests pragmatism and adoption of central principles where they aligned with local practices. This resulted in a patchwork of provision, determined by local paternalism and the individual circumstances of the case which balanced the needs of economy for ratepayers, paupers and employment.

Evidence is derived from a range of sources, including Union Minutes, newspaper reports, census data, pauper statistics and case studies using a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods to show how decisions were made on the ground. As relief report books have not survived, a sample of relief application cases taken from newspaper reports of Guardians’ meetings for two months in each of

¹ For example: Elizabeth T. Hurren, *Protesting about Pauperism: Poverty, Politics and Poor Relief in Late-Victorian England, 1870-1900* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press for the Royal Historical Society, 2007), pp. 250, 261-62; Lynn Hollen Lees, *The Solidarities of Strangers: The English Poor Laws and the People, 1700-1948* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 9.

1873, 1875 and 1879 provide insights into relief applications and change over time. A database compiled from Axminster workhouse's Census data 1861-1901 provides evidence of patterns of workhouse occupancy, albeit based on relatively small numbers and a transient population.

Section 2 examines the national and local context of falling levels of pauperism in the 1870s, providing a background for Axminster's approach to relief policy. Sections 3 and 4 use a range of case studies and local evidence to demonstrate patterns in Axminster's response to central pressure and the changing environment. Section 3 focusses on the nature and impact of resistance to central policy and the pursuit of independent action whilst Section 4 studies the extent of change and adaptation by Axminster's Guardians, how this compares with the more extreme 'crusading' tactics identified by Elizabeth Hurren in her study of Brixworth or Karel Williams' 'brutal dispauperisation' and how the impact of change in the local economic environment and relief practice reduced the focus on out-relief locally.²

2. National and Local Context

Falling levels of pauperism both nationally and locally provide the context for exploring how and why Axminster's relief ethos and practice developed over the course of the 1870s. The national campaign against out-relief was very successful in reducing levels of out-relief in its early phase between 1871 and 1876. Historians such as Williams, Hurren and George Boyer note what Williams describes as the 'brilliant short-run success' of the 'crusade' in terms of reducing pauperism, as national pauper numbers fell by 33% (outdoor) and 11% (indoor) between 1871 and 1876. Williams argues this was achieved through 'dispauperisation by any and every means'.³ Whilst relatively few Unions, mostly urban, adopted wholesale restrictive measures, the scale of reduction was such that most Unions must have implemented some restrictions.⁴ Recent theses such as those by Geoffrey Hooker, Richard Talbot and Jonathan Pratt have reinforced the diversity in the approaches to relief taken by individual Unions, which highlights the need for further studies on the impact of the 'crusade' era.⁵

² Hurren, *Protesting about Pauperism*, p. 249; Karel Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 102.

³ Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty*, p. 102; Hurren, *Protesting about Pauperism*, pp. 45-52; George R. Boyer, *The Winding Road to the Welfare State: Economic Insecurity and Social Welfare Policy in Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), p. 86.

⁴ Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty*, pp. 102-07.

⁵ Geoff Hooker, 'Llandilofawr Poor Law Union 1836-1886: 'The Most Difficult Union in Wales'' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Leicester, 2013); Richard Talbot, 'North South Divide of the Poor in the Staffordshire Potteries, 1871-1901' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Leicester, 2017); Jonathan Pratt, 'Paternalistic, Parsimonious Pragmatists: The Wigan Board of Guardians and the Administration of the Poor Laws 1880-1900' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Central Lancashire, 2011).

However, when considered over a longer time frame it appears that the impact of the 'crusade' was more limited. The 'crusade' era is conventionally said to end in 1893.⁶ Lynn Hollen Lees and Williams both note that the scale of reductions did not continue after the mid-1870s.⁷ For example in 1881 the LGB remarked with satisfaction that nationally the ratio of paupers to population had fallen from 46 per thousand to 32 per thousand between 1871 and 1880 and numbers on out-relief had reduced by more than a quarter. But they also noted that out-relief reductions were patchy. South-West England and Wales returned the two highest proportions of expenditure on out-relief (78% and 84.9% respectively compared with 60.7% nationally). The LGB blamed Unions for failing to follow sound administration, for being too ready to grant relief and for insufficient use of the workhouse test. They considered that extensive use of low level out-relief aided subsistence and suspected the 'old abuse' of aid in wages continued.⁸

Axminster's relief data clearly demonstrates that change took place between 1871 and 1881, showing both similarities and differences when compared with the national picture. Axminster's pauper numbers fell substantially between 1871 and 1876 as shown in the January 1st snapshot figures: c.30% (outdoor) and 35% (indoor) compared with Williams' national findings of 33% outdoor, 11% indoor, though Axminster's percentage reduction is based on low numbers (see **Table 6.2**).⁹ Axminster's proportion of paupers to population fell by around 30% over the decade as shown in **Figure 6.1** though this was slightly less than the national rate reduction of c.34%. However, Axminster's proportion of paupers compared with population remained significantly higher overall, highlighting that the issue of extensive pauperism remained unresolved.

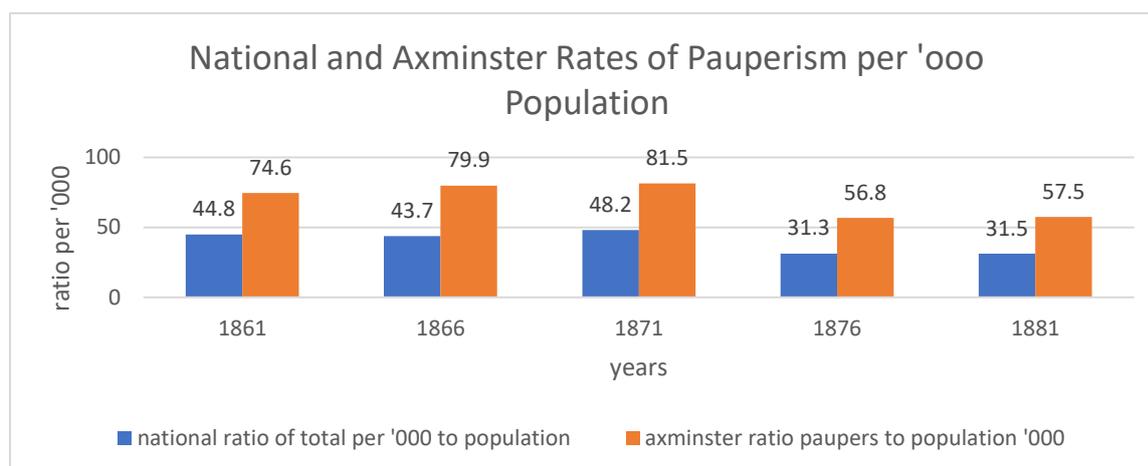
⁶ Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty*, p. 103.

⁷ Lees, *Solidarities of Strangers*, p.262; Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty*, p. 103.

⁸ UKPP, 'Tenth Annual Report of the Local Government Board, 1880-81', (1881 (C.2982)), pp. ix-xvii. Revised data in the 'Pauperism (England and Wales). (Half-yearly Statements)', (1901 (73)) in Appendix A2.5 shows that nationally the percentage reduction in paupers/population between 1871 and 1881 was higher at around 35%.

⁹ National: Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty*, p. 102; Axminster: see Table 6.2.

Figure 6.1: National and Axminster Rates of Pauperism Compared with Population



Source: National: UKPP, 'Pauperism (England and Wales). (Half-yearly Statements)', 1901; Axminster: UKPP, 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January, 1861-1881'. (See Appendix A2.2 and A2.5 for full details).

Significantly and unlike 'crusading' Unions the proportion of paupers receiving out-relief in Axminster remained well above the national average over the whole period of the 'crusade' until the early 1890s, suggesting that despite changes discussed below there was little impact from any revisions in local poor law practice (see **Table 6.1**). Axminster continued to provide most relief outdoors, typically c.90%, whilst national levels reduced substantially, so that the gap between Axminster and other Unions widened over time. Although costs in Axminster fell, c.82% of relief costs in 1881 were spent on out-relief, higher than the South-Western or national percentages noted above.¹⁰

Table 6.1: Percentage of Axminster and National Paupers Receiving Out-Relief, 1861–1901

% of the Pauper Population Receiving Out-Relief	1861	1871	1881	1891	1901
National %	80.2	81.3	70.9	67.8	62.6
Axminster	92.0	92.0	89.5	91.1	89.6
Axminster Total Paupers	1388	1514	1014	1102	779

Note: Average of 1st January and 1st July pauper Returns, excluding lunatics and casual/vagrant paupers.

Source: National: Williams, pp.158-161; Axminster: UKPP, Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January and July, 1861-1891, Pauperism (England and Wales). (Half-yearly Statements) 1901. (See Bibliography for full details).

The pace of change in Axminster lessened from 1876, both in terms of pauper numbers and relief costs, although more use of the workhouse was made in the second half of the decade (albeit still

¹⁰ UKPP, Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January, 1861-1891, Pauperism (England and Wales). (Half-yearly Statements) 1901; Comparative Statement of Amount Expended for In-maintenance and Out-relief, 1881. (See Appendices A2.2, A2.4 and A2.5 for full details).

with low numbers), mirroring Williams' findings.¹¹ **Table 6.2** demonstrates these changes which coincide in Axminster with a change of Inspector.

Table 6.2: Axminster - Change in Relief Numbers and Cost, 1871-1881

Inspector	Period	Numbers % Change			Costs % Change		
		In-Relief	Out-Relief	Total	In-Relief	Out-Relief	Total
Wodehouse	1871-1876	(35)	(30)	(30.25)	(9)	(20)	(18)
Courtenay	1876-1881	43	(9.5)	(5.5)	15	(5.5)	(2)
Whole Period	1871-1881	(7.5)	(36.5)	(34)	5	(24.25)	(20.25)

Source: UKPP, 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers relieved, 1st January, 1861-1881'; 'Comparative Statement of Amount Expended for In-maintenance and Out-relief, 1861-1881'. (See Appendix A2.4 for full details).

The data above forms the background for the following discussion which explores how Axminster approached relief practice in the 1870s and how it adapted its ethos and approach to the changes in national policy and social and economic environment. There is little evidence of formal policy in response to the 'crusade' and practice appears inconsistent at times, but analysis reveals patterns of decision making: resistance to central directives and compliance/accommodation where these directives aligned with local priorities. Overall, local independent action in response to local circumstances was maintained, but there are also signs of a gradual change over time as local practice adapted to changing circumstances and new pressures from the Centre.

3. Patterns in Relief Practice: Guardians' Resistance and Independent Action

Axminster's continuing ability to exercise local control is evident in the way the Union responded to central pressure to reduce high levels of pauperism and out-relief. The Union was well placed to challenge unwelcome central interventions in the 1870s and Axminster Guardians may well have regarded Wodehouse's repeated criticisms between 1871-1873 as unwarranted. They were aware from bi-annual audit reports that local costs and pauper numbers were already falling from high points in 1868/1869 (see also **Appendix 2**).¹² They confidently argued reductions were due to their actions and central pressure was unnecessary.¹³

Despite the continued pressure from the Centre to review their approach, Axminster was able to

¹¹ Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty*, pp. 103, 170.

¹² Reductions in pauper numbers and costs were noted in nearly all the bi-yearly audit reports between 1870-1876. DHC, Axminster Poor Law Union, PLU/Axminster/10, Axminster Guardians' Minute Book 1865-1871, Minutes, 2 June 1870, pp. 361-64; 15 December 1870, pp. 403-06; DHC, Axminster Poor Law Union, PLU/Axminster/11, Axminster Guardians' Minute Book 1871-1876, Minutes, 29 June 1871, pp. 19-23, 11 January 1872, pp. 64-65, 13 June 1872, pp.105-06, 28 November 1872, pp. 139-40, 26 June 1873, p. 199-200, 22 January 1874, pp. 246-47, 9 July 1874, pp. 291-92, 7 January 1875, pp. 333-34; 8 July 1875, pp. 389-93; 23 December 1875, pp. 432-33, DHC, Axminster Poor Law Union, PLU/Axminster/12, Axminster Guardians' Minute Book 1876-1879, Minutes, 25 May 1876, pp. 49-50, 15 February, 1877, pp. 127-28.

¹³ 'Axminster Board of Guardians', *Pulman's Weekly News and Advertiser*, 21 May 1872, p. 4.

continue existing practices and make choices as to what to amend, often ignoring central guidance they disliked. Both the Union and Wodehouse recognised that the balance of power in decision-making in relief policies often resided with Guardians, subject only to limited legally imposed boundaries.¹⁴ As such, the Guardian's initially felt little compulsion to act. In 1875 for example *Pulman's Weekly News* reported Guardian John Mitchell's comment that the LGB would 'laugh' at the Guardians' 'refusal to carry out ... orders until absolutely compelled to do so'.¹⁵ Whilst Axminster's Guardians could exploit this power to their advantage, open disputes in relief practice were limited as both parties understood the boundaries of discretion. Although Wodehouse was often critical of the Guardians, both he and the LGB exercised some sensitivity towards Axminster, on occasions stepping back from complaining about infringements which might have inflamed relationships. For example Wodehouse advised the LGB not to take issue with the Guardians' failure to develop infectious wards at the workhouse in 1872 and 1874, advising on both occasions that although these were needed it was 'not desirable' to press the question at present, although no reason was given.¹⁶

Axminster's failure to respond to central initiatives was often deliberate and grounded in knowledge of current central policy, rather than ignorance. The Union appears to have sought to keep up to date with new ideas and initiatives, even if they failed to implement them. For example, the Guardians purchased a new book of Regulations, joined The South-West Union Association and liaised with other Unions, considering petitions and circulars on amended practice.¹⁷

Four major departures from central relief recommendations in the 1870s had a significant long-term impact on costs and numbers of paupers relieved. Firstly, Axminster largely ignored suggestions from Inspectors to adopt formal publicised rules for granting relief. As a result, at times, the application of informal guidelines coupled with individual assessment of applications stretched policy interpretation. Lack of structure and capricious decision-making tended to increase levels of relief, as noted by Wodehouse in his 1871 Report examined in Chapter 5. However, as noted later in this chapter, they also had the effect of disguising changes in policy. Mitchell criticised illogical decisions in 1873, and in 1874 Guardians complained of inconsistencies in the provision of midwives and grants of bread for childbed applicants.¹⁸ The absence of relief registers makes assessment

¹⁴ 'ABG', *Pulman's*, 21 May 1872, p. 4.

¹⁵ 'ABG', *Pulman's*, 9 March 1875, p. 4.

¹⁶ TNA: MH 12/2109, Axminster Correspondence, August 1871-December 1874, 66165/1872 and 79564/1874, notes made on Reports of Visit to Axminster Workhouse undertaken by Assistant Inspector Dawson, 12 November 1872 and 24 November 1874.

¹⁷ For example: DHC, PLU/Axminster/11, Minutes, 1 May 1873, p. 187, 11 December 1873, p. 238; PLU/Axminster/12, Minutes, 27 March 1879, p. 363.

¹⁸ 'ABG', *Pulman's*, 1 July 1873, p. 4, 16 June 1874, p. 4.

difficult, but evidence in the Minutes and news reports suggests that at an individual level relief depended on the support within the Guardian body: how the case was argued and how deserving the applicant was seen to be. This relief culture is examined with examples in more depth below.

The second and third departures from central recommendations are evident in Axminster's limited use of a test of destitution and the workhouse test, two areas noted as failings by Wodehouse in his 1871 Report.¹⁹ The departures highlight a measure of benevolence (which Wodehouse described as misplaced humanity) in Axminster's relief practice, but also had potential to increase costs and pauper numbers.²⁰ For example, Axminster does not appear to have routinely used a test of actual destitution, as relief continued to be offered when applicants were in danger of becoming destitute, as the following case studies show. For example relief applications in January 1873 mention assets, funds or income of those applying for relief. The Guardians agreed by a majority to offer out-relief to Mrs Browning who applied for relief for herself and six children when her husband was jailed for poaching. Mrs Browning earned four shillings a week and could only afford to send two children to school. Whilst some Guardians thought the family should enter the workhouse, the majority agreed that 'it would be a pity to break up the home' and allowed her three shillings and four loaves as relief.²¹ A second case on the same date explored the circumstances behind Absalom Abbott's request for 56/7^d expenses in order to transfer his wife to a lunatic asylum and for maintenance thereafter. The Guardians thought Mr Abbott had money in the bank. Abbott admitted he was not 'shillingless' but was unable to work at his former trade, a limeburner. He had worked for his former employer for forty-five years and received £100 from a Mr White of Colyton some years ago but this money was mostly spent. He advised that he had brought up eight children respectably and was 'laid up' in the previous year for four months with rheumatism. Having considered this matter, the Guardians advised they would accept 2/6^d a week towards maintenance costs.²² Other cases, such as that of George Harding who earned a relatively high wage of 17/- a week as a railway worker, were routinely allowed midwives and/or bread in early 1873.²³ Axminster continued to make only limited use of the workhouse test, to the frustration of the Centre. Wodehouse's first workhouse report in 1871 opened with the comment that Axminster's large workhouse, built to accommodate over four hundred inmates, was unlikely to have had sufficient accommodation 'if the workhouse

¹⁹ UKPP, 'Out-Door Relief. Report of Edmond H. Wodehouse Esq., Poor Law Inspector to the Right Hon. James Stansfield, M.P., on Out-Door Relief in Seventy Unions in the Counties of Berks, Cornwall, Devon, Dorset, Gloucester, Kent, Somerset, Southampton, Surrey, Sussex and Wilts, 23 June 1871. Appendix B, No. 29, First Report of the Local Government Board, 1871-72', (1872 (C.516)) , pp. 95-96, 119-120, [hereinafter 'Wodehouse Report, First LGB Report'].

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 96-97.

²¹ 'ABG', *Pulman's*, 14 January 1873, p. 4.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 4.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

test were properly applied'.²⁴ He tried to persuade the Guardians in his 1873 meeting that adoption of this test would 'greatly relieve the rates'.²⁵ It seems this plea was ignored as out-relief, although falling, continued to be widely granted as seen in Section 2. An analysis of a sample of relief cases extracted from *Pulman's Weekly News* in 1873 and 1875, at a time when relief was reported in detail shows that less than 10% applicants were reported as being offered the house in 1873 and 1875. 75% applicants (1873) and 81% (1875) were granted out-relief with no mention of further investigation, although the small size of the sample must be borne in mind (see **Table 6.3**).

Table 6.3: Relief Application Results 1873 and 1875

Applicant Result	1873	1875
Applicant Refused	3	3
Workhouse Offered	4	1
Existing Relief Stopped or Reduced	2	0
Relief Granted	36	17
Under Investigation (Temporary Relief at Discretion) or Adjourned	3	0
Total Cases	48	21
% Refused Relief	6.25	14.3
% Offered Workhouse	8.3	4.8
% Granted Out-Door Relief with No Mention of Further Investigation	75	81

Note: The sample comprised all the relief cases reported in *Pulman's Weekly News* for two consecutive Axminster Guardian meetings for 1873 and available dates for 1875. A comparison with Axminster's Minutes for the same dates shows that some cases were omitted from newspaper reports. Forty-eight cases were reported in January 1873, twenty-one in October 1875.

Source: 'Axminster Board of Guardians', *Pulman's Weekly News and Advertiser*, 14 January 1873, p. 4, 28 January 1873, p.4, 4 May 1875, p. 4, 19 October 1875, p. 4; DHC, PLU/Axminster /11, Minutes, 9 January 1873, pp.153-57, 23 January 1873, pp. 158-60, 29 April 1875, pp. 369-74, 14 October 1875, pp .415-18.

There is no data available on applicants who declined the offer of the workhouse, but census records of working-aged workhouse inmates aged 16-64 remained similar in 1871 and 1881 and total inmates at these dates numbered 132 and 99 respectively (see **Table 6.4**). This consistency may possibly be explained by a desire to maintain workhouse numbers within an accepted range.

²⁴ Axminster's workhouse rarely had more than 140 inmates. TNA: MH 12/2109, Axminster Correspondence, August 1871-December 1874, 55012/1871, Axminster Union Visit Report by Edmond Wodehouse, 25 November 1871.

²⁵ 'ABG', *Pulman's*, 20 May 1873, p. 4.

Table 6.4: Workhouse Inmates Aged 16 to 65 and Over, 1861-1881

Inmate Age Band	1861	1871	1881
Total 16-64	43	53	51
Total 65 and over	18	14	31

Source: Census Returns for England and Wales, (1861-1881), (See Appendix A4.1 and Bibliography for sources).

The fourth departure from recommended practice was Axminster's continuing adherence to non-resident relief in contravention of central 'best practice', by providing out-relief for elderly applicants, allowing them to live with out-of-area relatives. Adopted at some point in the mid to late 1860s, this policy remained at the heart of Axminster's practice for many years. Relatively generous, humane and economic on an individual basis (as in-relief was more costly than out-relief), the policy proved to be expensive long-term and contributed to the Union's extensive level of pauperism in the 1890s (see Chapter 8). Numbers seeking non-resident relief were extensive due to a large population of elderly people and out-migration by their working-aged families. 'Crusaders' such as Brixworth's Albert Pell argued in 1873 that the removal of this relief would reduce pauperism as families would often accommodate elderly relatives without financial support from the poor law, whilst those left behind would be required to manage on out-relief or accept accommodation in the workhouse.²⁶ Wodehouse recommended Pell's ideas to Axminster Guardians in May 1873, although there is no evidence that they followed up this suggestion.²⁷

Axminster was however not averse to the Centre's message on the need to economise and did adopt cost-cutting policies. However they chose to prioritise cutting staff costs. Staff and pay cuts were facilitated by the loss of two senior officials, the death of their Clerk and the retirement of their Chaplain. Following Mitchell's suggestion, the Clerk's annual salary was reduced by a quarter to £60 and serious but unsuccessful attempts were made to secure a Chaplain's service unpaid.²⁸ At a junior level low wages and the refusal to countenance pay increases led to frequent resignations. For example, in the month following Christmas Eve 1874 five officials resigned because of low pay.²⁹ Axminster's parsimonious approach had limited success in reducing overall costs and was also time-consuming, requiring frequent negotiations and concessions. Turnover of junior staff continued to be high and stored up longer term management difficulties. Axminster's limited success in targeting staff costs reflects Hurren's findings as she identified reductions in this area as the least successful of

²⁶ UKPP, 'Out-door Relief: Report of Committee of Brixworth Union, Appendix B, No. 32', 'Second Annual Report of the Local Government Board, 1872-73', (1873 (C.748)), pp. 68-75; 'Outdoor Relief in the Brixworth Union - Report by the Rev. Wm. Bury Rector of Hazelworth, Appendix B No. 11, Third Annual Report of the Local Government Board 1873-74', (1874 (C.1071)), pp. 117-25.

²⁷ 'ABG', *Pulman's*, 20 May 1873, p. 4.

²⁸ DHC, PLU/Axminster/11, Minutes, 12 December 1872, pp. 144, 26 December 1872, pp. 149-50.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, Minutes, 24 December 1874, p. 330, 7 January 1875 p. 336, 21 January 1875, p. 341.

eight 'crusading' tactics in achieving savings.³⁰

Overall Axminster's pursuit of local control and independent decision-making exposed the limits of central enforceability in relief practice and partly reflected knowledge of local needs in an area with many very poor people. The continued rejection of aspects of central policy allowed a measure of benevolence and short-term economies for the Union, but ultimately, as will be seen in later chapters, contributed to elevated levels of pauperism.

4. Patterns of Practice: Alignment, Accommodation and Continuing Paternalism

A closer examination of Axminster's relief practice reveals that despite apparent resistance to central directives there was a greater degree of alignment and openness to central ideas than might at first appear. Some 'crusade' era ideas percolated into patterns of relief practice in the 1870s and early 1880s, even if slowly or in a limited version. Although the core approach of individual decision-making in applications for relief continued, the Guardians' ethos of economy for ratepayers became more evident over time. Some changes were widely publicised by the Guardians but many were gradual (a tactic adopted following Wodehouse's advice), unannounced and applied on an individual basis while maintaining the façade of independent action.³¹ Hence, whilst the Minutes do not record specific revisions emanating from Wodehouse's recommendations in 1872 or 1873, over time adjustments were made incorporating ideas in the 'Fleming Circular', discussed in Chapter 5.³² These changes included a growing distinction between relief applicants thought deserving and those undeserving of support with more careful investigation of need, the reduction of medical relief, and a less accommodating approach to some categories of paupers such as the low waged and women with illegitimate children, as evidenced in the case studies in this Chapter.

4.1 Revising Local Policy and Practice

As Chapter 5 established, at the time of Wodehouse's report in 1871 Axminster's practice was already aligned with the Centre's recommended practices in areas such as relatives' contributions and Relieving Officers' visits.³³ In addition, some alignment is also evident in cases where relief was refused because although Wodehouse criticised Axminster for its generous out-relief provision there are also continuing examples of refusals. For instance, following a complaint made to the Centre in 1872, the Guardians advised that they had denied out-relief to Jacob Dampier because the applicant,

³⁰ Hurren, *Protesting about Pauperism*, p. 249.

³¹ 'ABG', *Pulman's*, 21 May 1872, p. 4.

³² DHC, PLU/Axminster/11, Minutes, 16 May 1872, p. 98, 30 May 1872, p. 100, 15 May 1873, pp. 189-91.

³³ UKPP, 'Wodehouse Report, First LGB Report', pp. 90-103, 119-20.

although elderly was able-bodied.³⁴ **Table 6.3** shows that nearly 15% of applicants were either refused relief or offered the workhouse in 1873. Some of the refusals detailed appear harsh, for example, an application by Emma Beer's grandmother for a small payment of out-relief to support her illegitimate orphan granddaughter was rejected on a majority vote, possibly because the Guardians thought the family would maintain her anyway.³⁵

A reduction in benevolence was particularly noticeable in the treatment of the able-bodied. This was especially the case for the working-aged poor, where harsher measures and greater discrimination all contributed to reductions in pauper numbers and overall costs during the 1870s. A substantial fall in relief available to the able-bodied resulted from a new approach taken by the Guardians to medical relief and wage subsidies and from a harsher and increasingly judgemental approach taken towards relief applications.

Although reduction in medical relief was not a major policy focus in early years of the NPL, medical welfare formed an important component of relief, demonstrating a continuation of welfare need firmly established under the OPL, but one that was open to cost-cutting. This was especially true, if, as Steven King argues, medical relief continued to be funded at the levels he found in the last years of the OPL, as he suggests this element absorbed nearly 30% of parish relief budgets by the 1830s.³⁶ In practice cutbacks in medical relief were a key retrenchment strategy used by Unions adopting 'crusading' methodologies and one of the most successful in achieving savings, according to Hurren.³⁷ There is substantial evidence of a similar reduction in outdoor medical relief in Axminster, one area where the able-bodied poor were legitimately able to claim. Reductions were achieved through a combination of alterations to policy and local social and economic changes which led to wage increases for agricultural labourers. Axminster targeted medical reductions early, achieving considerable savings even before the strategy was promoted by the Centre or became a focus for 'crusading' Unions. **Table 6.5** summarises the reductions in the number of successful applications for temporary relief by the 'ordinary able-bodied poor' noted in the Minutes.

³⁴ DHC, PLU/Axminster/11, Minutes, 18 April 1872, p. 91.

³⁵ 'ABG' *Pulman's*, 28 January 1873, p. 4.

³⁶ Steven King, *Sickness, Medical Welfare and the English Poor 1750-1834* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), pp. 13-14, 115, 321, 332.

³⁷ Hurren, *Protesting about Pauperism*, p. 249; 'Second LGB Report', p. 73.

Table 6.5: Successful Claims for Temporary Relief by the Ordinary Able-Bodied Poor 1868-1879

Year	Self III	Wife III	Child(ren) III	Childbed/ Midwife	Miscellaneous Claims	Total
1868	149	32	14	59	33	287
1869	178	49	48	85	29	389
1870	152	19	17	72	46	306
1871	144	25	13	73	32	287
1872	142	15	13	69	29	268
1873	90	20	11	39	32	192
1874	102	18	10	32	22	184
1875	88	17	8	24	31	168
1876	76	16	8	13	17	130
1877	68	12	7	15	23	125
1878	63	11	1	3	31	109
1879	56	16	3	12	19	106
(Reduction) Between Years						
1869-1874	(43.7)	(63.3)	(79.2)	(62.3)	(24.1)	(52.7)
1875-1879	(36.4)	(5.9)	(62.5)	(50)	(38.7)	(36.9)
1869-1879	(68.5)	(67.3)	(93.8)	(85.9)	(34.5)	(72.8)

Source: DHC, Axminster Poor Law Union, PLU/Axminster/10-12, Axminster Guardians' Minute Books, January-December, 1868-1879.

Table 6.5 shows that following a highpoint in 1869, reductions in virtually all categories of medical relief occurred between 1869-1879. The greatest percentage decrease overall occurred between 1872-1873 (28% reduction), and for most categories the biggest falls occurred before 1876, when pressure from the Centre was greatest. Axminster Guardians debated reducing support for midwifery and bread in Board meetings with discussions reported in the local press.³⁸ After numerous refusals or partial reductions of this relief in early 1874, *Pulman's* noted Bently's suggestion that a precedent had been set for refusal of claims for midwives and bread for the able-bodied, though this was treated with some levity by Guardians, who suggested a range of exceptions including labourers and fishermen. The new precedent was not mentioned in the Minutes.³⁹ However, although grants of midwives and bread continued, as **Table 6.5** shows numbers receiving this assistance fell from 1873 onwards. The Guardians also repeatedly criticised and challenged the Union's medical officers for over-generosity in providing free care and supplies of 'necessaries' and demanded reductions. Reports in the press regarding concerns that some medical claimants were

³⁸ 'ABG', *Pulman's*, 10 March 1874, p. 4, 24 March 1874, p. 4.

³⁹ 'ABG', *Pulman's*, 24 March 1874, p. 4; DHC, PLU/Axminster/11, Minutes, 19 March 1874, pp. 263-67.

too well off to be allowed free care also publicised a determination to reduce these costs. Highlighted by a problem that had occurred at Lyme Regis, Guardians were concerned that Medical Officers did not discriminate between those who should pay and those who should be treated under poor law provisions. Bently thought the Doctor should decide, but no formal guidelines were drawn up.⁴⁰

A second significant change, though less visible than medical relief, related to the reduction in wage support from the mid-1870s onwards. Reductions were realised partly through a change in local policy and in the longer term by improved wages for agricultural labourers. However, as the Guardians had not previously admitted the existence of wage support, the change was not publicised or acknowledged. Evidence is partly circumstantial but is also found in discussions on the falling level of medical relief and in reported relief decisions. Despite the severe criticism of wage support raised in Wodehouse's 1871 Report, suspicions remained that Axminster Guardians were continuing to provide 'aid-in-wages'. Mitchell accused farmer Guardians of this at a meeting in 1873 in the presence of the LGB's sub-Inspector Dawson. Mitchell suggested that wage support was rife and alleged that 'people who sat at this Board were the sole cause of three parts of the poverty' [in the Union].⁴¹ Occasional press coverage also supported this view; one letter highlighted medical relief as a cover for 'aid-in-wages'.⁴² The low wage economy was at the heart of the issue and the LGB's refusal to permit Guardians to assist able-bodied poor people in crisis may also have encouraged attempts to circumvent the rules. For example in 1871 the LGB, on Wodehouse's advice, refused to sanction a compassionate payment to a recently bereaved widower for help with childcare on the basis that such payments depressed wages.⁴³ But the major issue (and remedy) cited by Guardians Mitchell and Boon was the need to increase wages by asking for more from the employer. They suggested wage increases were in both Guardian and ratepayer interest as this would reduce relief applications, but their approach was not supported by other Guardians. One such argument resulted in a blazing row with Mitchell threatening violence, accusing fellow Guardian Samuel Lowndes of interrupting him and advising him that 'if you were anywhere else but this boardroom, I would stop your mouth for you'.⁴⁴ Mitchell had suggested that the Guardians 'must see that men received better wages', although this view was not supported by others and Lowndes had suggested 'it was not our business'. Bently managed to diffuse the row, but he was

⁴⁰'ABG', *Pulman's*, 10 February 1874, p. 4, 7 April 1874, p. 4.

⁴¹'Axminster Board of Guardians. A Disturbed Meeting', *Western Times*, 7 February 1873, p. 8.

⁴²'A Devonshire Agricultural Labourer's Balance Sheet', *Pulman's*, 2 April 1872, p. 4; 'ABG', 11 February 1873, p. 4.

⁴³TNA: MH 12/2109, 54917/1871, Bond to LGB, annotated by Wodehouse on reverse, suggesting refusal, 4 December 1871; 54917/A/1871, LGB to Bond, 20 December 1871; 54917/A/1871 1189/1872, Bond to LGB advising child had died, 4 January 1872.

⁴⁴'ABG' *Pulman's*, 16 December 1873, p. 3.

accused by Lowndes of being unable to keep order.⁴⁵ Increasingly the Guardians responded to the wage issue by rejecting applicants seeking relief because their wages were extremely low by suggesting they should seek wage increases instead.⁴⁶ Ultimately however pressure to provide wage support faded from the mid-1870s onwards as falling numbers of agricultural workers led to a gradual improvement in agricultural wages.

Over the course of the 1870s Axminster made other pragmatic adjustments to its relief practice, incorporating ideas and recommended practices promoted by the Centre which together contributed to reductions in numbers and costs. These changes included tightened relief application procedures, restrictions in out-relief especially for some categories of women applicants, review of processes to winnow relief lists and the separation of charity and relief.⁴⁷ In 1875 the Guardians adopted Wodehouse's advice in requiring paupers to attend the pay table unless ill and thus improved their management system so they were not influenced by 'misrepresentations' through fraudulent claims, though this was tempered by an insistence in 1879 that Relieving Officers must have discretion.⁴⁸ Pragmatism played a part in the amendments to policy and practice as the Union were prepared to take some help from the Centre which could be a useful resource, deflecting unwelcome criticism and improving the financial position through assistance on some salaries for example.⁴⁹ Adjustments to practice were often gradual, but as this consideration of cases shows, by the late 1870s relief decisions became harsher, less paternalistic and press reporting was less sympathetic towards those paupers thought less deserving.

There is evidence of a change in Axminster's relief culture over the course of the 1870s. There was an increasing emphasis on the distinction between those thought deserving and the undeserving. This emphasis was added to Axminster's traditional approach which had prioritised local connection in judging relief decisions. As Snell notes, it was easier for Guardians to make judgements on people living in rural areas where the applicant was known.⁵⁰ The perception of locally settled poor people thought deserving of help changed over the course of the 1870s, reinforced by increasingly judgemental press reportage. Press reports in 1873 and 1879 reveal a marked change in attitudes to cases accepted for relief. As the overview of cases shown in **Table 6.6** demonstrates, relief grants in 1873 were relatively generous, with Guardians accepting a wide range of cases, which sometimes

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 3.

⁴⁶ 'ABG', *Pulman's*, 21 April 1874, p. 4, 5 May 1874, p. 4.

⁴⁷ 'ABG', *Pulman's*, 21 May 1872, p. 4, 24 March 1874, p. 4, 7 April 1874, p. 4, 23 March 1875, p. 4, 28 December 1875, p. 3; Jean Robin, 'The Relief of Poverty in Mid Nineteenth-Century Colyton', *Rural History*, 1 (1990), 193-218 (pp. 193-218); DHC, PLU/Axminster/11, Minutes, 19 March 1874, p. 264.

⁴⁸ 'ABG', *Pulman's*, 20 May 1873, p. 4, 4 May 1875, p. 4, 'Board of Guardians', 5 August 1879, p. 6.

⁴⁹ 'ABG', *Pulman's*, 23 March 1875, p. 4.

⁵⁰ K.D.M. Snell, *Parish and Belonging: Community, Identity and Welfare in England and Wales, 1700-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 274.

went beyond a strict application of Poor Law principles. They include out-relief grants to a family where the husband was in jail, an applicant seeking assistance with asylum costs, who admitted he had funds, and grants of midwife and bread for a man earning 17/- a week.⁵¹ The 1873 Minutes also recorded a case where the Guardians chose not to claim reimbursement from an inheritance due to an estate of a pauper on the basis her children were very poor and would need the money for their own welfare. It seems the approach was to take contributions but not to add to impoverishment.⁵² In contrast newspaper reports in 1879 were more focussed on process and review of cases, emphasising compliance with policy. For example, benefits were advertised as being dependent on school attendance. Thus the Guardians advised Eliza Bord that relief would only be provided in kind until her children attended school, whilst the parents of Thomas Trivett were told that bad weather was insufficient excuse for failing to send their child to school and relief would be stopped unless he attended regularly.⁵³ Ann Loud's relief had been stopped as her children were not in school. Loud advised that this was because her children had no boots to wear; however as it was noted that the children had been in attendance in the previous week relief was continued on the basis this attendance was maintained.⁵⁴ Reporting of cases in the press and relief practice also became less focussed on the needs of the pauper. For example, in 1879 an apprenticeship as a tailor was refused by Guardians for a boy who, in the opinion of the Medical Officer was not in good health. Several Guardians objected to the proposed apprenticeship on the basis that the economic need for farm employees over-rode other considerations and in addition they did not want to pay out-relief during the apprenticeship. The child when questioned advised he suffered from rheumatism but felt well at present. Bently advised he should look for work immediately.⁵⁵

⁵¹ 'ABG', *Pulman's*, 14 January 1873, p. 4.

⁵² DHC, PLU/Axminster/11, Minutes, 23 January 1873, pp. 158-59.

⁵³ 'ABG' *Pulman's*, 4 March 1879, p. 3.

⁵⁴ 'ABG' *Pulman's*, 18 March 1879, p. 7.

⁵⁵ 'ABG', *Pulman's*, 4 March 1879, p. 3.

Table 6.6: Sample Relief Cases Reported in *Pulman's Weekly News* in 1873, 1875, 1879

Cause of Relief Application*	1873	1875	1879
Illness/disability/death	25	10	0
Midwife/childbed (prime causation)	2	1	0
Husband in jail	3	0	0
Widow	3	2	0
Able bodied/unemployed	1	1	0
Relief for Child (unspecified)	2	0	0
Cost contribution	1	0	0
Old age (excluding illness)	4	0	0
Husband in asylum	1	0	0
Orphan	1	1	0
Clothes/boots	1	3	1
Additional relief/reinstatement of relief	2	3	2
No reason mentioned	2	0	3
Asking to remove wife from asylum	0	0	1
Relief for mother	0	0	1
Relief review – school attendance	0	0	3
Deserted wife	0	0	1
Apprenticeship	0	0	1
materials for work	0	0	1
Total cases	48	21	14

Note 1: Best fit for causation used. The three cases noted for 'husband in jail' in 1873 involved the same applicant on two occasions.

Note 2: The sample comprised all the relief cases reported in *Pulman's Weekly News* for two consecutive Axminster Guardian meetings for 1873 and 1879 and available dates for 1875. A comparison with Axminster's Minutes for the same dates shows that some cases were omitted from newspaper reports.

Note 3: Forty-eight cases were reported on the selected dates in 1873, twenty-one in 1875, fourteen in 1879.

Source: 'ABG', *Pulman's*, 14 January 1873, p. 4, 28 January 1873, p. 4, 4 May 1875, p. 4, 19 October 1875, p. 4, 4 March 1879, p. 3, 18 March 1879, p. 7; PLU/Axminster/11, Minutes, 9 January 1873, pp. 153-57, 23 January 1873, pp. 158-60, 29 April 1875, pp. 369-74, 14 October 1875, pp.415-18, 27 February 1879, 13 March 1879.

Further evidence of Axminster Guardians' increasing focus on deserving and undeserving applicants comes from the Union's attitude towards self-help and charity. Prudence and self-reliance, as noted by Snell, became increasingly important characteristics in assessing applicants for their deserving qualities.⁵⁶ The Union area had many self-help clubs which were still flourishing in the 1870s. From the mid-1870s onwards the Guardians took on board central guidance and penalised relief applicants who they judged to have failed to help themselves by saving when they could. In these cases, only the workhouse was offered. As an example, *Pulman's* reported a labourer who was ill and had (according to his wife) formerly earned 18/- a week (although Guardians believed this had

⁵⁶ Snell, *Parish and Belonging*, p. 276.

been 30/-) but was not in a club. He was denied out-relief and offered the workhouse. The Guardians expressed surprise that he needed to claim so quickly.⁵⁷

As the above examples show, the Guardians were increasingly taking charitable assistance into account when assessing the need for relief. This trend, however, reveals the capricious nature of Guardian support and the power of the Union in dispensing paternalistic assistance beyond the poor law. Several Union parishes, such as Axminster and Colyton, had extensive charities. Jean Robin's exploration of poor law and charitable relief in mid-nineteenth-century Colyton found that Colyton's Feofees charitable support approximated one-fifth of the parishes poor rate in the 1860s. This assistance was however only available to applicants who had not claimed poor relief in the previous three months.⁵⁸ Otherwise, before the 1870s charitable assistance was often ignored or taken into limited account when awarding relief as found by Wodehouse in his 1871 investigation.⁵⁹ However, as noted by David Englander, nationally following the 'Goschen Minute' in 1869 the dual support of charity and poor relief became less acceptable.⁶⁰ The new approach was adopted in Axminster following a discussion with Wodehouse in 1872 where he recommended taking into account systematic payments, though it is unclear whether the Guardians adopted this route because of his advice.⁶¹ Unsurprisingly, given their general approach, Axminster's practice remained inconsistent as Guardians continued to support suitable cases with charitable extras outside poor law provision. One example of this support comes from the assistance provided to Mr Littley. Littley had been granted out-relief in 1873 as a partially sighted man with a wife and five children. He came to the attention of the Guardians again as a blind man in 1875 when the Guardians looked for ways to obtain charitable support for his family whilst Littley was in an institution in Exeter learning a trade. Regular charity support was not available as he was receiving poor relief. In 1879 Littley sought help to purchase withies for basket making. Guardians regarded this as outside the remit of poor relief but advised they would make a grant for one last time. At that point Bently stepped in to make a private arrangement to provide the withies.⁶² This support emphasises that additional assistance was selective, setting aside Poor Law principles for those thought deserving but was provided by the choice of the Guardians and so was not rules-based. It also emphasises the power of Guardians in providing assistance, but also that support could not be relied upon. Axminster's approach was however less extreme than Hurren's findings in Brixworth. She argues charity was systematically

⁵⁷ 'ABG', *Pulman's*, 14 December 1875, p. 4.

⁵⁸ George P. R. Pulman, *The Book of the Axe*, 4th edn ([n.p]: [n.pub.], 1875; repr. Bath: Kingsmead Reprints, 1975), pp. 688-89; Robin, 'The Relief of Poverty', pp. 194, 214.

⁵⁹ UKPP, 'Wodehouse Report, First LGB Report', p. 120.

⁶⁰ David Englander, *Poverty and Poor Law Reform in Britain: From Chadwick to Booth, 1834-1914* (Harlow: Longman, 1998), pp. 104-05.

⁶¹ 'ABG', *Pulman's*, 21 May 1872, p. 4.

⁶² 'ABG', *Pulman's*, 1 July 1873, p. 4, 23 March 1875, p. 4, 18 March 1879, p. 7.

used to reduce relief lists by removing cases deemed better suited to charitable assistance and the Brixworth Union's leaders, Pell, Spencer and Bury viewed the poor as 'work-shy' and undeserving as a group.⁶³

4.2 Treatment of Women and the Cases of Charlotte Clarke and Mary Jane Rockett

The increasingly harsh local policy towards some categories of women represented the greatest change in the Guardians' policy. The change brought Axminster into line with LGB recommendations, even if in practice it was inconsistent.⁶⁴ The revised policy applied to those categories of women that the Centre had highlighted as less deserving: deserted wives, single mothers and widows with illegitimate children. In Axminster, as noted in Chapter 5, deserted wives and single mothers had previously been offered out-relief. But in 1874 the Guardians implemented and publicised a new policy proposed by Guardian James Boon. Widows with illegitimate children were to be offered the workhouse. Most of the Guardians supported this change although Mitchell and John Loveridge dissented: Mitchell because he considered that illegitimate children were nothing to do with the Guardians (if not the cause of a relief application) and Loveridge because he thought the workhouse would be over-crowded.⁶⁵ However, the practical impact of the change for poor women is unclear. Numbers of able-bodied female inmates remained low between 1861 and 1901 and although out-relief for able-bodied women decreased sharply between 1871 and 1876, on average over fifty women were receiving out-relief from 1876 onwards (**Table 6.7**). Axminster's policy may have had a deterrent effect, rhetoric may have been harsher than the practice, or other factors such as reduced medical relief and changing demographics may have contributed to falling out-relief numbers. In the 1890s it appears able-bodied women without a local support network such as widows born out of area were more likely to be indoor paupers.

⁶³ Hurren, *Protesting about Pauperism*, pp. 126-27, 129-30, 132-36, 155, 249.

⁶⁴ For example, the 'Fleming Circular' and 'Longley Strategy' in UKPP, 'Out-door Relief. Circular from the Local Government Board to the Poor Law Inspectors, 2 December 1871. Appendix A, No. 20', First Report of the Local Government Board, 1871-72', (1872 (C.516)), pp. 67-68); 'Poor Law Administration in London. Report....by Henry Longley, Local Government Inspector, 7 November 1873, Appendix B. No. 13, Third Annual Report of the Local Government Board 1873-74', (1874 (C.1071)), pp. 203-05.

⁶⁵ DHC, PLU/Axminster/11, Minutes, 19 March 1874, p. 264; 'ABG', *Pulman's*, 24 March 1874, p. 4, 7 April 1874, p. 4.

Table 6.7: Axminster- Able-Bodied Women Receiving Relief

Year (January 1 st)	Numbers in the Workhouse	Numbers Receiving Out-Relief
1861	11	89
1866	11	112
1871	15	116
1876	5	61
1881	11	49
1886	11	40
1891	8	59
1896	8	58
1901	12	41

Source: UKPP, 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January, 1861-1891', 'Pauperism (England and Wales). (Half-yearly Statements) 1901'. (See Appendices A2.1 and A2.2 for full details).

Despite changes in policy inconsistencies remained. Examples of both generosity and harsh treatment are not infrequent, some motivated by economic considerations but others by a genuine desire to help (or a combination of the two). However, understanding the Guardians' response based on individual cases presents difficulties as alongside inconsistent decision-making, only unusual cases, those of high public interest or those which tested accepted local practice achieved a high enough profile to leave evidence behind. Noting these caveats, the examples below, one from the 1870s and one from the 1880s contrast the approach taken to women with several illegitimate children, one unsympathetic, the second highly supportive. These contrasting cases, also highlight economic considerations, especially in the earlier instance where Guardians expressed concern that others might also copy the approach of leaving a child in the care of the Guardians (a practice that the LGB recommended for widows). As part of the response, in 1875 James Boon instigated an investigation to establish how many children were in the workhouse and the whereabouts of their parents which resulted in one attempt at removal.⁶⁶

The cases of Charlotte Clarke and Mary Jane Rockett

Charlotte Clarke, a locally born agricultural worker was aged about 27 when her case came before the Guardians in 1875 and 1876, after an earlier grant of out-relief in 1873 which followed the birth of a child in the workhouse.⁶⁷ By 1875 Charlotte had at least two illegitimate children with different fathers as there are two press reports of affiliation orders, the second of which included a paternity dispute and sought to paint a picture of Charlotte's dissolute lifestyle.⁶⁸ Although unclear it seems

⁶⁶ DHC, PLU/Axminster/11, Minutes, 14 October 1875, pp. 415-16, 28 October 1875, p. 419.

⁶⁷ 'ABG', *Pulman's* 1 July 1873, p. 4.

⁶⁸ 'Chard', *Western Gazette*, 15 September 1871, p. 6; 'Axminster. Paternity Repudiated' *Express and Echo*, 21 January 1875, p. 4.

unlikely Charlotte received payments, given the children's later presence in the workhouse. In 1875 the Guardians demanded Charlotte remove a child left in the workhouse. Her employer wrote to support her but was ignored, as was Charlotte's subsequent plea to Axminster's Clerk, that she was in 'delicate health'. Her offer to try to pay 6d a week for child maintenance was rejected. Charlotte was told to remove her child.⁶⁹ She may have complied, but this is not recorded. However, in 1876 she was again summonsed for leaving a child chargeable to the Union. Charlotte refused to comply, saying she could not afford to care for two children but the Guardians remained unsympathetic and summonsed her to appear before the local magistrates (a body which included some of Axminster's ex-officio Guardians). The magistrates declined to convict Charlotte believing she was she was too poor and suggested the Guardians should make an arrangement with her which the Guardians declined to do.⁷⁰ The main concern for the Guardians was the risk that Charlotte's actions might be copied, increasing their inmate costs. This concern was reinforced when a second woman, Ann Gigg, attempted to leave her child in the workhouse. The Guardians sought assistance from the LGB and from *The Local Government Chronicle* but the advice received did not help them as both newspaper and the LGB advised that they could not decline relief to a destitute child, that there were very limited circumstances where a prosecution for desertion might succeed and the Guardians couldn't force a mother into the workhouse, although they could consider a prosecution under the Vagrancy Acts or look to the putative father. This advice was so negative that on receipt the Guardians abandoned their action against Gigg.⁷¹ Whilst the immediate outcome for Charlotte is unclear, in 1881 she was resident in the workhouse with four children, aged between ten and one.⁷²

The determination with which the Guardians pursued Charlotte contrasts greatly with the treatment of Mary Jane Rockett a decade later. Mary Jane, a farmer's daughter, was by 1871 living, unmarried, with the much older Francis Charles. Between then and 1886 she had at least seven or eight children. Presumably due to Francis' ill health they decided to wed in 1886. The first set of banns called in April were not followed by marriage.⁷³ They were called again in August but Francis died after the second calling, after which Mary Jane applied for relief. The Guardians in this instance were wholly sympathetic to Mary Jane and sought specific confirmation from the LGB that she and

⁶⁹ DHC, PLU/Axminster/11, Minutes, 14 October 1875, pp. 415-16, 28 October 1875, p. 419, 11 November 1875, p. 422.

⁷⁰ DHC, PLU/Axminster/12, Minutes, 25 May 1876, p. 51, 8 June 1876, p. 56, 22 June 1876, p. 61, 6 July 1876, p. 66; Charlotte appeared before Magistrates J.A. Knight, J.T. Still and R.M. Daney, (the first two named were ex-officio Guardians). 'Petty Sessions', *Chard and Ilminster News*, 8 July 1876, p. 3.

⁷¹ DHC, PLU/Axminster/12, Minutes, 20 July 1876, p. 70, 3 August 1876, p. 76-77, 17 August 1876, p. 82, 31 August 1876, pp. 84-85; 'Axminster Board of Guardians', *Chard and Ilminster News*, 19 August 1876, p. 3.

⁷² 'Charlotte Clark' (1881) *Census Return for Axminster Workhouse, Axminster, Devon*. TNA: RG 11/2127, f.74, pp. 8-9.

⁷³ DHC, 2845A/PR/1/10, Membury Parish Registers, Banns, 1836-1907. Banns, 1886, pp. 88, 90.

her family could be given out-relief.⁷⁴ Somewhat surprisingly the LGB agreed on a time limited basis. This was then renewed three and then six-monthly over many years, with the only queries arising when the children became older and consequently regarded as self-supporting. Although unusual, it appears this case was not reported in the press.⁷⁵

The difference in treatment in these two cases is stark but suggests that decision making was partly based on local knowledge of character, background and assessments of deservingness. Charlotte was the daughter of a labourer whereas both Rockett and Charles had more respectable backgrounds with fathers who were a farmer and a butcher respectively.⁷⁶ Similarly, the contrast between Charlotte's seemingly dissolute behaviour and the Rockett/Charles family status (even if unconventional) together with the story of failed attempts to marry may have elicited sympathy. Guardian concern regarding the precedent for abandoning children to the workhouse may have been reasonable, given the two contemporaneous cases of Clarke and Gigg, but in practice the numbers of child inmates remained relatively steady after 1876 despite the Guardians inability to resolve the matter in their favour, so the economic problem did not materialise. Although child inmates increased from forty-two to forty-eight in the survey dates of January 1st 1876 to 1881, they did not exceed fifty for the rest of the century and fell to less than thirty by 1896.⁷⁷

4.3 Continuity in Local Culture and Paternalism

Despite these accommodations of central policy, Axminster's ethos and practice does not demonstrate the same demise of paternalism which Hurren identified in Brixworth. Hurren argues this was achieved by the way Poor Law policy undermined the mixed economy of welfare and reduced or eliminated customary rights (privileges?) such as charity, alms-house provision and burial rights, previously enjoyed by poor people. She argues these changes were imposed by a wealthy, powerful, ideologically driven bloc able to dominate the Guardian body.⁷⁸ By contrast, Axminster's relief culture, although it became harsher over time was far less extreme and the duties and responsibilities inherent in rural paternalism such as protecting, guiding and helping dependents and

⁷⁴ TNA: MH 12/2115, Axminster Correspondence, July 1886-December 1888, 83895/1886, Axminster's Clerk Forward to LGB setting out circumstances, 15 September 1886; 83895/A/1886, LGB to Forward agreeing three months, 24 September 1886; DHC, Axminster Poor Law Union, PLU/Axminster/14, Guardians' Minute Book 1884-1888, Minutes, 30 September 1886, p. 271.

⁷⁵ Agreement for continued out-relief obtained until 2 November 1893, when it ceased through death of a child. DHC, Axminster Poor Law Union, PLU/Axminster/16, Axminster Guardians' Minute Book 1891-1894, Minutes, 2 November 1893, p. 265.

⁷⁶ 'Francis Charles' (1841) *Census Returns for Membury, Devon*. TNA: HO 107/201/5, f.4, p. 2; 'Mary Jane Rockett' (1861) *Census Returns for Stockland, Devon*. TNA: RG 9/1372, f.65, p. 2.

⁷⁷ Numbers of child inmates: 1876 (42), 1881 (48), 1886 (49), 1891 (42), 1896 (28), 1901 (24) in Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers relieved, January and July, 1861-1891, 'Pauperism (England and Wales). (Half-yearly Statements)', (1901 (73)). See Bibliography for full details.

⁷⁸ Hurren, *Protesting about Pauperism*, pp. 1, 155, 255-56.

poor people that David Roberts identified were not discarded.⁷⁹ In contrast to what Hurren found, there are several groups where positive evidence of local support continued, such as the treatment of the elderly and in the case of Mary Jane and her children. As argued in Chapter 4 there remained a thread of community support for local poor people and paupers within Axminster's society in the 1870s and beyond. This partly overrode economic considerations, laissez-faire and harsh self-help ideologies and preserved elements of paternalism which saw local paupers as an integral but distinct part of the local community. For example, workhouse inmates were involved in community events although often kept separate. Local newspapers reported summer outings, Christmas and New Year festivities and invitations to garden parties, under the direction of the local elite and Guardians who attended and assisted at such events. In 1879 for example, *Pulman's* reported a 'New Years treat at the Workhouse' (7th January), an 'Annual Excursion...' [a visit to the seaside] (22nd July), a 'Treat to the Inmates' [garden party] (16th September) and 'Christmas at the Workhouse', (30th December).⁸⁰ The ethos that poor people were a part of society is also seen in the treatment of pauper funerals. 'Crusader' tactics of cutting burial costs to the extreme (as found in Brixworth) or of selling pauper cadavers were not found in Axminster.⁸¹ Problems with pauper burials were reported to Guardians on several occasions and action implemented on complaints on matters such as correct burial services.⁸²

4.4 The Impact of Changing Economic Conditions, Local Practice and the Changing Social Environment

Whilst the crusade era is generally held to last until the early 1890s, central pressure to change relief practice abated locally from the mid-1870s onwards, with the replacement of Wodehouse by Inspector Courtenay in early 1876. Courtenay did not focus on out-relief. Notwithstanding this, as noted in Section 2, Axminster's out-relief trend continued downwards in the later 1870s, albeit at a reduced rate and with minor deviations.

Although levels of pauperism caused less contention between Centre and locality from the mid-1870s to the later 1890s, they remained high in Axminster, but the Union did not appear to be particularly exercised by the issue, until problems of costs surfaced in the late 1880s, examined in Chapter 7. In 1888 for example, Axminster's Auditor remarked that the Union was one of the highest spenders in his area and urged the Guardians to act.⁸³ When compared with national rates,

⁷⁹ David Roberts, *Paternalism in Early Victorian England* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1979), pp. 4-7.

⁸⁰ 'Devonshire News, Axminster', *Pulman's*, 7 January 1879, p. 7, 22 July 1879, p. 7, 16 September 1879, p. 7, 30 December 1879, p. 6.

⁸¹ Hurren, *Protesting about Pauperism*, pp. 202-11, 249.

⁸² For example: 'Board of Guardians', *Pulman's*, 23 December 1879, p. 6.

⁸³ DHC, Axminster Poor Law Union, PLU/Axminster/15, Guardians' Minute Book 1888-1891, Minutes, 13 September 1888, pp. 54-55.

and despite falling numbers it is clear that the underlying issue remained unresolved as seen in **Figure 6.1**, as although declining Axminster's pauperism exceeded national rates by a considerable margin.

Whilst local relief policy had an impact on levels of pauperism, the sustained reduction in pauper numbers was also influenced by wider changes in the economic and social environment, explored in previous chapters. Increasing wages within the agricultural labour market meant that locally working-aged pauperism, especially amongst agricultural workers became less of a problem and focus of central or Guardian attention. This change was first mentioned by Mitchell in 1875 when he noted a decline in pauperism.⁸⁴ In 1879 *Pulman's* reported that Relieving Officer Griffin advised the Guardians that for the 'first time ever' in his recollection Axminster parish had no new relief cases.⁸⁵ This change occurred alongside a continuing litany of complaints in the local press about the dire state of agriculture. For example, in March 1879 *Pulman's* reprinted articles from the *Agricultural Gazette* and *The Economist* both of which highlighted the need to reduce high wages for agricultural workers.⁸⁶ These articles were followed in September 1879 by two letters which highlighted, alongside complaints about agricultural recession, higher rates, taxes, rents and wages, the cost of poor rate and having to employ men to do boys work because the latter were now in school.⁸⁷

Snell suggests that the national reduction in out-relief during the 'crusade era' was primarily due to the growth in productivity and wealth alongside newer forms of public assistance and a corrective for high 1860s levels, taking a different perspective to Andy Croll who found that falling pauper numbers in Wales were due to restrictive practices rather than reducing demand.⁸⁸ The situation in Axminster seems to result from restrictions in areas such as medical relief but also improved wages for agricultural workers, largely from a reduction in the workforce rather than increased productivity; unlike Snell's findings there is no suggestion that there was a substantial increase in wealth in the area. Overall the differences in the literature highlight the diversity of experience of poverty, dependent on local economies and local approaches to the Poor Law.

There is also evidence of the beginnings of a further change in the public perception of pauperism in Axminster, with an increasing appreciation that it was often outside the control of the individual, further distinguishing the deserving from the undeserving. A *Pulman's* comment at Christmas 1879 included thoughts on pauperism, considering that whilst many brought it on themselves, many

⁸⁴ 'ABG', *Pulman's*, 10 August 1875, p. 4.

⁸⁵ 'Board of Guardians', *Pulman's*, 14 October 1879, p. 7.

⁸⁶ 'Farmers and Labourers' and 'The Fall in Wheat' in *Pulman's*, 4 March 1879, p. 5.

⁸⁷ 'Original Correspondence', *Pulman's*, 16 September 1879, p.2, 30 September 1879, p. 2.

⁸⁸ Snell, *Parish and Belonging*, pp. 263-64; Andy Croll, 'Reconciled Gradually to the System of Indoor Relief': The Poor Law in Wales During the 'Crusade against out-Relief', c. 1870 – c. 1890', *Family & Community History*, 20 (2017), 121-44 (p.129).

others fell into it through ‘force of circumstances and no blame to themselves’.⁸⁹ The comment indicated new directions in attitudes to pauperism with greater attention focussed on the management of specific categories of paupers such as those thought less deserving including non-local casual/vagrant paupers or the deserving elderly both examined in Chapters 7 and 8.

5. Conclusion

Previous chapters have investigated the embedded and pervasive pauperism of the area, the culture of localism in Axminster and the policy challenge from the Centre. Chapter 6 brought together these elements to examine how Axminster responded in the 1870s to pressures to change their practice revealing the power and impact of continuing localism. A determined focus on autonomy and local decision-making continued to shape Axminster’s approach to relief, influencing how the Guardians responded to Wodehouse’s challenge, the level and nature of change and resistance to or accommodation of new ideas. Mostly this compliance was pragmatic, with practices addressing local issues such as underlying economic conditions.

Axminster’s ingrained acceptance of high levels of pauperism alongside economy for ratepayers and a measure of humanity towards locally settled paupers continued as the local relief philosophy, although it was partially adapted over time. The traditional decision-making process based on knowledge of individuals was pragmatic. Cases were individually assessed employing a limited use of local and central rules, precedents and the elastic application of principles, which led to inconsistency in decision making. This ran contrary to the increasingly formalised bureaucratic approach preferred by the Centre leading inevitably to disagreement between Guardians and Inspectors, especially with the abrasive Wodehouse. There was no dilution in the determination to maintain autonomy and local control from the Guardians in the 1870s, which was very evident in their responses to the Centre and overall the Union’s localism was successfully defended. The balance of power in relief business remained with the Guardians.

However, although this exercise of independence exposed the limits of central enforceability, an in-depth analysis makes it clear that Axminster was more compliant than might at first appear. The Guardians’ recognised change was sometimes necessary and adopted some central relief suggestions, provided it was by their choice and not by imposition or being seen to comply with central suggestions. In essence, the Guardians accommodated central principles when they aligned with local values or made economic sense.

⁸⁹‘Christmas at the Workhouse’, *Pulman’s*, 30 December 1879, p. 6.

Despite elements of individuality and inconsistency over time clear patterns and trends emerge in evidence drawn from data, case studies and Guardian meeting reports. New ideas percolated into local practice with changes made to achieve greater levels of economy through cost reduction and amendments to support for locally settled paupers. Less generosity in medical relief, the elimination of much wage support, clarification in the use of charity, greater differentiation between deserving and undeserving applicants and a gradual adoption of more definite principles (although still there to be broken) all provide evidence of a changing, more stringent approach to relief. But attempts to take a harder line could still be defeated by a lack of support from magistrates, illustrating the persistence of older ingrained paternalistic attitudes amongst the elite. Many changes were gradual, unacknowledged or covert to preserve the sense of autonomy. Other changes were declared as policy or reported in the press such as the treatment of widows with illegitimate children and the necessity for school attendance; these approaches may have played well with the local audience as public attitudes changed.

Reductions in relief provision in Axminster when combined with local economic and demographic change mirrored the results found in many other Unions and not just those supporting 'crusading' tactics: a strong decrease in out-relief throughout the 1870s, as found by Williams. Axminster's changes echo elements of the 'crusading' tactics identified by Hurren such as cuts in medical relief, though employed in a less extreme way. Axminster was not a 'crusading' Union but like Brixworth used local power in its own way. Hooker's study of Llandilofawr Union in Wales found continuing high levels of out-relief at over 90%, similar to those found in Axminster and argued the 'crusade' had little impact.⁹⁰ In Axminster, similarly, the impact on numbers was limited.

The motivation for change in Axminster after 1871 is not clear cut. However the evidence from the cases in this chapter suggests change occurred when it aligned with local interest. Axminster's relief ethos of economy for rate-payers and humanity for paupers was summed up by Axminster's Guardians' Vice-Chair Charles Ewens in 1875 when he commented that the Guardians' 'one object' was to see 'the poor and the ratepayers' interests were properly looked after', an underlying approach that continued, although adapted throughout the 1870s.⁹¹ Given local hostility to the NPL it is unlikely the Guardians and ratepayers aimed to adopt an ideological approach, either to achieve or return to the 'principles of 1834'. Nor was there a conscious adoption of the new, harsh relief initiatives of the 'crusade'. Adjustment was more likely to have resulted from the unstated recognition that cost-cutting was necessary following the increases of the later 1860s, alongside the

⁹⁰ Hooker, 'Llandilofawr Poor Law Union', pp. 1, 88.

⁹¹ 'ABG' *Pulman's*, 4 May 1875, p. 4.

influence of changing ideas from the Centre and in public opinion, although application was inconsistent. Balancing the respective interests of ratepayers and paupers with a relief practice which was increasingly focused on the locally settled deserving poor created significant responsibilities. Guardians were effectively the last stop in protecting life, required to decide difficult situations within a limited budget and skill set, whilst protecting the financial interests of ratepayers. The methods they employed emphasised local control and decision making, preserving the belief that the Guardians served both constituencies. In practice there was a greater emphasis on general economising which formed a continuing thread of local policy, the impact of which is explored in the following chapters. The fact that reductions both precede and post-date Wodehouse emphasises the local nature of the cost reduction initiative.

Chapter 7: Managing Axminster Union in an Era of Change: New Priorities, Responsibilities and Challenges c.1875-1895

1. Introduction

This chapter continues the exploration of Axminster's management of the Poor Law between the mid-1870s and the mid-1890s. Following on from Chapter 6's focus on relief policy for locally settled paupers and the 'crusade', Chapter 7 investigates a new set of challenges such as growing responsibilities in public health and increasing expectations of medical services, financial crises and problems with vagrancy which the Union encountered in the following two decades. Axminster had weathered the central challenge to its out-relief practice in the 1870s, but as the focus on out-relief abated it was replaced by growing demands from the Centre for Unions to take on more responsibilities. In Axminster this occurred in the context of a stagnant local economy. The timeframe mostly coincides with the period when Inspector Henry Courtenay supervised Axminster, between 1876 and 1896, an Inspector whose approach to supervision was very different from that of his predecessor.

The chapter argues that throughout this period the Union experienced contradictory forces exerting pressures which began to erode the Guardians' authority. Although on the surface these two decades represented a high point for local control, gradually the changing social and economic situation in Axminster placed demands on the Union that began to expose its weaknesses. Axminster's Guardians had the opportunity to exploit a confident localism in the 1880s and early 1890s because stable circumstances favoured local control. Fewer local paupers, a unified approach within the Guardian body and the uneven application of the Centre's growing reach and powers across England and Wales allowed Axminster considerable freedom. But, at the same time, a push towards modernisation that began in the Centre as national social policy developed, increased demands for better, more professional management and expectations of services amongst local inhabitants which Axminster struggled to meet. Competing demands on the Union and its Guardians from the Poor Law, the LGB and local ratepayers and different obligations arising from legislation and recommendations required a range of approaches and tactics to address, from enforcement to persuasion. These issues and Axminster's response are explored thematically in four case studies.

The chapter starts in Section 2 with discussion of the literature and an exploration of the conditions which allowed confident localism to flourish in Axminster. This is followed by four case studies examining areas of Union practice which had a significant impact on local management between the mid-1870s and mid-1890s, with the time period covered by each case study indicated below. Firstly

Section 3 explores the Union's response to its growing responsibilities in managing public health in the early and mid-1870s. This demonstrates how a developing central drive towards more accountable government generated conflicts that began to undermine the Guardians' authority. Secondly, in Section 4, an investigation into local financial scandals in the later 1880s and early 1890s highlights the increasing reach of the Centre in terms of accounting and auditing which drew attention to Axminster's local informal practices. However, as a counterpoint in Section 5, an examination of Axminster's approach to vagrant relief over the whole period between the 1870s-1890s demonstrates how a less interventionist approach from the Centre in some areas allowed the Union to maintain an independent stance and ignore some new Acts which demanded harsher practice. Section 6, the final section adjusts the focus again, revealing the limitations of this independent approach in an investigation into Axminster's increasingly outdated workhouse and medical facilities, focussed on a time frame between the 1880s and the mid-1890s. Together these studies highlight complex and sometimes contradictory policy and practice, the increasing weakness of an independent approach and the stagnation associated with an introverted localism.

2. An Era of Confident Localism: Mid-1870s–Mid-1890s

2.1 Context: The Study in Relation to the Literature

Historians have highlighted the period from the mid-1870s to the mid-1890s as one of transition to a new approach to social policy alongside the developing role of local government. This chapter helps to see this process developing on the ground, taking forward debates on social policy and local government, localism and central-local relationships.¹ Chapters 1 (Section 2.4) and 2 (Sections 3 and 5) provided a broad historiographical analysis of the reach, power and effectiveness of central influence and control in the development of local government and the relationship between Centre and locality. Historians such as Christine Bellamy and Keith Laybourn associate the period with the growth of central power but also its limited reach, whilst John Davis contends that there was a lack of desire at the Centre to enforce changes in policy and provision before the late 1890s.² Both Bellamy and Roger Davidson further highlighted weaknesses in the LGB that impacted on the Poor

¹ Martin Daunton, 'Introduction' in *Charity, Self-Interest and Welfare in the English Past*, ed. by Martin Daunton (London: UCL Press, 1996), pp. 1-17; Robert M. Gutchen, 'Local Improvements and Centralization in Nineteenth-Century England', *Historical Journal*, 4 (1961), 85-96; Jose Harris, 'Political Thought and the Welfare State 1870-1940: An Intellectual Framework for British Social Policy', *Past & Present*, 135 (1992), 116-41; Keith Laybourn, *The Evolution of British Social Policy and the Welfare State c.1800-1993* (Keele: Keele University Press, 1995), pp. 10-13, 129-50).

² Christine Bellamy, *Administering Central-Local Relations 1871-1919: The Local Government Board in its Fiscal and Cultural Context* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), pp. 10-11; Laybourn, *Evolution of British Social Policy*, pp. 129-36; John Davis, 'Central Government and the Towns', in *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, ed. by Martin Daunton, 3 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) III, pp. 259-86, (p.265).

Law: a lack of strategy, resources or controls.³ As Chapter 7 shows, the small rural Union of Axminster provides a further example of this complexity of development with aspects of both localism and centralism playing a role in Union practice. But at the same time Axminster's experience also highlights the tension between local autonomy and central control seen by Martin Daunton and the continuing importance of localism recognised by Keith Snell.⁴

The importance of relationships between Guardians and Inspectors in policy development is again emphasised in this chapter, echoing studies such as those by Bellamy who explored the role of the LGB and its Inspectorate in depth. She emphasises the Inspectorship's approach as one of discretion rather than compulsion.⁵ In Axminster, the more accommodating relationship that developed between Axminster and the Centre under Lord Courtenay's supervision was significant, as it facilitated the Union's localism. Finally, E.P. Hennock and Michael Rose identified the period between the 1870s and mid-1890s as an interval between two periods of significant innovation in social theory whilst Jose Harris, taking a wider view argues that a 'watershed' in society, social policy and political thought occurred nationally from the 1870s and 1880s.⁶ In this chapter ineffective pressure from the Centre reinforces the view that the 'watershed' (at least as experienced in Axminster) occurred in the early 1870s and the later 1890s.

2.2 Context: The Emergence of Confident Localism

Axminster's self-assured localism emerged in a complex local context between the mid-1870s and mid-1890s where different challenges to those experienced previously came to the fore. Whilst localism had been an important factor in the Guardians' practice in the 1870s, it became more prominent and confident as a guiding principle in the last quarter of the nineteenth century for reasons explored in this Section.

This was partly the result of the relatively benign local environment for the management of poor relief that existed for much of period between the later 1870s and mid-1890s. Although Axminster's pauper numbers remained high, as seen in **Appendix 2**, there was little demand for change to out-

³ Bellamy, *Central-Local Relations*, pp. 111-55; Roger Davidson, *Whitehall and the Labour Problem in Late-Victorian and Edwardian Britain: A Study in Official Statistics and Social Control* (London: Croom Helm, 1985), pp. 187-91.

⁴ Martin Daunton, 'Introduction', in *Cambridge Urban History*, ed. by Daunton, III, pp. 1-56 (p. 15); K.D.M. Snell, *Parish and Belonging: Community, Identity and Welfare in England and Wales, 1700-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 4-6, 496-504. See also Philip Harling, 'The Centrality of Locality: The Local State, Local Democracy, and Local Consciousness in Late-Victorian and Edwardian Britain', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 9 (2004), 216-34 (pp. 216-23); Stephen A. Royle, 'The Development of Small Towns in Britain', in *Cambridge Urban History*, ed. by Daunton, III, pp. 151-84 (p. 163).

⁵ Bellamy, *Central-Local Relations*, pp. 111-55.

⁶ E.P. Hennock, 'Poverty and Social Theory in England: The Experience of the Eighteen-Eighties', *Social History*, 1 (1976), 67-91, (pp. 69, 89-91); Michael E. Rose, 'The Crisis of Poor Relief in England 1860-1890', in *The Emergence of the Welfare State in Britain and Germany 1850-1950*, ed. by W. J. Mommsen with Wolfgang Mock (London: Croom Helm, 1981), pp. 50-70 (pp. 52, 64-65); Jose Harris, *Private Lives, Public Spirit: Britain 1870-1914* (London: Penguin, 1994), pp. 252-56.

relief practice either from the Centre or locally, notwithstanding the lack of wealth in the area. The Guardians gained confidence in their approach from the handing of the out-relief challenge in the 1870s as it encouraged them to take an independent line.

As explored in Chapter 4 anti-centralism was deeply embedded in Axminster. Local opposition to increased central demands developed over a long period leading to growing local resistance to central policies. The cumulative impact of centrally imposed local authorities that had been established in the area from the 1850s onwards, such as local Courts, Police and School Boards evidenced an encroaching and largely unwelcome centralisation, exacerbated by the challenge from George Pulman who continued his outspoken opposition to centralisation in *Pulman's Weekly News* until he retired in 1878. This sentiment helped to create an environment where any new central initiative was viewed with suspicion by the Guardians who were uncertain about what the reforms meant in practice, especially where cost was involved, or local power to make decisions challenged. In this environment, reforms and directives from central government including reforming legislation such as the 1871 Vaccination Act and the Public Health Acts of 1872 and 1875 explored in Section 3 were viewed as a significant challenge to local autonomy.

Axminster's Guardian body formed a more cohesive unit from the later 1870s until the mid-1890s, strengthened by improved intra-local relationships and reduced levels of anti-centralist pressure from the press from the 1880s onwards. After Pulman's retirement his successors did not follow his approach; subsequent owners of *Pulman's Weekly News* widened its geographical scope and took less interest in Axminster's affairs. These changes allowed the Guardians' localism to flourish. By the 1880s the Guardians tended to act together under Bently's leadership and the Board was less fractious following Mitchell's death in 1878, Boon's departure in 1881 and following the gradual turnover in Guardian participants. For much of the 1880s farmer Guardians dominated numbers on the Board, 'men of business [who] got through their work well' as Bently described them in 1885. He also stated that 'he had never presided over a pleasanter Board'.⁷ Although there was disagreement on aspects of policy, overt conflict was rare. It appears the guiding ethos remained as defined by Vice-Chair Charles Ewens in 1875 when he commented that the Guardians' 'one object was to see 'the poor and the ratepayers' interests were properly looked after'.⁸ This principle was not refined until the mid-1890s.

The confident localism which emerged was also bolstered by the more conciliatory approach to relationships taken by the region's Inspector Courtenay, appointed in 1876. His approach acted as a

⁷ 'Board of Guardians', *Pulman's Weekly News and Advertiser*, 7 April 1885, p. 8.

⁸ 'ABG', *Pulman's*, 4 May 1875, p. 4.

counterbalance to perceptions of growing intrusiveness. Courtenay's supervision contrasted sharply with that of his more abrasive and ideological predecessor Wodehouse. The relationship he established with Axminster was cordial and his oversight of the Union was lower key and more conciliatory. Courtenay's handling of the first crisis of his tenure illustrates this more measured response. He attended Axminster at the Guardians' request within three weeks of starting work, following allegations from Guardian John Mitchell that the workhouse officers were incompetent. His report commented on the cleanliness of the workhouse but noted that it needed many repairs. Whilst the recently appointed workhouse master could be held responsible for this state, he noted that most officers were inexperienced when appointed and needed time to become efficient. He summed up stating 'that if the Guardians put the House in proper repair it would be giving the Master a fair opportunity of proving his fitness or otherwise for his Office'.⁹ By not attributing blame directly, over time a more positive environment and relationship was created with Axminster which in turn impacted on the development and direction of the Union.

As a result of these changes relief management focussed on individual applicants, difficult cases and outlier classes such as 'lunatics' and vagrants. These classes along with workhouse accommodation standards and medical provision became the focus of attention during Courtney's period as Inspector, rather than out-relief. Consequently, local challenge, when it came, focussed on provision of services and on the wider scope of the Guardian duties so that although localism flourished, in the long run incipient problems and change served to undermine local independence.

3. New Responsibilities: Challenging the Ethos and Authority of Axminster's Guardians

This first case study is an early example of the growing challenge to localism and illustrates how the developing central drive for more accountable government in the 1870s began to undermine the Guardians' authority through the creation of new demands, expectations and standards which Axminster found difficult to meet.

The previous chapter demonstrated how Axminster found ways to adapt its relief practice in the 1870s without surrendering its ability to make local decisions. However, the Union's Guardians encountered greater difficulties in maintaining local control when managing their new responsibilities in public health. They were forced into compliance, when their preferred method for dealing with unwelcome intrusion by ignoring central requests or direction proved ineffective in

⁹ DHC, Axminster Poor Law Union, PLU/Axminster/12, Axminster Guardians' Minute Book 1876-1879, Minutes, 19 April 1875, pp. 34-35.

response to reforming legislation. The LGB exercised greater powers of enforcement when pursuing reforms backed by legislation or where public support was forthcoming, which gave them greater authority in pressing for change. Central directives set up conflict with Axminster which began to undermine local autonomy, its ethos and traditional ways of working but this time the pressure for change also came from the local population increasingly keen on improvements promised by public health reforms.

The debates by historians on the growth and reach of central government discussed above revealed the variety of views on the extent of growing central power in local government. The examples in this section highlight the shift towards greater central intervention, a pattern seen in studies by Bellamy and Laybourn and by David Eastwood. Eastwood's discussion on 'Remaking the Public Domain' which focussed on the period leading up to 1870 underlined that the relationship between Centre and locality was worked out in Parliament and noted the role of centralising prescriptive statutes, including the array of Public Health Acts enacted after 1848. Together the statutes created a 'more intensively governed country'.¹⁰ These perspectives are relevant to this study because, as this section shows, Axminster Guardians did not recognise that the balance of power was gradually shifting towards the Centre.

The clash between Axminster and the LGB over the compulsory appointment of Vaccination Officers following the 1871 Vaccination Act provided an early indication of the increasing limitations on local, independent action. The Act required that such appointments had to be approved by the LGB.¹¹ In 1872 Axminster's Guardians sought to limit interference from the LGB and keep costs down through avoiding (in their view) unnecessary appointments. With Wodehouse in the background challenging Axminster's choices, the Guardians initial choice and decision to appoint a single candidate, Mr. Lock, the BMD Registrar, was rejected by the Centre who also challenged the proposed salary believing it to be inadequate. Axminster disputed this, arguing that their candidate was happy with the proposed remuneration and in March 1872 asked their Clerk to 'inform the Local Government Board that the Guardians saw no reason to alter the amount of salary proposed ... especially as Mr. Lock had agreed to perform the duties [at the previously suggested amount]'.¹² However after further pressure, and postponing consideration, Axminster appointed two officers, but this

¹⁰ Bellamy, *Central-Local Relations*, pp. 111-55; Laybourn, *Evolution of British Social Policy*, p. 135; David Eastwood, *Government and Community in the English Provinces, 1700-1870* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997, pp. 159-62.

¹¹ *Vaccination Act 1871* (34 & 35 Vict. c. 98) <<https://uk.westlaw.com/>> [accessed 22 July 2023]

¹² Original appointment suggestion: DHC, Axminster Poor Law Union, PLU/Axminster/10, Guardians' Minute Book 1865-1871, Minutes, 14 December 1871, p. 55; LGB rejection and Axminster response: DHC, Axminster Poor Law Union, PLU/Axminster/11, Axminster Guardians' Minute Book 1871-1876, Minutes, 7 March 1872, pp. 77-78, LGB then advise two officers preferred: PLU/Axminster /11, Minutes, 21 March 1872, p 80, 16 May 1872, p. 97.

necessitated releasing their original recruit who had already started work.¹³ The LGB next disputed the areas allocated to the officers, so Axminster made small amendments.¹⁴ Eventually, after nearly nine months of wrangling, the appointments were approved.¹⁵

This issue highlighted that dealings with the Centre could be slow, tortuous and leave little room for independent manoeuvre when the Centre chose to assert their authority. As negotiations were covered by the press (Pulman noted 'Circumlocution Again' and suggested the LGB knew nothing of local circumstances), the continued concessions emphasised publicly the relative weakness of local independence and the limited effect of Guardian intransigence.¹⁶

Axminster's response to the requirements of the new Public Health Act of 1872 further exposed the limits of local autonomy and the difference between central policy and local ethos. This Act and the later codifying Act of 1875 was a further instance of the increasing influence of central government.¹⁷ The Acts were administered by the LGB's Medical Department and delivered locally in rural areas by Boards of Guardians who undertook the role of Rural Sanitary Authority. The dispute between Axminster and the LGB led to what Pulman described as 'The Humiliating Position of Boards of Guardians'.¹⁸ The 1872 Act required Unions to appoint District Medical Officers of Health, but both Axminster and the adjoining Union of Honiton refused to do so on the grounds that this represented unnecessary centralisation and expense.¹⁹ This resulted in a publicly reported stand-off between Axminster and the LGB. The Guardians openly ignored reminder letters and challenged Assistant Inspector Dawson when he attended their meeting in September 1874, advising him that they believed they were acting legally, and that the central proposal was too expensive. Pulman wrote approvingly in October 1874 that 'Axminster Guardians very sensibly do not see the force of appointing high-salaried officers for purposes worse than unclear'.²⁰ Eventually, in December 1874 Wodehouse broke the stalemate with a visit. Pulman reported his uncompromising speech to the Guardians in detail. Wodehouse stated that of his fifty-nine Unions, only Axminster and Honiton had not complied. He reminded the Guardians that 'it was not wise to fight against an

¹³ DHC, PLU/Axminster/11, Minutes, 16 May 1872, p. 97, 30 May 1872, p. 101, 13 June 1872, p. 106.

¹⁴ Ibid., Minutes, 25 July 1872, p. 115.

¹⁵ Ibid., Minutes, 8 August 1872, p. 117. This exchange was also traced in central-local correspondence. TNA: MH 12/2109, Axminster Correspondence, August 1871-December 1874, from 31 January 1872 onwards with Wodehouse noting actions on reverse of letters. For example: TNA: MH 12/2109, 6240/B/1872, letter Fleming, LGB to Bond, Clerk, Axminster Union, 24 February 1872; 16958/1872, letter Bond to LGB, 23 March 1872; 16958/B/1872, Hibbert LGB, to Bond, 2 May 1872.

¹⁶ 'Devonshire News, Axminster - Circumlocution Again', *Pulman's*, 9 April 1872, p. 3.

¹⁷ *Public Health Act, 1872* (35 & 36 Vict. c. 79); *Public Health Act, 1875*. (38 & 39 Vict. c. 55) <<https://uk.westlaw.com/>> [accessed 18 July 2023]

¹⁸ 'ABG, More Jacks in Office - The Humiliating Position of Boards of Guardians', *Pulman's*, 12 January 1875, p. 3.

¹⁹ 'ABG, More Threatened Pulls Upon the Rates', *Pulman's*, 22 September 1874, p. 4.

²⁰ TNA: MH 12/2109, 19891/A/1874, LGB to Forward, Clerk, Axminster Rural Sanitary Authority, 25 March 1874; 'ABG, Threatened-Jack- in- Office-ism', *Pulman's*, 25 August 1874, p. 4; 'ABG, More Threatened Pulls Upon the Rates', *Pulman's*, 22 September 1874; p. 4, 'ABG', *Pulman's*, 20 October 1874, p. 4.

Act of Parliament' and that the correspondence had dragged on since May 1873. If they failed to comply, Wodehouse advised he would leave it to the LGB to act.²¹ Although left in no doubt as to their position, the Guardians remained resentful, with one complaining that people 'would not be able to eat or drink without the sanction of the Local Government Board'.²² In early January 1875 Axminster capitulated. Chairman Bently noted that whilst they had delayed the appointment for over two years, the LGB would make it 'over their heads' if they did not comply.²³ Pulman unsympathetically reported their 'humiliation'.²⁴ The Guardians continued to express disapproval as they advised the two officers subsequently employed that the appointment was regrettable and forced upon them.²⁵ The portrayal of these issues in the local press illustrated, particularly for ratepayers, the erosion of the Guardians' authority and the difference in central and local approaches to public health.

Increasingly, developments in national social policy resulted in the growing expectation of public benefit from reforms and the view among local populations that these were not an unjustified imposition on local authorities that the Guardians (and Pulman) suggested. In this portrayal the LGB could appear as supporters of public benefits rather than as a force for interference, whilst the Guardians could be seen as a body that stood in the way of progress. The cumulative effect of these changing attitudes over time contributed to a sense that an excessively local approach served the locality less well. This shift in perception is illustrated by the Guardian's response to the public health reforms which generated new standards and demands which Axminster's Guardians were not equipped to meet.

The public health reforms of 1872 and 1875 exposed Guardians' practice to ratepayers on matters which directly affected them as a result of the Guardians new responsibility as the Rural Sanitary Authority and demonstrates that their response was sometimes lacking. For example, Axminster parish had a severe and long-running problem with drainage and water supply, but the parish's Guardians were deeply unsympathetic to this issue. Despite strong opposition from Axminster's Guardians, a petition was sent from Axminster residents directly to the LGB and led to a local government enquiry and a Sanitary Report in 1874. The report favoured the residents and made

²¹ 'ABG', *Pulman's*, 15 December 1874, p. 4.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 4.

²³ 'ABG, More Jacks in Office – The Humiliating Position of Boards of Guardians', *Pulman's*, 12 January 1875, p. 3.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

²⁵ 'ABG, More Office and its Inflictions', *Pulman's*, 26 January 1875, p. 4; 'ABG, How Rates Increase', *Pulman's*, 9 February 1875, p. 4.

numerous recommendations for improvements.²⁶ However despite central support for local campaigners, local authority action was slow. The reading of the report when presented to Guardians in February 1875 was deferred as the Clerk told the Guardians it would take half an hour to read.²⁷ Axminster took little action on the recommendations and complaints to the LGB rumbled on for years. Many of the drainage improvements were still outstanding in the 1890s. This outcome was not in itself unusual as Bellamy suggests delays by local authorities were common.²⁸

Despite the limited success of the petition, the new responsibilities and requirements had a wider impact on Union administration as their management was time consuming and diverted capacity away from poor law matters, so that Guardian meetings became longer, and interest, at least in local reporting was diluted with less focus on the poor law and pauperism. It also suggests that a new form of local democracy and public accountability was developing, as the Guardians came into direct contact with ratepayers, in matters which had a direct impact on them. Central interest encouraged residents to circumvent the Guardians and deal directly with the LGB, which over time undermined Guardian authority. Finally, reforms broke up the Union as a single local authority as urban districts were carved out of the Rural Sanitary Authority over time and dealt directly with the LGB, further limiting the authority and purpose of the Guardians as the link with the LGB.

4. Financial Crises and Flawed Staff Management

A second example of the growing challenge to localism from both Centre and within the Union can be seen in this case study of crises and scandals which struck the Union in the later 1880s and early 1890s. It highlights the increasing reach of the Centre in terms of accounting and auditing and the expectation of professional standards, contrasting with Axminster's local informal practices. Two financial crises involving senior Union staff revealed inherent flaws in the local approach to staff management and in their local financial oversight. These scandals had important repercussions in the longer term, undermining the Union's claim to competence within the locality and its reputation at the Centre. In addition it would appear the Union reacted by significantly reducing expenditure at the workhouse, revealed in the bi-annual audit reports. On five occasions in the early-mid 1890s Axminster returned the lowest average costs for in-relief in Auditor Robert Tucker's district of fifteen

²⁶ TNA: MH 12/2109, 26598/1874, residents' letter and petition to the President of the LGB requesting an Inspection, [no day] April 1874 together with copy *Pulman's* report headed 'Mischief' dated 14 April 1874; 49504/1874, Axminster Guardians' objection letter, 18 July 1874.

²⁷ 'ABG, More Interference', *Pulman's*, 9 February 1875, p. 4.

²⁸ Dr F. St. George Mivart, *Report to the Local Government Board on the General Sanitary Circumstances and Administration of the Axminster Rural District* (London: HMSO, 1899), pp. 4-6, 20; Bellamy, *Central-Local Relations*, pp. 218-20.

Unions.²⁹ The parsimonious approach had a negative impact on workhouse provision as explored in Section 6. Tucker was generally helpful to Axminster having been their Auditor since 1862 but tended to rely on persuasion which took time to be accepted by the Guardians.

The first crisis involved long-serving Relieving Officer William Halse who committed suicide in October 1886 following the discovery of repeated errors in his books. Problems had been flagged by the Auditor for more than a year but the Guardians had ignored these on three occasions, excusing Halse and accepting his explanations. Axminster only acted when the LGB became directly involved, following up on Tucker's audit reports.³⁰ Galvanised into action by Halse's suicide the Guardians appointed their deputy Clerk as a temporary Relieving Officer. They also ordered an immediate investigation into Halse's accounts which revealed them to be chaotic, even though Axminster's Clerk had reported to each Guardian meeting that he had examined the ROs books and found them to be in order. It appears Halse omitted invoices, so the problem was disguised. Some payments were time barred as they hadn't been reported and agreed by Guardians. A subsequent special Audit authorised by the LGB revealed the extent of Halse's failure and resulted in a claim for £43 on his Sureties. The Sureties – at least one of whom was a close relative – paid quickly. Whilst the Guardians regretted that some individuals had lost out, it does not appear that they recompensed those affected.³¹

The 'light touch' oversight, a slow response to the problem and the loyalty shown to Halse in accepting his excuses without further investigation exacerbated the problem and suggests a weakness in local governance despite record keeping and supposed levels of control. Conversely the significance of central supervision and bureaucratic systems was highlighted as the issue was discovered and dealt with because of central oversight.

The second set of irregularities involved workhouse Matron Thomasina White directly and highlighted the weak oversight by Master Thomas Pickering. The Guardians were alerted to excessive expenditure at Axminster workhouse in its May 1889 Auditors' report. Expenditure was more than 30% higher than that in the adjoining Union of Honiton. The high level of expenditure

²⁹ DHC, Axminster Poor Law Union, PLU/Axminster/16, Axminster Guardians' Minute Book 1891-1894, 25 February 1892, pp. 45-47, 11 January 1894, pp. 286-88; 3 May 1894, pp. 329-31; DHC, Axminster Poor Law Union, PLU/Axminster/17, Axminster Guardians' Minute Book 1895-1897, Minutes, 22 August 1895, pp. 93-95, 14 November 1895, pp. 125-27.

³⁰ DHC, Axminster Poor Law Union, PLU/Axminster/14, Guardians' Minute Book 1884-1888, Minutes, 2 April 1885, p. 112, 15 October 1885, p. 165, 8 July 1886, pp. 244-47, 14 October 1886, p. 275, 28 October 1886, p. 279, 30 October 1886, pp. 283-84.

³¹ *Ibid.*, Minutes, 4 November 1886, pp. 285-86, 11 November 1886, pp. 288-89, report dated 18 November 1886, inserted between pp. 295-96, 25 November 1886, p. 295, 23 December 1886, p. 304, 6 January 1887, pp. 309-10, 3 February 1887, p. 320, 3 September 1885, p. 153.

was also visible in a press report on comparative costs of pauper maintenance in Devon.³² A Guardian Committee set up to investigate the issue reported the high cost of provisions and clothing in Axminster and cited 'laxity and extravagancein all the departments'.³³ Issues included problems with local tradesmen in the supply of provisions and substitution of different or cheaper goods than those ordered. Although horrified by the findings the Guardians decided there had been no intention to defraud and accepted Pickering's apology.³⁴ A second complaint against the Matron was made almost immediately regarding the substitution of goods which led to a formal LGB enquiry chaired by Inspector Courtenay.³⁵ Although White was found guilty the LGB decided not to dismiss her.³⁶ Yet again this wasn't the end of the matter, as in 1890 there was a problem with 'wrong' goods delivered.³⁷ On this final occasion the Guardians handled the matter locally without LGB involvement. Both the Master and Matron were severely reprimanded, although some Guardians wanted them sacked.

In this instance, and probably influenced by the recent Halse problem, Axminster responded speedily to the Auditors report, and when the second complaint against Matron White came to light sought the assistance of the LGB by choice, showing that central-local cooperation was possible and the value of an independent audit. There was however a relatively weak response to the irregularities as reprimands were the sole penalty. It is not clear whether the blame should have lain primarily with Pickering for insufficient monitoring or whether it was the Matron's responsibility to check supplies. The failures and waste of ratepayer's funds were fully reported and brought the Union into disrepute with some local ratepayers and with the Centre for not protecting ratepayers' financial interests. For example, a letter from 'A Ratepayer' published in *Pulman's* on 23rd July 1889 in respect of the initial problem suggested that the situation was 'a scandal and disgrace to all concerned' and suggested that Guardian neglect contributed to the problem.³⁸

Overall, these cases show that central accounting procedures and review processes had increasing reach but a limited impact on local management. A preference for local solutions still held sway even if they were increasingly counterproductive. When the Matron White scandal reappeared the

³² Audit Report for Lady Day 1889, Axminster's indoor costs were 3/2½d, Honiton at 2/4½d. DHC, Axminster Poor Law Union, PLU/Axminster/15, Guardians' Minute Book 1888-1891, Minutes, 9 May 1889, p. 147; 'The Cost of Paupers' Maintenance in Devon', *Pulman's*, 21 May 1889, p. 7.

³³ DHC, PLU/Axminster/15, Minutes (including insert), 4 July 1889, pp. 166-67.

³⁴ 'Board of Guardians, Alleged Irregularities at the Union Workhouse', *Pulman's*, 9 July 1889, p. 8; DHC, PLU/Axminster/15, Minutes (including insert), 4 July 1889, pp. 167-68.

³⁵ 'Local Government Enquiry at the Workhouse', *Pulman's*, 5 November 1889, pp. 7-8.

³⁶ 'Board of Guardians – The Charges Against the Matron', *Pulman's*, 10 December 1889, p. 7.

³⁷ DHC, PLU/Axminster/15, Minutes, 8 May 1890, p. 275, 22 May 1890, p. 279.

³⁸ 'The Management of the Workhouse', *Pulman's*, 23 July 1889, p. 8.

Guardians sought to settle it locally and applied a weak sanction, demonstrating the persistence of localism even though its flaws had become publicly apparent.

5. The Challenge of the Casual/Vagrant Pauper

In contrast to the difficulties Axminster encountered in respect of the new responsibilities in public health and in staff management, the Guardians' confident localism prevailed in its management of relief for the group of paupers variously described as casuals, vagrants or tramps. However, Axminster's policy towards this category of paupers illustrates how the local approach proved inadequate in both ideas and the determination necessary to tackle the problem. The solutions adopted, based on local knowledge and short-term economy for the ratepayer, were fairly typical of Union responses generally, as discussed below. However, their actions tended to increase rather than reduce vagrant numbers and costs. Local practice also demonstrates the direct impact of refusing to implement central rules and guidance but also limitations in enforcement of Acts designed to deter vagrancy. A relatively unquestioning approach from the Centre and Inspector Courtenay compounded the problem allowing it to continue unabated.

Historians have focussed on a number of issues when discussing relief for vagrants. Rachel Vorspan suggests that this issue posed the most intractable problem confronting poor law administrators in later Victorian England, a view echoed by Brian O'Leary who suggests her work has not yet been seriously challenged.³⁹ Historians including Margaret Crowther, Lionel Rose and the Webbs have noted difficulties in managing this category of paupers which led to inconsistencies in the policy responses over time. National policy vacillated in the appropriate degree of deterrence to be applied to a group which included those seeking work, the truly destitute homeless and vagrants. As has been widely recognised nationally, numbers of casuals/vagrants varied over time, influenced by periods of harsh and more relaxed central policy initiatives, the economic cycle, weather, and local factors such as fairs and local employment opportunities. Nationally numbers were at a low point in 1875 and then increased from the later 1870s onwards, reaching a peak in 1895.⁴⁰ From 1871 onwards Government policy became increasingly harsh after a period of relative laxity, a revised policy approach which the Webbs argued affected all wayfarers, not limited to vagrants.⁴¹ The Pauper Inmates Discharge Act (1871) increased compulsory detention of returning casuals/vagrants, and the Casual Poor Act (1882) stated that first-time applicants were to be detained for two nights

³⁹ Rachel Vorspan, 'Vagrancy and the New Poor Law in Late-Victorian and Edwardian England', *English Historical Review*, 92 (1977), 59-81 (p.59); Brian O'Leary, 'Vagrancy in North Devon 1870-1914', *Local Historian*, 39 (2009), 287-99 (p. 288).

⁴⁰ Vorspan, 'Vagrancy', p. 63; O'Leary, 'Vagrancy', pp. 289-93.

⁴¹ Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *English Poor Law History: Part II: The Last Hundred Years*, English Local Government Series, 8 and 9, 2 vols ([London]: [Longmans], 1929; repr. London: Cass, 1963), I, pp. 410-11.

and habitual users to be detained until 9am on day four.⁴² This policy was modified in 1892 to allow casuals to be discharged at dawn to take up a job if the workhouse master agreed.⁴³ However, Vorspan argues that central coercive powers were minimal and in practice Guardians relieved at their discretion.⁴⁴ Linked to this, the Webbs suggested a lack of uniformity combined with an increasing tendency towards tolerance in many localities and eventually in the Centre by 1900.⁴⁵ Lionel Rose also argues that there were wide variations in practice, suggesting that Guardians, particularly in rural areas, often preferred to release casuals as soon as possible, with a view to saving costs.⁴⁶ The investigation below looks beyond this literature to examine the longer-term impact of local policy on levels of vagrant pauperism in Axminster and what eventually drove change.

Throughout most of the forty-year period of this study, Axminster Guardians approached the issue of managing vagrant pauperism as an inevitable problem that was insoluble but transient, with numbers affected by matters such as the economic cycle and army employment, a situation echoing the findings of Vorspan. Numbers of casual or vagrant paupers seeking relief in Axminster ebbed and flowed from the 1840s onwards, and the concern of the Guardian Board rose and fell accordingly. In 1848 Axminster's then Chairman William Tucker submitted evidence that was mainly hostile to a national enquiry into vagrancy. He described Axminster's casual paupers as comprising local troublesome vagrants and Irish families who travelled the area on a six-week circuit. Over 900 casual or vagrants received relief in 1847.⁴⁷ By 1865 vagrant numbers had reduced to a maximum of four per night and comprised mainly adult men, a gender trend which continued throughout the remainder of the century.⁴⁸ The final two decades of the century saw vagrancy return as a growing issue for Axminster, mirroring national concern and taking up increasing amounts of Guardians' time.

The policies pursued by Axminster Guardians such as tolerance and short-term economy undermined central attempts to reduce levels of casual pauperism and had a direct impact on

⁴² *Pauper Inmates Discharge and Regulation Act, 1871* (34 & 35 Vict. c. 108); *Casual Poor Act, 1882* (45 & 46 Vict. c. 36) <<https://uk.westlaw.com/>> [accessed 20 July 2023]

⁴³ M.A. Crowther, *The Workhouse System 1834-1929: The History of an English Social Institution* (London: Batsford Academic, 1981), pp. 248-52, 255, 260; Lionel Rose, *'Rogues and Vagabonds': Vagrant Underworld in Britain 1815-1985* (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 77-86; Webb and Webb, *Poor Law History*, I, pp. 411-14.

⁴⁴ Vorspan, 'Vagrancy', p. 61.

⁴⁵ Webb and Webb, *Poor Law History*, I, pp. 413-14.

⁴⁶ Rose, *'Rogues and Vagabonds'*, pp. 79, 83-84.

⁴⁷ UKPP, 'William Tucker Esq., Chairman...Axminster Union to the Poor Law Board: 26 February 1848. Reports and Communications on Vagrancy' (1847-48 (987)), pp. 55-60.

⁴⁸ UKPP, Reports on Vagrancy to President of the Poor Law Board by Poor Law Inspectors, (1866 (3698), p. 4; 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved', January and July, 1861-1891', 'Pauperism (England and Wales). (Half-yearly Statements)' 1901. See Bibliography for details.

numbers seeking relief in Axminster. The Union placed little emphasis on managing the issue or in making the workhouse unappealing as a stopping point. Axminster had several attractions: the town was situated on a main road; its workhouse was easily accessible and the Union's practice was relatively lenient. There is no evidence that local employment needs drew casual workers into the area, although it is possible the use of way-tickets in Lyme Regis may have increased its popularity with casual seafarers.⁴⁹ An analysis of census data for Axminster workhouse provides little further evidence. There were no casuals or vagrants resident on 1861 and 1871 census nights but three 'casuals' were present in 1881, ten in 1891 and five 'vagrants' in 1901. All were male, ranging in age from 20-68. Most were general or agricultural labourers. None were of local origin; birthplaces included Ireland (2), Scotland (1) and Northern England (3).⁵⁰

Axminster's policy was based on what ultimately proved to be misguided thoughts of economy and a relatively tolerant acceptance of the need to relieve vagrants but was nevertheless accompanied by very basic accommodation in the workhouse. Inspectors' criticisms of local practice remained unaddressed. In the 1870s Inspectors Wodehouse and Dawson complained that bathing was not provided, casuals slept on raised platforms without partitions and, significantly, that no work was required. Repeated challenges only resulted in a moveable bath being installed. By the mid-1880s concern about numbers was increasing and Courtenay suggested that provision of hammocks as sleeping accommodation might reduce the workhouse's attractiveness. Bently disagreed, advising he did not begrudge vagrants 'boards and straw' and complacently suggested that as army reservists were being called out numbers should reduce.⁵¹ This proved a vain hope as numbers continued to rise. The Union's audit in August 1885 highlighted lax policy as a cause. Axminster still allowed casuals to leave after one night's accommodation rather than the two required under the 1882 Casual Poor Act.⁵² This practice was cheaper as it reduced the need to provide work which Axminster viewed as uneconomic; Bently commented as late as 1895 that 'the work the tramps did was good for nothing'.⁵³ But as Vorspan recognised, this strategy was ultimately self-defeating as it increased numbers of applicants.⁵⁴ In November 1885 Pickering reported over sixty visits in a week, with twenty-one seeking shelter on one night, but accommodation was only available for ten. Bently had no solution to this, advising Pickering to do his best and hope the numbers decreased.⁵⁵ The

⁴⁹ Way tickets had been introduced in several counties including Dorset from 1870. Casuals/Vagrants who declared their route were offered bread at a stopping point, aimed at reducing mendacity. Webb and Webb, *Poor Law History*, I, pp. 412-13.

⁵⁰ 'Axminster Workhouse' (1861-1901) *Census Return for Axminster, Devon*. TNA: RG 9/1371, ff.31-33, pp. 55-60; RG 10/2033, ff.11-14, pp. 14-20; RG 11/2127, ff.73-75, pp. 5-10; RG 12/1667, ff.123-25, pp. 5-6; RG 13/2017, ff.95-97, pp. 1-6.

⁵¹ 'Board of Guardians, *Pulman's*, 24 February 1885, p. 7.

⁵² DHC: PLU/Axminster/14, Minutes, 6 August 1885, p. 144; 'Board of Guardians', *Pulman's*, 11 August 1885, p. 7.

⁵³ 'Board of Guardians, *Pulman's*, 5 May 1896, p. 7.

⁵⁴ Vorspan, 'Vagrancy', p. 61.

⁵⁵ 'Board of Guardians, *Pulman's*, 17 November 1885, p. 8.

Union continued with their superficially cheaper policy, but the problem continued unabated. In 1895 it was reported that the Assistant Relieving Officer had relieved over 2000 tramps in a year, but the Union still attributed this to Axminster being on the main road to Exeter and thus drawing in tramps from a wide area, rather than their accommodating practice.⁵⁶ Even at this late point, Axminster still saw the issue of vagrants/tramps as one which was inevitable and insoluble.

Although Axminster's approach to the vagrant question was out of step with central policy it was not unusual amongst Unions. Lionel Rose notes that in 1896 less than half the workhouses retained inmates for more than one night.⁵⁷ However, the Union's continued focus on local independent policy, complacency and resistance to central ideas delayed action in tackling the issue until the later 1890s, after Courtenay's departure. Central attempts to resolve the issue had been tentative and had little impact. However, by 1897 numbers threatened to become overwhelming as the tramp problem in Lyme Regis became 'alarming'.⁵⁸ Having investigated procedures adopted in other nearby Unions, Axminster publicised the discontinuance of way tickets and able-bodied vagrant relief at Lyme, which had drawn tramps to the area. Numbers reduced dramatically and almost immediately. Whilst three hundred and forty-one were relieved in December 1896, this was reported to have reduced to six accepted cases after the new system was introduced on 1st April 1897.⁵⁹ However the Union's usual pattern of complacency and delay reasserted itself. Although the Minutes also noted, finally, that Axminster had set up a committee to consider work and detention for vagrants in April 1901, nothing further was minuted that year.⁶⁰ The Union took the easiest and superficially cheapest way to handle the problem.

This example of a local policy based on local knowledge and a short-sighted response to an immediate relief need shows how a less forceful approach towards supervision from the Centre combined with a confident localism to create a greater problem over time, highlighting the limitations of both the local approach and ineffective central pressure to change. In this instance Axminster changed their practice of their own volition when the problem of vagrancy threatened to become overwhelming, rather than as a result of pressure from the Centre.

⁵⁶ 'Board of Guardians', *Pulman's*, 2 July 1895, p. 7.

⁵⁷ Lionel Rose, *Rogues and Vagabonds*, p. 84.

⁵⁸ DHC, PLU/Axminster/17, Minutes, 7 January 1897, p. 289.

⁵⁹ DHC, PLU/Axminster/17, Minutes, 21 January 1897, p. 299, 1 April 1897, pp. 331-32.

⁶⁰ DHC, PLU/Axminster/19, Minutes 11 April 1901, p. 57.

6. The Challenge of Modernisation: Workhouse Services and Medical Facilities

The weakness in Axminster's localism was further reinforced by their failure to accept central recommendations to modernise poor law medical services and facilities at the workhouse in the 1880s and 1890s. Although the local approach to workhouse services had some limited success, as this section demonstrates, it was increasingly out of date when compared with more modern approaches. A subsequent crisis and adverse publicity highlighted local Guardian intransigence, increasingly poor workhouse services and the stagnation associated with an introverted localism. Axminster's problems were exacerbated by the Union's relative poverty which emphasised the need for economy and the limited resources available to address issues.

Whilst many of Axminster's policies were backward looking, their adoption of outsourcing in relation to education for workhouse children and for some hospital services shows that the Union's independent approach could be innovative and successful. For example, the Union closed its workhouse school in 1877 and sent inmate children to the local Board School, one of the first in the West of England to adopt this practice. Motivations for this change included economy, as a single children's caretaker replaced two schoolteachers (although the Guardians were disappointed to find they were no longer able to claim a teacher subsidy from the LGB). Axminster's new policy was accepted by the LGB and very gradually adopted by other Unions in the area.⁶¹ A similar outsourcing approach was taken with some hospital services in the 1880s as Axminster paid a retainer to two local cottage hospitals to allow suitable pauper patients to be treated. This initiative ran counter to the Centre's demand for an infirmary at the workhouse, discussed below.⁶²

The LGB's focus on Axminster in the 1880s and 1890s centred on improvements to the workhouse and its services, in accordance with the national drive to improve facilities in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Both Crowther and Karel Williams argue that substantial building and rebuilding of workhouses occurred at this time: infrastructure was renewed or adapted and additional expensive facilities such as infirmaries constructed.⁶³ In addition, as Michael Flinn has suggested, there was an increasing focus on poor law medical services. Flinn argued that the development of separate hospital accommodation, first introduced in London, spread slowly into provincial Unions,

⁶¹ UKPP, 'Children attending the School of the Union Workhouse...half year ended Lady Day 1878. Appendix E, Eighth Annual Report of the Local Government Board 1878-79, (1878-79 (C.2372)), pp. 321-22.

⁶² For example: PLU/Axminster/15, Minutes, 13 September 1888, p. 52.

⁶³ Crowther, *The Workhouse System*, pp. 62-63; Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty*, pp. 124-25.

who took a longer time to modernise. He highlighted that sometimes Guardians resisted these changes, which accords with the reaction of Axminster's Guardians.⁶⁴

The LGB and Courtenay adopted tactics of persuasion in seeking improvements to workhouse infrastructure and medical facilities in Axminster in the period between 1880 and the mid-1890s. They achieved minimal success, as Axminster largely ignored their demands. Courtenay's repeated suggestions for improvements and modernisation met with the Union's usual response of delay and slow reluctant accommodation. His colleagues who supervised medical and mental health aspects at the workhouse met with similar delays or intransigence.⁶⁵ Facilities in the workhouse had been good in the 1860s, although issues with defective medical accommodation and facilities dated back to that time. Subsequently the fabric of the building deteriorated whilst at the same time national requirements and standards increased. Courtney's tenure was marked by a litany of complaints from the Centre, regarding inadequate infectious wards, overcrowding and limited provision for the sick, poor sleeping accommodation for tramps, the need for baths, water closets and an infirmary.⁶⁶ Many of these concerns, apart from the infirmary, were eventually addressed but in the absence of compulsion from the Centre Axminster's provision became increasingly outdated and inadequate.

Ultimately cost-cutting, parsimony and failure to modernise attracted unwelcome outside attention. Matters came to a head in the mid-1890s, following an unannounced visit from a Dr Ley in 1894 and a highly critical report in the *British Medical Journal (BMJ)* into workhouse conditions in 1895. These visits demonstrated how far Axminster had fallen behind with workhouse standards and the inadequacy of local policy. It is unclear why Dr Ley, a Guardian for the Devon Union of Newton Abbot, chose to visit Axminster. Ley compared the conditions he found in Axminster to those at his Union which had been heavily criticised in a LGB enquiry. He acknowledged the cleanliness of the workhouse, the good quality of its management and 'happy' inmates but stated that much of the structure of the workhouse was very poor. His comments were reported in the press and caused indignation amongst the Guardians amidst claims of inaccuracy. Courtenay refused Axminster's request to discuss the matter and appears to have provided no support. However, the Guardians took no action to address Ley's complaint, which was unfortunate as the issue soon reappeared.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ M.W. Flinn, 'Medical Services under the New Poor Law', in *The New Poor Law*, ed. by Fraser, pp. 45-66 (pp. 63-66).

⁶⁵ For example: PLU/Axminster/15, Minutes, 13 September 1888, p. 52, 20 December 1888, p. 89, 3 January 1889, p. 93.

⁶⁶ The Minutes between January 1880 and July 1896 contain repeated requests for these improvements. For example DHC, Axminster Poor Law Union, PLU/Axminster/13, Axminster Guardians' Minute Book 1880-1884, Minutes, 22 April 1880, p. 42, 6 May 1880, p. 44; PLU/Axminster/15, Minutes, 13 February 1890, p. 240; PLU/Axminster/16, Minutes, 29 November 1894, p. 395; PLU/Axminster/17, 25 July 1895, pp. 84-85.

⁶⁷ DHC, PLU/Axminster/16, Minutes, 6 September 1894, pp. 367-68, 4 October 1894, p. 377; press report examples: 'Dr Ley and the Axminster Workhouse', *Western Times*, 7 September 1894, p. 8; 'Axminster Guardians and Dr Ley', *Western Times*, 25 September 1894, p. 7; 'Dr Ley and the Axminster Workhouse', *Devon and Exeter Daily Gazette*, 5 October 1894, p. 8.

Shortly after Ley's visit, a reporter from the *BMJ* visited Axminster's workhouse as part of an investigation the journal was undertaking. Whilst the reason for the visit is unclear, press reports hinting at scandals were one way of forcing action and it is possible that an interested party alerted the press to Axminster's position. The *BMJ*'s report was published nationally in April 1895 and caused a furore. Detailed criticism noted that facilities were completely inadequate. The workhouse was 'destitute of comfort', lacked sanitation or hot water and unclassified inmates were mixed together.⁶⁸ These findings were widely reported in the West Country and an editorial in the *Devon and Exeter Daily Gazette* commented that although neglect by Axminster's officials was not suggested, the Guardians had failed to do all that was reasonable.⁶⁹ Axminster's Guardians reacted by setting up a Committee to visit the workhouse and invited the press to accompany them in order to satisfy people they described as 'outsiders'.⁷⁰ Several reporters attended and the representative from *The Devon and Exeter Daily Gazette* reported that the Committee addressed each of the complaints. The reporter suggested many of these were exaggerated by the *BMJ*, although it added the caveat that if the Committee's recommendations were carried out the *BMJ*'s report would not have been published in vain.⁷¹ Axminster's Committee also reported that the *BMJ* report contained 'many absolute mis-statements and gross exaggerations' but recommended changes which were subsequently adopted, along with most of Courtenay's previous suggestions.⁷² Not all the Guardians thought the Union had been badly treated; one defended the criticism and said he was pleased the Guardians had been roused into action.⁷³ The *Western Times* reported in June 1895 that the Guardians were seeking specifications for rugs, chairs, sanitary offices and bay windows.⁷⁴ Axminster slowly implemented the new works but the *BMJ*'s (and Courtenay's) recommendation to build a separate infirmary was not implemented.

Courtenay's lack of support for Axminster's Guardians was unsurprising as he had been pressing them to improve workhouse facilities for some time. For example, his workhouse report of 29th November 1894 (reported in the Minutes) had praised improvements to the 'imbecile' wards but urged the Guardians to again consider another escape staircase, the provision of W.C.s, a further men's bath, hot water for the sick ward and a wooden floor for the nursery.⁷⁵ Neither Courtenay nor

⁶⁸ 'Reports on the Nursing and Administration of Provincial Workhouses and Infirmaries', *British Medical Journal*, 20 April 1895, pp. 879-80.

⁶⁹ 'Leading article', *Devon and Exeter Daily Gazette*, 3 May 1895, p. 7.

⁷⁰ DHC, PLU/Axminster/17, Minutes, 2 May 1895, pp. 50-51.

⁷¹ 'Axminster Workhouse. The Report of the "British Medical Journal". Inspection by Guardians', *Devon and Exeter Daily Gazette*, 10 May 1895, p. 13.

⁷² DHC, PLU/Axminster/17, Minutes, 16 May 1895, pp. 54-59, (quotation p. 55).

⁷³ 'Axminster Guardians and Rural District Council', *Devon and Exeter Daily Gazette*, 17 May 1895, p. 7; 'The "British Medical Journal" and the House - Another Writer Criticised', *Pulman's*, 21 May 1895, p. 7.

⁷⁴ 'Axminster Guardians', *Western Times*, 28 June 1895, p. 5.

⁷⁵ DHC, PLU/Axminster/16, Minutes, 29 November 1894, p. 395.

the LGB regarded the measures Axminster took in 1895 as sufficient. For example, the LGB continued to press for a small infirmary to be built. Axminster countered that their upgraded accommodation was sufficient, ignoring the LGBs view that an infirmary was more than sleeping accommodation. After repeated rejections eventually the LGB abandoned the argument.⁷⁶ Axminster was not alone in this; Williams estimates that approximately half of English and Welsh Unions built infirmaries between c.1870-1914, but Axminster was not one of them.⁷⁷

This dispute illustrates how far Axminster had fallen behind. Inward looking localism, parsimony and makeshift improvements were damaging the Union with inadequate services highlighted despite clean and kindly workhouse provision. As with the public health issues investigated above, the Union suffered reputational damage in the wider area, although there does not appear to have been pressure from Axminster's ratepayers to improve workhouse facilities, possibly due to cost implications. However, unlike the wider issues on public health, the poor services provided to the workhouse mainly impacted directly on the pauper subset of the community, so that although the Guardians were standing in the way of progress, it does not appear there was a concerted or prolonged public pressure to improve.

7. Conclusion

This chapter has explored how local Union administration developed from the mid-1870s until the mid-1890s by focusing on the impact of modernisation and pressure to change. Whilst Axminster had succeeded in maintaining a considerable degree of autonomy in decision-making when challenged on relief policy in the 1870s, this freedom began to serve the community less well in the years that followed. Although the 1880s and early 1890s were a high point of local control Axminster's response to a disparate range of central and local requirements and expectations coupled with changing circumstances revealed flaws in its approach. These flaws are important because they exacerbated difficulties the Union faced in the later 1890s, examined in Chapter 8.

Overall, Axminster's practice and central-local relations echo findings in the literature: the unevenness of the growth and application of central power, the gradual impact of centralising statutes, the continuing power of localism and gentlemanly central-local relationships.⁷⁸ However this chapter focusses on the effect of these findings on local poor law management. LGB policies shaped Axminster's procedures. Axminster faced both challenges and leniency from the Centre. At times central policy pulled in divergent directions, with strengthened powers and requirements

⁷⁶ DHC, PLU/Axminster/17, Minutes 25 July 1895, pp. 84-85, 19 September 1895, p. 107.

⁷⁷ Karel Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 127.

⁷⁸ Bellamy, *Central-Local Relations*, pp. 10-11; Davis, 'Central Government', in *Cambridge Urban History*, ed. by Daunton, III, p. 265; Eastwood, *Government and Community*, pp. 159-62; Snell, *Parish and Belonging*, pp. 4-6, 496-504.

unevenly applied, which limited its impact and led to accommodation with local practice. On the one hand, reforms during the 1870s in areas such as public health increased demands, which smaller, rural Unions such as Axminster were often unable to meet. On the other hand, although reforms backed by Acts of Parliament gave the Centre powers in public health appointments for example, action depended on the Centre having both the will and the means to enforce. Despite their increased authority, the LGB largely relied on persistent reminders, but persuasion failed to work with recalcitrant Union Guardians. Axminster appointed Medical Officers of Health under threat of Parliamentary sanction, but (as was typical of many Unions) repeatedly ignored the requirements of the Vagrancy Acts. The latter was possible because as Vorspan argues, coercive powers were lacking.⁷⁹

Whilst the less intrusive approach from the Centre facilitated localism between the mid-1870s and mid-1890s, other local factors also played a part. After the departure of the anti-centralist Pulman, a Guardian Board who supported Bently's leadership and an introspective local agenda created a largely unified approach. Although the number and cost of local paupers remained relatively high, there was little focus on this aspect of management. The widened remit of the Guardians led to a greater focus on costs in areas other than those directly associated with relief for local paupers: the workhouse, vagrancy, medical and staff costs were all targeted.

The confident but introverted localism that emerged through handling relief matters bolstered the belief in the superiority of local knowledge and understanding of local costs. It resulted in a reluctance to co-operate with new demands from the Centre. From a local perspective, a case can be made that the Guardians were successful in managing the Union. There were, for instance, few problems associated with the relief of paupers. Strong local control was retained, with relatively little interference by the LGB and a good relationship (at least superficially) maintained with their Inspector. Local solutions exploited local knowledge and reflected the local economic reality. In some instances policies were progressive, such as the use of the local board school, a practice later adopted by other Unions.

However, closer examination reveals that action (and inaction) taken by the Union undermined its development and management in the longer term. This middle period of the NPL management was one where the growing requirements of local government were not addressed by Axminster. The local approach and ethos became increasingly out-dated. Although rational in the short-term, some decisions were not helpful in the long run. For example, although local policies on vagrancy kept

⁷⁹ Vorspan, 'Vagrancy', p. 61.

costs down initially, over time the problem was exacerbated. Whilst the reluctance to address new responsibilities was partly due to the attitudes of Axminster's Guardians, their underlying response was also shaped by the lack of resources available. As explored earlier in this thesis, the Union was not wealthy, and the range of expertise within the Guardian body was reduced because there was a limited diversity in occupations, dominated by farmers who lacked the range of expertise needed to address Axminster's developing needs.

In the longer term the value of localism and the authority of the Guardians was gradually undermined by wider developments in social policy in areas such as public health and medical care. Local government reforms and the growing availability of central support increased expectations of facilities and services. In failing to take on board new initiatives Axminster became increasingly out of step, falling behind with best practice. Finally, the creation of Urban and Rural Authorities broke up the Union as a single point of local control and heralded greater urban and rural divergence. The weaknesses in local administration found here echo the views of the Webbs' who were scathing of lay participation and the inefficiencies which accompanied it.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Webb and Webb, *Poor Law History*, I, pp. 228-30.

Chapter 8: Managing Axminster Union in a Changing Environment – Diminution, Change and a Revised Approach

1. Introduction

The chapter argues that after more than twenty years of defending localism, ideas and practice changed in the decade following 1894. This occurred because Axminster's Guardians found that locally devised solutions to poor law management problems no longer worked. Local economic, demographic and cultural factors, previously largely unquestioned by Guardians, were brought into focus by new local governance reforms and new ideas on social policy and poor relief. Two case studies show how Axminster's localism adjusted to the new environment and how the Union pragmatically adapted its practice. The Union embraced greater collaboration, recognised the value of central assistance and gradually aligned its approach to central relief policy, accepting that local relief practice was often unable to respond adequately to social and economic challenges. The new outward looking and collaborative approach that emerged in Axminster Union was more in line with uniform practices promoted by the LGB and increasingly adopted by Unions across England and Wales. At the same time however, as this chapter shows, the Centre exhibited reluctance to extend its reach into new areas of responsibility so that centralisation remained limited.

Chapter 8 offers new perspectives on the working of Union administration at the very end of the nineteenth century, the period between 1890-1901 on which there are relatively few studies. The continuing importance of settlement has received some attention from Keith Snell and latterly from Steven King and Anne Winter in their collection of essays which explores the topic widely and includes an introduction by Joanna Innes, King and Winter and a study by Elizabeth Hurren which focusses primarily on its impact on poor people between 1870 and 1900.¹ Further discussion of settlement forms the basis of the first case study. Snell makes a strong case for 'invigorated localism' between the mid-nineteenth century and the 1870s with a resolute opposition to centralism. He suggests that from the 1870s this begins to unravel with 'de-localisation' aided by financial grants from the Centre.² Snell also concludes that 'belonging' was complex and a local pride and community retained importance, both culturally and legally well into the early twentieth century. This chapter finds that the gradual decline of localism begins later in Axminster, in the

¹ K.D.M. Snell, *Parish and Belonging: Community, Identity and Welfare in England and Wales, 1700-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Joanna Innes, Steven King and Anne Winter, 'Introduction. Settlement and Belonging in Europe, 1500s-1930s', in *Migration, Settlement and Belonging in Europe, 1500-1930s: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. by Steven King and Anne Winter (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013), pp. 1-28; Elizabeth Hurren, 'Belonging, Settlement and the New Poor Law in England and Wales 1870s-1900s', in *Migration, Settlement and Belonging*, ed. by King and Winter, pp. 127-52.

² Snell, *Parish and Belonging*, pp. 4-6.

1890s and when the change in local government structures and developments in the local economic environment began to impact on local poor law culture and localism.³

Most studies covering the period 1870-1901 focus on relief administration during the 'crusade' era, which is generally accepted to have ended by the mid-1890s.⁴ However, as Hurren argues, by 1900 the national outlook on relief provision had become more understanding of the complexities involved and the inadequacy of self-reliance and market forces.⁵ This chapter explores this theme by examining how both Centre and locality responded to the resurgent problem of rural pauperism in South West England. It argues that the eventual central response in Axminster was Inspector-led and equally robust to that found in the 1870s, although, as the chapter shows, a deeper reading of policy finds differences that indicate a revised approach towards social policy and an altered local Union environment had come into play. The chapter also responds to calls in the literature for a greater understanding of the officials who dispensed relief. Natalie Carter and King for example have argued that little work has been done so far on the 'administrative and process changes' that sought to maximise the reach of the state.⁶

The chapter starts in Section 2 by examining the factors that undermined localism within the Axminster area including a weakened local economy and the impact of continuing administrative reforms. A consideration of the impact of local government reorganisation and the appointment of a dynamic new generation of central and local officials in the mid-1890s follows, as these transformations had a significant effect on local management. Two case studies then focus on central and local responses to significant issues encountered by the Union. The first in Section 3 relates to a settlement problem that escalated into a legal dispute which reached the House of Lords and led to a revision in Axminster's approach towards the Centre. This dispute highlights changing power dynamics between Unions of different sizes, revealing the limits of independent localism and an adjustment in the central-local relationship, but also practical limits to centralisation. The second case study in Section 4 investigates the re-emergence of extensive and intractable pauperism in Axminster caused by extensive poverty amongst elderly residents. Central and local responses to

³ Snell, *Parish and Belonging*, pp. 496-504.

⁴ Steven A. King, and Peter Jones, 'Fragments of Fury? Lunacy, Agency, and Contestation in the Great Yarmouth Workhouse, 1890s-1900s', *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 51 (2020), 235-65 (p. 241); Snell, *Parish and Belonging*, p. 279; Karel Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 103.

⁵ Elizabeth Hurren, 'World without Welfare': Paupers Perspectives on Medical Care under the Late-Victorian Poor Law 1870-1900', in *Obligation, Entitlement and Dispute under the English Poor Laws*, ed. by Peter Jones and Steven King (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), pp. 292-320 (pp. 317-20).

⁶ Natalie Carter and Steven King, 'I Think We Ought Not to Acknowledge Them [Paupers] as That Encourages Them to Write': The Administrative State, Power and the Victorian Pauper', *Social History*, 46 (2021), 117-44 (pp. 118-19); Peter Jones and Steven King, 'Obligation, Entitlement and Dispute: Navigating the English Poor Laws 1600-1900', in *Obligation, Entitlement and Dispute*, ed. by Jones and King, pp. 1-19 (pp. 7-9).

this problem reflect the local impact of changing social policy on relief practice and a further adjustment in central-local relationships.

2. Depression, Disruption and a Reinvigorated Approach

This section explores why Axminster's management ethos was no longer sustainable by the later 1890s. It argues that a revision in approach resulted from a range of factors including economic depression and disruptive administrative and broader political changes which occurred from the 1830s onwards but impacted most significantly at the end of the century. Initial, gradual change gathered pace and reached a tipping point in the later 1890s following organisational transformation after the 1894 Local Government Act and the recruitment of a new generation of central and local officials. These developments reduced Axminster Union's size, status and ability to sustain independent action and consequently, the Union's reliance on local solutions became subject to challenge and local revision. In turn this created a local governance environment more attuned to central directives. Taken together these factors add a further dimension to the argument that the 1890s was a crucial decade of change in attitudes to the Poor Law as argued initially by Michael Rose.⁷

2.1 Diminished Status - A Context of Depression and Disruption

Earlier chapters in this thesis demonstrate that Axminster suffered ongoing economic decline throughout the period of this study. Ongoing financial weakness in the Union area, a legacy of the agricultural recession, little reindustrialisation and depopulation reduced the proportion of economically active residents whilst increasing numbers of dependent, elderly inhabitants. Combined with a substantial underlying level of pauperism this created significant financial strain. For example, the population of Axminster Union declined by more than 10% between 1861 and 1891 whilst numbers of those aged sixty-five or over increased by 13%. The population fell by a further 12% between 1891 and 1901, partly as a result of boundary changes (see **Appendices A3.1 and 6**). The necessity to appease ratepayers and keep rates down added to the pressure on Guardians to cut costs. For example, on five occasions in the early 1890s Axminster returned the lowest average costs for in-relief in their Auditor's area of fifteen Unions.⁸

⁷ Michael E. Rose, 'The Crisis of Poor Relief in England 1860-1890', in *The Emergence of the Welfare State in Britain and Germany 1850-1950*, ed. by W. J. Mommsen with Wolfgang Mock (London: Croom Helm, 1981), pp. 50-70 (p. 65).

⁸ DHC, Axminster Poor Law Union, PLU/Axminster/16, Axminster Guardians' Minute Book 1891-1894, Minutes, 25 February 1892, pp. 45-47, 3 May 1894, pp. 329-31, 11 January 1894, pp. 286-88; DHC, Axminster Poor Law Union, PLU/Axminster/17, Axminster Guardians' Minute Book 1895-1897, Minutes, 22 August 1895, pp. 93-95, 14 November 1895, pp 125-27. Appendix A2.6 provides detail of comparative rateable values.

Boundary revisions between 1836 and 1901 undermined localism by reducing the Union's size and status and thus its ability to sustain independent action. Axminster Union was situated across the Devon-Dorset boundary with five of its eighteen parishes in Dorset (see **Appendix A1.2**). Although this spread was not exceptional, the location made it susceptible to Government moves to address administrative anomalies and reorganise along county lines. Between 1836 and the early 1880s Union parishes were subject to numerous changes. These included diocesan transfers, the loss of a parliamentary seat at Lyme Regis, parish transfers between counties and individual parish realignments (see **Appendix 6**). None of the changes augmented the Axminster Union area; instead, cumulatively they threatened a sense of local identity and autonomy. As Snell has argued, inhabitants generally disliked parish changes of this type and his findings tie in with Axminster's negative response to various streamlining proposals made by the LGB in the later 1880s.⁹ Axminster Guardians responded to the county boundary changes mooted following the 1887 Local Government (Boundaries) Act by encouraging their Dorset parishes to transfer to Devon, and by petitioning Parliament against the move.¹⁰ Vice-Chairman Curgenvin described the proposed transfer of Lyme Regis to the adjoining Union of Bridport as 'the most insane thing possible'.¹¹ The proposals were also problematic for residents as the practical advantages of remaining with Axminster (such as distance to travel) had to be offset by a strong county loyalty. For example, a vestry meeting in the parish of Hawkchurch expressed a preference to remain in Dorset.¹²

The plans associated with the 1887 Act were not implemented but the debate around them set the tone for the disruption in the 1890s when reorganisation was finally enacted. Initially Axminster was to lose all five of its Dorset parishes, including Lyme Regis, one of its major contributors. Axminster's Minutes recorded numerous parish transfer discussions between March 1894 and November 1895, including protests and petitions. The developing situation was also tracked publicly in the local press. The outcome, after negotiation and argument, realigned Axminster as a Devon based Union. Two parishes, Chardstock and Hawkchurch (despite its initial preference) transferred from Dorset but two Dorset parishes, Thorncombe and Charmouth were lost to adjoining Unions (changes summarised in **Appendix 6**). Unusually, however Axminster retained Dorset-based Lyme Regis, after

⁹ Snell, *Parish and Belonging*, p. 73.

¹⁰ *Local Government (Boundaries) Act 1887* (50 & 51 Vict. c. 61) <<https://uk.westlaw.com/>> [accessed 24 July 2023]

¹¹ DHC, Axminster Poor Law Union, PLU/Axminster/14, Guardians' Minute Book 1884-1888, Minutes: Discussions/actions on boundaries: 22 December 1887, p. 436, 5 January 1888, pp. 440-41, 19 January 1888, p. 445, 2 February 1888, pp. 450-51; petition, 16 February 1888, pp. 455-56, 1 March 1888, p. 458. Curgenvin quotation: DHC, Axminster Poor Law Union, PLU/Axminster/15, Guardians' Minute Book 1888-1891, Minutes, 29 September 1889, pp. 190-91; 'Board of Guardians', *Pulman's Weekly News and Advertiser*, 1 October 1889, p. 8.

¹² 'Hawkchurch', *Pulman's*, 21 May 1889, p. 7.

petitions from both the Lyme authorities and from Axminster Guardians. Curgenvin, acting as Guardians' Chairman, praised this 'common sense' result.¹³

These changes had important practical implications. Firstly, the loss of population and rateable value reduced Axminster's size and potential influence, the impact of which is explored in **Case Study 1** in Section 3. The scale of Axminster's loss was significant when compared with other Unions. Axminster lost over 8% of its 1891 population and over 9% of its rateable value by these 1896 changes. Nationally, only two of the twenty Unions reported to have lost or exchanged parishes in the tax year ended 1897 lost more.¹⁴ Secondly, the demands distracted attention from other major issues, such as the growing problem of pauperism explored in **Case Study 2**. There was considerable disruption to Union business as changes were implemented. There were also numerous practical difficulties such as paupers residing in the 'wrong' workhouse. Whilst Beaminster Union paid Axminster to retain Thorncombe's indoor paupers, negotiations with Bridport Union proved difficult.¹⁵ For example, Bridport sought reimbursement for Charmouth's contribution to building Axminster's workhouse sixty years previously.¹⁶ Bently publicly dismissed this claim saying that 'Axminster Guardians are not such confounded fools as the Bridport Guardians imagine them'. The LGB declined to become involved.¹⁷ Eventually Axminster paid Bridport twenty-three pounds and ten shillings to dispose of the issue.¹⁸ Relations between the two Unions remained frosty with many disagreements, including untangling finances and Bridport's refusal to act as paymaster for Axminster's non-resident paupers.¹⁹ Further problems occurred. Dorset Lunatic Asylum demanded immediate removal, or alternatively increased charges, for any Axminster paupers in its care, which given that the Devon Asylum was overstretched caused time-consuming administrative difficulties.²⁰ A final disruptive element undermining the previous organisation resulted from the setting up of Rural and Urban District Councils following the 1894 Local

¹³ DHC, PLU/Axminster/16, Minutes, 8 March 1894, pp. 307–09, 13 May 1894, p. 333, 27 December 1894, insert 'Administrative Counties of Devon, Dorset and Somerset', p. 408; DHC, Axminster Poor Law Union, PLU/Axminster/17, Axminster Guardians' Minute Book 1895-1897, Minutes, 8 August 1895 p. 91, 19 September 1895, pp. 105-106, 28 November 1895, pp. 131-32. Travel issues: 'Board of Guardians and District Council', *Pulman's*, 10 September 1895, p. 7; Common sense quotation: 'Board of Guardians and District Council', *Pulman's*, 3 December 1895, p. 7.

¹⁴ UKPP, 'Annual Local Taxation Returns, 1896-97 (part I-VII.)', (1898, (250 289 325 351-I 351-II 351-III , p. 85; Summary of Population Statistics: GB Historical GIS / University of Portsmouth, Axminster PLU/RegD through time | Population Statistics | Total Population, *A Vision of Britain through Time*. Copyright Great Britain Historical GIS Project and University of Portsmouth as set out in chapter 3 <http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10005590/cube/TOT_POP> [Date accessed: 18 December 2021]

¹⁵ DHC, PLU/Axminster/17, Minutes, 2 April 1896, p. 176, 30 April 1896, p. 189.

¹⁶ DHC, PLU/Axminster/17, Minutes, 16 April 1896, pp. 184-85, 1 April 1897, p. 331.

¹⁷ 'Board of Guardians and Rural District Council', *Pulman's*, 11 August 1896, p. 7.

¹⁸ DHC, PLU/Axminster/17, Minutes, 1 April 1897–27 May 1897, pp. 331-56.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 331-56.

²⁰ DHC, PLU/Axminster/17, Minutes, 12 November 1896 p. 263, 10 December 1896, p. 277, 24 December 1896, p. 280.

Government Act.²¹ The new Councils had to be untangled from Axminster's previous organisation, with concerns raised about an improper constitution.²²

2.2 The Impact of New Local Government Organisation on Axminster's Poor Law Management

The development of Local Government in the Victorian period was complex. Stephen Royle suggests that although localism continued in small towns, by the end of the century those towns that couldn't adapt to new political and economic conditions faced decline, a situation pertinent to Axminster.²³ Reforms such as the 1894 Local Government Act, although mainly beyond the scope of this study, created a new and lasting structure that revised responsibilities for local government and aimed to improve efficiency through rationalisation, although as Lynn Hollen Lees notes some overlapping boundaries and confused jurisdictions remained.²⁴ As will be explored below, the revised constitution and remit for Union Boards, electoral changes and the broadened franchise had wide-ranging impacts and led to revisions in administrative practice.²⁵

Over the course of the 1890s broader political changes began to undermine the existing political order in Axminster. Localism, so entrenched and defended in previous decades was weakened and challenged by organisational changes in local administration and new ideas in social policy. In addition, the involvement of a new generation of central and local Officials, a change last seen in the 1860s and 1870s, had a significant impact on poor law management.

As discussed in Chapter 4, the 1894 Local Government Act affected the composition, outlook, focus and functions of the Guardian body. Axminster's new organisation comprised mainly Rural District Councillors who incorporated guardianship into their wider role. Two Urban Districts, Lyme Regis and Seaton elected Guardians who only attended the poor law elements of meetings. Axminster Guardians had expressed concerns that the widened franchise and eligibility for Guardianship would lead to profligacy, supporting a petition objecting to the reduced rating qualification for Guardianship. Their reaction mirrored wider political concerns but in practice fears of higher spending proved unfounded.²⁶ Nevertheless the 1894 reorganisation was generally welcomed locally by the wider population. *Pulman's* gave the new body a cautious welcome and initially there

²¹ *Local Government Act 1894* (56 & 57 Vict. c. 73) <<https://uk.westlaw.com/>> [accessed 20 July 2023]

²² 'Rural District Council Dorset and Devon', *Pulman's*, 5 March 1895, p. 7, 'Board of Guardians and Rural District Council', 12 March 1895, p. 7.

²³ Stephen A. Royle, 'The Development of Small Towns in Britain', in *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, ed. by Martin Daunton, 3 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) III, pp. 151-84 (p. 173).

²⁴ Lynn Hollen Lees, 'Urban Networks', in *Cambridge Urban History*, ed. by Daunton, III, pp. 59-94, (p. 85).

²⁵ Philip Harling, 'The Centrality of Locality: The Local State, Local Democracy, and Local Consciousness in Late-Victorian and Edwardian Britain', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 9 (2004), 216-34 (pp. 221-23).

²⁶ DHC, PLU/Axminster/16, Minutes, 15 December 1892, pp. 147-48; J.P.D. Dunbabin, 'British Local Government Reform: The Nineteenth Century and After', *English Historical Review*, 92 (1977), 777-805.

was a slight increase in interest in elections.²⁷ In December 1894 there were eight contested elections for the new administration. However, local interest quickly faded as in 1898 there were only two parish elections.²⁸

Over time these changes had a significant impact on Axminster's management of the poor law due to the revised structure of the Guardian body. In 1894 there was a 53% (19/36) turnover in members, the majority of those newly elected were new, followed by a 39% turnover in 1898 (13/33) and 30% in 1901 (10/33).²⁹ The new Guardians/Councillors were drawn largely from a range of non-farming backgrounds and included some with professional and trade/retail occupations, a range last seen in the 1870s. Comparing occupations in the census years of 1891 and 1901, the percentage of farmer Guardians fell from 71% to 39% whilst those with a trade/retail background rose from 10% to 28% and professionals from 0% to 12% (see **Table 4.1** in Chapter 4). *Pulman's* noted the increase in tradesmen on the Assessment Committee and the 'excision' of farmers.³⁰ Female guardians were appointed at the first opportunity in 1894 but this participation was not sustained, and in 1901 no women stood for election.³¹ The sharp reduction in the farming interest between 1891 and 1901 probably reflected the widened terms of reference and increased demands, as the new role required a commitment to a three year term alongside a wider range of responsibilities.

Change in Axminster Union's outlook and practice was not immediate. Initially the inexperience of new Guardians and the removal of ex-officio participation, discussed in Chapter 4, reinforced the position of the old order under Bently. Bently, although now elderly, was unanimously elected as the first Chairman of the RDC, continuing until his death in 1909.³² His influence was particularly evident in dealing with established responsibilities such as relief practice. However his failure to move with the times attracted criticism as this extract from a letter to the Editor of *Pulman's* in 1900 shows:

To the Chairman of the Axminster Guardians any suggestion of improvement is as a red rag to a bull. Whether it comes from the Government or from a private Guardian that it is an

²⁷ 'Parish Councils and Guardians', *Pulman's*, 1 January 1895, p. 4.

²⁸ DHC, PLU/Axminster/17, Minutes, 10 January 1895, pp. 1-4; DHC, Axminster Poor Law Union, PLU/Axminster/18, Axminster Guardians' Minute Book 1897-1900, Minutes, 28 April 1898, pp. 52-54.

²⁹ DHC, PLU/Axminster/16, Minutes, 20 April 1893, p.193; PLU/Axminster/17, Minutes, 10 January 1895, pp. 1-4, PLU/Axminster/18, Minutes, 28 April 1898, pp.52-54; DHC, Axminster Poor Law Union, PLU/Axminster/19, Axminster Guardians' Minute Book 1900-1903, 24 April 1901, pp. 60-61.

³⁰ [title destroyed], *Pulman's*, 21 April 1896, p. 7.

³¹ DHC, PLU/Axminster/17, Minutes, 10 January 1895, pp. 1-4; Axminster PLU/18, Minutes, 28 April 1898, pp. 52-54; DHC, PLU/Axminster/19, Minutes, 24 April 1901, pp.60-61, 23 May 1901, p. 71.

³² DHC, PLU/Axminster/17, Minutes, 10 January 1895, p.4; 'Axminster Guardians and Council', *Western Times*, 9 July 1909, p. 9.

improvement is enough to condemn it in his eyes. That anything has existed for a hundred years is sufficient argument for keeping it, ... no matter how much better a thing may be obtained today.³³

Increasingly after 1894 the outlook of the new Board changed, as a cohort of more active and influential participants was elected, including for example William Knight who was closely related to Axminster's Lord of the Manor. These new members had a greater interest in a range of local affairs, a wider breadth of expertise and the three-year period in office reduced turnover and allowed them to build up skills and understanding. Minutes of Guardian meetings and the case studies below show that they were more dynamic, questioning received wisdom, and open to new ideas on social policy and methods of working. Over time they contributed fresh ideas, for example Guardian William Knight who was a Solicitor (see **Case Study 1**). Barrister Marwood Tucker attended a vagrancy conference in Exeter.³⁴ The Board gradually became more professional and outward looking and were more open to dealing with the LGB (see **Case Study 1**). By the end of the century Axminster Guardians were more demanding and wanted to know more. For example, the Minutes are more detailed and include more information on individual cases. Formal record keeping ensured knowledge was more retrievable and less reliant on local memory from long-serving members.³⁵

2.3 A New Generation of Central Officials: Reinvigorated Challenge

The appointment of a new generation of central officials following the retirement of incumbents proved to be a defining moment for Axminster's poor law management. The most significant change arose from the employment of a new Inspector and a new Auditor which led to a change in Axminster's relief policy (see **Case Study 2**). Herbert Preston-Thomas replaced Lord Courtenay in 1896 after the latter's twenty years as the South-West's Inspector.³⁶ In 1898 Henry Walrond replaced Robert Tucker who had been District Auditor since 1862.³⁷ Both new appointees raised stern criticisms of Axminster's practice and unlike their immediate predecessors were determined to effect changes, differing from the hands-off approach adopted by Courtenay or the comfortable relationship that Tucker had established with the Guardians.

³³ 'Letter' *Pulman's*, 4 December 1900, p. 7.

³⁴ DHC, PLU/Axminster/17, Minutes, 5 September 1895, p. 102.

³⁵ For example Minute Book 10 covered 6 years (13 April 1865-6 April 1871) in 430 pages whilst Book 18 covered 2 years 10 months (23 December 1897-11 October 1900) in 450 pages. DHC, Axminster Poor Law Union, PLU/Axminster/10, Axminster Guardians' Minute Book, 1865-1871, DHC, Axminster Poor Law Union, PLU/Axminster/18, Axminster Guardians' Minute Book 1897-1900.

³⁶ Herbert Preston-Thomas, *The Work and Play of a Government Inspector* (Edinburgh: Blackwood and Sons, 1909), pp. 250, 266.

³⁷ DHC, PLU/Axminster/18, Minutes, 28 April 1898, p. 60; Axminster Poor Law Union, PLU/Axminster/9, Guardian's Minute Book 1857-1865, Minutes, 16 December 1862, p. 392.

Preston-Thomas's appointment especially had a long-term impact on relief practice in Axminster and his district more widely. As explored in Chapter 2, Preston-Thomas thought the South-West area was ripe for change and his definite views on how relief policy should be applied were in tune with those of the LGB.³⁸ His priorities and persistence are evident when compared with the work of others. Lengthy reports, critical assessments and circulars for both the LGB and his Unions contrasted with the short reports of his predecessor Courtenay.³⁹

Unlike the 'crusade' which had had a national focus, Preston-Thomas's out-relief challenge was locally focused. His autobiography sets out his beliefs on social policy in some detail. He favoured an approach that he had encountered in Elberfeld, Germany; beyond temporary relief, only people incapable of work and unsupported by liable relatives or charity should receive assistance.⁴⁰ In the South-West he challenged 'indiscriminate' grants of out-relief, which he believed pauperised the population, discouraged saving and promoted 'reckless living'. Other targets include women with illegitimate children (the 'worst class in the workhouse'), the poor condition of South-Western workhouses, inadequate medical facilities, and insufficient support for 'lunatics'.⁴¹ He thought out-relief should be targeted towards the deserving poor, but should be set at an adequate level, rather than spreading small amounts thinly.⁴² The industrious elderly should receive generous out-relief and only those without support or needing care should be in the workhouse. However, he recognised that for some elderly people the workhouse was a 'misnomer', as in his experience he found the old could live there in 'quiet content' in good accommodation.⁴³

The impact of this change in personnel and the reinvigorated management can be seen in the following case studies. These take two issues which affected Axminster's management at the end of the nineteenth century and examine how the context and changes explored above impacted on the central-local dichotomy and on the Union's localism. They demonstrate how the revised thinking of the new generation on social policy combined with a diminished status in the local authority to undermine Axminster's long-standing ethos of localism and opened it up to newer approaches to poor law management.

³⁸ Preston-Thomas, *Work and Play*, p. 250, quotation: p. 266; Elberfeld: pp. 119-27.

³⁹ For example: 'Twenty-second Annual Report of the Local Government Board, 1892-93, Appendix B', (1893-94 (C.7180)), p. 84.

⁴⁰ For example: Preston-Thomas, *Work and Play*, pp. 119-27, pp. 269-70.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 'indiscriminate': p. 269, 'recklessness': p. 270, 'worst class': p. 285, poor quality workhouse: p. 278, medical and 'lunatics': p. 278.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 267, 269.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, elderly pp. 266-70. General concerns and potential remedies were interwoven in chapters on Essex, pp. 223-50, West Country: pp. 266-93, vagrants: 321-34, 344-54. Summary achievements 1897 until retirement in 1908, pp. 358-65, 'misnomer', p. 227-28, 'quiet content' p. 286.

3. Case Study 1: The Evolution of Localism: Settlement, Arbitration and a Revised Approach to the LGB

This case study illustrates how the imbalance in wealth and resources of larger Unions generated an imbalance of power that weighed disproportionately heavily on smaller, impecunious Unions in the event of a dispute. In this circumstance the LGB was seen by these smaller Unions as a means to help mitigate disparity. In Axminster the tensions came to a head over the problem of pauper settlement, which continued to be a cause of dispute between Unions in the later nineteenth century, driven by cost considerations.

The law relating to settlement dated back to 1662 and was originally designed to allow the removal of people who were likely to become chargeable to their native parish by an order from JPs.⁴⁴ By the later nineteenth century the Statute had been much modified. Acts such as the Irremoveability Acts of 1846-8, 1861 and 1865 curtailed the return of paupers to their parish of settlement. However, loopholes remained and the potential cost of maintaining paupers such as young people with extensive needs meant that disputes continued, sometimes at great expense, as this case study shows. Snell argues disputes between urban and rural Unions were particularly challenging as irremoveability tended to favour the latter and as a result settlement often remained subject to contest that could arouse considerable ill feeling.⁴⁵ Hurren concurs with this view arguing that settlement issues remained complex, with the resolution of problems expensive, time consuming and involving the case law.⁴⁶

Axminster's high levels of outward migration meant that it normally received paupers from Unions looking to return paupers to their place of settlement, rather than seeking to remove paupers elsewhere. The process of checking depositions was well established but agreeing settlement for those who had a tenuous connection with the Union was difficult and acceptance potentially expensive. However, although Axminster routinely investigated and challenged cases, Guardians usually approached issues pragmatically and conceded once reasonable proof was given. For example, of the eight cases minuted in 1893, six were from Unions asking Axminster to receive a pauper. Three were accepted without challenge, one after an identity check and two were accepted after further investigation.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ John Cannon, 'Settlements and Removals' in *The Oxford Companion to British History*, ed. by John Cannon, rev.edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 853.

⁴⁵ Snell, *Parish and Belonging*, pp. 83, 88, 105, 160, 272.

⁴⁶ Hurren, 'Belonging, Settlement' in *Migration, Settlement and Belonging*, ed. by King and Winter, p. 147.

⁴⁷ DHC, PLU/Axminster/16, Minutes, 12 January 1893-28 December 1893, pp. 154-285.

The settlement dispute between Axminster and Plymouth Unions arising from the case of Matilda Small/Manley formed one of the most significant issues faced by Axminster in the 1890s. The case touched on many points of tension and is a good example of the contest between Unions highlighted by Snell and Hurren. The case illustrates the limited options available to disputants, the imbalance of power and financial risks faced by impecunious Unions, the limited support available from the LGB, but also the value of the Courts and legislation in seeking resolution, even if it remained risky and time-consuming. It shows how Axminster adjusted its approach towards the Centre, seeking, in effect, to increase the LGB's power over Unions. It also highlights the need for national intervention but also the reluctance of the LGB to extend its reach.

In September 1895, Plymouth, the largest and wealthiest Union in Devon requested that Axminster accept responsibility for Matilda Small (otherwise Manley), a 19-year-old 'lunatic'. Matilda was part of the large family of Eliza Manley and Seth Small, variously described as travellers, gypsies or hawkers. As her parents were unmarried, Matilda's father was not responsible for her and although Matilda's birthplace was Plymouth, it did not appear that she had established a settlement there. Plymouth alleged that Axminster, seventy miles distant from Plymouth, was Matilda's place of settlement, a claim based solely on her mother Eliza's birth more than fifty years previously 'under a hedge' (according to the evidence of Eliza's mother) in the outlying parish of Stockland.⁴⁸ There was no suggestion that the family had lived in the Axminster Union area for any length of time. Consequently, Matilda's connection with Axminster appeared extremely tenuous. Although initially minded to accept, Axminster's Guardians reviewed the evidence in late 1895, concluding the 'hedge' was situated in an adjoining parish and Union and further investigated potential settlements for Eliza based on apprenticeship or derived from her father. None of the other parishes were within Axminster Union. Having taken Counsel's opinion the Guardians appealed the Plymouth magistrates' decision which had awarded Matilda's settlement to Axminster.⁴⁹ At the subsequent Quarter Sessions in January 1896, the Recorder decided that as Matilda was illegitimate she retained her mother's settlement until she gained her own. Although Axminster's contentions on Eliza's settlement were either not proven or dismissed, the Recorder further decided, on a convoluted point of law, that as Eliza was legitimate her settlement derived from that of her father. Consequently, under the terms of Section 35 of The Divided Parishes and Poor Law Amendment Act (1876) Matilda's settlement was her birthplace, Plymouth.⁵⁰ This apparent leap in logic arose

⁴⁸ DHC, PLU/Axminster/17, Minutes, 5 September 1895, p. 103, 31 October 1895, p. 123, 14 November 1895 pp. 127-28.

⁴⁹ DHC, PLU/Axminster/17, Minutes, 28 November 1895, pp. 132-33, 12 December 1894, p. 137, 27 December 1895, p. 142.

⁵⁰ *Divided Parishes and Poor Law Amendment Act 1876* (39 & 40 Vict. c. 61) <<https://uk.westlaw.com/>> [accessed 24 July 2023]

because Eliza's settlement could not be used as it was 'derivative' and under the terms of the Act couldn't be enquired into. Plymouth were to pay Axminster's costs.⁵¹ Plymouth refused to accept this judgment, appealing in turn to the Queen's Bench in 1896, the Court of Appeal (paying extra as they were out of time) in 1897, and finally to the House of Lords in 1898.⁵² Axminster Guardians became increasingly worried by the potential liability for legal costs as the case developed but felt trapped. If they capitulated the Union would have been responsible for costs, estimated by their Assistant Clerk to be £1,000 at Appeal stage, against Axminster's annual income of around £15,000, alongside continuing care costs for Matilda (13/- a week).⁵³

However in July 1898, nearly three years after the case commenced, the House of Lords decided unanimously in Axminster's favour; Axminster's Clerk read the report in *The Times* to the Guardians at their meeting on 21st July, who expressed great satisfaction at the decision.⁵⁴ The Lord Chancellor's comment that he 'thought all such cases were things of the past' highlighted how intractable resolving the problem of settlement remained especially given its cost implications for Unions.⁵⁵

Axminster Guardian William Knight proposed a petition to amend the law as a response to the perceived injustice of the Small/Manley case, following the Union's success at the Court of Appeal but before the case was finally settled in the Union's favour. Knight was a dynamic member of the new 1894 intake of Guardians and by virtue of his position in local society and profession as a solicitor wielded considerable influence in the Union. He noted that the case showed the 'hardship' which often resulted from litigation 'persisted in' by public bodies, especially large, influential Boards against smaller ones. He suggested an attempt should be made to find a solution so that this type of issue could be settled by arbitration or some other inexpensive means. Axminster's Guardians agreed with this view.⁵⁶ The petition he proposed gained unanimous support from Axminster's Guardians and was circulated to around 600 Unions in England and Wales.⁵⁷ Headed 'Arbitration v the Law', it highlighted the hardship and difficulties faced by smaller Unions when challenged by richer Authorities, the potential for injustice and the waste of ratepayers' money. The petition

⁵¹ DHC, PLU/Axminster/17, Minutes, 9 January 1896, pp. 146-47.

⁵² Ibid., Minutes, 23 July 1896, pp. 222-23, 6 August 1896, p. 227, 20 August 1896, p. 232, 3 September 1896, p. 236, 15 October 1896, p. 249, 29 October 1896, pp. 255-56, 21 January 1897, p. 295, 4 February 1897, pp. 300-01; PLU/Axminster/18, Minutes, 3 February 1898, p. 22, 17 February 1898, p. 26, 12 May 1898 p. 67, 28 June 1898, pp. 84-85.

⁵³ DHC, PLU/Axminster/17, Minutes, 22 July 1897, pp. 380-81.

⁵⁴ 'Guardians of the Poor of Axminster Union v Guardians of the Poor of Plymouth', *The Times*, 3 February 1897, p. 15, 'Law Reports, July 19, House of Lords, The Guardians of Plymouth v The Guardians of Axminster Union', *The Times*, 20 July 1898, p. 3; DHC, PLU/Axminster/18, Minutes, 21st July 1898, p. 98.

⁵⁵ 'Plymouth Guardians v Axminster Guardians', *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 17 June 1898, p. 11.

⁵⁶ DHC, PLU/Axminster/17, Minutes, 4 February 1897, pp. 300-01.

⁵⁷ Ibid., Minutes, 18 February 1897, pp. 305-06, 4 March 1897, p. 313.

suggested that existing provisions for voluntary questions to the LGB be strengthened to Compulsory Arbitration in cases of Settlement or Chargeability. Arbitration could be set aside in cases of public interest to go to the Law, but these cases would be publicly funded rather than by individual Unions. A further proposal suggested that the LGB should handle all inter-Union disputes.⁵⁸ The subsequent circular struck a chord with many Unions, as nearly a third replied to Axminster's Clerk, with over 80 per cent in favour, suggesting they would contact the LGB and less than 3 per cent were against. Axminster sent a draft memorial to every Union to assist.⁵⁹

Unanimous support from Axminster's Guardians for a solution which involved compulsory arbitration was a major change. Until that point Axminster had been determined, even notorious, for going its own way. The change shows how a change in personnel combined with a difficult financial position and a sense of injustice and impotence transformed a long-standing determination to preserve independence.

The LGB's response provides another twist in this study. An initial enthusiasm for the policy revision suggested by Axminster did not survive the appointment of a new Permanent Secretary. Initially the LGB had looked favourably on Axminster's request for compulsory arbitration as it aligned with the views of the then Permanent Secretary Sir Hugh Owen on settlement and chargeability, though he did not favour it for wider disputes between Unions. Nearly 150 Unions had petitioned or memorialised the Board requesting change along the lines Axminster suggested.⁶⁰ Owen noted in a memorandum summarising LGB thinking: 'It shows some confidence in the Board that an application of this kind should be made by a large a number of Boards of Guardians'.⁶¹ The Parliamentary Secretary to the LGB, T.W. Russell was similarly supportive, noting MP's were strongly in favour and that 'it would be a distinct advantage if all disputes as to settlement were settled by the Board'. The LGB President Henry Chaplin was also in favour and a draft 'Poor Law (Determination of Differences) Bill' was prepared. However, Samuel Butler Provis, Owen's successor, questioned whether the draft achieved its intended purpose.⁶² Subsequent legal advice highlighted potential pitfalls, and questioned whether Unions would be happy to pay for this service. Concerns were raised about demands on the LGB's staff and whether the expense of reform would be justified as additional

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, Minutes, 18 February 1897, pp. 305-06.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, Minutes, 13 May 1897, pp. 352-53, 24 June 1897, pp. 369-70.

⁶⁰ The LGB's consideration of the matter is usefully drawn together in a package of typed notes sent by Permanent Secretary Provis to their Legal Advisor Alfred Adrian, with a request dated 14 January 1899 to consider the Poor Law (Determination of Differences Bill), (subsequently referred to as the 'Provis Memorandum'). TNA: MH 12/2119, Axminster Correspondence, 1897-May 1899, 105423/C/1898, Provis to Adrian, 'Provis Memorandum', 14 January 1899.

⁶¹ TNA: MH 12/2119, 105423/C/1898, Copy Minutes on Axminster; 105423/C/1898, Hugh Owen to Russell and the President of the LGB re: Arbitration in Disputes as to Settlement, copied in 'Provis Memorandum', 9 November 1898.

⁶² Owen retired at the end of 1897. Provis's memorandum was written in mid-January 1898.

'trouble' would fall to the LGB in handling cases and savings would be 'very trifling'.⁶³ These barriers ultimately defeated the proposal.

There were further reasons for the loss of interest in the proposed changes. Axminster's legal success in 1898 may have reduced the need for intervention as, given the importance of precedence in English law, the decision showed how cases such as Matilda's would be settled. The LGB also noted that their extensive data revealed that the legal costs attributable to Unions were relatively low.⁶⁴ Pressure for change from Axminster also fell away once their case was won, with evident relief that their determined resistance to bullying by a larger Union had been successful. Axminster followed up their petition with the LGB twice in 1900: no reply was noted the first time, whilst the second received a noncommittal response advising the matter was receiving consideration but the LGB 'could not however say at the present time whether it would be practicable to propose early legislation in the direction desired by the Guardians'.⁶⁵

In overview, whilst pauper transfer requests and low-level settlement disputes between Unions were not unusual (as noted above, Axminster handled eight in 1893), cases which reached the House of Lords were rare.⁶⁶ Similarly, whilst petitions and circulars from Unions were a common way to seek to influence Government policy in the 1890s, a petition and memorial led by Axminster that received serious consideration by the LGB and resulted in a Parliamentary Bill was exceptional. Even more unprecedented, given Axminster's previous record of dealings with the LGB, was their request that the LGB's powers be increased. This change in Axminster's approach to central assistance was partly due to a change in personnel as the Guardian Board became more outward looking and Knight was confident in using the Law but is also evidence that national solutions to local problems were increasingly necessary. Axminster's Guardians actively embraced collective action reflecting a sea change in Axminster's localism. Royle notes that small towns needed to adapt or face decline; Axminster's actions in this instance provide a good example of this.⁶⁷

Most of all, it supports historians' views that, given its resources, the LGB had a limited appetite for extending its powers or responsibilities. Christine Bellamy for example suggests the LGB 'operated in a climate in which neither the political will [n]or the local capacity to fund the local services of the

⁶³ TNA: MH 12/2119, 105423/C/1898, Adrian to Provis, response to 'Provis Memorandum', 17 January 1899.

⁶⁴ TNA: MH 12/2119, 105423/C/1898, Memo from Hugh Owen, detailing disputed law costs for settlement and removal: 1895-1897 as £1869, £1245, £1590 respectively and noted falling trend, in 'Provis Memorandum', 9 November 1897.

⁶⁵ DHC, PLU/Axminster/18, Minutes, 24 May 1900, p. 388, 16 August 1900, p. 429, 30 August 1900, p. 433.

⁶⁶ DHC, PLU/Axminster/16, Minutes, 12 January 1893 – 28 December 1893, pp. 154-285.

⁶⁷ Royle, 'Small Towns', in *Cambridge Urban History*, ed. by Daunton, III, p. 173.

state could be assumed'.⁶⁸ In the absence of personal support from its leaders the LGB reverted to maintaining the status quo.

4. Case Study 2: A Revised Approach to Relief? Axminster's Response to 'Extraordinary' Levels of Pauperism and a Reinvigorated Centre

This case study focusses primarily on the period 1890s-1901 but also extends into the first decade of the twentieth century to cover the term of Preston-Thomas's Inspectorship, in order to demonstrate how and why Axminster accepted that a change to its relief policy was necessary. It highlights the impact of the new generation of central and local officials on provision, as well as changing views on welfare policy and the consequences of the failure to reduce pauper numbers in the two decades from the mid-1870s on. Nationally the later 1890s saw an increasing concern and desire to address the issue of poverty amongst the elderly, the focus of a Royal Commission on the Aged Poor in 1895.⁶⁹ As George Boyer and Timothy Schmidle note this recommended a more generous approach to old age poverty.⁷⁰ However, despite the national recognition of this problem and the very high number of elderly people in the Union area, central attention focussed primarily on tightening administrative procedures to reduce pauperism in general, largely ignoring the issue of elderly poverty.

It appears that the high level of pauperism in Axminster was accepted by both Centre and locality until the later 1890s. Although the very high level of pauperism in Axminster was noted by the LGB in their 1892-1893 Report it was not until Inspector Preston-Thomas arrived in early 1897 that out-relief received focussed attention.⁷¹ This renewed focus highlighted changes that had occurred in Axminster's pauperism since the 1870s. Pauperism in old age had largely replaced that of the working-aged by the 1890s, a result of the large-scale depopulation explored in Chapter 3. Gradual improvements in economic conditions, employment opportunities and migration limited working-aged unemployment, but as reported by one of Axminster's Medical Officers of Health in 1888 'the active and healthy leave the country parts ... [so] that the number of persons requiring parish aid does not diminish'.⁷²

⁶⁸ Christine Bellamy, *Administering Central-Local Relations 1871-1919: The Local Government Board in its Fiscal and Cultural Context* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), p. 111.

⁶⁹ 'Royal Commission on the Aged Poor', (1895 (c 7684 C7684-I C7684-II)).

⁷⁰ George R. Boyer and Timothy P. Schmidle, 'Poverty among the Elderly in Late Victorian England', *Economic History Review*, 62 (2009), 249-78 (p.273).

⁷¹ 'Twenty-second LGB Report', p. xlviii.

⁷² TNA: MH 12/2115, Axminster Correspondence, July 1886- December 1888, 13614/1888, Dr O'Brien, Axminster Medical Officer of Health, 1887 Report to the LGB on Axminster's Northern Sanitary District, 7 February 1888.

Pauper statistics emphasise the scale of the issue. Nationally rates of pauperism followed a downward trend. **Table 8.1** illustrates the position from 1881 onwards. In Axminster rates compared with population remained high, increasing in the 1880s and falling after the peak in 1891 and out of step with reductions in national figures (**Table 8.1**). Pauperism rates among the able-bodied also exceeded national figures in the 1890s. (**Table 8.2**).

Table 8.1: Rates of Pauperism – Axminster and National 1881-1901

Ratio of pauperism per '000 of population	1881	1886	1891	1896	1901
National	31.5	29.9	27.1	27.7	25.0
Axminster	57.5	57.2	67.3	65.4	55.9
Difference Axminster/National	26.0	27.3	40.2	37.7	30.9

Source: National: UKPP, 'Pauperism (England and Wales). (Half yearly Statements), 1901', p.vi; Axminster: UKPP, 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers relieved, January, 1861-1896', 'Pauperism (England and Wales). (Half-yearly Statements), 1901'. (See Appendix A2.2 for full details).

Table 8.2: Rates of Able-bodied Pauperism – Axminster and National 1881-1901

Ratio of able-bodied paupers per '000 of population	1881	1886	1891	1896	1901
National	4.3	4	3.4	3.7	3
Axminster	4.2	3.8	4.8	4.4	4.2

Note: Axminster's ratio rounded to one decimal place.

Source: National: UKPP, 'Pauperism (England and Wales. (Half Yearly Statements) 1901', p. viii; Axminster: 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers relieved, January, 1861-1896', 'Pauperism (England and Wales). (Half-yearly statements), 1901'. (See Appendix A2.2 for full details).

Axminster Guardians had received little challenge to their generous relief provision from LGB after the departure of Wodehouse until the late 1890s. For example eight of fifteen central audits between January 1890 and June 1897 reported year-on-year reductions in overall expenditure and on eight occasions in the same period the Union had the lowest average in-relief cost per week in the audit area. These reports, focussed on costs, provided Axminster with what proved to be a false reassurance given the challenges that were to come.⁷³

⁷³ DHC, PLU/Axminster/15, Minutes 17 July 1890, pp. 297-300, 26 March 1891, pp. 373-76, 18 June 1891, pp.407-10; PLU/Axminster/16, Minutes, 25 February 1892, pp. 45-47, 14 July 1892, pp. 95-98, 9 March 1893, pp. 174-76, 7 September 1893, pp. 237-40, 11 January 1894, pp. 286-88, 3 May 1894, pp. 329-31; PLU/Axminster/17, Minutes, 21 February 1895, pp. 25-26, 28 August 1895, pp. 93-95, 14 November 1895, pp. 125-27, 11 June 1896, pp. 205-06, 12 November 1896, pp. 264-65.

Many old people had been left behind by outward migration so immediate family support was less available than in more stable environments, increasing the reliance on poor relief. Axminster allowed small contributions from family members, rather than pressing strongly for full reimbursement which David Thomson suggests was common after 1870.⁷⁴ The Union also continued to pay non-resident relief, which typically allowed an elderly person to reside with a family member away from the Union area. Both practices increased pauper numbers and costs.

It appears Axminster's policy on elderly relief was based on a sense of a communal duty to provide for the old, an ethos identified by Thomson as general before 1870; Thomson suggests a major shift from public to private support after 1870. By contrast, Pat Thane concludes that family support, where available, continued as a component alongside other income in an economy of makeshifts.⁷⁵ She stresses the value of obligatory family support, even if distant, and contends that the role of poor relief for the elderly should not be over-estimated.⁷⁶ Some elements of Axminster's practice correspond with Thane's view; however, on the whole, the Union appears closer to the situation described by Thomson and Boyer. Boyer dissents from Thane's analysis, arguing that public assistance continued on a large scale despite the 'crusade'. Boyer suggests children were most likely to provide assistance if they lived nearby and supports his case by arguing that 30% of those aged 65 or over received relief in 1891-2. Boyer's statistical exploration noted strong regional differences, with southern England providing more relief than the North. He concludes that the local administration, the local economy and regional and cultural differences all contributed to differing responses to elderly pauperism.⁷⁷

An early indication that policy should be reviewed came in 1895 when the *Guardians* unanimously supported a suggestion from Guardian William Aplin that they should 'take more consideration for the interests of ratepayers, at the same time not being oppressive to the poor' because out-relief was now very expensive relative to food prices.⁷⁸ Press reports on Union business at that time were often short and did not focus on relief but an editorial in *Pulman's Weekly News* later that year echoed Aplin's view, suggesting out-relief should be judged 'strictly but not harshly' as there was a duty to the whole population of the Union.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ David Thomson, 'Welfare and the Historians', in *The World We Have Gained: Histories of Population and Social Structure*, ed. by Lloyd Bonfield, Richard M. Smith and Keith Wrightson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp. 355-78 (pp. 373-74).

⁷⁵ Thomson, 'Welfare and the Historians', in *World We Have Gained*, ed. by Bonfield, Smith and Wrightson, pp. 373-74; Pat Thane, 'Old People and Their Families in the English Past', in *Charity, Self-Interest and Welfare in the English Past*, ed. by Martin Daunt (London: UCL Press, 1996), pp. 84-103 (pp. 99-100).

⁷⁶ Pat Thane, 'Social Histories of Old Age and Aging', *Journal of Social History*, 37 (2003), 93-111 (pp. 100-03).

⁷⁷ George R. Boyer, 'Work for Their Prime, the Workhouse for their Age': Old Age Pauperism in Victorian England', *Social Science History*, 40 (2016), 3-32; Boyer and Schmidle, 'Poverty among the Elderly' pp. 249-78.

⁷⁸ 'Board of Guardians', *Pulman's*, 9 April 1895, p. 7.

⁷⁹ 'The Question of Out-relief', *Pulman's*, 1 October 1895, p. 4.

The eventual central challenge to Axminster's relief practice was multi-faceted and sustained, dominated by Inspector Preston-Thomas and supported by Auditor Walrond. Both new appointments in 1896 and 1898 respectively heralded a marked shift in approach with drive, persistence and clarity of purpose replacing the more lenient approaches of their immediate predecessors. An increased emphasis on uniformity through more rigorous inspection, (trends long recognised in the literature), revealed Axminster's administrative weakness as well as failings in its relief practices.⁸⁰

Preston-Thomas found many faults with West Country Guardians' practice in general, suggesting that anticipated improvements following the 1890s Local Government reorganisation were slow to emerge. He complained of continuity in practice, longevity of Chairmen, haphazard meetings, poor relief practice, unwillingness to change, instances of obstructive and drunken guardians and an inability to understand official instructions. Many of these observations, such as length of service (Bently had been Chairman for twenty-five years in 1897), poor relief practice and unwillingness to change applied to Axminster.⁸¹ All Preston-Thomas's Unions received multiple visits and circulars suggesting improvements. Preston-Thomas's approach towards Axminster's relief practice was more sympathetic towards the poor than Wodehouse's and his relationships with the Union were less antagonistic but he was similarly challenging on poor administration. The major priority for Axminster, in his view, was the reform of out-relief policy ; other priorities such as building an infirmary, vagrancy issues, 'lunatic' care and workhouse standards were awarded less attention.⁸²

Pressure to change increased after Auditor Walrond's appointment in 1898. Walrond immediately highlighted faults in local systems, suggesting in September 1898 that some payments were illegal.⁸³ In 1899 he stated that methods of reviewing relief were informal and insufficient. A subsequent investigation revealed that the paperwork relating to ingredients used for the workhouse diet dated back to the 1850s and was in practice ignored. Axminster were very reluctant to update this in a subsequent dispute with the LGB.⁸⁴ Walrond also changed the reporting format; he worked with the Union Clerk and did not provide formal detailed reports for the Guardians that Tucker had provided.

⁸⁰ For example: E.P. Hennock, 'Central/Local Government Relations in England: An Outline 1800-1950', *Urban History*, 9 (1982), 38-49; Steven King, 'Thinking and Rethinking the New Poor Law', *Local Population Studies*, 99 (2017), 5-19 (p. 5).

⁸¹ Preston-Thomas, *Work and Play*, Essex but relevant to South-West pp. 236-37, West Country specific, pp. 266-77.

⁸² MH12/2119, 105924/A/1896, 18225/1897, Preston-Thomas suggests the infirmary should be not be followed up in an undated note on the reverse of an extract of Courtenay's Workhouse Report of 9 May 1896; Preston-Thomas, *Work and Play*, pp. 358-65.

⁸³ DHC, PLU/Axminster/18, Minutes, 15 September 1898, p. 118.

⁸⁴ TNA: MH 12/2119, 29587/1899, dietary dated 1853 and 1857; 29587/A/1899; LGB to Forward Axminster's Clerk, enclosing copy dietary, 16 March 1899; 50005/1899, letter from Forward to LGB, advising dietary tables impractical, 14 April 1899; 50005/A/1899, LGB to Forward, Union have no authority to change, 29 April 1899, in note on reverse of this letter Preston-Thomas suggested the LGB let the matter drop, 8 June 1899.

Axminster's Clerk managed to fill some gaps but comparative data with other Unions was no longer available so the Guardians were unable to verify or counter Preston-Thomas's claims.⁸⁵ It appears knowledge (and power) was being centralised and then disseminated in a controlled method via circulars and statistics, a trend noted by E.P. Hennock for example.⁸⁶

Public criticism of Axminster's relief policy is revealed in Annual Local Government Reports between 1899 and 1909, discussed below with further detail in **Appendix 7**. In 1899 Preston-Thomas challenged Axminster's 'extraordinary' level of pauperism at fifty-five per thousand, which he argued might be partly due to an 'exceptionally large' aged population but was due mainly to there being 'no fixed rules'.⁸⁷ In 1900 in a Report on Pauperism and the Aged Poor he suggested that although there was 'an unusually large number of the aged' in Axminster (9.25% of the population were aged over 65, the highest in the West Country), he was not 'otherwise aware of unfavourable circumstances' thus ignoring other problems faced by the Guardians. Overall he thought the West of England was 'extraordinarily and....unnecessarily pauperised'.⁸⁸ In 1902 Preston-Thomas again noted that Axminster had one of the highest levels of pauperism due to old age and depopulation but also wondered about the potential impact of a lack of female employment, Friendly Societies or the influence of alcohol, but advised the problem was mainly the Union's administration.⁸⁹ Some of this criticism became public knowledge in the locality as his reports to Guardians were reported in the local press, although there seems to have been little public pressure to change direction.⁹⁰

Interestingly, although Preston-Thomas recognised the presence of high numbers of elderly residents in his reports to the LGB, he declined to accept that the levels of pauperism reflected this situation, advising the Guardians that the Union was paying too many people, and remained fixated on Axminster's weak administration.⁹¹ He frequently noted that Axminster was the most pauperised Union in his area, seen in his reports of 1903 and 1905 for example.⁹² In 1909 he summarised his views on the Union to the Royal Commission Poor Laws on Relief of Distress, advising there was nothing unfavourable in the area which accounted for the numbers of old people (apart from migration by the 'young and vigorous'), and that the problem of pauperism was mainly freely

⁸⁵ DHC, PLU/Axminster/18, Minutes, 13 October 1898 p. 131, 8 June 1899, Clerk's report of Audit for Lady Day 1899 interleaved between pp. 239-40.

⁸⁶ Hennock, 'Central/Local Government Relations', pp. 40-43.

⁸⁷ UKPP, 'Twenty-eighth Annual Report of the Local Government Board, 1898-99, Appendix B', (1899 (C.9444)), p. 130.

⁸⁸ UKPP, 'Twenty-ninth Annual Report of the Local Government Board, 1899-1900, Appendix B', (1900 (Cd.292)), pp 103-05.

⁸⁹ UKPP, 'Thirty-first Annual Report of the Local Government Board, 1901-1902, Appendix B', (1902 (Cd.1231)), pp. 94-101.

⁹⁰ 'Board of Guardians and Rural District Council', *Pulman's* 26 June 1900, p. 7.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁹² UKPP, 'Thirty-second Annual Report of the Local Government Board, 1902-1903, Appendix B', (1903 (Cd.1700)), pp. 96, 106; 'Thirty-fourth Annual Report of the Local Government Board, 1904-1905, Appendix B', (1905 (Cd.2661)), p. 218.

granted out-relief and lax administration.⁹³ It appears he regarded the question of the elderly poor as insoluble.

Axminster's response to Preston-Thomas's criticism reveals elements of resistance and slow and partial accommodation of central policy, reflecting the contest between traditional practices, new policies, and challenges posed by the local context. The main thread of resistance, as in the 1870s, was a reluctance to adapt to new ways of managing poor relief. The Guardians continued to ignore unwelcome challenges and consequently small amounts of out-relief continued. Superficially the Guardians took notice of Preston-Thomas's suggestions and, in contrast with the 1870s, debates were recorded in the Minutes, but discussion did not necessarily lead to action. For example, in 1901 a Guardian questioned whether action was to be taken on a circular sent by Preston-Thomas which suggested stricter enquiries be made when assessing new relief applications. The Minutes noted 'a discussion ensued but no resolution passed'.⁹⁴

However, Preston-Thomas's persistence increasingly achieved results as Axminster made gradual moves towards accommodation and modernisation. The change was facilitated by the newer Guardians becoming more experienced, confident and questioning in their approach which reduced Bently's domination of relief policy. By 1900 the Union had gradually tightened its administration and amended its relief practice, making its practice more uniform. Yet Preston-Thomas's criticism continued: he compared Axminster's performance unfavourably with the adjoining Union of Honiton which received praise for reform.⁹⁵ The Guardians sought more management information to allow a greater depth of understanding of local pauperism so as to enable a more targeted approach to relief. More data was collected, for example Relieving Officers were instructed to compile lists of paupers receiving relief at the pay table (1900) and lists of contribution arrears were provided to the Guardians.⁹⁶ Tighter financial controls were put in place. Alternative forms of assistance also increased and charitable actions for the poor were regularly reported in the press, including gifts of coal and soup kitchens.⁹⁷ Cumulatively these made a small difference, and Axminster's out-relief remained very high but in 1906 Preston-Thomas was able to report that that despite Axminster's 'defective administration', the Guardians had at last admitted to giving more out relief than necessary, censuring themselves and had committed to making 'more careful and strict inquiries on

⁹³ UKPP, 'Royal Commission on the Poor Laws, Appendix Volume I. Minutes of Evidence ... being mainly the Evidence given by the Officers of the Local Government Board', (1909 (Cd. 4625)), pp 234, 242; 'Royal Commission on the Poor Laws, Appendix volume IA, Appendices to Minutes of Evidence ... being mainly the Evidence given by the Officers of the Local Government Board for England and Wales', (1909 (Cd.4626)), pp. 38, 216.

⁹⁴ DHC, PLU/Axminster/19, Minutes, 12 September 1901, p. 111.

⁹⁵ Council', *Pulman's*, 26 June 1900, p. 7.

⁹⁶ DHC, PLU/Axminster/18, Minutes, 18 January 1900, pp. 333-34.

⁹⁷ For example: 'Axminster', *Pulman's*, 19 February 1895, p. 7.

new cases'.⁹⁸ This change in approach was maintained; Preston Thomas reported continued gradual improvement in 1908.⁹⁹ However progress was slow as in 1909 he still believed Axminster needed to improve. Axminster was still amongst those listed with the highest rates of pauperism at 5.1%, although better than adjoining Dorset Unions of Beaminster (6.9%) and Bridport (5.3%).¹⁰⁰ This suggests that the problem was endemic in the area and interestingly the Report to the same Committee by Baldwin Fleming covering Bridport and Beaminster makes no mention of their extensive pauperism, suggesting that he was more accepting of the situation.¹⁰¹

Other policy adjustments demonstrate the change in local outlook and some received a positive response from Preston-Thomas. For example, although physical accommodation and nursing facilities in the workhouse continued to be criticised, by 1900 the treatment of paupers was 'good' and 'above average' in 1901.¹⁰² A formal Ladies' Visiting Committee had also been set up as noted above, and Axminster received praise as an exemplar of good practice in its treatment of boarded-out children.¹⁰³ As explored in Chapter 7, a revised policy towards vagrancy finally tackled this long-standing issue. Axminster also became more positive about LGB assistance, recognising that some issues could not be tackled locally. For example, help was requested when a lack of accommodation at the Devon Lunatic Asylum meant the numbers of cases threatened to overwhelm the Union and the Lunacy Commission proved unhelpful in resolving the problem.¹⁰⁴

An assessment of Axminster's relief policy between the mid-1890s and early 1900s suggests the Union was in part deserving of Preston-Thomas's criticism. Axminster were slow to acknowledge and address that its relief policy contributed to high levels of pauperism. However, Preston-Thomas failed to recognise or address the severe economic and demographic issues causing poverty in the Union area. From the Guardians' perspective criticism levelled at Axminster may have appeared unfair. As noted above Axminster's long-term policy remained one of balancing the interests of ratepayers and paupers, but shifting policy to favour ratepayers by looking to reduce out-relief payments as food prices had reduced. Trends in pauper numbers other than vagrants (excepting 1895 where high numbers were caused by bad winter weather) were falling by the time Preston-

⁹⁸ UKPP, 'Thirty-fifth Report of the Local Government Board, 1905-1906, Appendix III', (1906 (Cd.3105)), p. 470.

⁹⁹ UKPP, 'Thirty-seventh Report of the Local Government Board, 1907-1908, Appendix III', (1908 (Cd.4347)), p. 317.

¹⁰⁰ UKPP, Royal Commission on the Poor Laws, Appendix I, (1909 (Cd.4625)), pp. 234, 242; 'Royal Commission on the Poor Laws, Appendix IA, (1909 (Cd.4626)), pp. 38, 216.

¹⁰¹ UKPP, 'Royal Commission on the Poor Laws Appendix IA', (1909 (Cd.4626)), pp. 378-90.

¹⁰² DHC, PLU/Axminster/18, Minutes, 1 February 1900, pp. 336-37.

¹⁰³ TNA: MH 12/2119, 105958/1898, Report from Miss Mason on Boarding Out in Axminster, 18 August 1898.

¹⁰⁴ TNA: MH 12/2119, 86142/1898, 86142/A/1898, 90068/1898, 90068/A/1898, 103583/1898, letters between LBG and Lunacy Commission attempting to resolve the issue Axminster raised in their letter 7 July 1898. Although the LGB were supportive, the Lunacy Commission could not assist; letters 7 July 1898, 11 July 1898, 13 July 1898, 5 August 1898, 12 August 1898.

Thomas took over in 1897 (see **Table 8.1**). Problems arising from the lack of re-industrialisation, consequent migration and extensive old-age pauperism were real challenges for Axminster Guardians, even though ignored by Preston-Thomas. Moreover, Unions in East Devon and West Dorset noted above in a similar position to Axminster were not castigated to the same extent suggesting that reasons for Preston-Thomas's criticism need to be sought elsewhere. The evidence here is that the troubled central-local relationship and Axminster Guardians' intransigence appears to have drawn Preston-Thomas's attention. His criticism arose mainly from the slow and limited recognition of problems and failure to implement ideas designed to address them. Other Unions such as Honiton in a similar position made changes more quickly and received praise as noted above.

Hurren argues that by 1900 there was a new perception and language of welfare. Axminster was often slow to acknowledge this change.¹⁰⁵ New ideas percolated slowly after the 1894 governance reform but at times the Union remained deaf to ideas from outsiders, a legacy of ingrained localism. Nevertheless, Axminster's policy was one of choice and not simply the result of inertia, concurring with King's view that Guardians policies were often 'deliberate'.¹⁰⁶ The Guardians kept abreast of developing ideas considering the plethora of petitions circulated amongst Unions, and selectively supported those which appealed to them, alongside conference attendance. Yet reductions in pauperism in the early twentieth century were partly due to structural reasons rather than the impact of policy. For example, over time the local economy improved in conjunction with the demographic make-up of the area as an increase in the younger population reduced the proportion of both elderly and working aged paupers (see **Figure 3.1** in Chapter 3 which shows the revised population structure in 1911).

5. Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that Axminster Guardians' independent localism was no longer viable by the end of the nineteenth century. A changed economic, social, political and administrative environment required different approaches to developing social policy with its increased service, and financial and political demands. Axminster's deeply ingrained culture of localism was buffeted by destabilising administrative changes and this period saw it begin to give way. The result was an adjustment to the local poor law ethos and practice, as a new generation of central and local officials took control, bringing new ideas which reflected wider cultural shifts. Local culture became less wedded to the value of autonomy in decision making and was more open to new ideas, collaborative working and the value of LGB assistance. In highlighting that important changes in local social policy

¹⁰⁵ Elizabeth Hurren, 'World without Welfare' in *Obligation, Entitlement and Dispute*, ed. by Jones and King, pp. 317-20.

¹⁰⁶ King, 'Thinking and Rethinking the New Poor Law', p. 13.

and practice occurred from the mid-1890s onwards the chapter echoes the findings of Michael Rose who argues that the 1890s were a crucial decade for change.¹⁰⁷ It also answers calls by Jones and King for further understanding of how Guardians approached their dual obligations to ratepayers and paupers.¹⁰⁸

The chapter demonstrated the impact of local government reform on the structures and organisation of a small rural Union. The slow trend towards 'modernisation' revealed how independent localism was gradually diminishing and evolving. Localism was undermined by increasing acceptance of uniformity in practice, an increasing division between wealthy, powerful Unions and those who were financially challenged. Although Axminster retained the essence of its underlying relief ethos, how this was interpreted was revised. The pace of change was often slow, reluctant and uneven in nature and timing, but gradually a new more modern, updated approach began to emerge, with practice more aligned with LGB direction and initiatives.

Axminster's localism had been very persistent, remaining largely untouched until the last years of the nineteenth century and its gradual decline commenced later than 1870s-1880s highpoint suggested by Snell in his national assessment of localism.¹⁰⁹ There are several reasons for this change, and why it fell more slowly than Snell suggests, through a combination of 'push and pull factors' arising from developments nationally and locally.

Firstly, the changing perception of the nature of society spread ideas which filtered into national Poor Law policy and gradually percolated into local practice. For example, poverty was no longer seen as an inevitable condition leading to a greater distinction between the deserving and undeserving and differentiated rule-based treatment for categories of pauper, such as the elderly or vagrants so that by 1900, as Hurren argues, there was a new perception and language of welfare.¹¹⁰ Axminster eventually adopted some of these ideas, for example collecting data on paupers, with more reliance on investigation and rules. However, despite the increasing national sympathy towards pauperism in old age, neither the Centre nor Axminster addressed the issue directly. Preston-Thomas noted the level of old age repeatedly in his reports, but could suggest no answer, falling back on his argument that Axminster's problems resulted from poor administration. Axminster Guardians, when asked to respond to ideas for reform from the Committee investigating

¹⁰⁷ Rose, 'Crisis of Poor Relief', p. 65.

¹⁰⁸ Jones and King, 'Obligation, Entitlement and Dispute', in *Obligation, Entitlement and Dispute*, ed. by Jones and King, pp. 7-8.

¹⁰⁹ Snell, *Parish and Belonging*, pp. 4-5, 13.

¹¹⁰ Hurren, 'World without Welfare' in *Obligation, Entitlement and Dispute*, ed. by Jones and King, pp. 317-20.

poverty in old age, advised they thought it 'a matter for expert evidence'.¹¹¹ There appears to be no specific policy aimed at alleviating old age pauperism.

Secondly these changes led to an increase in expectations of services which required higher levels of spending and organisation which, when combined with problems which were too big to be solved by an individual approach, led to a recognition that more comprehensive solutions were needed than could be supplied locally. The dispute with Plymouth and the intractable problem of elderly pauperism illustrate why national support was needed. Thirdly a lack of money was at the heart of the change in approach. The ability to stand alone was undermined by Axminster's relative poverty in the face of growing demands. Recognition that small impecunious Unions needed central assistance was telling. Axminster's problems were not unusual; these difficulties affected poorer Unions generally. The support received in their petition for greater central power in arbitration disputes indicates that many other Unions considered this would be beneficial. Fourthly, the changing perception of the LGB locally was important, as Axminster recognised that the acceptance of LGB assistance had not ended local control. By the end of the century central ideas seemed less draconian and there was less for anti-centralists to fight against. There was also a greater alignment in views, and greater trust placed in the opinions of outside expertise as seen in the request for LGB support in Axminster's settlement dispute. Finally, revisions were facilitated by a generational change in management personnel at both the LGB and locally. Preston-Thomas and Walrond brought dynamism, persistence and new ideas. Locally the reduction in influence of the once dominant farming lobby widened the Union's outlook, created a broader base for Guardianship and increased professional, clerical and trade participation.

¹¹¹ UKPP, 'Select Committee on Aged Deserving Poor. Report, Proceedings, Evidence, Appendix, Index', (1899 (296)), p. 158.

9. Conclusion

1. Overview

This study investigated the management of Axminster Poor Law Union between the 1860s and c.1900 and aimed to understand the relationship between developing national policy and local poor law management practice. It examined a Union in a region and timeframe less frequently studied in the literature, went beyond the period traditionally associated with the 'crusade against out-relief', and focussed primarily on the work of poor law Guardians. It explored themes of contest and accommodation focussed on central and local approaches to the management of poverty and pauperism, the impact of key central policies on the locality, the role and importance of central and local personalities and relationships (including those between Guardians and Inspectors) and the significance of local autonomy, in a context of enduring poverty and pauperism in Axminster Union. It argued that an overriding localism shaped Axminster's poor law practice and its response to central policy and pauperism.

The study argued that the developing role of the central administrative state (represented here by the PLB/LGB and its Inspectors), together with changes in national Poor Law policy generated approaches to poor law management that differed from those practised in other English and Welsh localities and showed why Axminster was repeatedly seen as a problem Union by the Centre. Axminster's response to national policy highlighted the continuing importance of localism and local relief culture in managing a Poor Law Union. Throughout the period covered by this thesis the Union focussed on retaining as much local control as possible.

The thesis adopted a two-part structure. The first, Chapters 2-4, provided an explanation as to why Axminster responded as it did to the management challenges it faced in the later nineteenth century. Chapter 2 outlined the national context and set the scene for later central-local contest as it explored the evolving administrative state and early developments in the NPL. An examination of Axminster's poverty and pauperism in Chapter 3 concluded that although both poverty and the impact of demographic change were significant causes of Axminster's high level of pauperism, they were insufficient alone to explain the problem or the criticism the Union received. Chapter 4 explored this further. It revealed the importance of the local culture of relief, the role and significance of the local Guardian body and individual Guardians in shaping local practice, and the over-riding importance of local control and decision making. The second half of the thesis explored the impact of these circumstances and the role of localism in developing local practice. As Chapter 5 demonstrated, the 1870s established how and why Axminster's defence of its traditional way of

working became a problem for the Centre. Deeply embedded localism clashed with an increasing central desire for uniformity and provoked strong anti-centralist feelings in Axminster which were then inflamed by an adversarial Inspector. The Chapter included an analysis of how local poor law relief practice worked on the ground in Axminster in the 1870s in comparison with other Unions in southern England and underlined the wide divergence between central thinking and local realities. It also emphasised the role of central criticism in seeking change and the role of challenging central-local relations. The practical impact of 'crusade' era policies on Axminster's practice explored in Chapter 6 revealed that Axminster's response to pressure to change worked well for the Union in the short term, but in the longer term set up problems, such as over-confidence in local solutions. In particular, pauperism was exacerbated by the continuation of widely available out-relief that was not based on fixed rules. The period between the mid-1870s and mid-1890s investigated in Chapter 7 was one where, for the most part, a lack of effective pressure from the Centre enabled the Union to maintain its existing approach. However, Axminster was increasingly out-of-step with developing central policy; changing demands and growing requirements in public health and for workhouse services and medical facilities posed challenges which an impecunious Union still wedded to local policies resented or struggled to meet. Finally, Chapter 8 established that Axminster's independent localism was no longer viable by the mid-1890s and needed to change. The Union eventually sought assistance from the Centre to do so. An inter-Union legal dispute recognised the disparity of power between wealthy and poor Unions and the desire for the latter to have a financial safety net, which overcame Axminster's normal reluctance to involve the Centre in local affairs. In addition, Axminster made some adjustments to its relief practice by cutting costs and improving relief administration around the turn of the century, following persistent persuasion by their local Inspector, having accepted that some change was necessary.

The thesis contributed to poor law histories by building a better understanding of local and central dynamics and answered calls for a greater understanding of the role and impact of Guardians on localities, by providing further explanation of national trends and regional variation. The literature review in Chapter 1 highlighted the diverse nature of modern poor law scholarship and observed that it provides an increasingly nuanced appreciation of poverty and NPL policy and administration. It noted that, despite the depth and range of existing studies, further work was needed to understand the impact of central policies and priorities, the growing responsibilities of Poor Law Unions and Guardians and the impact of enforced change in administrative structures in later Victorian England and Wales. As explored in Section 2.4 of Chapter 1, new approaches by historians such as Steven King raise questions about the interaction between local and central authorities, the dynamics of the personalities involved in Union management, and the way the economic and social

environment influenced local attitudes, poor law policies and practices.¹ In answering these calls this thesis took forward key themes in the literature and explored elements of late nineteenth-century welfare culture, including the impact of significant central policies such as deterrent out-relief in the 'crusade' era, the extent and impact of localism, the growth and limitations of central influence, the role and influence of Guardians and their relationships with Inspectors and the contest of ideas and values. Thus the thesis contributed further perspectives to existing scholarship by historians such as Elizabeth Hurren and Keith Snell by focussing on the practical application and impact of these themes on local Union practice.² It revealed Axminster's response to the problems the Union faced and how it differed from other Unions' experience. Moreover, whilst there are numerous studies on the social and economic context of rural poverty exploring the complex consequences of deprivation and changing social relationships, there has been little focus on South-West England, where many localities suffered post-industrial decline.³ This thesis sought to address this relative absence through a study based on a Union situated on the Devon/Dorset border by focussing on the importance of local social economic and political circumstances in creating the welfare environment in which the NPL was interpreted.

Axminster, with its complex range of social and economic problems, high levels of pauperism and difficult relationships with the Centre proved a good subject to explore research questions that concentrated on the impact of divergent ideas, practices and understandings of pauperism. As this thesis demonstrated the Union area experienced very high and continuing levels of poverty and pauperism, at times some of the worst in England and Wales, accompanied by extensive depopulation. The area was deindustrialised, increasingly agricultural and economically depressed but had also historically been used to a high level of independent local governance. A study based in this locality thus added further understanding of the importance of local context in the development of local poor law management, taken forward in the following sections. The Union's approach to relief administration also made it a valuable subject of study as its ethos, rooted in traditional beliefs, increasingly diverged from modernising ideas and central policy developments. Over the course of the later nineteenth century Axminster's Guardians fought resolutely to defend their local approach to poor law management and sought to maintain what E.P. Hennock has described as 'local provision of local wants, locally identified', a typical approach to local governance in the period

¹ Steven King, 'Thinking and Rethinking the New Poor Law', *Local Population Studies*, 99 (2017), 5-19 (pp. 6-19).

² Elizabeth T. Hurren, *Protesting about Pauperism: Poverty, Politics and Poor Relief in Late-Victorian England, 1870-1900* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press for the Royal Historical Society, 2007); K.D.M. Snell, *Parish and Belonging: Community, Identity and Welfare in England and Wales, 1700-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

³ For example: Alun Howkins, *Reshaping Rural England: A Social History 1850-1925* (London: Routledge, 1991); Barry Reay, *Rural England: Labouring Lives in the Nineteenth Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

before 1834.⁴ Axminster's ethos of localism encompassed a local moral economy that sought to balance rights and responsibilities towards ratepayers with an element of humanity towards locally settled paupers. This approach continued throughout the period of this study, gradually adjusting and evolving through many twists and turns.

The analysis of existing literature in Chapter 1 led to the development of three interlinked research questions. Although these questions focussed on Axminster, the findings contributed insights into local management practice more widely and added a further perspective on later Victorian poor law administration, discussed further in the following section. **Firstly how and why did a Union identified as a problem by the Centre respond to pressure to change?** This thesis established that Axminster responded to central pressure with a combination of resistance, accommodation and compliance which changed over time. A complex range of reasons underlay these responses. Failure to comply and slow accommodation was deliberate but accorded with the Guardians' perception of Axminster's need. A confident localism, based on the premise that decisions affecting local people should be made locally provided the strongest motivation throughout. This led to central-local contest in the 1870s, an adherence to independent action in the 1880s and early 1890s, and adaptation of practice from the later 1890s onwards. Axminster was not an ideological 'crusading' Union but its response to changing policy demands was more complex than a simple rejection of central ideas. The underlying impact of an economically distressed Union area was important. Many of the practices Axminster adopted reflected the need to economise through cost cutting, focussed on staff costs and specific areas of out-relief in the 1870s and by avoiding the redevelopment of the workhouse infrastructure and medical services in the 1880s and early 1890s. Axminster's Guardians appear to have accepted their weak financial position and focussed instead on provision within their limitations. Changing ideas of deservingness also filtered into Axminster's practice, so that slowly and increasingly measures recognised in the literature, such as a reduction in support for women seen as less deserving, become more prominent in local policy. Axminster's relief policy in the late 1890s and early 1900s gradually moved towards central demands to improve administration.

Secondly, what were the causes of the disputes and disagreements between the Centre and local Guardians and what was their impact? As the evidence in this thesis demonstrated, Axminster's defence of its traditional way of working and unwillingness to change was a major cause of friction with the central authorities who were increasingly embracing bureaucracy and uniformity. Until the

⁴ E.P Hennock, 'Central/Local Government Relations in England: An Outline 1800-1950', *Urban History*, 9 (1982), 38-49 (pp. 38-39).

very end of the century this approach was an anathema to Axminster where individual non-rule-based decision making was key. Axminster had a strong local moral economy which encompassed an element of paternalism that clashed with central views on relief practice and the development of services. In the longer term, this local approach was unsustainable as the Union increasingly fell behind modern standards in infrastructure and service provision and needed to adapt to newer ideas. The local ethos was much disliked by the Centre as the lack of uniformity tended to increase costs and local diversity in practice made central oversight more difficult, especially as inspection resources were limited. The study highlighted the importance of personal relationships as a key factor in the central-local clash. The personal approach of both Inspectors and Guardians had a significant impact. The challenges from Wodehouse in the 1870s and Preston-Thomas in the 1890s forced elements of change in local practice, whilst a more lenient approach from Courtenay in the 1880s and early 1890s allowed Axminster to go its own way. The collective approach taken by Axminster's Board of Guardians dominated local practice; the Union's Board was at its most dynamic when it comprised a mix of Guardians with differing backgrounds and expertise and most cohesive and inward looking when dominated by a homogenous Board of farmers. The collective approach was leavened by the impact of individual Guardians such as Bently whose paternalism coloured the outlook of the Board over an extended period, Mitchell's radicalism and Knight's dynamism and innovative thinking in the 1890s.

Thirdly, to what extent did Axminster Union reflect the problems of pauperism as conceptualised by the Central Poor Law Authorities? In both the 1870s and the 1890s the Centre focussed on weaknesses in Axminster's administration, arguing the Union was too generous and had no fixed rules. A review of central and local approaches to relief policy concluded that this assessment has elements of veracity. On the one hand there was evidence to support the central contention that local administration was at fault, especially when judged against central standards. From the perspective of the Centre other Unions managed better, reducing their pauperism levels. For example, the adjoining Union of Honiton received praise from Preston-Thomas for so doing.⁵ The change in Axminster's approach in early 1900s, when the Union implemented tougher and more focussed administration that contributed to falling levels of pauperism also established that there was scope to make change. However, on the other hand the problems of poverty that Axminster faced were not addressed by central policies. The Union, though not unique, experienced extensive poverty throughout the period of this study, due to local economic and demographic problems which the Centre neither accepted nor addressed as an intractable cause of pauperism. The

⁵ 'Board of Guardians & Rural District Council', *Pulman's Weekly News and Advertiser*, 26 June 1900, p. 7.

problem of poverty in Axminster was deeply embedded and virtually insoluble until the 1890s when a gradual economic upturn started to reduce its impact and consequently the levels of pauperism fell. In essence therefore the central approach tackled the perceived issue of pauperism but did not make an impact on the underlying problem of rural poverty.

To answer the research questions, this thesis used a range of sources including Axminster Union Minutes, correspondence between Centre and Union and their Inspectors, national PLB/LGB reports and statistics and local newspaper reports, chosen because they provided different perspectives on aspects of local Union management. The combination of qualitative and quantitative methods used in this micro-study developed an in-depth understanding of local policy and practice, dialogue and perspectives and the scale of local poverty and pauperism. Together they revealed patterns in central-local interaction, in decision making and change over time and captured key turning points. This was important because, as Chapter 4 noted, Axminster's ethos of localism, a way of thinking and acting based on shared assumptions, was not openly stated or captured in the archive so had to be elicited through a combination of sources, close reading and data analysis. In-depth analysis was used to reveal the views of an otherwise relatively obscure Guardian Board and drew attention to the influence of individuals, while quantitative data was used to understand the scope of pauperism and enabled local and national comparisons to be made. The focus on a single Union raises questions of typicality, but as this study has shown, Axminster's experience added a further dimension to understanding of local Union management and the research techniques used permitted local and national comparisons to be made. The methods in this micro-study enabled the role and importance of Guardian Boards, the Poor Law Inspectorate, the personal influence of key individuals, central-local relations and most importantly localism to be understood in the development and implementation of local Poor Law policy and practice.

This thesis contributed to our understanding of the implementation of the Victorian Poor Law in several ways. As explored in Section 2.4.2 of Chapter 1 there has been considerable debate on the linked questions of continuity, change and compromise, the extent to which the Central Authorities could impose their policies, diversity in practice, and the importance of out-relief. Much of the research based on local studies suggested continuity in poor law practice, as David Englander (amongst others) noted. Englander challenged this view and argued that NPL practice undermined local accountability as impersonal bureaucracy, large Unions and remote Boards replaced local parish relationships.⁶ The work of Michael Rose, Hurren and Karel Williams supported this approach

⁶ For example: David Englander, *Poverty and Poor Law Reform in Britain: From Chadwick to Booth, 1834-1914* (Harlow: Longman, 1998), pp. 15, 86-87; Keith Laybourn, *The Evolution of British Social Policy and the Welfare State c.1800-1993*

and emphasised the extent of change in NPL practice.⁷ However, this thesis contended that elements of continuity were evident in Axminster's approach to poor law management. Axminster's ethos towards poor relief was underpinned by the traditional values of the OPL even at the end of the nineteenth century. Change in Axminster was slow and incremental and local values remained dominant. Broadly, variation in practice was key across England and Wales. For example, Wodehouse's assessment of relief practices in his 1871 Report highlighted diversity in approaches to relief although there was strong (but incomplete) compliance with legally enforceable Poor Law Orders.⁸ This diversity often occurred at Union rather than regional level, which suggested individual factors and local approaches were significant.

The thesis developed knowledge on the impact of central policies by exploring the practical application of later Victorian relief policy in the period of the 'crusade' and extended beyond its traditional ending in 1893. Axminster's practice provided a contrast with the harsh policies and practice identified by Hurren in Brixworth but demonstrated, as Williams suggested, that even non-ideological Unions adopted some methods of the 'crusade'.⁹ Hurren's detailed exploration of late Victorian poverty politics and poor relief covered approximately the same period as this thesis, and her focus on the experiences and response of poor people in Brixworth, a Union that epitomised 'crusading', provided an excellent contrast to Axminster. Axminster's ratepayers did not support crusading ideals, and of the eight crusading tactics Hurren identified, Axminster adopted only three. The Union cut staff costs, reduced outdoor medical relief and sought contributions from relatives. Brixworth's remaining tactics utilised creative ideas that aimed to reduce pauper numbers or boost Union income through the sale of cadavers, for example, which did not feature in Axminster's practice.¹⁰ Axminster was not a strong supporter of deterrent out-relief policy and pragmatically selected or ignored elements of central suggestions, depending on local priorities. Moreover, by extending the study beyond the traditional end of the 'crusade' this thesis demonstrated that the Centre continued to challenge Unions on cost-cutting and administrative efficiencies and established that this later period is worthy of more detailed study, discussed further in the following sections.

(Keele: Keele University Press, 1995), pp. 24-35; Karel Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), pp. 59-75, 81-90.

⁷ Michael E. Rose, 'The Crisis of Poor Relief in England 1860-1890', in *The Emergence of the Welfare State in Britain and Germany 1850-1950*, ed. by W. J. Mommsen with Wolfgang Mock (London: Croom Helm, 1981), pp. 50-70; Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty*, pp. 59-107; Hurren, *Protesting about Pauperism*, pp. 1-263.

⁸ UKPP, 'Out-Door Relief. Report of Edmond H. Wodehouse Esq., Poor Law Inspector to the Right Hon. James Stansfield, M.P., on Out-Door Relief in Seventy Unions in the Counties of Berks, Cornwall, Devon, Dorset, Gloucester, Kent, Somerset, Southampton, Surrey, Sussex and Wilts, 23 June 1871. Appendix B, No. 29, First Report of the Local Government Board, 1871-72', (1872 (C.516)), pp. 88-104.

⁹ Hurren, *Protesting about Pauperism*, pp. 128-55, 249; Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty*, p. 107.

¹⁰ Hurren, *Protesting about Pauperism*, pp. 128-55, 249.

This thesis refined our understanding of the 'crusade' era. Mary MacKinnon suggested that support for the 'crusade' was heightened by the 1865 Union Chargeability Act, which increased the tax burden on the middle-classes and provided increased funds for workhouse building.¹¹ In Brixworth Hurren found that farmers became supporters of deterrence as a result of strong local support amongst the poor for agricultural trade unionism.¹² Neither of these factors applied to Axminster; the tax burden had not been unevenly spread as there was no significant disparity of wealth or need between parishes. Both the local ethos and economic situation supported continuing out-relief whilst minimising spending elsewhere. Historians have also considered whether the 'crusade' was a new initiative as suggested by Williams and Hurren or backward-looking, achieving the principles of 1834 as suggested by Rose and supported by George Boyer.¹³ This study of Axminster found elements of both arguments; Wodehouse's approach and focus on the workhouse test, for example, harked back to 1834, but the range of challenges posed to Unions was new, which emphasised that the approach and local response to deterrence was highly dependent on the individual circumstances of Unions, both in terms of their economic position and their local poor law culture and ethos. Overall this study showed that Axminster added a further dimension to our understanding of the 'crusade' era with its blend of traditional values and pragmatism that focused on local needs.

The thesis by necessity touched upon a range of debates on political culture. These debates included the contest of old and new ideas on social policy and the growing reach and power of the central administrative state versus a continued attachment to localism. The study focussed on the practical application of policy and in so doing underlined the persistence of traditional ideas that incorporated a local moral economy, paternalism and local decision making and thus demonstrated their role in slowing the penetration of both utilitarian approaches and later changes to social policy. Axminster's Guardians' ethos was a product of the Union's political and social composition and power structures, which in turn informed a determined localism, an approach which encapsulated the belief that local people knew better than Central Poor Law Authorities how to administer poor relief. The Guardians approach to the Centre and its policies comprised resistance and selective change in the 1870s, a large degree of autonomy in the 1880s and early 1890s and increased levels of compliance and collaboration in the later 1890s. Jose Harris suggested that a 'watershed' in

¹¹ Mary MacKinnon, 'English Poor Law Policy and the Crusade Against Outrelief', *Journal of Economic History*, 47 (1987), 603-25.

¹² Hurren, *Protesting about Pauperism*, p. 117.

¹³ Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty*, pp. 91-107, Hurren, *Protesting about Pauperism*, pp. 250-51; Rose, 'Crisis of Poor Relief', pp. 50-70; George R. Boyer, *The Winding Road to the Welfare State: Economic Insecurity and Social Welfare Policy in Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), p. 25.

society, social policy and political thought occurred nationally in the 1870s and 1880s.¹⁴ At a local level change in Axminster occurred more slowly and was patchier. National trends such as the gradual targeting of relief eventually took hold, but on the whole Axminster made changes in poor law practice for pragmatic rather than ideological reasons, and the primacy of local decision-making remained key. Snell's study highlighted the importance of belonging at parish level; this study revealed that belonging also applied to Axminster at Union level as it underpinned the local relief ethos and formed a strong connective bond between Axminster's Guardians.¹⁵

The evidence in this thesis demonstrated that state intrusiveness had an uneven, if increasing impact until the later 1890s, as limited enforcement powers restricted the ability of the central administrative state to impose its will. Axminster Guardians generally complied with central requirements when it suited them and otherwise only under legal duress. The LGB's lack of desire (or ability) to extend its reach was evident in its refusal to seek extended powers in arbitration disputes despite requests from numerous Unions to do so. These findings accorded with those of historians such as John Davis, Martin Daunton and Lynn Hollen-Lees.¹⁶ Through exploring the role and influence of individual Inspectors this study emphasised the significant role of the Inspectorate and the increasing importance of bureaucratic knowledge in Union management, highlighted by historians such as Chris Otter and James Vernon.¹⁷ This thesis argued that the work and individual approaches of central Inspectors formed a key influence in the policy direction taken by Unions, whether this was due to a forceful presence that sought to push through an agenda or gentlemanly ineffectiveness. Change, when it came was strongly influenced by individuals. The thesis established that persistent challenge and criticism as used by Wodehouse and Preston-Thomas achieved some change, although in the 1870s especially this was usually unacknowledged. These tactics added nuance to views that support and gentlemanly persuasion were the usual methods adopted to achieve central goals.¹⁸ The latter approach, adopted by Courtenay, was less effective.

This study's focus on the role, character and impact of Guardians in local poor law management demonstrated the importance of gaining a greater understanding of this body and the leading

¹⁴ Jose Harris, *Private Lives, Public Spirit: Britain 1870-1914* (London: Penguin, 1994), pp. 252-56.

¹⁵ Snell, *Parish and Belonging*, pp. 4, 13-14, 17-18.

¹⁶ John Davis, 'Central Government and the Towns', in *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, ed. by Martin Daunton, 3 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), III, pp. 259-86, (pp. 262-68); Martin Daunton, 'Introduction', in *Cambridge Urban History*, ed. by Daunton, , III , pp. 1-56 (p. 15); Lynn Hollen Lees, 'Urban Networks', in *Cambridge Urban History*, ed. by Daunton, III, pp. 59-94, (pp. 84-85).

¹⁷ Chris Otter, *The Victorian Eye: A Political History of Light and Vision in Britain, 1800-1910* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), pp. 20, 99-134; James Vernon, *Distant Strangers: How Britain Became Modern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), , pp. 51-76.

¹⁸ Christine Bellamy, *Administering Central-Local Relations 1871-1919: The Local Government Board in its Fiscal and Cultural Context* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), pp. 142-55.

individuals within it. Axminster's experience in comparison with studies by Hurren, Geoff Hooker, Jonathan Pratt and Karen Rothery for example revealed both similarities and differences in approach with diversity in practice overall which was affected by the local social, economic and political context in which individual Unions functioned and the nature of participants. Hurren's exploration of Brixworth showed how national elites could dominate both a local Guardian Board and exercise significant influence on national policy.¹⁹ In contrast Axminster's Guardians, despite their lack of prestige were still able to follow their own path in relief practice. Hooker's study of Llandilofawr featured similarities with Axminster, in its rural nature, the focus on local attachment (albeit at a parish, rather than area level) and dislike of central interference. However, unlike Axminster ex-officios were not involved in governance.²⁰ Pratt's study of industrial Wigan, a very different social and economic context to Axminster, revealed a Guardian Board that was politically engaged, but otherwise had similarities to Axminster. Wigan's Guardians took a pragmatic approach to poor relief which recognised a strong local identity.²¹ Rothery's thesis on NPL administration in Hertfordshire again focused on Guardians, albeit at an earlier period, and emphasised diversity in practice, but also the continuing influence of ex-officios, a similar position to that found in Axminster.²² These findings suggest that more studies are essential to gain further understanding of the impact of Guardians and the extent of diversity, whether regional or local.

The following section draws together the discussion in Section 1 to reflect on the wider applicability of this study for poor law research and touches on its relevance for histories of the developing administrative state.

2. Broader Implications

Overall the thesis contributed towards the construction of a modern interpretation of the NPL, one that emphasised complexity, placed a greater focus on local contributions to both central policy development and local practice and underlined the role of people and relationships in this process.²³ As noted above, the micro-study methodology enabled a deep understanding of local management outlook and practices to be obtained; this approach could be developed for use in studies of other Unions. The findings in this thesis also emphasised the value of poor law research that explored the

¹⁹ Hurren, *Protesting about Pauperism*, pp. 108-12, 129-36.

²⁰ Geoff Hooker, 'Llandilofawr Poor Law Union 1836-1886: 'The Most Difficult Union in Wales' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Leicester, 2013).

²¹ Jonathan Pratt, 'Paternalistic, Parsimonious Pragmatists: The Wigan Board of Guardians and the Administration of the Poor Laws 1880-1900' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Central Lancashire, 2011).

²² Karen Rothery, 'The Implementation and Administration of the New Poor Law in Hertfordshire c.1830-1847' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Hertfordshire, 2017).

²³ See for example, Steven King and others, *In Their Own Write: Contesting the New Poor Law* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2022), pp. 6-15.

later Victorian period, as this timeframe currently attracts less attention but is important for understanding how policy, practice and central-local relationships evolved in a period of transition. The study's focus on a forty-year period between 1860 and 1900 enabled the 'crusade' era to be considered in a wider context of evolving social policy, when the welfare environment and ideas on the nature of poverty and treatment of paupers were changing and highlighted key turning points which occurred in the 1870s and 1890s.

Alongside the contribution to poor law scholarship set out in Section 1, the thesis has the potential to add insights in other areas of welfare research such as those related to the extent, impact and funding of poverty in old age and approaches towards medical care. For example Axminster's attitude to medical relief and hospital care reflected its independent approach and limited financial resources but was at odds with central policy. The Union's policy and practice underlined the continued importance of medical relief in the NPL era, as argued by King, but also that this was an aspect open to cost-cutting as Unions sought to work within their local economic contexts and available means. It also emphasised the limited influence of central directives in developing medical care.²⁴

The study also contributed to the wider debate on the success or failure of the NPL. A review of Axminster's NPL practice tends to support arguments for failure; out-relief did not reduce significantly and centrally prescribed uniform standards of welfare were not achieved. The thesis revealed numerous examples of Axminster's ability to ignore central policies and directives, apparently with impunity. Traditional values persisted into the late nineteenth century and inertia slowed or negated central policy implementation. In addition, this study showed that central policies did not address the underlying issue of poverty and thus had limited success in reducing pauperism by the end of the nineteenth century.

The thesis uncovered the significance of differing central and local understandings of the issues that underpinned the management of poverty and pauperism. These differences have broad relevance for poor law studies. The clash of ideas and values revealed that central policy did not adequately tackle problems of poverty. The Centre addressed the consequences of poverty through policies which sought to reduce the resultant pauperism and its costs. The Guardians faced the problem of local poverty and the fact that central policies did not tackle its underlying causes. Local policy and practice became one of continually mitigating poverty's consequences using tactics designed to address a different concept of the problem. These differing perspectives on poverty and pauperism

²⁴ Steven King, *Sickness, Medical Welfare and the English Poor 1750-1834* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), pp. 13-14, 56, 115, 140, 321, 332.

provide an overall understanding of why divergent approaches between Centre and localities continued, and whilst greater compliance could be attained, the underlying issues of poverty remained unresolved.

The study highlighted the importance and the extensive variation in local poor law practice, both of which have wider applicability in poor law studies. Firstly, the thesis emphasised the significance of complex local contexts. It demonstrated the importance of situating local studies within their evolving socio-economic, demographic and political contexts, as these shaped local patterns of practice and underlined the need to extend empirical studies into currently understudied areas, discussed further in the next section. The wide-ranging issues Axminster faced also applied to other Unions situated in the South-West and potentially elsewhere in rural England. More broadly the extent of diverse contexts underlines the difficulty the Centre encountered in developing and implementing universally applicable policies, whilst complexity reinforces the difficulty historians face in developing regional and national overviews of local poor law practice. Secondly, it emphasised the continued importance of localism in adapting practice to reflect local environments. Whilst Axminster's localism may have been extreme, its outlook and way of working contributed understanding as to why diverse practices could continue in the absence of compulsion, a finding applicable to other Unions in similar settings. The thesis emphasised the continuing role of traditional values in the clash with an increasingly modernising state and showed how a combination of local ethos, pragmatism and understandings of local priorities proved a formidable obstacle to centralising forces, often slowing or limiting the penetration of new ideas or the implementation of homogenising policies.

The significance of the financial status of Unions became very apparent in this study, as local policy choices often reflected wealth or poverty, increasing the distinction between rich and poor Unions. This thesis demonstrated that local policies could better reflect local requirements, but both implementation and steps towards modernisation became increasingly difficult for poorer Unions. Whilst enhanced economic support from the Centre for local development has been widely recognised as a factor which reduced opposition to centralism, this thesis suggested that the absence of funds was also a significant reason for shifting views.²⁵ As discussed in Chapter 8, the study highlighted the increasing vulnerability of small, poor authorities when faced with challenge from wealthy Unions, a concern reflected in the substantial support that Axminster obtained for its petition seeking a financial safety net from the Centre in legal disputes between Unions.

²⁵ See for example, Snell, *Parish and Belonging*, p. 5.

The study emphasised the importance of refining understanding of Union management at a local level in a range of settings. It demonstrated that the interaction of policy and practice was better understood when considered within the context of the developing role of local government and social policy. The holistic approach adopted in this thesis, which included issues such as Guardians' increasing responsibilities for public health, provided practical insights into the development of local governance. The new obligations were more demanding of Guardians' time and skills and increased their exposure to ratepayers. This focus revealed the pressures that Guardians faced and emphasised the breadth and depth of local knowledge and financial and moral responsibility which attached to the role. The more rounded approach also shifted the emphasis of study towards everyday working, through considering, for example, the impact of Guardians, Inspectors, local culture, local policy priorities and their respective roles in adapting central policy to varying local needs. The thesis established the importance of individuals and relationships as key factors in shaping the development and implementation of policy at a local level, an element which has received less attention in administrative histories focussed on policy. It demonstrated how individuals influenced how far and fast national policy was implemented and highlighted the role of tense and complex relationships. Furthermore investigation of the backgrounds and outlook of Guardians and Inspectors provided valuable insights into their approach to their role. This focus on the impact of individuals such as Inspectors could be factored into studies exploring the development of governance more widely.

The findings in this thesis link and add perspective to current research on poor law history 'from below'. Axminster's tactics of resistance and accommodation of central policy and the role of relationships between Guardians and the Centre demonstrated some similarities with the methods adopted by paupers and their advocates in King and others' study of pauper agency which highlighted that central power could be challenged and on occasions successfully contested.²⁶ More widely, the thesis highlighted the nature of local poverty in the rural West Country. It explored Guardians' attitudes towards paupers, including paternalism and measures of relief in the 'mixed economy of welfare' and provided some understanding of the makeshift economies employed by elderly paupers. Overall evidence in this study suggested that Axminster's relief practice towards locally settled paupers, although capricious, was relatively humane, with payments widely made and a limited use of the workhouse, a theme which would benefit from more in-depth research, discussed further below.

²⁶ King and Others, *In Their Own Write*.

Finally the methods and findings in this thesis have wider applicability for studies of the developing administrative state. The thesis demonstrated the depth of insights that can be obtained by linking local and national records, facilitated by the increasing range of online, searchable resources such as local newspapers. The insights discussed above such as the importance of understanding policy developments within complex local contexts, the value of considering local government development in conjunction with the NPL, rather than as a separate entity, the local application of policy focussed on local administrators, the role of local values and contestation and the impact of individuals may all prove useful in studies of governance more widely.

3. Looking Ahead: Future Research Opportunities

This concluding section suggests several topics, questions and approaches for future research which have opened up from this study, including the wider themes discussed in Section 2. Alongside the need for further exploration and debate on matters such as the extent of continuity and change and the impact of the 'crusade' against out-relief, this study supports calls for further research on understudied regions such as the South-West and Wales, a need identified in Chapter 1's literature review and reinforced by the range of insights into local NPL management found in this thesis. These findings also add to the well-recognised requirement for wider studies to synthesise the diversity found in local works so that patterns of practice and scale of variation can be identified on a regional and national canvas.

Future research focussed on the interface between localities and national policy and practice and the influence of individuals and local contexts would add broader insights into the development of the administrative state in later Victorian England and Wales, through integrating national and local perspectives. For example, research into the persistence and impact of localism and its role in impeding central policy implementation would provide a greater understanding of its significance in welfare practice. Studies focussed on a range of different environments would show how quickly new ideas on social policy penetrated and whether Axminster's focus on local values and decision making was typical in rural/semi-rural areas. In addition, further research into the local operation of late Victorian and early Edwardian Poor Law, a time when approaches to poverty and pauperism were being re-evaluated, would, as noted above, set the 'crusade' era in a broader context and link with the well-researched welfare developments of the early twentieth century. Moreover this approach to the NPL could usefully be broadened to develop links between later nineteenth century NPL policy and practice and the growth of the administrative state. This would enable both elements to be placed in their wider context and considered as integral parts of state governance, rather than as topics in isolation.

Research directed towards provincial and rural/semi-rural Union management and centred on the role of Guardians will add to growing understanding of this important but often neglected body. Although the focus is small-scale, comparative studies of Union Boards situated in a range of socio-economic, political and demographic backgrounds would provide insights into how Guardian Boards and nascent Rural District Councils responded to change and increasing responsibilities, their influence on the poor law processes and the direction of central policy, the role of local values and the nature of relationships with both Centre and paupers, the latter linking with the current focus on history 'from below'. It would enable historians to discern more fully the distribution of power between Centre and locality and gain an appreciation of the impact of local approaches, priorities, the extent of local freedom and the overall competence of Boards. The impact of differing Board compositions, whether transient or dynastic, the role of Guardian relationships and the influence of Guardians at an individual level, exploring their backgrounds, outlook, politics and personality would provide a greater understanding of their power and potential to shape practice. A similar approach to the roles and impact of paid Union staff, particularly Relieving Officers and Union Clerks would provide a more rounded picture of local administration and the extent of growing professionalisation in provincial Unions.

Alongside a need for a greater understanding of Guardians, further research into the impact of Poor Law/LGB Inspectors will provide valuable insight into their key role as the interface between the central administration and individual Unions. Investigations that compare outcomes between different Inspectors, districts and change over time would gauge the extent of an individual's influence, their effectiveness in achieving central aims, as a communication channel between centre and locality and establish the level of freedom an individual Inspector had in focussing on their own priorities.

Finally, this study has highlighted the value of widening the research focus onto the more 'ordinary' and everyday experience of poor law management, moving away from iconic and extreme places and practices which can colour understanding of the Poor Law. Further research focussed on the day-to-day operation of poor law management in a range of low-profile Unions operating in different contexts, using a mix of central and local resources as in this thesis, would provide a more complete appreciation of local administration. Although harder to uncover as less newsworthy, this type of evidence can be found through close study of resources such the local press (now considerably easier as often online and searchable), Guardian Minutes and MH12 correspondence and would provide a balance to high profile reports which tend to emphasise and repeat the extremely negative aspects of the NPL. This need for balance touches on the difficult question of

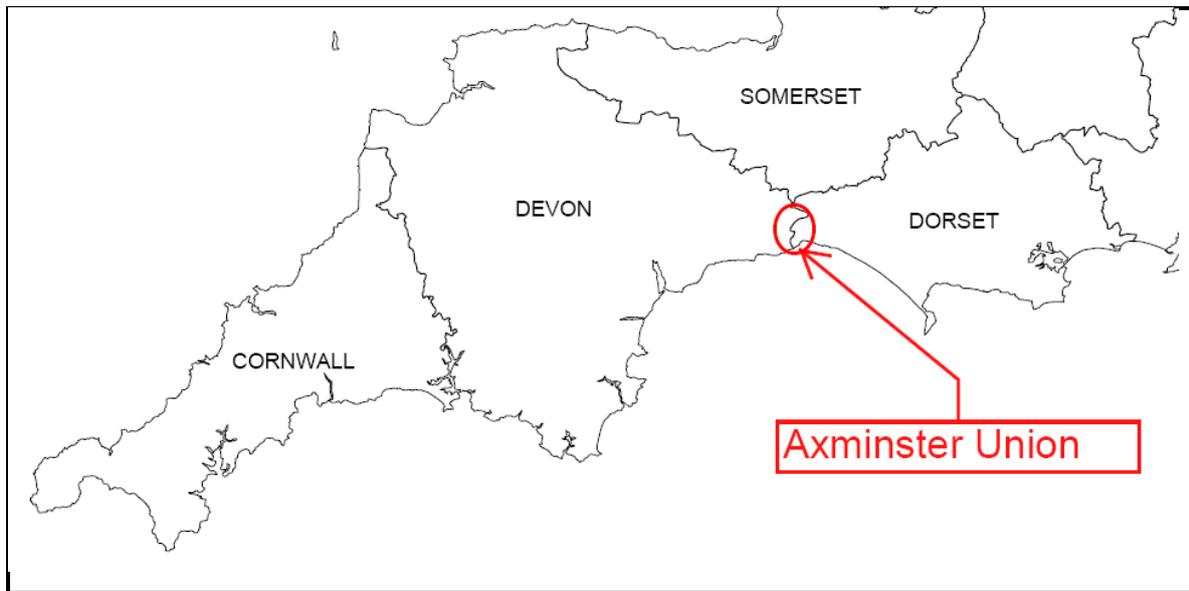
how harsh or unpopular the NPL was in everyday practice. This thesis has shown relatively little opposition from paupers or ratepayers in Axminster despite the high levels and costs pauperism over a forty-year period. Further research is needed on the locality to understand this puzzling lack of dissent. The topic also warrants further studies in a range of Unions within a wide timeframe, focussed on the level of local disputes, as this would add insights into the level of dissatisfaction, acceptance or acquiescence towards local NPL practice.

Overall this study of Axminster Poor Law Union has added broad insights into how local poor law management evolved in a rural West Country setting in the later nineteenth century. It has highlighted the influence of a challenging and changing local environment and the impact of differing central and local views and policy approaches to the continuing problems of poverty and pauperism. In doing so the thesis has underlined the need for further research exploring the varied local landscape of welfare in late Victorian England.

APPENDICES

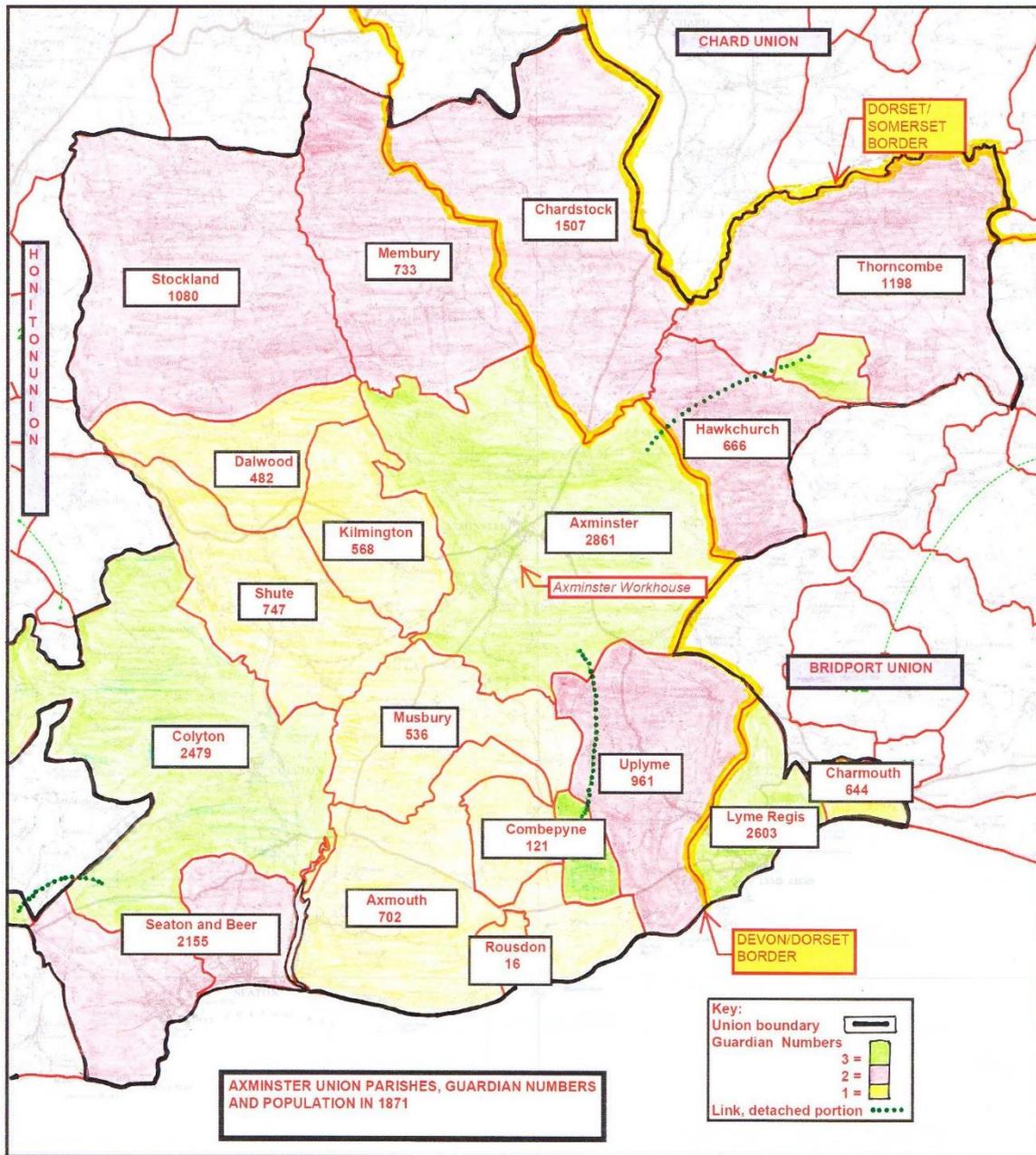
Appendix 1: Location and Union Maps

A1.1 Location: Axminster Union



Source: Reproduced from Ordnance Survey map data by permission of the Ordnance Survey © Crown copyright 2010.

A1.2 Map: Axminster Union Parishes in 1871



Source: UKPP, Census of England and Wales 1871 Volume II. (Registration of Union Counties); Index to Population Tables, (1872 (C.676-I C.676.II)), pp. 230-231; DHC, Axminster Poor Law Union, PLU/Axminster/11, Axminster Guardians' Minute Book 1871-1876, Minutes, 20 April 1871, p. 1; R.J.P. Kain and R.R. Oliver, (2020) *Historic Parishes of England and Wales: An Electronic Map of Boundaries before 1850 with a Gazetteer and Metadata*. [data collection]. UK Data Service. Sheet 177. SN: 4348, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-4348-1>.

Appendix 2: Axminster Union: Numbers of Paupers Relieved and Costs

A2.1 Paupers Relieved Indoors on 1st January 1861-1901

Year (January 1 st)	Population at previous census	a.b. male	a.b. male in health	a.b. male temp disabled	a.b. female	a.b. female in health	a.b. female temp disabled	a.b. child under 16	n.a.b. male	n.a.b. female	n.a.b. Child under 16	'lunatics' male	'lunatics' female	'lunatics' child under 16	total number vagrants relieved	vagrants relieved	total in work- house
1861	20,303 (1851)	1			11			16	21	18	39	1	6	0		1	114
1866	19,758 (1861)	0			11			17	26	20	52	4	7	0		2	139
1871	19,758 (1861)	1			15			28	31	16	46	2	6	0		2	147
1876	20,059 (1871)	0			5			10	22	15	32	4	5	0		2	95
1881	20,059 (1871)	4			11			17	33	26	31	3	4	0		7	136
1886	18,769 (1881)	8			11			19	18	18	30	4	9	0		4	121
1891	18,769 (1881)		5	0		8	0	15	26	21	27	2	12	0		1	117
1896	17,714 (1891)		2	0		8	0	11	29	13	17	5	10	0		16	111
1901	16,238 (1891) 15,623 (1901 after census)		4	0		12	0	18	26	16	6	3	11	0	17		113

Note 1: See note and source details below table 2.2.

Note 2: The population number of 16,238 cited for the 1891 census in 1901 is the reworked calculation after the removal of two parishes following reorganisation in 1896.

A2.2 Paupers Relieved Outdoors on 1st January 1861-1901

Year (January 1st)	Population at previous census	a.b. male	a.b. male own sickness, accident or infirmity	a.b. male other causes	a.b. female (could be wife of a.b. male)	a.b. child (child of a.b. parent)	n.a.b. male	n.a.b. female	n.a.b. Child	insane	'lunatics' male (1901 in asylums etc)	'lunatics' female (1901 in asylums etc)	lunatics child under 16 (1901 in asylums etc)	vagrants out of work- house	Total out of work -house	net total of paupers relieved
1861	20,303 (1851)	40			89	190	298	533	161		16	28	5	0	1,360	1,474
1866	19,758 (1861)	57			112	283	306	547	99		12	22	1	0	1,439	1,578
1871	19,758 (1861)	67			116	278	302	544	152		9	19	0	0	1,487	1,634
1876	20,059 (1871)	14			61	139	247	455	93		14	22	0	0	1,045	1,140
1881	20,059 (1871)	15			49	129	233	412	70		15	19	1	0	943	1,079
1886	18,769 (1881)		10	3	40	102	234	435	89		18	22	0	0	953	1,074
1891	18,769 (1881)		10	4	59	143	271	444	106		13	25	1	0	1,076	1,193
1896	17,714 (1891)		4	6	58	163	260	440	61		13	30	1	11	1,047	1,158
1901	16,238 (1891) 15,623 (after 1901 census)		5	4	41	120	183	338	30	2	12	25	0	0	723, (760 if asylum dwellers included)	873

Note: Axminster Union comprised seventeen parishes until 1861, increased to eighteen subsequently and reduced by two in 1896. The 1901 census data reflects the reduced population. In this table a.b. refers to 'able bodied' paupers, n.a.b. to the 'not-able-bodied'. Data categories were amended over time. Where no data reported boxes have been blacked out.

Source: UKPP, 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January: 1860 and 1861', (1860 383B.I), pp. 36-37; 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January: 1865 and 1866', (1865 442B.I), pp. 32-33; 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January: 1870 and 1871', (1871 140B), pp. 30-31; 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January: 1875 and 1876', (1876 138B), pp. 24-25; 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January: 1880 and 1881', (1881 60B), pp. 24-25; 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January: 1885 and 1886', (1886 58B), pp. 24-25; 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January: 1890 and 1891', (1890-91 130B), pp. 24-25; 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January: 1895 and 1896', (1896 64B), pp. 24-25; 'Pauperism (England and Wales). (Half-yearly Statements)', (1901 73)), pp. 28-29.

A2.3 Paupers Relieved by Gender and Category on 1st January 1861-1901

Pauper Category	1861	1871	1881	1891	1901
Men	360	401	285	316	222
Women	651	691	498	532	407
Children	406	504	247	291	174
'Lunatics'	56	36	42	53	53
Vagrants	1	2	7	1	17
Total Paupers	1474	1634	1079	1193	873
Axminster Union Population Total	19758	20059	18769	17714	15623
Axminster Union % paupers to population	7.46	8.20	5.75	6.73	5.59
National % paupers to population	4.48	4.82	3.15	2.71	2.5

Note: Data condensed from data in Appendices A2.1 and A2.2. Paupers categorised as 'lunatics' or vagrants are not included in the general categories of men, women or children.

Source: Axminster data: See Appendix A2.2. National data: Pauperism (England and Wales). (Half-yearly Statements)', (1901 (73)), p. vi.

A2.4 Pauper Numbers and Costs, 1860 -1881

Axminster Pauper Numbers				Axminster Pauper Relief Costs (£)					
	Indoor	Outdoor	Total				Indoor	Outdoor	Total
1860	103	1378	1481			1860	282	2690	2973
1861	114	1360	1474			1861	418	2919	3337
1862	146	1366	1512			1862	448	2961	3409
1863	139	1435	1574			1863	423	2762	3186
1864	161	1363	1524			1864	428	2741	3169
1865	141	1463	1604			1865			
1866	139	1439	1578			1866	406	2993	3400
1867	127	1391	1518			1867	476	3137	3613
1868	132	1508	1640			1868	538	3398	3936
1869	143	1525	1668			1869	550	3115	3665
1870	148	1516	1664			1870	514	3021	3535
1871	147	1487	1634			1871	480	2970	3450
1872	132	1356	1488			1872	485	2994	3479
1873	121	1279	1400			1873	487	2858	3345
1874	110	1146	1256			1874	452	2793	3245
1875	92	1178	1270			1875	384	2456	2840
1876	95	1045	1140			1876	436	2381	2817
1877	105	1051	1156			1877	438	2455	2893
1878	127	1022	1149			1878	579	2458	3037
1879	154	967	1121			1879	577	2285	2862
1880	142	935	1077			1880	563	2196	2759
1881	136	943	1079			1881	504	2249	2753

Note: Number taken from Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers relieved, on 1st January. Costs exclude shillings and are for the 6 months to Lady Day in each year apart from 1865, the Return for which was not found.

Source: Pauper Numbers: UKPP, 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January: 1859 and 1860', (1859 Session 1 (208B.I)), pp. 36-37; 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January: 1860 and 1861', (1860 383B.I)), pp. 36-37; 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January: 1861 and 1862', (1861 (324B.I)), pp. 36-37; 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers relieved, January: 1862 and 1863', (1862 (307B.I)), pp. 36-37; 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January: 1863 and 1864', (1863 (431B.I)), pp. 34-35; 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January: 1864 and 1865', (1864 507B.I)), pp. 32-33; 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January: 1865 and 1866', (1865 (442B.I)), pp. 32-33; 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers relieved, January: 1866 and 1867', (1866 422B.I)), pp. 32-33; 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January: 1867 and 1868', (1867 (431B.I)), pp. 32-33; 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January: 1868 and 1869', (1867-68 (344B.I)), pp. 32-33; 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January: 1869 and 1870', (1868-69, 337B.I)), pp. 28-29; 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January: 1870 and

1871', (1871 (140B)), pp. 30-31; 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January: 1871 and 1872', (1872 126B)), pp. 26-27; 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January: 1872 and 1873', (1873 (103B)), pp. 30-31; 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January: 1873 and 1874', (1874 (60B)), pp. 24-25; 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January: 1874 and 1875', (1875 (122B)), pp. 24-25; 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January: 1875 and 1876', (1876 (138B)), pp. 24-25; 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January: 1876 and 1877', (1877 (96B)), pp. 24-25; 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January: 1877 and 1878', (1878 (85B)), pp. 24-25; 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January: 1878 and 1879', (1878-79 (80B)), pp. 24-25; 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January: 1879 and 1880', (1880 (66B)), pp. 24-25; 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January: 1880 and 1881', (1881 (60B))', pp. 24-25.

In Relief and Out Relief Costs: UKPP, 'Comparative Statement of Amount Expended for In-maintenance and Out-relief, 1858-59', (1859 Session 1 (208C)) p. 35; 'Comparative Statement of Amount Expended for In-maintenance and Out-relief, 1859-60', (1860 (383C)), p. 35; 'Comparative Statement of Amount Expended for In-maintenance and Out-relief, 1860-61', (1861 (324C)), p. 35; 'Comparative Statement of Amount Expended for In-maintenance and Out-relief, 1861-62', (1862 (307C)), p. 35; 'Comparative Statement of Amount Expended for In-maintenance and Out-relief, 1862-63', (1863 (431C)), p. 33; 'Comparative Statement of Amount Expended for In-maintenance and Out-relief, 1864-65', (1865 (442C)), p. 33; 'Comparative Statement of Amount Expended for In-maintenance and Out-relief, 1865-66', (1866 (422C)), p. 22; 'Comparative Statement of Amount Expended for In-maintenance and Out-relief, 1866-67', (1867 (431C)), p. 22; 'Comparative Statement of Amount Expended for In-maintenance and Out-relief, 1867-68', (1867-68 (344C)), p. 22; 'Comparative Statement of Amount Expended for In-maintenance and Out-relief, 1868-69', (1868-69 (337C)), p. 18; 'Comparative Statement of Amount Expended for In-maintenance and Out-relief, 1870-71', (1871 (140C)), p. 18; 'Comparative Statement of Amount Expended for In-maintenance and Out-relief, 1871-72', (1872 (126C)), p. 18; 'Comparative Statement of Amount Expended for In-maintenance and Out-relief, 1872-73', (1873 (103C)), p. 18; 'Comparative Statement of Amount Expended for In-maintenance and Out-relief, 1873-74', (1874 (60C)), p. 18; 'Comparative Statement of Amount Expended for In-maintenance and Out-relief, 1874-75', (1875 (122C)), p. 18; 'Comparative Statement of Amount Expended for In-maintenance and Out-relief, 1875-76', (1876 (138C)), p. 18; 'Comparative Statement of Amount Expended for In-maintenance and Out-relief, 1876-77', (1877 (96C)), p. 18; 'Comparative Statement of Amount Expended for In-maintenance and Out-relief, 1877-78', (1878 (85C)), p. 18; 'Comparative Statement of Amount Expended for In-maintenance and Out-relief, 1878-79', (1879-80 (80C)), p. 18; 'Comparative Statement of Amount Expended for In-maintenance and Out-relief, 1879-80', (1880 (66C)), p. 18; 'Comparative Statement of Amount Expended for In-maintenance and Out-relief, 1880-81', (1881 (60C)), p. 18.

A2.5 Ratio of Paupers to Population

Year	National Ratio per '000 Paupers to Population	Axminster Ratio per '000 Paupers to Population
1861	<i>44.8</i>	<i>74.6</i>
1866	<i>43.7</i>	<i>79.9</i>
1871	<i>48.2</i>	<i>81.5</i>
1876	<i>31.3</i>	<i>56.8</i>
1881	<i>31.5</i>	<i>57.5</i>
1886	<i>29.9</i>	<i>57.2</i>
1891	<i>27.1</i>	<i>67.3</i>
1896	<i>27.7</i>	<i>65.4</i>
1901	<i>25</i>	<i>55.9</i>

Source: National: UKPP, 'Pauperism (England and Wales). (Half- yearly statements)', (1901 (73)), p. vi;
Axminster: See Appendix A2.2.

A2.6 Poor Rates: Axminster, Surrounding Unions and County Comparisons

Union	1870	1884	1897
	s/d.	s/d.	s/d.
Axminster	$2/7^d$	$2/6\frac{3}{4}^d$	$2/5^d$
Honiton	$2/8\frac{1}{2}^d$	$2/4\frac{1}{2}^d$	$2/7\frac{3}{4}^d$
Bridport	$2/11\frac{3}{4}^d$	$2/1\frac{3}{4}^d$	$2/8^d$
Beaminster	$3/3\frac{3}{4}^d$	$2/6\frac{1}{4}^d$	$2/5^d$
Chard	$2/6\frac{1}{4}^d$	$2/10\frac{3}{4}^d$	$2/8^d$
County comparatives:			
Exeter	$2/6\frac{3}{4}^d$	$2/8\frac{1}{4}^d$	$2/6\frac{3}{4}^d$
Plymouth	$3/3^d$	2/- -	$2/10\frac{1}{4}^d$
Newton Abbot	$1/9^d$	$1/6\frac{1}{2}^d$	$2/1\frac{1}{2}^d$

Note: Rate in the £ formulated from poor rate divided by rateable value; data for 1897 calculated by dividing poor rate receipts by the 1896 rateable value, excluding any payments received as aid-in-rates. Resultant figure an approximation.

Source: UKPP, 'Annual Local Taxation Returns, 1896-97 (Parts I.-VII.)', (1898 250 289 325 351 351-I 351-II 351-III), pp. 30-31, 74-75; 'Return for Unions in England and Wales of Amount of Poor Rates Levied, 1847, 1856, 1866, 1870 and 1882-84', (1886 (138)), pp. 14-17.

Appendix 3: Axminster Population

A3.1 Union Population, 1851-1901

Census Year	Union Population	Increase (decrease) since previous census
1841	20,583	
1851	20,303	(1.4%)
1861	19,758	(2.7%)
1871	20,059	1.5%
1881	18,769	(6.4%)
1891	17,714	(5.6%)
1896	16,238	(8.3%)
1901	15,623	(3.8%) (on revised population) (11.8%) on original 1891 population
1911	16,804	7.6%

Note: The boundaries of the Union changed in 1861 and 1896 and population figures have been adjusted to take account of these changes. This is reflected in the two figures given for 1901.

Source: 1896 population taken from UKPP, Pauperism (England and Wales). (Half-yearly Statements), 1901 (73), pp.28-29; GB Historical GIS / University of Portsmouth, Axminster PLU/RegD through time | Population Statistics | Total Population, *A Vision of Britain through Time*. Copyright Great Britain Historical GIS Project and University of Portsmouth as set out in Chapter 3. <http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10005590/cube/TOT_POP> [accessed 20 May 2023]

A3.2: Percentage of Total Axminster Population in Age Bands

Male

Male %	1851	1861	1871	1881	1891	1901	1911
Age 0-14	36.5	38.6	39.9	37.9	36.3	34.4	28.2
Age 15-65	56.9	54.6	52.6	54.3	54.7	56.6	64.1
Age 65+	6.6	7.0	7.4	7.9	9.1	9.0	7.7
Total %	100	100.2	99.9	100.1	100.1	100	100

Female

Female %	1851	1861	1871	1881	1891	1901	1911
Age 0-14	33.8	33.8	35	33	31.4	28.4	25.2
Age 15-65	59.0	58.6	57.2	58.8	59.4	61.6	65.5
Age 65+	7.2	7.6	7.7	8.3	9.3	9.8	9.4
Total %	100	100	99.9	100.1	100.1	99.8	100.1

Note: Percentages calculated from sources noted below.

Source: GB Historical GIS, University of Portsmouth, Axminster PLU/RegD through time | Population Statistics | Males and Females, *A Vision of Britain through Time*. Copyright Great Britain Historical GIS Project and University of Portsmouth <<http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10005590/cube/GENDER>> [accessed 8 December 2022]; GB Historical GIS / University of Portsmouth, Axminster RegD/PLU through time | Population Statistics | Age & Sex Structure to age 85 & up, *A Vision of Britain through Time*. <https://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10005590/cube/AGESEX_85UP> [accessed 8 December 2022]

Appendix 4: Axminster Guardians

A4.1 Non-Farming Occupations of Guardians in the Census, 1861-1901

1861	1871	1881	1891	1901
county magistrate	landowner (2)	clergy (3)	clergy (2)	clergy (5)
clergy (2)	retired farmer and landowner	land and house proprietor	major general (retired)	solicitor (2)
lawyers (3)	retired builder and JP	annuitant	barrister (retired)	retired barrister
provision merchant	magistrate	income from land and dividends	retired farmer	local magistrate
druggist and stationer	solicitor	retired merchant and JP	monumental mason and secretary of friendly society	own means, monumental mason
chemist druggist and town councillor	provision merchant	ironmonger, grocer, general merchant	corn and seed merchant	corn miller and farmer
thatcher	millers and corn factor	corn merchant	butcher and farmer	retired merchant
millers		tanner	house builder	corn cake merchant
				farmer and butter merchant
				millers/corn merchant
				baker/confectioner
				grocer/ corn dealer
				mineral water manufacturer
				builder

Note: Occupations self-described.

Source: Census (1861-1901) Census Returns for England and Wales, for Axminster, Axmouth, Colyton, Combepyne, Kilmington, Membury, Musbury, Rousdon, Seaton and Beer, Shute, Stockland, Uplyme, Lyme Regis, Chardstock, Hawkchurch, Charmouth (excluding 1901) and Thorncombe (excluding 1901), available at <<https://www.ancestry.co.uk>> [accessed 19 July 2023]. See Bibliography for full reference for census book and year.

A4.2 Chairmen and Vice-Chairmen

Name	Parish	Occupation	Length of Service post 1860-1901, (blocks of years)
George Cartwright	Not Applicable, ex-officio	Justice of the Peace	15 (1)
Robert Hillman	Lyme Regis	Solicitor, Mayor and Major of Volunteers OR his son (same name), a Solicitor	10/11, (1)
William Symes Pryer	Axminster	Druggist, Stationer	5, (1)
James Halse	Colyton	Farmer, 56 acres	8, (1)
John Bently	Chardstock	Described as gentleman in election notices. Farmer and landowner (census)	37, (1)
John Godden	Uplyme	Solicitor	14/15, (1)
Charles Ewens	Axminster	Provision merchant	14,(3)
James Chappell	Axmouth	Retired farmer and landowner	9, (2)
William Harding	Seaton-Beer	Farmer, 602 acres	14, (3)
Samuel Lowndes	Charmouth	County Magistrate for Dorset	2, (1)
Robert Halson Follett	Kilmington	Grocer, general merchant	7, (1)
Rev Curgenvan	Lyme Regis 1878-1881, Rousdon 1881-end 1894, Axmouth and Rousdon 1895 -1901+	Curate or rector	22, (1)
William Halse Row	Musbury	Farmer	14, (2)
James Griffin	Membury	Yeoman	14, (2)
Thomas Woolmington	Combpyne, then Musbury	Farmer, 436 acres Combpyne, then Musbury	25, (4)

Note 1: Thirty-one Guardians elected from 1861, 33 after 1894. Occasional election notices have survived. For most years the Minutes list Guardians at the first meeting of the year in late April. There are occasional gaps, for example where it is unclear who was appointed and two years in the 1860s where best estimates are necessary.

Note 2: Where guardianship is not continuous blocks of years are noted (in brackets).

Source: Census: See Appendix A4.1 and Bibliography for details; Guardian Boards for each year: DHC, Axminster Poor Law Union, PLU/Axminster/9-19, Axminster Guardians' Minute Books, 1857-1903.

A4.3: Summary of Chairmen and Vice-Chairmen

Years	Chairman and Vice-Chairmen
1860-1864	Cartwright, Hillman, Pryer
1864-1865	Pryer, Hillman, Halse
1865-1867	Cartwright, Hillman Halse
1867-1868	Cartwright, Halse , Bently
1869-1871	Cartwright, Bently, Godden
1871-1872	Bently, Ewens, Chappell
1872-1873	Bently, Ewens, Harding
1873-1874	Bently, Ewens, Lowndes
1874-1875	Bently, Ewens Godden
1875-1880	Bently, Ewens, Chappell
1880-1883	Bently, Chappell , Follett
1883-1885	Bently, Chappell , Curgenvin
1885-1890	Bently, Curgenvin, Row
1890-1893	Bently, Curgenvin, Griffin
1893 – end 1894	Bently, Curgenvin, Woolmington
1895-1901	Bently, Curgenvin

Note: Farmers highlighted in bold. Detail condensed from Appendix A4.2.

Source: See Appendix A4.2 for detail.

A4.4 Turnover of Guardians

Inspector at Time of Election	Years	Number of New' Guardians Assuming Office in Year (turnover)
Gulson	1861-62	6
Gulson	1862-63	12
Gulson	1863-64	10
Gulson	1864-65	12
Gulson	1865-66	10
Gulson	1866-67	11
Gulson	1867-68	10
Gulson	1868-69	10
Ward	1869-70	13
Ward	1870-71	12
Ward	1871-72	9
Wodehouse	1872-73	12
Wodehouse	1873-74	5
Wodehouse	1874-75	7
Wodehouse	1875-76	10
Wodehouse	1876-77	8
Courtenay	1877-78	11
Courtenay	1878-79	9
Courtenay	1879-80	11
Courtenay	1880-81	13
Mean		<i>10.1</i>
Median		<i>10</i>

Source: DHC, Axminster Poor Law Union, PLU/Axminster/9-13, Axminster Guardians' Minute Books, 1857-1884.

Appendix 5: Analysis of the Wodehouse Report

A5.1 Analysis of Answers to Questions Posed by Wodehouse from Unions in Seven Counties in Southern England

Questions, as Listed and Numbered by Wodehouse, with Answers Beneath	Berkshire (4 Unions)	Cornwall (6 Unions)	Devon (7 Unions)	Dorset (3 Unions)	Gloucester (2 Unions)	Somerset (9 Unions)	Surrey (5 Unions)	Total Unions in category
i) Revision of relief lists every:								
3months	<i>Cookham, Farringdon, Reading</i>	<i>Penzance</i>					<i>Farnham</i>	5
6 months	<i>Wokingham</i>	<i>Camelford</i>	<i>Honiton</i>			<i>Bridgewater, Taunton</i>	<i>Dorking, Guildford</i>	7
12months		<i>Stratton</i>	<i>Axminster, East Stonehouse, Tiverton</i>		<i>Bristol</i>	<i>Chard (via vestry)</i>	<i>Epsom, Kingston</i>	8
Indefinite		<i>St Austell, Falmouth, Truro</i>	<i>Newton Abbot, Plymouth</i>	<i>Sherborne, Shaftsbury, Wareham (some 6 months some 12 months)</i>	<i>Clifton</i>	<i>Axbridge (in practice 12 months), Bath, Bedminster, Shepton Mallet, Wells, Yeovil</i>		15
Other			<i>Exeter - partially</i>					1

Questions, as Listed and Numbered by Wodehouse, with Answers Beneath	Berkshire (4 Unions)	Cornwall (6 Unions)	Devon (7 Unions)	Dorset (3 Unions)	Gloucester (2 Unions)	Somerset (9 Unions)	Surrey (5 Unions)	Total Unions in category
ii) Longest period of relief granted by Guardians?								
3months	<i>Cookham, Farringdon, Reading</i>	<i>Penzance</i>					<i>Epsom, Farnham</i>	6
6 months	<i>Wokingham</i>	<i>Camelford</i>	<i>Honiton</i>	<i>Shaftsbury</i>		<i>Bath (but some longer), Taunton</i>	<i>Dorking; Guildford</i>	8
12months			<i>Axminster, East Stonehouse, Tiverton</i>		<i>Bristol,</i>	<i>Chard;</i>	<i>Kingston</i>	6
Indefinite		<i>St Austell, Stratton, Falmouth, Truro</i>	<i>Newton Abbot, Plymouth, Exeter</i>	<i>Sherborne, Wareham</i>	<i>Clifton</i>	<i>Axbridge, Bedminster, Bridgewater, Shepton Mallet, Wells, Yeovil</i>		16

Questions, as Listed and Numbered by Wodehouse, with Answers Beneath	Berkshire (4 Unions)	Cornwall (6 Unions)	Devon (7 Unions)	Dorset (3 Unions)	Gloucester (2 Unions)	Somerset (9 Unions)	Surrey (5 Unions)	Total Unions in category
v) Is the pauper required to attend along with fresh RO report for all relief applications renewals?								
Yes	<i>Farringdon, Reading (partial), Wokingham (generally)</i>	<i>St Austell (first instance), Camelford, Truro</i>	Axminster , <i>Honiton (first instance), East Stonehouse; Newton Abbot (first instance), Plymouth, Exeter</i>	<i>Sherborne, Shaftsbury (first instance), Wareham</i>	<i>Bristol, Clifton</i>	<i>Bath (generally), Bedminster, Bridgewater, Shepton Mallet, Yeovil (first instance)</i>	<i>Dorking, Epsom, Farnham, Guildford (first instance), Kingston</i>	27
No	<i>Cookham</i>	<i>Penzance, Falmouth (appeals to board), Stratton</i>	<i>Tiverton (unless living near workhouse)</i>			<i>Axbridge, Chard (unless appealing), Wells, Taunton</i>		9

Questions, as Listed and Numbered by Wodehouse, with Answers Beneath	Berkshire (4 Unions)	Cornwall (6 Unions)	Devon (7 Unions)	Dorset (3 Unions)	Gloucester (2 Unions)	Somerset (9 Unions)	Surrey (5 Unions)	Total Unions in category
ix) What proportion of relief in kind?(max. limit)								
1/2	<i>Cookham, Wokingham</i>						<i>Farnham</i>	3
5/12							<i>Epsom</i>	1
1/3	<i>Reading, Farringdon</i>			<i>Wareham</i>		<i>Chard, Yeovil</i>	<i>Guildford, Kingston</i>	7
1/4				<i>Sherborne</i>		<i>Bedminster</i>	<i>Dorking</i>	3
1/5			Axminster, Exeter	<i>Shaftsbury</i>	<i>Clifton</i>	<i>Bath, Bridgewater, Shepton Mallet, Wells, Taunton</i>		9
1/6			<i>Tiverton</i>					1
<1/7			<i>East Stonehouse</i>					1
1/8			<i>Plymouth</i>					1
1/9		<i>Penzance</i>						1
1/11						<i>Axbridge</i>		1
1/20			<i>Newton Abbot</i>					1
None		<i>St Austell, Camelford, Stratton, Falmouth, Truro (virtually none)</i>	<i>Honiton</i>					6
Not answered					<i>Bristol</i>			1

Questions, as Listed and Numbered by Wodehouse, with Answers Beneath	Berkshire (4 Unions)	Cornwall (6 Unions)	Devon (7 Unions)	Dorset (3 Unions)	Gloucester (2 Unions)	Somerset (9 Unions)	Surrey (5 Unions)	Total Unions in category
x) What proportion accept when offered the workhouse test?								
Majority							<i>Dorking</i>	<i>1</i>
1/2				<i>Wareham</i>				<i>1</i>
1/3	<i>Reading</i>							<i>1</i>
1/5			Axminster	<i>Sherborne</i>		<i>Bridgewater</i>	<i>Guildford</i>	<i>4</i>
1/10	<i>Farringdon</i>	<i>St Austell (plus), Camelford, Falmouth, Penzance, Stratton</i>	<i>Exeter; Newton Abbot, Plymouth, Tiverton</i>		<i>Bristol, Clifton</i>	<i>Axbridge, Taunton, Wells</i>	<i>Farnham, Kingston</i>	<i>17</i>
1/20	<i>Wokingham</i>	<i>Truro</i>	<i>East Stonehouse</i>			<i>Bedminster</i>		<i>4</i>
1/50						<i>Bath</i>		<i>1</i>
More than most (per Wodehouse)			<i>Honiton</i>					<i>1</i>
Not frequently used (per Wodehouse)						<i>Yeovil</i>		<i>1</i>
Minority (per Wodehouse)				<i>Shaftsbury</i>		<i>Chard</i>	<i>Epsom</i>	<i>3</i>
Not reported	<i>Cookham</i>							<i>1</i>
Not known						<i>Shepton Mallet</i>		<i>1</i>

Questions, as Listed and Numbered by Wodehouse, with Answers Beneath	Berkshire (4 Unions)	Cornwall (6 Unions)	Devon (7 Unions)	Dorset (3 Unions)	Gloucester (2 Unions)	Somerset (9 Unions)	Surrey (5 Unions)	Total Unions in category
xi) How do Guardians generally deal with deserted wives? [n.b. often qualified re collusion]								
Workhouse	<i>Farringdon, Reading (about half), Wokingham</i>	<i>Camelford, Falmouth, Truro</i>	<i>Honiton, Newton Abbot, Exeter (one month or sometimes)</i>	<i>Sherborne</i>	<i>Bristol, Clifton</i>	<i>Axbridge, Chard (initially), Wells (initially)</i>	<i>Dorking (unless known to be respectable)</i>	16
Out-relief	<i>Cookham</i>	<i>St Austell, Penzance, Stratton</i>	<i>Axminster, East Stonehouse, Tiverton, Plymouth</i>	<i>Shaftsbury, Wareham</i>		<i>Bath, Bedminster, Bridgewater, Shepton Mallet, Taunton, Yeovil</i>	<i>Epsom, Farnham, Guildford (unless collusion or bad character), Kingston (but say they offer in-relief)</i>	20
xiii) Is relief granted in aid of earnings?								
To widows for example	<i>Cookham, Farringdon, Reading, Wokingham</i>	<i>St Austell, Penzance, Camelford, Falmouth, Truro</i>	<i>East Stonehouse, Tiverton, Newton Abbot, Plymouth, Exeter</i>	<i>Sherborne, Shaftsbury, Wareham</i>	<i>Bristol, Clifton</i>	<i>Axbridge (some children large families to workhouse); Bath, Bedminster, Bridgewater, Chard (sometimes widowers' children to workhouse), Shepton Mallet, Taunton, Wells (as Chard), Yeovil</i>	<i>Dorking, Epsom, Farnham, Guildford, Kingston</i>	33
Possible aid-in-wages		<i>Stratton</i>	<i>Axminster, ?Honiton</i>					3

Questions, as Listed and Numbered by Wodehouse, with Answers Beneath	Berkshire (4 Unions)	Cornwall (6 Unions)	Devon (7 Unions)	Dorset (3 Unions)	Gloucester (2 Unions)	Somerset (9 Unions)	Surrey (5 Unions)	Total Unions in category
xiv) Are Guardians careful to make children and other legally liable relatives pay maintenance contributions?								
Yes	<i>Farringdon</i>	<i>St Austell, Penzance, Camelford, Falmouth, Truro</i>	<i>Axminster,</i> <i>Tiverton, Newton Abbot, Plymouth, Exeter</i>		<i>Clifton</i>	<i>Axbridge, Bedminster, Chard, Wells, Taunton</i>	<i>Dorking, Epsom; Farnham, Guildford, Kingston</i>	22
'Profess' they do		<i>Stratton</i>	<i>Honiton, East Stonehouse</i>		<i>Bristol</i>	<i>Bath, Bridgewater, Shepton Mallet</i>		7
Not noticeable in practice	<i>Cookham, Reading, Wokingham</i>			<i>Sherborne, Shaftsbury, Wareham</i>		<i>Yeovil</i>		7

Questions, as Listed and Numbered by Wodehouse, with Answers Beneath	Berkshire (4 Unions)	Cornwall (6 Unions)	Devon (7 Unions)	Dorset (3 Unions)	Gloucester (2 Unions)	Somerset (9 Unions)	Surrey (5 Unions)	Total Unions in category
xv) Are the Outdoor Relief Prohibitory Order or the Regulation Order strictly observed; if not how, and is this frequent?								
Yes	<i>Farringdon, Reading, Wokingham</i>	<i>St Austell, Penzance, (exceptions agreed by Board), Camelford, Falmouth, Truro</i>	<i>Honiton, East Stonehouse, Newton Abbot, Plymouth, Exeter</i>	<i>Sherborne, Shaftsbury</i>	<i>Bristol, Clifton</i>	<i>Axbridge, Bath (ex. cases referred to PLB, Bridgewater, Chard; Shepton, Taunton, Yeovil</i>	<i>Dorking, Farnham, Guildford, Kingston</i>	28
Not infringed as far as aware		<i>Stratton</i>						1
Observed as a general rule	<i>Cookham (evasion noted)</i>		<i>Axminster, Tiverton</i>	<i>Wareham - occasional departure -</i>		<i>Bedminster – paid stone breaking but not returned as paupers, Wells (widowers’ children)</i>	<i>Epsom – able-bodied men under RO for a fortnight</i>	7

Note: Wodehouse reported on seventy Unions in eleven counties. This table analyses thirty-six of these, including all those in his report from Devon (other than Stoke Damerl excluded as it was administered under a local Act, Cornwall, Dorset, Gloucestershire and Somerset, plus one each from Berkshire and Surrey to provide breadth and context. The 4 counties Wodehouse reported on, but excluded from this analysis are Kent, Hampshire, Sussex and Wiltshire.

Source: UKPP, 'Out-Door Relief. Report of Edmond H. Wodehouse Esq., Poor Law Inspector to the Right Hon. James Stansfield, M.P., on Out-Door Relief in Seventy Unions in the Counties of Berks, Cornwall, Devon, Dorset, Gloucester, Kent, Somerset, Southampton, Surrey, Sussex and Wilts, 23 June 1871. Appendix B, No. 29, First Report of the Local Government Board, 1871-72', (1872 (C.516)), pp. 103-215.

A5.2 Out-Relief: Precis of Questions and Answers for Five Unions Detailing the System Adopted by Guardians in Granting Out-Relief

Wodehouse Question Part 1: System adopted by Guardians in granting out-relief	Axminster	Honiton	Chard	Epsom	Farnham	Farringdon
i) How often is there a general revision of relief lists?	Every year	Every 6 months	Vestry of each parish revise once a year. Guardians then review recommendations at their next meeting	Every year	Every 3 months	Every 3 months
ii) Longest period of relief granted by Guardians?	A year	6 months	A year	3 months	3 months	3 months
iii) What time periods relief generally given? 1) the sick 2) able-bodied (ab) widows 3) single ab women in Unions not under Prohibitory Order 4) ab men relieved in the labour yard 5) old, infirm, chronic cases	Sick: during sickness. Widows/children/elderly: chronic cases placed on permanent list and go from revision to revision	Sick: during sickness. Widows/children/elderly : chronic cases go from revision to revision	Sick: during sickness. Widows/children/old: chronic cases go from revision to revision unless RO reports change in circumstances	Sick: during sickness or for fortnight or month. Widows/children till end of current quarter. Old/ infirm chronic cases for three months at a time	Sick: varies from 2 weeks to 5 weeks. Widows/ children – 3 months and have to appear personally once every 6 months. Old/infirm/chronic cases - 3 months at time	Sick: week to week – never more than 3 weeks Widows/children/old/infirm/ chronic cases: 3 months at time

Wodehouse Question Part 1: System adopted by Guardians in granting out-relief	Axminster	Honiton	Chard	Epsom	Farnham	Farringdon
iv) Is the pauper required to attend along with fresh RO report at every application for relief renewal?	Yes	Attendance on original application, but not on renewal. Fresh report always obtained from RO	Not required. If applicant dissatisfied can appeal in person at next meeting. A fresh report in all cases required from RO	Attendance required unless good reason for absence. Fresh report required from RO on every application.	Unless prevented by age/illness attendance required on application and twice a year afterwards. Fresh report required	Apart from those on permanent list, yes for attendance and fresh report
v) Do Guardians take any steps, and if so what, to get children of paupers on out-relief to school?	Enquiry on application but no steps taken	None	None	None	None	None
vi) Length of time taken to 'dispose' of applications for relief?	Not answered	Not answered	Not answered	Not answered	Not answered	Not answered

Wodehouse Question Part 1: System adopted by Guardians in granting out-relief	Axminster	Honiton	Chard	Epsom	Farnham	Farringdon
vii) Do Guardians generally question applicants or do they rely on relieving officers report? Is it often that members of the Guardian Board show knowledge of family or circumstances; do they visit homes of applicants?	Guardians personally question applicants; in the majority of cases a member is personally acquainted with the applicant's personal circumstances	Guardians personally question applicants; in the majority of cases a member is personally acquainted with the applicant's personal circumstances	Question applicants when come on appeal; in the majority of cases a member is personally acquainted with the applicant's personal circumstances	Guardians personally question applicants; in the majority of cases a member is personally acquainted with the applicant's personal circumstances	Guardians personally question applicants; in the majority of cases a member is personally acquainted with the applicant's personal circumstances	In almost every case the Chair is personally acquainted with the applicant's personal circumstances
viiia) Does the Chair have the Relief Application Book and Report Book with him and insert relief himself properly? If not, who does it and when? Who enters in Relief Order book (and when)?	Chair writes in Relief Order book; clerk in Application and Report book	Chair writes in Relief Order book; clerk in Application and Report book	Chair writes in Application and Report book copied afterwards in clerk's office into Relief Order book. On some days there is delay and the Application and Report book is in the meantime returned to the RO	Chair writes in Application and Report book; relief order book copied afterwards not same day; several weeks done at a time	Not answered	Not answered
viii) Arrangements for labour test from ab recipients of relief	Not answered	Not answered	Not answered	Not answered	Not answered	Not answered

Wodehouse Question Part 1: System adopted by Guardians in granting out-relief	Axminster	Honiton	Chard	Epsom	Farnham	Farringdon
ix) What proportion of relief allowed in money and in kind?	About one fifth in kind	None in kind, other than by RO on own responsibility or after recommendation by MO	Between one third and a quarter in kind	Five twelfths in kind	Between half and third in kind	About one third in kind
x) General disposition towards applying workhouse test? In what circumstances is the workhouse usually offered? When offered test what are the results? [Wodehouse advises he doesn't believe the answers here: Axminster and Honiton especially castigated]	Workhouse offered to ab men, those with drunken habits, and those who make dishonest or suspicious statements to Guardians or officers. Not 1/5 accept	Workhouse offered to ab men, those with drunken habits and those who make dishonest or suspicious statements to Guardians about their earnings. (Wodehouse noted he couldn't ascertain acceptance rate, but thinks a larger proportion go to workhouse than in most Unions. He also noted 'imperfect classification' of workhouse meant it was difficult to apply the workhouse test properly)	Workhouse offered to ab applicants and those of drunken habits; not much used as destitution test; majority refuse the workhouse	Workhouse offered to ab men, except married men left to RO for first fortnight; also offered to applicants of drunken and incorrigible idle habits and those who make dishonest or suspicious statements to Guardians or officers. (Difference in opinion as to acceptance rate but W believed it was refused in a large majority of cases)	Workhouse offered to all ab except in special cases which are reported to the PLB in accordance with the Prohibitory Order. Not more than 1 in ten accept	Workhouse offered to ab applicants, drunks or those with incorrigibly idle habits and those who make dishonest or suspicious statements to Guardians or officers. Not one in ten accept

Wodehouse Question Part 1: System adopted by Guardians in granting out-relief	Axminster	Honiton	Chard	Epsom	Farnham	Farringdon
xi) On what principle do the Guardians generally deal with deserted wives?	Deserted wives generally given out-relief. Workhouse offered if collusion suspected. Husband prosecuted. No reward offered	Deserted wives generally offered workhouse unless satisfied no collusion. Husband prosecuted if found	Deserted wives generally offered workhouse at first; but after time if husband cannot be found offered out-relief. Husband prosecuted if found; no reward offered	Generally given out relief; husbands prosecuted. £2 reward offered	Generally given out relief; husbands prosecuted. £1 reward offered	Deserted wives generally to workhouse. Exceptionally given out-relief but never when ab. Husband is prosecuted.
xii) What principle is applied to deal with contributions, if any, from pensions and benefit clubs?	Club money is estimated at about half its value in determining relief	Club money is estimated at about half its value in determining relief	Club money is estimated at about half its value in determining relief	Club money is estimated at about half its value in determining relief. Cases of pensions rarely occur among out-door paupers	Where man receives club money relief only given to wife and children; club money supposed to be man's support	Money is taken into account in the same way as any other source of income

Wodehouse Question Part 1: System adopted by Guardians in granting out-relief	Axminster	Honiton	Chard	Epsom	Farnham	Farringdon
xiii) Is relief granted in aid of earnings? To what extent and in what class of cases? [Chard appears to breach Outdoor Relief Prohibitory Order but this was not commented on by Wodehouse]	Yes, Wodehouse not able to ascertain any special class of cases to which this applied. Example occurred when he visited. An ab man in regular employment and paid normal wages for the district granted 1/6d to look after his children whilst wife in hospital	Yes, but Wodehouse not able ascertain within what limits.	Yes, to widows and aged persons; widowers' children occasionally taken into workhouse	Yes, to widows and aged persons, but not to any in regular or constant employment	Yes, to widows and aged persons, but not to any in regular or constant employment	Yes, to widows with children. No others.
xiv) Are Guardians careful to make children and other legally liable relatives pay maintenance contributions?	Those legally liable compelled. Legal proceedings frequently taken	They profess those legally liable compelled. Legal proceedings occasionally taken	Those legally liable compelled. When he visited 3-4 cases contribution were being received under Justice's Order	They profess those legally liable compelled. Legal proceedings occasionally taken	Wodehouse was told that those legally liable compelled, proceedings frequently taken	Those legally liable compelled. Legal proceeding about 6-7 times a year. 14 cases contributing when Wodehouse visited
xv) Are the Outdoor Relief Prohibitory Order or the Regulation Order strictly observed; if not, in what instance is it departed from, and is this frequent?	Generally Prohibitory Order carried out. Wodehouse cites a recent case of widow with 'bastard' given relief, and also case noted in xiii above.	Prohibitory Order strictly observed	Prohibitory Order strictly observed	Ab men in some cases left to RO for a fortnight and receive relief in kind. Not aware of other infringements of Order	Prohibitory Order strictly observed	Prohibitory Order strictly observed

Wodehouse Question Part 1: System adopted by Guardians in granting out-relief	Axminster	Honiton	Chard	Epsom	Farnham	Farringdon
xvi) Do medical officers attend meetings of Guardians?	No	No	No	No	No, except for special reasons	No
xvii) Have Guardians or their officers any communications with people administering charitable relief in their Union?	Private charity not taken into account; no system of communication	No system of communication	Relief from charity taken into account to some extent; but no system of communication	No system of communication, but relief lists left with the assistant overseer for each parish	No system of communication	Do not take any form of charity into account except a lodging fee Guardians exercise discretion as to whether to allow "medical extras" recommended by the MO

Wodehouse Question Part 1: System adopted by Guardians in granting out-relief	Axminster	Honiton	Chard	Epsom	Farnham	Farringdon
Unnumbered Ordinary scale of relief allowed to various pauper classes?	Widows and children 1/- and a loaf for every child after one An elderly man or woman – 2/- and a loaf Old couple 4/- and 2 loaves	Widows and children 1/- for each child and 2/6d for the woman is max. relief amount. An elderly man or woman – 3/- max Old couple 6/- max	Widows and children 1/- and a loaf for every child and one 1/- for self if unable to work. An elderly man or woman – 2/6 and a loaf Old couple 5/- and 2 loaves	Widows and children 1/6 for each child, nothing for selves – relief given partly in bread, meat and money. An elderly man or woman – 2/- and a loaf; or 1/- a loaf and 2lbs of meat Old couple 2/-, 2 loaves and 2lbs of meat	Widows if able to work supposed to support selves and 1 child, receive 1/- and loaf for each other child; if not able to work receive 1/- and loaf for self and for each child; An elderly man or woman – 2/- and a loaf Old couple 4/- and 2 loaves	Widows and children 6d and 6lb bread for every child after one An elderly man or woman – 2/- and 6 lbs bread Old couple 3/6d and 12lbs of bread

Wodehouse Question Part 2: Questions on relief administration and supervision by ROs	Axminster	Honiton	Chard	Epsom	Farnham	Farringdon
1 Number of relieving officers.	2 districts, 2 officers	2 districts, 2 officers	3 districts, 3 officers	2 districts, 2 officers	3 districts, 3 officers	2 districts 2 officers;
2 Does the RO have an assistant and what are his duties?	None	None	None	None	None	None
3 Is there a pay clerk, and if so, does the RO attend when poor are paid?	None	None	None	None	None	None
4 Does the RO do all visiting himself? Does he keep a diary/record of visits? Do Guardians see it when hearing relief applications and how often is it called for?	All visits; no diary	All visits; diary kept	All visits; no diary			

Wodehouse Question Part 2: Questions on relief administration and supervision by ROs	Axminster	Honiton	Chard	Epsom	Farnham	Farringdon
5 How often does the RO visit: A) those relieved as sick B) able bodied widows and single ab women C) ab men relieved in labour yard D) old and infirm, chronic cases	Sick: not less than once in 3 weeks Widows with children and old and infirm chronic cases not less than once a quarter;	Sick: not less than once a month. Widows with children and old and infirm chronic cases not less than once a quarter	Sick: not less than once a month. Widows with children and old and infirm chronic cases not less than once a quarter	Sick: once in 3 weeks or more if serious. Widows with children and old and infirm chronic cases – in one district once a month; in the other larger district not less than once a quarter	Sick: not less than once in 3 weeks. Widows with children once a fortnight in one district and not less than once in three weeks in another. Old and infirm chronic cases – in one district not less than once a fortnight; in another not less than once a month	Sick: once a week. Widows and children – once every 3 months unless reason for oftener. Old etc every 3 months
6 Does the RO visit home of pauper before giving order for workhouse or labour yard? If not does he visit afterwards, and when? Reported to Guardians?	Order for admission to workhouse given without visiting home of pauper	Does not as a rule visit beforehand; reports every case at next meeting	Does not as a rule visit beforehand; reports every case at next meeting	Visits where applicant not previously known to him; reports cases to next meeting	Yes, visits beforehand and reports to Guardians at next meeting	Does not visit beforehand if case previously known to him

Wodehouse Question Part 2: Questions on relief administration and supervision by ROs	Axminster	Honiton	Chard	Epsom	Farnham	Farringdon
7 Does the RO visit when granting temporary relief, if not how soon after? Is relief always in kind? And is it reported at next Guardian meeting?	Yes, before granting 'temporary provisional relief'; always in kind; reported at next meeting	Grants 'temporary provisional relief' first and visits afterwards generally – sometimes takes a week; always in kind; reported at next meeting	Does not always visit before grants 'temporary provisional relief' first; where visits afterwards not until next parish pay day; always in kind; reported at next meeting	Visits if practicable; if not within 3 days afterwards; always in kind; reported at next meeting	Yes, before granting 'temporary provisional relief'; always in kind; reported at next meeting	Yes, before granting 'temporary provisional relief'; always in kind; reported at next meeting
8 Do Guardians in any case direct ROs to relieve at their discretion? Do they always require a report at every following meeting on nature and amount of relief?	Frequently. Require report at next meeting	Occasionally. Require report at next meeting	Occasionally. Require report at next meeting	Frequently. Require report at next meeting	Rarely direct to relieve at discretion. When do so they require a report	Not answered

Wodehouse Question Part 2: Questions on relief administration and supervision by ROs	Axminster	Honiton	Chard	Epsom	Farnham	Farringdon
9 Are RO visits at stated intervals, are rounds well known to paupers or does he visit at odd times and unexpectedly?	Uncertain times and unexpectedly	Uncertain times and unexpectedly	Generally on pay day; also occasionally uncertain times and unexpectedly	Uncertain times and unexpectedly	Uncertain times and unexpectedly	Uncertain times and unexpectedly

Note 1: Unions selected: Honiton and Chard adjoin Axminster; Epsom selected randomly, Farnham and Farringdon examples of better practice (Farringdon received praise from Wodehouse).

Note 2: All questions in Part 1 included. First 9 (of 18) questions in Part 2 included; remainder excluded as they related primarily to detailed questions on relief stations.

Note 3: Abbreviations: Relieving Officer (RO), able-bodied (ab).

Note 4: Shading based on Wodehouse's assessment and judgement used as to best fit: red = very poor unacceptable practice, orange = intermediate (but not acceptable practice), green = recommended practice. Unshaded either not assessed or no answer recorded by Wodehouse.

Source: 'Wodehouse, First LGB Report', pp. 89-104, 106-07, 119-20, 124-25, 162-64, 187-89.

Appendix 6: Examples of Imposed Boundary Changes, 1834-1896

Date	Change	Parishes affected
1836	Transfer diocese	Stockland (Bristol to Exeter) Thorncombe (Exeter to Salisbury)
1844	Parish transfer (County)	Stockland and Dalwood (Dorset to Devon) Thorncombe (Devon to Dorset)
1882	Isolated parts of individual parishes transferred	Axminster, Axmouth, Chardstock, Colyton, Membury
Post-1894 Local Government Restructure		
April 1896	Union transfer from Axminster	Thorncombe to Beaminster, (loss c.1000 population) Charmouth to Bridport, (loss c.500 population)
September 1896	Parish transfer (County)	Hawkchurch and Chardstock from Dorset to Devon
1896	Parish realignments	Rousdon linked to Axmouth; Seaton and Beer separated

Source: Diocese transfer: 'Order in Council 4 October 1836', *London Gazette*, 19426, 7 October 1836, pp. 1733-34. County Transfer: *Counties (Detached Parts) Act 1844* (7 & 8 Vict. c. 60) < <https://uk.westlaw.com/> > [accessed 25 July 2023]. Parishes transfer: *Divided Parishes and Poor Law Amendment Act 1882* (45 & 46 Vict. c. 58) < <https://uk.westlaw.com/> > [accessed 25 July 2023]. Parliamentary Borough abolished: *Representation of the People (Scotland) Act 1868* (31 & 32 Vict. c. 48) < <https://uk.westlaw.com/> > [accessed 25 July 2023]. Transfer Thorncombe and Charmouth: DHC, Axminster Poor Law Union, PLU/Axminster/16, Axminster Guardians' Minute Book 1891-1894, Minutes, copy 'Order of the Joint Committee of Devon and Dorset and Dorset and Somerset transferring Thorncombe to Beaminster and Charmouth to Bridport', 27 December 1894, p. 408; 'Twenty-fifth Annual Report of the of the Local Government Board 1895-96, Appendix D', (1896 (c.8212)), p. 372. Transfer Hawkchurch and Chardstock: DHC, Axminster Poor Law Union, PLU/Axminster/17, Axminster Guardians' Minute Book 1895-1897, 9 July 1896, pp. 215-16, 1 October 1896, pp. 245-46.

Appendix 7: Inspector Preston Thomas's Criticism of Axminster in Reports to the LGB and to the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws

Year	Summary of Inspector Preston-Thomas's views:
1899	Report to the LGB: Axminster has an 'extraordinary' level of pauperism (55 per '000). Part of excess may be due to an 'exceptionally large' aged population but mainly due to no fixed rules.
1900	Report on pauperism and the Aged Poor: The West of England was 'extraordinarily and... unnecessarily pauperised'. Ratio in Axminster 53 per '000. This was partly due to the 'unusually large number of the aged'. He noted that 9.25% population were aged over 65, by far the highest percentage in West Country. He described the Union as mainly agricultural, with some small towns and a few 'watering places' which were 'finding favour'. He commented that he was not aware of anything unfavourable in its circumstances.
1902	Report to the LGB: Axminster has one of the highest rates of pauperism and the highest rate of elderly. He argued that pauperism was due old age and depopulation (although he focussed only on the previous 10 years). He supposed that a lack of friendly societies alongside with vague queries on the role of alcohol and a lack of female employment may have played a role but firmly believed pauperism levels were mainly due to local Union administration.
1902-3	Report to the LGB: Axminster was the most pauperised Union in his area with 50 per '000. The Union had the highest number of old people (94 per '000).
1904-5	Preston-Thomas continued to report that Axminster was the most pauperised Union in his district.
1906	Report to the LGB: Axminster had 'defective administration'. Axminster Guardians have admitted to giving more out-relief than necessary, censuring themselves and committed to making 'more careful and strict inquiries on new cases'.
1908	Report to the LGB: Axminster's management was improving but many old people in the Union area.
1909	Evidence given to the Royal Commission Poor Laws on Relief of Distress: Axminster amongst those listed with the highest rates of pauperism at 5.1%, although better than adjoining Dorset Unions of Beaminster (6.9%) and Bridport (5.3%). Preston-Thomas commented on the Union area and its pauperism: Union was an agricultural area, with small towns, watering places and nothing especially unfavourable but 94 per '000 were aged over 65. In his view pauperism was mainly an administrative problem due to freely granted out-relief and laxity in management. There had been some improvement since 1897. When considering why the Union had so many elderly people Preston-Thomas advised he couldn't understand why, it unless it was due to a massive migration by the 'young and vigorous'. Between 1891 and 1901 there had been a 10% reduction in population. (The Report by Baldwin Fleming covering Bridport and Beaminster makes no mention of their extensive pauperism).

Source: UKPP, 'Twenty-eighth Annual Report of the Local Government Board, 1898-99, Appendix B', (1899 (C.9444)), p. 130; 'Twenty-ninth Annual Report of the Local Government Board, 1899-1900, Appendix B', (1900 (Cd.292)), pp 103-05', ; 'Thirty-first Annual Report of the Local Government Board, 1901-1902, Appendix B', (1902 (Cd.1231)), pp. 94-101; Thirty-second Annual Report of the Local Government Board, 1902-1903, Appendix B', (1903 (Cd.1700)), pp. 96, 106; 'Thirty-fourth Annual Report of the Local Government Board, 1904-1905, Appendix B', (1905 (Cd.2661)), p. 218; 'Thirty-fifth Annual Report of the Local Government Board, 1905-1906, Appendix III', (1906 (Cd.3105)), p. 470; 'Thirty-seventh Annual Report of the Local Government Board, 1907-1908, Appendix III', (1908 (Cd.4347)), p. 317; 'Royal Commission on the Poor Laws, Appendix Volume I. Minutes of Evidence ... being mainly the Evidence given by the Officers of the Local Government Board', (1909 (Cd. 4625)), pp 234, 242; 'Royal Commission on the Poor Laws, Appendix volume IA, Appendices to Minutes of Evidence ... being mainly the Evidence given by the Officers of the Local Government Board for England and Wales', (1909 (Cd.4626)), pp. 38, 216.

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- 'Comparative Statement of Amount Expended for In-maintenance and Out-relief, 1871-72', (1872 (126C))
- 'Comparative Statement of Amount Expended for In-maintenance and Out-relief, 1872-73', (1873 (103C))
- 'Comparative Statement of Amount Expended for In-maintenance and Out-relief, 1873-74', (1874 (60C))
- 'Comparative Statement of Amount Expended for In-maintenance and Out-relief, 1874-75', (1875 (122C))
- 'Comparative Statement of Amount Expended for In-maintenance and Out-relief, 1875-76', (1876 (138C))
- 'Comparative Statement of Amount Expended for In-maintenance and Out-relief, 1876-77', (1877 (96C))
- 'Comparative Statement of Amount Expended for In-maintenance and Out-relief, 1877-78', (1878 (85C))
- 'Comparative Statement of Amount Expended for In-maintenance and Out-relief, 1878-79', (1879-80 (80C))
- 'Comparative Statement of Amount Expended for In-maintenance and Out-relief, 1879-80', (1880 (66C))
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- 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January: 1859 and 1860', (1859 Session 1 (208B.I))
- 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January: 1860 and 1861', (1860 (383B.I))
- 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, July: 1860 and 1861', (1861 (324B))
- 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January: 1861 and 1862', (1861 (324B.I))
- 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January: 1862 and 1863', (1862 (307B.I))
- 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January: 1863 and 1864', (1863 (431B.I))

- 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January: 1864 and 1865', (1864 507B.I))
- 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January: 1865 and 1866', (1865 (442B.I))
- 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January: 1866 and 1867', (1866 422B.I))
- 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January: 1867 and 1868', (1867 (431B.I))
- 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January: 1868 and 1869', (1867-68 (344B.I))
- 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January: 1869 and 1870', (1868-69, 337B.I))
- 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January: 1870 and 1871', (1871 (140B))
- 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, July: 1870 and 1871', (1871 (140B.I))
- 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January: 1871 and 1872', (1872 126B))
- 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January: 1872 and 1873', (1873 (103B))
- 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January: 1873 and 1874', (1874 (60B))
- 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January: 1874 and 1875', (1875 (122B))
- 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January: 1875 and 1876', (1876 (138B))
- 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January: 1876 and 1877', (1877 (96B))
- 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January: 1877 and 1878', (1878 (85B))
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- 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January: 1879 and 1880', (1880 (66B))
- 'Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers Relieved, January: 1880 and 1881', (1881 (60B))
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