

## THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY POOR LAW IN LIVERPOOL AND ITS HINTERLAND:

towards the origins of the workhouse infirmary\*

M.W.Royden

Theirs is yon house that holds the parish poor,  
Whose walls of mud scarce bear the broken door;  
There, where the putrid vapours, flagging, play,  
And the dull wheel hums doleful through the day;  
There, children dwell who know no parents' care;  
Parents, who know no children's love, dwell there!  
Heart-broken matrons on their joyless bed,  
Forsaken wives, and mothers never wed;  
Dejected widows with unheeded tears,  
And crippled age with more than childhood fears;  
The lame, the blind, and, far the happiest they!  
The moping idiot and the madman gay.  
Here too the sick their final doom receive  
Here brought, amid the scenes of grief, to grieve.

George Crabbe, 'The Village', 1773

During the early nineteenth century, the Poor Law was often heavily criticised for its leniency and was said to discourage the unemployed from seeking work, while at the same time placing an enormous burden upon the ratepayer. The period of transition between the Old and New Poor Law which took place in the 1830s and 1840s was a difficult one and the urban expansion of the port of Liverpool and the surrounding rural hinterlands imposed considerable demands upon the system. The origins of the Workhouse Infirmary were rooted in the changes brought in by the New Poor Law; by the twentieth century these institutions had become the foundation for many of the nation's

---

\* For the purpose of this paper I have concentrated on only those key developments at Brownlow Hill which could not be ignored within the local context, as a more particular study of the Liverpool Workhouse by C.D.King appears elsewhere in this collection of papers.

general hospitals.

The seeds of the Poor Law itself lie in the Elizabethan desire to remove vagrants and beggars from the streets and to introduce a legislative framework to deal with the growing problem of the poor. In 1601, during the reign of Elizabeth I, an Act of Relief of the Poor was passed which was to be the basis of Poor Law administration for the next two centuries. It divided the recipients of relief into three categories:

- (i) the able bodied, who were to have work provided for them
- (ii) the rogues, vagabonds and beggars, who were to be whipped or otherwise punished for their unwillingness to work
- and (iii) the 'impotent' poor (the old, the sick and the handicapped) who were to be relieved in almshouses.

By the provisions of the Act, each parish was made responsible for its own poor. It was to appoint Overseers of the Poor (usually the church wardens and a couple of large landowners) who would collect the poor rate. The money would then be spent in four main ways:<sup>1</sup>

- (i) *'for setting to work the children of all such whose parents shall not be thought able to maintain them'*
- (ii) *'for setting to work all such persons married or unmarried, having no means to maintain them, and who use no ordinary or daily trade of life to get their living by'* [that is, the able-bodied pauper]
- (iii) *'for providing a convenient stock of flax, hemp, wood, thread, iron, and other ware, and stuff to set the poor on work'*
- and (iv) *'for the necessary relief of the lame, impotent, old, blind and such other among them being poor and not able to work'.*

The Act also made it legal 'to erect, build and set up convenient houses or dwellings for the said impotent poor and also place inmates or more families than one in one cottage or house'; this appears to be the initial authority for the erection of buildings later to become known as workhouses. A number of parishes took up this option realising there was a considerable saving to be made compared with supporting paupers within their own homes or as vagrants. Further Acts were passed over the next two centuries to extend the administration or to prevent abuse of the system.

The initial implementation of the 1601 Act had taken no account of the disparity between the size of parishes in the north of the country compared with those in the south. Childwall, for example, comprised nine townships,<sup>2</sup> each

---

1 43 Eliz. I, c 2.

2 Childwall, Much and Little Woolton, Wavertree, Allerton, Garston, Speke, Halewood,

of which was of similar size to whole parishes in the south. This anomaly was largely addressed by the settlement Act of 1662, which made each *township* responsible for its own poor, especially if they had resettled elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> Parishes were permitted to send paupers back to their own parish to receive relief if they became a burden. (This power remained on the Statute Book until 1945). In Liverpool, following the devastation of the Civil War, it was decreed in 1648 that displaced 'yong Children and Beggars wch ... are found Wandering and begging contrarie to Lawe ...' were to be 'shipt for the Barbadoes or otherwise ... be put apprentices if ye belong to this Towne'.<sup>4</sup> The New World was now receiving the poor of Liverpool; this is the earliest known reference to emigrants from the town. The numbers steadily increased over the next century, as paupers were transported to the plantations for apprenticeships of between 4 and 11 years.

In administering its own poor relief, Liverpool was already acting independently of the parish of Walton-on-the-Hill (of which it was a part). In 1656 it was 'ordered that hereafter this towne shall keep and maintaine their own poore, and that the poor of all other places shal be kept out from begging here'. To further reduce expenditure, a Beadle was appointed to keep out the beggars, received a bonus of sixpence for every rogue whipped.<sup>5</sup>

A second key development in poor law legislation was Knatchbull's General Workhouse Act of 1723 which enabled single parishes to erect a workhouse if they wished, so that they could enforce labour on the able-bodied poor in return for relief.<sup>6</sup> This 'workhouse test' would enable parishes to refuse relief to those paupers who would not enter them. Nationally, the building of workhouses increased considerably under this Act; by the end of the century their number had increased to almost 2,000, most holding between 20 and 50 inmates. In Liverpool, a small workhouse was in operation from 1723 in Pool Lane, South Castle Street, but as the system became more complicated and expensive, in 1732 a new building was erected on a plot of land behind the

---

Hale.

- 3 13 & 14 Chas. 2, c 12, s 21.
- 4 Liverpool Town Books, 17 November 1648 (G.Chandler, *Liverpool* (London: Batsford, 1957), p. 382). One of the first captains to take emigrant servants was Bryan Blundell who was so moved by their plight that he founded the Bluecoat Hospital, the first such charity school in Liverpool.
- 5 Liverpool Town Books, February 1656 (*ibid.*).
- 6 9 Geo. 1, c 7, s 4.

Bluecoat Hospital on the corner of College Lane and Hanover Street.<sup>7</sup> The poor rate was reduced by a third in consequence, since the poor were now subject to the workhouse test and there was strict application of the law. There was, for example, no outdoor relief for the poor, unless a written order was given by the mayor or a Justice of the Peace.

In the surrounding parishes and townships, if a workhouse existed at all, it was usually a small cottage rented for the purpose. In many cases, records appear not to have survived and although isolated references have been found to such establishments, the very existence of the buildings themselves is often in doubt.<sup>8</sup> In West Derby, however, we can be more certain: the 'Old Poor House', built in 1731 on the northern side of Low Hill, near to the present site of the 'Coach and Horses', was in use until the late 1830s.<sup>9</sup> Other rural workhouses are known to have been in operation at Halewood (1723-1837), Huyton (1732), Prescot (1732-50), Speke (1742-76) and Woolton (1834-37). Others may have existed, probably for a short period, at Allerton (1776), Childwall (1776), Ditton (1776), Hale (1776), Cronton (1770-89) and Wavertree (1776) (where a local parishioner was paid to marry a woman and take her off the poor relief!).<sup>10</sup>

Halewood exemplifies a local township dealing largely with its own poor. Records show that overseers spent money on outdoor relief to the sick and short-term unemployed and, more permanently, on orphans and the elderly. Paupers were boarded out for a year at a time in the community, while others received money for board, clothes, shoes, coal and services of a doctor. A copy of the new Act was purchased for 7d in 1723, following which a cottage was rented from Earl of Derby at 6d per year. Most of the overseers' time and money was spent dealing with the problem of policing the settlement issue.

Inevitably, much of what is written about this period reveals the grim face of the poor law administration. Attitudes in the local townships were probably more informal and more sympathetic than those of the hard-pressed overseers of the Liverpool Vestry, constantly battling against the huge demand

---

7 Liverpool Vestry Books, 11 April 1732, fol. 102v.

8 G.W.Oxley, 'The Permanent Poor in South West Lancashire under the Old Poor Law', in *Liverpool and Merseyside*, ed. by J.R.Harris (London: Frank Cass, 1969), p. 48; G.W.Oxley, 'The Administration of the Poor Law in the West Derby Hundred of Lancashire 1601-1837' (unpublished master's thesis, University of Liverpool, 1966), pp. 425-27.

9 M.W.Royden, 'Mill Road: the People's Hospital' (Liverpool: Words Network for the Liverpool Obstetrics and Gynaecology Services NHS Trust, 1993), pp. 2 and 3 (map and illustration).

10 Oxley, 'The Administration of the Poor Law', pp. 425-27.

placed upon them. As Janet Hollinshead observed in her study of eighteenth-century Halewood,<sup>11</sup>

When the Overseers of the Poor could provide Hannah Hitchmough, an elderly lady, with not only her board and clothes, but also with tobacco to smoke, and when they also gathered flowers for a pauper, Samuel Stevenson's funeral, it does suggest that they knew the people concerned and that they cared.

In Liverpool it was inevitable that given the expanding size of both the town and the poor, the impracticalities of the 1723 law would be revealed. Towards the end of the century outdoor relief was reintroduced as the workhouse could not cope with the numbers of potential inmates. In 1771 a new purpose-built workhouse was opened on the outskirts of the town, high up on Brownlow Hill. Despite several alterations and additions to the building, it soon became inadequate for coping with the rapidly expanding pauper population and the poor health suffered by so many of the inmates. In 1801 it became necessary to erect a Fever Hospital to the south of the main building (it was bigger than all the other Liverpool Hospitals put together) and a smallpox ward was added in 1823.

The committee of overseers had evolved into the 'Liverpool Select Vestry' in 1821 and a more rigorous implementation of the poor law followed to combat the heavy operating cost. Abuses in relief were investigated; the labour test became more stringent; able-bodied men were put to work building roads, cultivating land, and breaking stones, while pauper inmates whitewashed cellar dwellings in the town. Meanwhile, the facilities were made even grimmer to discourage applicants. Not surprisingly there was a steep drop in expenditure.

Generally, management of the poor law across the country was inefficient and high costs of indoor relief had led to Gilbert's Act in 1782,<sup>12</sup> which provided rigid guidelines on how parishes could combine into 'unions'. The Act gave instructions on how to manage a workhouse and, together with a recommended set of rules, the aim was produce standardisation as far as possible. Now the unemployed able-bodied poor would be provided first with outdoor relief and then with employment, while indoor relief in poorhouses was confined to the care of the old, sick, infirm and their dependant children.

The later years of the century saw an economic depression when, during times of extreme hardship, parishes themselves took emergency measures rather

---

11 J.E.Hollinshead, 'Halewood Township: A Community in the Early Eighteenth Century', *Trans.Hist.Soc.Lancs.Chesh.*, 130(1981), 32-34.

12 22 Geo. 3, c 83.

than wait for the improbable — that employers would raise wages. The Speenhamland system introduced after 1795 was largely applied in the southern agrarian areas, where wages were brought up to subsistence level by the issue of a weekly dole. Farmers took advantage of this and lowered wages paid to their labourers, knowing that parishes would take the burden of the difference. The economic problems this caused over the following decades, together with hostile attitudes to the pauper and the demands for a right to a standardised system of relief, pressured the Government into setting up a Royal Commission in 1832 to investigate the operation of the Poor Law.

When the Commissioners concentrated their inquiry on the extra costs paid out by overseers, the replies from the parish officials in the West Derby Hundred were either unhelpful or curt. Walton, Much Woolton and West Derby, for example, stated that they paid no extra money to able-bodied men in their parishes, and Toxteth Park and Everton gave little detail in their replies. Liverpool, Ormskirk and Prescot, however, were more forthcoming, suggesting that demands increased during the winter and that relief was largely unnecessary in the vicinity of an expanding prosperous port such as Liverpool. The overall conclusion of the Commission was that most of the poor in south-west Lancashire were aged, infirm or widows. In the rural villages further away from the town, handloom weavers were the only major group who required relief while still in full employment, but they were quite literally a dying breed as the shift towards factory production expanded.<sup>13</sup>

### *The New Poor Law*

Following the conclusions of the Commission, the government introduced a Bill which contained most of its recommendations. While there was great opposition to the proposals from many quarters, there was too much disunity for it to be effective. Royal Assent was granted on 14 August 1834<sup>14</sup> and the Poor Law Amendment Act was placed on the Statute Book.

The new Act minimised the provision of outdoor relief and made confinement in a workhouse the central element of the new system. To qualify for relief, it was not sufficient for the able-bodied to be poor, they had to be completely destitute. The measure of this was their willingness to enter the workhouse, and it was originally planned that this was to be the only provision for relief. The only truly deserving — in the opinion of the government — would be those 'desiring' to reside in such a repellent institution. To help them in their decision, the surroundings were made as unpleasant as possible as a

---

13 Oxley, 'Permanent Poor', p. 30.

14 4 & 5 William 4, c 76.

deterrent to those seeking relief. Consequently, married couples were separated and children taken from their parents. Overall, inmates were segregated into seven groups according to age and sex: aged or infirm men or women; able-bodied men or women over 16; boys or girls aged 7-15; and children under seven. Each group was assigned its own day rooms, sleeping rooms and exercise yards. They could see each other, but not speak during communal meals or at chapel, and could only meet at infrequent intervals at the discretion of the guardians.

By the terms of the Act, a central administrative body was created — the Poor Law Commission — which in turn ordered that parishes were to be grouped together into poor law unions to provide the finance to build the workhouses. Each union was to be run by professional officers under the jurisdiction of an elected Board of Guardians.

In Liverpool, opposition to the changes was vehement, the Vestry believing they were already operating in the spirit of the Law. Indeed, when Gilbert Henderson was sent to investigate Liverpool on behalf of the Commissioners, he was most impressed with what he saw. For example, he witnessed the thorough investigation each poor relief applicant was subjected to by members of the Vestry. In one morning he saw 250 cases dealt with, most of whom were refused relief. His report to the Commissioners was a favourable one; his only complaint was that the Thursday 'liberty hours' were being scandalously abused by the paupers. The amount spent per pauper was looked on with particular favour by the investigator; the national average in 1832-33 was 9s 9d, in Liverpool it was little more than 4s.<sup>15</sup>

Despite opposition to the New Poor Law in Liverpool, the changes finally took place in March 1841 when the Liverpool Poor Law Union<sup>16</sup> was established. The Select Vestry were duly replaced by a Board of Guardians who planned in early 1842 to reconstruct the Brownlow Hill workhouse (at a cost of £25,000) to house 1,800 inmates, a capacity that would soon prove to be totally inadequate.<sup>17</sup> However, opposition was so vigorous that an Act was passed in June the following year to exempt Liverpool from the New Poor Law Act<sup>18</sup> and the Select Vestry were given legal authority to assume the role of

---

15 Eric Midwinter, *Old Liverpool* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1971), p. 74.

16 A misnomer: Liverpool 'Union' was the only union in the country to consist of a single parish. It was the largest Poor Law unit in the land with, by now, 223,000 inhabitants.

17 Midwinter, p. 79.

18 5 & 6 Vict., c LXXXVIII: 'An Act for the Administration of the Laws relating to the Poor in the Parish of Liverpool, 10 June 1842'.

the Board of Guardians.

In the surrounding rural areas, 23 parishes, stretching from Ince Blundell in the north, to Garston in the south, combined to form the West Derby Union, one of the largest in the country.<sup>19</sup> Formed in 1837, it was to be run by a Board of Guardians, the members of which were elected representatives from each parish. That same year the Poor Law Commissioners despatched their first order to the West Derby Union instructing them that, under the terms of the new Act, the united parishes should<sup>20</sup>

contribute and be assessed to a common fund for purchasing, building, hiring or providing, altering or enlarging any workhouse or other place for the reception and relief of the poor of such Parishes.

The Guardians immediately declared that the old parish poor houses, now under their jurisdiction, were totally inadequate to cater for the demands of the new legislation. A search was begun to find a site suitable for the erection of a new workhouse, large enough to provide accommodation for the poor of the entire West Derby Union. Before the end of the decade, the Board had succeeded in purchasing land from Thomas Shaw, lying either side of Mill Lane (Kensington) among the local sandstone quarries and brick-fields. By 1841, the workhouse was complete and the transfer of inmates from the Old Poor House on Low Hill took place during the summer of that year.<sup>21</sup> This was the first occupation of the Mill Road Institution, although it soon suffered a setback when the building caught fire in March 1843, damaging a considerable quantity of clothing and bedding.

No sooner had the occupants moved out of the Old Poor House than the Liverpool Select Vestry applied in March 1842 to rent the building to alleviate

---

19 The parishes were: West Derby, Bootle cum Linacre, Everton, Fazakerley, Kirby, Kirkdale, Walton-on-the-Hill, Aintree, Great Crosby, Little Crosby, Ince Blundell, Litherland, Lunt, Netherton, Orrell and Ford, Sefton, Thornton, Toxteth Park, Childwall, Allerton, Garston, Wavertree, Croxteth Park.

20 'Orders of the Poor Law Commissioners' (1837-1848), Township of Toxteth Park Board of Guardians Archives. Liverpool Record Office.

21 The completion date of 1844 given by such writers as J.A.Picton (*Memorials*, vol III, 1875, p. 424) is incorrect. A contemporary account (T.Smith, *Results of the Central Administration of the Poor Laws - Exhibited in some of its workings in the West Derby Union, but especially illustrated by its operation in the parochial affairs of the extensive Township of West Derby*, 1848) specifically states the completion as being by the summer of 1841. Thomas Smith was a member of the West Derby Union Board of Guardians and a retired Overseer of the Township.

the overcrowding at Brownlow Hill. The rent was payable quarterly at a rate of £80 per year, which seems to have been misappropriated by Mr Dolling, the Overseer of West Derby. (This was a considerable sum, probably equivalent to his annual salary).<sup>22</sup>

The new Mill Road Workhouse of the West Derby Union was barely complete before it was realised that it was already too small. The Guardians soon pressed the new Poor Law Board<sup>23</sup> for permission to extend the site. Their calls, however, went unheeded until eventually the Poor Law Board permitted a makeshift measure which entailed the erection of a new chapel and school (on the site later occupied by the Nurses' Home), thereby providing room for additional dormitories in the main block, which formerly housed such facilities. Further alterations were carried out after additional space was created following the Guardians' resolution to send all sick patients to the fever hospital in Netherfield Road. Such fated patients were occupying precious workhouse accommodation. It was intended that the 'fever sheds' and 'any other spare rooms' should be used as workshops, 'in which competent persons would be employed in the instruction of the boys in some useful trade or occupation'. The men were not to be left idle either: the Guardians added, 'further, that a quantity of land be taken in the neighbourhood for spade husbandry to employ adult and able-bodied paupers'.<sup>24</sup>

Problems caused by the lack of suitable accommodation for the sick came to a head in 1852, when it was decided to build a new hospital fronting West Derby Road (on a site now lying between Home Street and Hygeia Street). It would be known as West Derby Union Workhouse Hospital, arguably the true 'ancestor' of Mill Road Hospital.

No illustrations or views of Mill Road Workhouse (or the Hospital) appear to exist, and no early personal accounts of it have survived. However, in the early 1860s, the Reverend John Jones, a Congregational minister from Kirkdale, who was convinced that 99% of pauperism was due to the temptation of alcohol, set out on a mission to prove his case. In search of evidence, he inevitably toured the three workhouses of the locality: Liverpool (Brownlow Hill), Toxteth (now Sefton General) and West Derby (Mill Road). At last we

- 
- 22 *Ibid.* This is a scathing 76 page attack on the shortcomings of the 1834 Act especially as regards the inadequate accounting procedures of the clerks of the New West Derby Union. It accused Mr Dolling, the Overseer, in particular, of the misappropriation of funds.
- 23 The Commissioners were replaced by the Poor Law Board in 1847, who in turn were superseded by the Local Government Board in 1871.
- 24 West Derby Union Minutes [hereafter WDU Min.], vol. 1, 26 December 1849. Liverpool Record Office.

have a first hand account of what lay within.<sup>25</sup>

We come first of all to the West Derby Union Workhouse. As we pass in through the gate, a building of moderate proportions stands before us. We have seen structures having a far more imposing aspect; but still how unlike it is to the 'Parish Poor House' which the poet has revealed to us.

After comparing what he saw with the image conjured up by Crabbe's description of the rural poor house, he moved inside and again noted the contrast:

How different the scene around us! Here we have commodious and amply lit apartments, made cheerful by blazing fires, while the floor, and tile walls, and the furniture, in point of cleanliness, must please the most fastidious, and be found to meet the requirements of the most stringent of sanitary officers.

And here, too, are the men and women with their uniform attire, some of them more or less decrepit, forming themselves into a circle around the fire; others more active, standing or moving about; and others darning stockings or sewing a garment.

But here is another class - these are bedridden most of them will probably rise up no more. How feeble does this one look, how wan the other; how distressing the cough of a third; they feel they have come to the workhouse to die, but they seem resigned to their fate and thankful for the care and attention bestowed upon them. But for such a provision they know it would fare badly with them, huddled up as they would be in some corner of a dark cellar on a heap of straw; but here they repose on a comfortable couch, attended to by the nurse, cared for by the doctor ministered by the chaplain, and often cheered by the kind look and word of the governor: Yes, they may well indeed feel thankful that their last days shall pass away under such circumstances, although a pauper's burial and a pauper's grave await them...

A not too distressing account, compared to contemporary descriptions of the horrors witnessed at the notorious Brownlow Hill workhouse, and far removed from Dickensian imagery, especially those scenes described in *Oliver Twist* and his requests for more gruel.

In Brownlow Hill, scores of sick persons in every stage of nearly every known illness (a large proportion of them incurable or very old and entirely helpless) were nursed, if it could be called nursing, by able-bodied pauper women selected from the adult wards of the Workhouse. Seldom of reliable or compassionate character, it is unlikely that any of the 'nurses' had received formal training.

In 1865, Agnes Jones, a Nightingale nurse who tried to improve the

---

25 Rev. John Jones, 'The Slain in Liverpool during 1864 by Drink (including Social, Medical and Criminal Statistics of Drunkenness)', reprinted from *Liverpool Mercury* (1865). Mr Jones produced annual reports on the plight of the poor of Liverpool until his death.

nursing at Liverpool Workhouse, wrote:<sup>26</sup>

I am almost distracted between sickness and anxiety and drunkenness. I have one head nurse in great danger. These ex-pauper women whom we are training were paid their wages on Friday, and the next day five came in tipsy ... How little I can do!

At Mill Road similar problems were encountered. Several times nurses were dismissed for drunkenness or fighting on the ward. In September 1863, for example, Elizabeth Hamilton (a nurse on the fever ward) was finding the horrors of her job too much. The ward was already over capacity and patients were being turned away and sent to the Netherfield Road fever hospital. Temptation proved her undoing and she sought solace in the entire supply of wines and spirits which had been ordered for the patients under her care. Not surprisingly, she was found in an extreme state of drunkenness while on duty, whereupon she was given a month's notice to leave her £18 a year job.<sup>27</sup>

Within three years of her arrival in Liverpool, Agnes Jones had worked herself to death, dying from typhoid contracted from the victims under her care. Nevertheless, her work was carried on and Liverpool Select Vestry resolved to adopt her reforms in the Brownlow Hill workhouse. Florence Nightingale said of her:<sup>28</sup>

In less than three years she reduced one of the most disorderly populations in the world to something like Christian discipline. She converted the Liverpool Select Vestry to the conviction, as well as the humanity, of nursing the pauper sick by trained nurses, the first instance of its kind in England.

Close ties had been forged between the Boards and the Health Committee in the fight against the spread of disease. In 1853 the Health Committee of Liverpool contacted the West Derby Board of Guardians requesting co-operation over precautionary measures to prevent the spread of Asiatic Cholera. Local medical officers were to notify the Liverpool authorities of all cases of diarrhoea and cholera in the area, and the relieving officers were to report similar

---

26 T.H.Bickerton, *A Medical History of Liverpool from the earliest days to the year 1920*, ed. by H.R.Bickerton & R.M.B.Mackenna (London: John Murray, 1936), p. 209.

27 WDU Min., vol. 7, 16 September 1863. Other wages paid by the Guardians at this time were: Master of the Workhouse—£120-180 p.a.; Matron—£40 p.a. plus rations; School Mistress—£30 p.a.

28 Bickerton, p. 210.

instances and filthy housing conditions known to them.<sup>29</sup> At this time, the disease seemed to be largely confined to Liverpool but, due to the close proximity of Mill Road, all necessary steps were being taken to prevent it spreading. By 1854, representatives of the Board were being asked to visit a house in Walton-on-the-Hill to investigate a reported case of Cholera.<sup>30</sup>

### *Three Unions*

It was clear that the West Derby Union was far too large to administer efficiently, and therefore on 13 May 1857 Toxteth Park Union was formed to ease the increasing burden being placed upon the Mill Road Workhouse. A new workhouse for Toxteth was erected in Smithdown Road which could take 600 paupers and a further 100 in its new Infirmary (later Sefton General). To further alleviate the cramped conditions at Mill Road, the Guardians placed an advertisement in the local press in May 1862 indicating their desire to secure land of not less than 20 acres on which they intended to erect a new workhouse. It had been reported that:<sup>31</sup>

... the present workhouse has long been inadequate to the requirements of a rapidly increasing Union ... the Guardians have for years been patching and adding to a building which was originally never contemplated to afford accommodation for a Union containing 156,000 inhabitants and provide accommodation for a rapidly increasing number of casual wayfarers which exceeded 4,000 during the last six months ...

Within a couple of months, 37 acres at Walton-on-the-Hill had been purchased from the Earl of Sefton at a cost of just over £11,000. The Guardians had already sold the West Derby Union Hospital on West Derby Road for the same figure, and intended to raise a similar sum to cover the costs of the new building by the sale of Mill Road.<sup>32</sup> The first stone of Walton Workhouse was laid on 29 March 1864 by Thomas Haigh, Chairman of the West Derby Union Board of Guardians. The work on the new building (later to become known as Walton Hospital) was expected to take four years.

During October and November of 1867, Mr Crane, an Officer from the

---

29 Two months later, the Guardians also appointed a Public Vaccinator who would receive ls.6d for every successful case of vaccination. He was not paid for unsuccessful vaccinations.

30 WDU Min., vol. 2, various dates, 28 September 1853-13 September 1854.

31 *Ibid.*, vol. 7, 20 August 1862.

32 *Ibid.*

Poor Law Board, visited the local workhouses of Liverpool, Toxteth and West Derby, in order to report on their condition. His report on Mill Road Workhouse described its workings shortly before their transfer to Walton:<sup>33</sup>

the workhouse is wholly insufficient for the wants of the Union. By the removal of the schools and by other means, it has been of the most part converted into a hospital and infirmary. Nevertheless, it is not large enough even for the sick and infirm poor. No detached infirmary seems to have been erected, nor is there any detached fever hospital. Contagious and infectious cases are placed in separate wards in the main building. At present there are 427 cases on the medical list. There is no resident medical officer, but 2 medical officers constantly attend. There are 15 resident nurses with salaries varying from £15-30 per year with rations etc. for each. Four of these act as cost night nurses. The Guardians provide all drugs at about £400 a year.<sup>34</sup> They have also appointed a dispenser who is in attendance during the whole of each day. The fever wards especially are too full. Great attention is evidently bestowed on ventilation, which is effectively kept up as far as possible; and the utmost cleanliness prevails throughout the establishment. It is only by such precautions that so large a number of cases have hitherto been congregated with safety in so limited a space.

And, regarding Walton:

I visited the new workhouse which is in an advanced state. It is highly desirable that the new hospitals there should be completed with as little delay as possible, so that the sick may be removed from the old workhouse and placed under the care of a medical officer who should reside in the new workhouse and devote his whole time to the duties of his office.

Walton Workhouse was formally opened on 15 April 1868, at a final cost, including the land purchase, of £65,000. It had accommodation for 1,000 'inmates' and was almost full by the opening day. The former Mill Road inmates enjoyed a 'good dinner and a half pint of ale each (oranges for the youngsters), and tobacco and snuff for the aged'. During the afternoon, guests toured the building to the accompaniment of various airs played by the juvenile band of the workhouse. Later that night, dignitaries dined at the Adelphi Hotel when the Chairman of the Guardians praised the Union with an oration of self-glorification, concluding:<sup>35</sup>

No doubt in many of the metropolitan workhouses the poor were harshly and

---

33 *Liverpool Daily Post*, 1 April 1868 (referring to report of November 1867).

34 Many Boards of Guardians would expect doctors to provide their own drugs.

35 *Liverpool Daily Post*, 15 April 1868.

unfairly treated, but in the provinces workhouses were as a rule, fairly and charitably conducted.

As we have seen from the cases of both Brownlow Hill and Mill Road, even before Walton opened it was realised that space would soon be in short supply. Consequently, Mill Road Workhouse, originally due to be sold to help fund the new Walton institution, was reprieved. While the new workhouse was under construction, a programme of alteration was put into operation to turn Mill Road into a workhouse hospital for the sick poor to help prevent the anticipated strain on the hospital wards at Walton. After the transfer of inmates in 1868, the conversion plan was stepped up in the now vacated building.

The period of transition was difficult. Wards had to be opened at Mill Road earlier than expected when smallpox became rife at Walton in 1870. The Board of Guardians issued a directive in January 1871 ordering the Medical Officer to vaccinate all children in the Mill Road workhouse 'as soon as practicable after admission or birth, and do give to the Master certificates stating the cause why any particular child cannot be vaccinated'.<sup>36</sup> The following week the Guardians took a further step in the attempt to control the spread of infection, when a special sub-committee entitled 'the Smallpox and Infectious Diseases Committee' was formed. This was given full powers 'to act as they may deem most advisable in the present emergency',<sup>37</sup> (the emergency being described as an epidemic of 'smallpox and relapsing fever').

Meanwhile, the Board found time to send a petition to Parliament objecting to the Bill then in the Commons which called for the prevention of the removal of poor persons to Ireland, on the grounds that the ramifications for workhouses would be considerable should such legislation be placed on the Statute Book. Greatly affected would be the Liverpool Workhouses, which had witnessed a massive influx of Irish since the 1840s, the majority of whom were now consigned to poverty.

Boards of Guardians still had the power to send paupers back to the parish from which they came, unless that parish paid for their upkeep in the workhouse of their new abode. Not a penny would be spent on those who did not qualify for relief within that Union. Nor were the Guardians averse to sending paupers abroad to the colonies. Canada was their usual choice. In April 1884, the Board decided that<sup>38</sup>

---

36 WDU Min., vol. 9, 25 January 1871.

37 *Ibid.*, 1 February 1871.

38 *Ibid.*, vol. 18, 30 April 1884.

the several poor persons ... being desirous of emigrating to Canada, the necessary steps to be immediately taken to effect the emigration and that a sum not exceeding £14.3.0d be expended for each person upon the common fund of the Union ...

The oldest of these poor persons was sixteen, and the youngest a girl aged four and a boy just two. It begs the question how children aged two and four, without parents, could 'desire' to sail on a crowded boat halfway across the world into the unknown. This was not an isolated incident; several transportations were underwritten by the West Derby Board before the end of the century in an effort to alleviate the 'burden' placed on the Union. One man in particular, however, was concerned about transportation. Harris P. Cleaver, Clerk to the West Derby Guardians and a man noted for his devotion to his work,<sup>39</sup> had deep reservations regarding the transportation of such young children. Fearing for their treatment, he travelled to Canada at his own expense to investigate their situation. So distressed was he at what he observed regarding the condition under which many of the children were living, that upon his return he persuaded the Guardians to discontinue this policy and to find an alternative to keeping the children in the workhouse. A short while later, funding was made available and in the late 1880s the Cottage Homes were opened in Fazakerley to house school children. Liverpool Select Vestry followed suit and shortly afterwards a similar scheme was carried out to erect Olive Mount Children's Homes. The West Derby Union widened their facilities for children when a Children's Convalescent Home was opened in Heswall, later to be renamed the Cleaver Sanatorium.

The spectre of incurable disease lay over the workhouse for a greater part of half a century following the opening of Mill Road. Due to widespread squalor, poverty and poor sanitary conditions, smallpox, cholera and typhoid claimed thousands of victims. Even for those illness that could be treated, medicines were in short supply and cases would be referred to professional vaccinators, who had to provide their own materials. Even the post of Medical Officer was hardly a position of autonomy: the final word on many decisions frequently lay with the Guardians and action would rarely be determined until the following Board meeting. Consider the ludicrous situation caused by this procedure when such lay people (with not a medical qualification between them) were required to give authorisation to the Medical Officer to amputate the foot of a woman named Smith, an inmate of Mill Road Workhouse.<sup>40</sup>

Nevertheless, the later years of the nineteenth century were a period of great medical progress and new attitudes within the nursing profession; in such

---

39 His father had been the Clerk before him, from 1847 until his death in 1880.

40 WDU Min., vol. 10, 17 January 1872.

a climate foundations were being laid to take care for the sick and poor into the twentieth century. Many new institutions, taking advantage of modern developments and techniques, were being opened in Liverpool: the Royal Southern Hospital (rebuilt in 1872), the Hospital for Women in Shaw Street (1883), the Homeopathic Hospital (1884), and the new Royal Infirmary (1890). Workhouse Infirmaries, however, were clearly not at the forefront of such developments, yet change was undoubtedly necessary.

Despite the fact that Mill Road had been reprieved and altered to take on a new role in the early 1870s, it was becoming increasingly obvious that the building was inadequate, outdated, and above all, unhealthy. There was no alternative to its being condemned. The old building had in the past been adapted where possible but it was generally agreed that they had gone as far as they could along that road and a completely new purpose-built establishment was necessary to provide modern hospital facilities. The old building was pulled down in its entirety, leaving only the detached Lower Hospital (built in the 1850s at the rear of the main block close to Atwell Street) for 'imbeciles'.<sup>41</sup> The sick patients, meanwhile, were transferred to the Test House in Belmont Road, the vagrant workhouse of the West Derby Union (later known as Newsam General Hospital).

The foundation stone for the new building was formally laid on 18 March 1891. As work continued into the mid-1890s, Mr Jenner-Fust, the Local Government Board Inspector, told the West Derby Guardians at their weekly meeting in March 1893, that 'Mill Road Infirmary when quite completed would be one of the best specimens of a workhouse infirmary in the country'.<sup>42</sup> 'Workhouse' was the crucial word. The new venture, although a modern building, was still not up to the standard of the voluntary hospitals, and it would be another fifty years before it came anywhere near losing the 'poor relation' tag among its regional counterparts.

Poverty in England throughout the Victorian period was largely equated with immorality, irreligion and intemperance; given the politics and the philosophy of the period, there was little chance of overturning a poor law which was outdated and based from the beginning on a profound misconception of the causes of poverty. It was ironic that when another local civil servant, Mr Holding, commented,<sup>43</sup>

---

41 The Lower Hospital was destroyed in the Blitz of 1941.

42 *Liverpool Daily Post*, 23 March 1893.

43 *Liverpool Review*, 9 February 1889. Mr Holding was the Master of the West Derby Union's new Fazakerley Cottage Home for workhouse children.

party politics are coming more and more to the one thing — to the idea of social reform — we are getting nearer and nearer every year to the idea that the young and the old who cannot work and cannot keep themselves have a right to be kept by the community.

he was, in fact, outlining the provision of the Old Poor Law, which had been so ruthlessly cast aside over fifty years earlier.

The initial care of the destitute fell largely on the shoulders of the parish doctor, who worked for a meagre salary in impossible conditions. He could admit serious cases to the Poor Law hospitals but it was less easy to admit patients to the better equipped voluntary hospitals. Even as late as 1909, the stigma and fear attached to the workhouse infirmary showed no sign of abatement:<sup>44</sup>

... the parish doctor is always available. But the poor do not like the parish doctor and they will adopt any device rather than summon him. They dread what they know to be too often the burden of his message: 'You must go into the Workhouse Hospital'. Of course, we know it is very silly of them to dread the workhouse hospital but that does not alter the fact that they do dread it and that they dread the parish doctor ...

The respectable poor preferred to endure almost any degree of neglect or misery at home rather than be sent to the workhouse.

Dissatisfaction with the Poor Law and disagreement over its objectives led to the setting up of a further Royal Commission in 1905. It concentrated on the relevance of the old Act to a modern urban industrial society, on how far charity was funding areas originally covered by the Act, and to what extent new welfare agencies were undermining the provisions of the Poor Law. The Commission found it impossible to come to unanimous conclusions and issued conflicting Majority and Minority Reports in 1909. Both were ignored by the Liberal government, but the Local Government Board responded to them by tightening up its administration, especially regarding indoor relief, while Asquith prophesied, 'You will find that Boards of Guardians will die hard'. Meanwhile, 'Lloyd George's Ambulance Wagon,' that vast programme of social reform which might eventually make the Poor Law unnecessary, gained momentum and an opportunity to bury the 1834 Act once and for all was squandered.

Over the next three decades the Poor Law was gradually dismantled. The 1908 Children's Act had already given local authorities new powers to keep under-privileged children out of the workhouse. On New Year's Day 1909 old-age pensions were introduced; in the same year labour exchanges were set up to help anyone without work find a job, and in 1911 the National Health

---

44 'The Sixpenny Doctor by a Town Parson', *Liverpool Daily Post*, 27 December 1909.

Insurance Bill was passed which provided state benefit for sickness and maternity. The term 'workhouse' was dropped in 1913 in favour of 'Poor Law Institution' and indoor relief was increasingly confined to the 'helpless poor', children, old people and the sick.

In the West Derby Union, in an attempt to improve administration and financing of what was now three unions operating in the same city, the West Derby Union was enlarged by its amalgamation with the Select Vestry of Liverpool and the Township of Toxteth Park. This merger formally commenced on 1 April 1922 by the terms of the Liverpool Corporation Act passed the previous year. The new authority would operate under the retained name of the 'West Derby Union'.

Chamberlain's Local Government Act of 1929 was the death knell for the Poor Law. Unions and their Boards of Guardians were finally swept aside and responsibility for the destitute passed to the new Public Assistance Committees within County and Borough Councils. So began a difficult period of transition in the face of Local Government cuts and stringent economies in Liverpool, where demonstrations and riots against the tough measures occurred as early as 1931.