

Letters to the Editor of *The Times* ,  
on the Reform Poor Law

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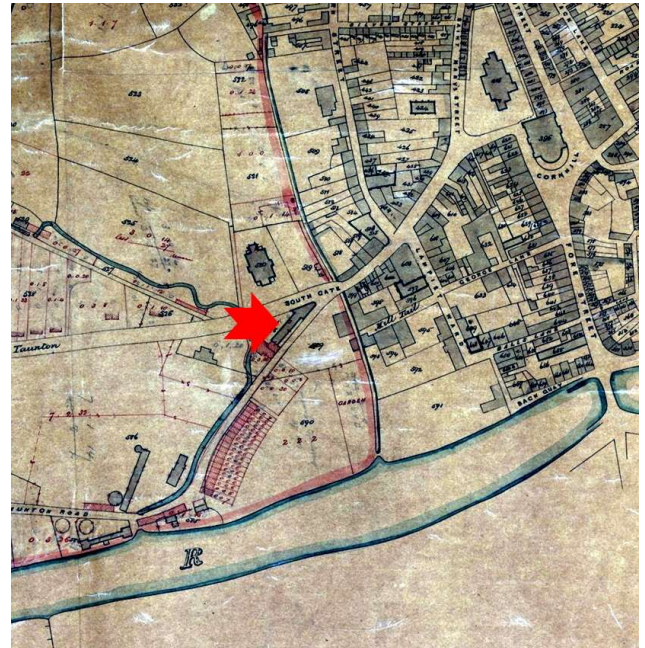


Introduction

Before the poor law reforms in 1834, poor houses existed in many Somerset towns and large villages, and were administered by local elected officials, usually churchwardens. In Bridgwater, there were four Overseers, two for the town, and two for Bridgwater Without.

In the middle ages an almshouse was established by the West Gate. A second almshouse in the town had been established near the South Gate by c1603. In 1618 there were 12 almsfolk, and from 1658 they were paid £3 a year, the interest on a sum bequeathed by Bernard Sparke to be lent to tradesmen. The South Gate almshouse was said to have been 'utterly demolished', probably during the siege in 1645, but it was rebuilt in brick in 1693-5, partly paid for by the gift of £300 from Major Matthew Ingram, a native of the town. The gift was augmented in 1699 by £100 given by Mary Brent, which was laid out in the purchase of land in Hamp. The almshouse evidently remained unfinished for some years. Dorothy Holworthy's charity was being distributed to the almsfolk; by 1820 the alms house was let to the churchwardens for use as a parish poorhouse, and both its founder and its original purpose had been forgotten. The building, stood outside the south gate, on a narrow site between the road to Taunton and the path to Hamp known as Hamp Ward. It was adjoining the Hamp Mill on the Hamp Brook – so

convenient for any drainage of the premises. The brook is now culverted below Broadway. The building had storeys added to the two side wings later and is still there, divided into small houses, and with the entrances on Taunton Road. (Condensed from *VCH Somerset* Vol 6.)



Location of the Parish Poorhouse. c1840-50

Access was off the road to Hamp Ward, as the route of the present Taunton Road was not turnpiked till the late C18.



The Southgate Poor House in about 1860 after it had become inactive.

A report of 1777 showed that some villages had poor houses: Bridgwater, holding up to 80; Lyng, 10; Middlezoy, 10; Over Stowey, 20; North Petherton, 90; Nether Stowey, 14 and Stockland Bristol, 8. The poorhouse housed the sick, the disabled, the unemployed, young children, the old and the mad.

The mood of many in the 1830s was that if the poor could not support themselves or were old

and could not work, rather than being given payments from the parish to keep going in their homes or the parish poorhouse, they should be forced into enlarged workhouses, where the object was to make the able-bodied pauper worse-off than the worst paid labourer, and where they would be badly fed, forced to wear uniforms, and families broken up, with men, women and children placed into separate dormitories. This should result in a reduction in the numbers getting payments and so reduce the amount taken for the Poor Rate from the better-off in the community.

Parishes were grouped into Poor Law Unions. Bridgwater Union covered 40 parishes and had 48 Guardians, drawn from the Gentry. It was split into 7 districts, each with a medical officer and a relieving officer, responsible for visiting the poor,

The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 created a Poor Law Commission, based in London, which in turn created local Assistant Commissioners:

Somerset was organised by Robert Weale (whose area also covered Gloucestershire and Worcestershire), who in turn the created seventeen Poor Law Unions in Somerset to replace the Elizabethan Poor Law, where it was administered on a parish basis. Each Union had elected Guardians, drawn from the gentry and better-off tradesmen.

The Poor Law Commissioners issued detailed instructions as to how the workhouse was to be run. Until 1842 all paupers took their meals in silence. There were no books or newspapers, and smoking was forbidden. Until 1842 paupers had no right to see their children. The able-bodied were kept active by stone-breaking for road repair, oakum-picking, and grinding corn by hand.

The Commissioners issued six sample dietaries, specifying the daily rations each pauper was to receive. Bridgwater's Guardians adopted No 3:<sup>1</sup>

**No. 3.—DIETARY for ABLE-BODIED PAUPERS.**

	BREAKFAST.		DINNER.				SUPPER.		
	Bread.	Gruel.	Cooked Meat.	Potatoes or other Vegetables.	Soup.	Bread.	Cheese.	Bread.	Cheese.
	oz.	pints.	oz.	lb.	pints.	oz.	oz.	oz.	oz.
Sunday - - - Men -	8	1 ½	-	-	-	7	2	6	1 ½
Women	6	1 ½	-	-	-	6	1 ½	5	1 ½
Monday - - - Men -	8	1 ½	-	-	-	7	2	6	1 ½
Women	6	1 ½	-	-	-	6	1 ½	5	1 ½
Tuesday - - - Men -	8	1 ½	8	½	-	-	-	6	1 ½
Women	6	1 ½	6	½	-	-	-	5	1 ½
Wednesday - - Men -	8	1 ½	-	-	-	7	2	6	1 ½
Women	6	1 ½	-	-	-	6	1 ½	5	1 ½
Thursday - - - Men -	8	1 ½	-	-	1 ½	6	-	6	1 ½
Women	6	1 ½	-	-	1 ½	5	-	5	1 ½
Friday - - - Men -	8	1 ½	-	-	-	7	2	6	1 ½
Women	6	1 ½	-	-	-	6	1 ½	5	1 ½
Saturday - - - Men -	8	1 ½	Bacon, 5	½	-	-	-	6	1 ½
Women	6	1 ½	4	½	-	-	-	5	1 ½

Old people of 60 years of age and upwards may be allowed one ounce of tea, five ounces of butter, and seven ounces of sugar per week, in lieu of gruel for breakfast, if deemed expedient to make this change.  
 Children under nine years of age to be dieted at discretion; above nine, to be allowed the same quantities as women.  
 Sick to be dieted as directed by the medical officer.

So, from the above, the ration at Bridgwater was

**Breakfast every day**

*Bread and gruel*

**Dinner**

*One day a week – soup and bread*

*Two days a week – Meat or bacon and vegetables*

*Four days a week – bread and cheese*

**Supper every day**

*Bread and cheese*

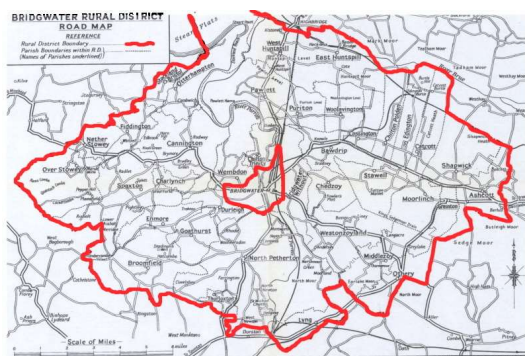
Old people might have tea, butter and sugar in lieu of gruel for breakfast.

What was gruel? According to Wikipedia, gruel is a food consisting of some type of cereal—such as ground oats, wheat, rye or rice—boiled in water or milk. It is a thinner version of porridge that may be more often drunk than eaten and may not need to be cooked. The recipe in the *Manual of Workhouse Cookery* of 1901 has 2 ozs of oatmeal,

½oz, treacle, with a little salt and perhaps a little allspice with water to make a pint. The oatmeal was added gradually to the boiling water and stirred till smooth and boiled for about twenty minutes till cooked. In fact, a present-day porridge of Jumbo oats cooked in this manner and with a dollop of black treacle in the bottom of the dish it is served in, is very palatable.

But in the 1830s the cooking for the inmates must have been done on a large scale. There was no piped clean water, just wells and the sewerage system must have been rudimentary. Contemporary accounts refer to foodstuffs being adulterated or contaminated with things like rats droppings. It was inevitable that contaminated water was used for the cooking, so ensuring the spread of waves of disease.

Bridgwater was notorious for outbreaks of gastro-intestinal infections in the C19, culminating in the cholera outbreak of 1842. See chapter 4 of: <https://bridgwaterheritage.com/wp/people/utilities/public-health-and-water-supply-in-bridgwater/> Piped water was not laid on to the town until 1879



The area of the Bridgwater Poor Law Union, 1834. It later became the area in the jurisdiction of Bridgwater Rural District Council from 1894.

In the area covered by the Bridgwater Union, the population in 1831 was 28,566. There were 48 Guardians appointed. Most villages had one, but large centres like Bridgwater and North Petherton had more.

A new workhouse was to be built at Northgate, Bridgwater, which opened in 1837. While this was being constructed the poorhouses at Bridgwater and North Petherton were allowed to remain open but the others might be sold off. Bridgwater normally housed around 40 inmates, but was held it could hold 112 – by making each bed hold more

than one pauper – at least 2 adults and up to 6 children in each.



The new workhouse on Northgate was designed as a hexagon on the Panopticon principle, where three wings, men, women and children, radiated from the centre from which they might be observed at all times by the staff. Men and women, husbands and wives, were segregated into the able-bodied and the elderly. The buildings bounding the hexagon were various workshops and stores, and the spaces in between were divided by high walls so the sexes should not mix. The hospital blocks to the left were not added until later in the C19.

The 1841 Census showed there were 197 inmates and six staff, Master, Matron, school master and mistress and porter.

Charles Dickens described workhouse life in an article in *Household Words*, in, 25 May, 1850 which gives an impression of what the Bridgwater workhouse was like.

<https://www.thecircumlocutionoffice.com/awalkinaworkhouse/>

Later in the C19 the *Bridgwater Mercury* regularly reported in detail the deliberations of the Board of Guardians, where paupers made their case for help, – and noted what they achieved. It is as if today folk applying for Social Security found their particulars in the Press the following week! The Blake Museum has in its collection a poster over a metre tall listing the names of paupers in the Union in receipt of outdoor relief.<sup>2</sup> Many of the Guardians' records are in the Heritage Centre archive at Taunton. and might be used to make a study of the workhouse later in the C19. But this is for the future.



John Bowen (1785-1854)

He was born in Bridgwater. He left school at the age of 11, and was apprenticed to Thomas Pyke, brass founder but became restless and left to seek adventure. He moved to London in 1805, and in 1806 he started work with a lighthouse contractor named Robinson, and the winter of 1807-8 he was sent to the Farne Islands, Northumberland, to put up a temporary light. In 1808 he went to India for the East India Company, erecting lighthouses and making machinery.

Bowen returned home in 1812 for a two-year break, then he returned to India and the East India Company, and carried out consultancy work for Calman and Brown of Calcutta.

He was involved in 1816 in an adventurous mission to transport the cast iron components of a large iron bridge, and a pumping engine, upriver from Calcutta to Lucknow. Bowen returned overland to Calcutta, but bad health forced his return to England. He became a wine merchant in Bridgwater, and involved himself in local affairs. He became a churchwarden at St Mary's. Later he became engineer to the Bridgwater Turnpike Trust. He became an Overseer of the Poor at the Parish workhouse, as did his friend William Baker

Bowen was a social reformer, and opposed the 1832 Reform Act<sup>3</sup> He edited a newspaper called *The Alfred* from 1831 to 1833, but gave it up as the result of violent opposition to his stance on the Act of 1832, in which the mob attacked his house in Friarn Street, assaulted him and beat him unconscious.

Bowen was appointed a Guardian of the Poor for the Bridgwater Union, but resigned in 1837 over conditions at the Bridgwater Workhouse, and employed a great deal of energy in efforts to reform the situation. He published in 1835 a 111-page. *Letter to the King* denouncing the Poor Law He wrote twelve letters to *The Times*, 20 December 1837 and 11 March 1838 (which he soon after published as a pamphlet with the title *The Reform Poor Law*) and which are discussed here, detailing, for example, 27 deaths in six months, and reporting 94 deaths from dysentery following cost-cutting in food purchasing.<sup>4</sup>

After the publication of *The Times* letters Bowen was called before the Parliamentary Committee on the Operation of the Poor Law Amendment Act in

1838, as was his friend, and fellow overseer, William Baker, a Bridgwater carrier. The Lords committee, chaired by lord Wharnccliffe, took Bridgwater evidence over 19 days, between 12 June to 17 July, 1838. 43 people gave evidence the printed testimony runs to 800 pages. Their evidence was published verbatim, with that of the medical men, some of the Guardians, some of the Relieving Officers involved. It was published in: *Parliamentary papers: Minutes of evidence before the select committee on the operation of the Poor law Amendment Act*, Vol 19 1838, parts 1 and 2; Part 1 may be seen online here:<sup>5</sup> and part 2 may be seen online here:<sup>6</sup>

The first volume has Bridgwater material from p. 525 and covers the medical provision for the workhouse and the area it served in great detail, and was concerned at the time with the reduction in the number of Parish Surgeons, from 17 to 7 to undertake the care of 40 parishes, and hence to the detriment of the poor who required medical assistance.<sup>7</sup>

The second volume begins at page 753 and continues with the evidence of Dr Jonathan Toogood, who was then involved with the Bridgwater Infirmary.

Later, much evidence is given by John Bowen and William Baker about the dire conditions within the Bridgwater workhouse itself. There is first hand evidence from a number of the women who used to attend the sick, and wash the bedding.

Pp 1321 to 1323 is a detailed analytical index to the Bridgwater material. This online volume is hyperlinked from the index pages, so it is easy to find the evidence. Both volumes are a most important source of information on the running of the workhouse and the people involved.

The end of the first volume noted simply recorded the evidence but did not adjudicate on it, it being the end of the Parliamentary session.

It is strange there is no mention of either Bridgwater Union, (other than in statistical tables), or the Parliamentary enquiry in any of the *Annual Reports of the Poor Law Commission*, 1836-1840, so it can only be inferred the affair was quietly dropped and no action taken. It is also strange that Bowen said nothing in his biography of Baker, published in 1854.<sup>8</sup>

All the evidence was also published in Appendix 3 of *Journals of the House of Lords*. vol 70, 1837<sup>9</sup> This appendix also includes material about other workhouses the Committee was investigating at the time, and which occupied them for the whole of May and the first week of June.

Bowen included there much valuable material on the working of the Bridgwater poorhouse, previously, including tables of cost and names of paupers, with the times they had been there.

The following statement by Bowen shows the

statistics, 1829-1835. The average numbers of inmates were about 75. The last 2 columns, being under the new Poor Law shows a reduction in the amount spent on food, and also Bowen's note that from September 1836 to March 1837 the expenditure by head had dropped by a third.

When Bowen became an Overseer he drew up a list of the poorhouse inmates 1830-31. In that year there were 74, – 4 idiots and lunatics, 30 elderly averaging 74 years of age, 24 children and 16 of intermediate age. most disabled.<sup>10</sup>

EXPENSE of supporting and clothing the Inmates of the old Workhouse for Seven Years.  
(Fractional Parts of Pounds Sterling are omitted in the comparative Statement.)

	1829.	1830.	1831.	1832.	1833.	1834.	1835.
Cheese, Butter, and Milk -	75	72	62	74	74	69	69
Bread and Flour -	169	194	184	193	177	135	120
Butcher's Meat, Pigs, &c. -	138	131	136	151	155	120	126
Potatoes, Peas, and Rice -	46	49	36	43	54	52	40
Groceries -	39	43	36	28	26	28	32
Malt, Cider, and Spirits -	54	43	50	50	55	42	44
Soap and Candles -	16	19	18	18	17	14	12
Coals and Turf -	32	42	29	28	34	34	33
Apparel -	68	42	62	47	55	52	63
Shoes, Leather, &c. -	29	31	22	24	32	28	18
Sundry House Bills -	15	16	15	13	15	14	16
Total Annual Amount, including the Fractional Parts omitted -	685	687	656	674	698	590	578
Average Number of Persons in the House, including the Governor and Family -	74	76	78	86	83	78	73

Average Expense of each Person weekly, 3s. 2½d., Clothing excluded; the weekly Expense on the old System was 2s. 11d. for each Person. From September 1836 to March 1837 the weekly Expenses of each on the new System ranged from 1s. 10½d. to 2s. 1½d., being a Reduction of about 33 per Cent.

(Signed) J. BOWEN.

Elsewhere in his writings, Bowen complained about the accommodation in the new Northgate workhouse. The windowsills were too high, so the inmates could not see out, but far worse was the cramped layout which deprived them of space. He showed that a prisoner in his cell had 1000 cu. ft., but the workhouse inmate 108 cu. ft. The prisoner had 292 ounces of food per week, but the inmate 145. Annual deaths of convicts in the prison hulks was 2.3%; in prison 2.5%, and in Bridgwater workhouse, while the epidemic raged, 41.4%.

pointing out its defects. The remaining seven letters covered the new Bridgwater set-up in great detail, in particular the outbreak of what appears to have been virulent dysentery in which thirty inmates out of ninety-four died. His letters are important because they include tables listing the named sick and dying, taken from the Guardians' record, and also the texts of numerous letters and extracts from the minute books.

Letter I,

Bridgwater, Dec. 20, 1837

Bowen castigated prominent Parliamentarians for their unfeeling attitudes towards the working poor and their dissemination of falsehoods about them, and the removal of their right to be helped

The *Times* letters

John Bowen described the working of the Amended Poor Law Act in the first five letters,

A series of twelve letters by John Bowen on Poor-law reform published in *The Times*, 1837-8

Then published by him as a pamphlet

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by the parish. This on the grounds of saving the costs of the rate-payers.

Letter II,

Bridgwater, Jan. 3, [1838]

Bowen continued on his theme, noting how the poor were deprived of their rights but had no redress. The poor were reduced being beggars.

Letter III,

Bridgwater, January 8, 1838

In this letter Bowen described how the poor were to be treated by the better-off whose only goal was to reduce the amount they were to pay for the poor rate. By concentrating them in Union workhouses, economies might be made.

Letter IV,

Bridgwater, Jan. 11, 1838

Bowen railed against the Board of Poor Law Commissioners, with claims about secret tribunals. They had the ability to establish scales of rations for the inmates. He quoted a Parliamentary statistic that £2,400,000 was saved annually, and that the value of a number of country estates had increased in consequence. He quoted the case of the wife of a local Guardian who was refused permission by an Assistant Commissioner to provide, from her own pocket, Christmas dinner for the inmates.

Letter V,

Bridgwater, January 15, 1838.

He quoted the case of a Mr Mott,<sup>11</sup> who had been a contractor for feeding the paupers of Newington, Alverstoke and Lambeth, who remonstrated with a Guardian who wished to provide small packets of tea to the elderly inmates, as it would cost an extra 6d a week additional to their food allowance. Mott was later appointed a Commissioner with the duty of regulating diets.

*From here onwards, in the rest of the letters, Bowen noted the detail of administration of the Bridgwater workhouse.*

Letter VI,

Bridgwater, January 10, 1838

He had been an Overseer under the Old Law for four years, but declined to be involved after the formation on the Bridgwater Union in May 1836, but changed his mind on learning of the way the

new law was being applied in the town, so was elected the following year. He was opposed to the secrecy being imposed on the Guardians, and defended his right, and indeed obligation, to go public. He published a pamphlet about the problem and then a series of letters to *The Times*, where he described the effect of the outbreak of diarrhoea from eating gruel which killed about 1/3 of the inmates, and despite the entreaties of the medical staff, the local Guardians persisted with it as it had been mandated by the Poor Law Commissioners, in London, and could not be changed.

The enquiry by the local Guardians meant that they were in effect being judge and jury in their own case. It was held in secret from which the public were excluded, and Bowen was refused a copy of the final report.

Letter VII

Bridgwater January 15, 1838

Bowen discussed another enquiry, by Assistant Commissioner Weale, into a *Times* letter from him. He also described inadequacies in the medical provision in North Petherton workhouse. He quoted a letter from the commissioners refusing him a copy of Weale's report. He quoted verbatim the correspondence with the Commissioners, and also extracts from the records of the Visiting Committee and the medical weekly returns about the inmates' health. The latter showed many delays in action being taken by the authorities

Letter VIII,

No date

Bowen discussed the No 3 diet, introduced 14 June 1836. It was not rigidly applied at first and often milk was substituted. But the Board of Guardians objected as it deviated from the Commissioners' rule, so it was rigidly enforced from 16 August. By 27 September colic and diarrhoea had appeared in the elderly and children. He quoted Parliamentary evidence that the same had occurred in the workhouse at West Hampnett, (West Sussex) and a letter of October 25 to the Guardians from Abraham King, one of the medical officers. In reply they said the diet should not be eased for those not on the sick list.

He quoted extracts from the Minute Book August 16 1836 to February 14 1837 showing that a

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hundredweight (50 kg) of oatmeal was ordered twice a month.

Bowen took up his post as Guardian on 31 March 1837

Letter IX,

Bridgwater, January the 27th, 1838.

He began his task by inspecting the poorhouse, and examining the documentation – the obituary, the visitors' book, the Medical Weekly Returns and other papers. He noted that the general appearance of the poor was "haggard and emaciated beyond description". The Visitors called in the medical officer and together they approached the Guardians with the request that the diet should be changed to milk for breakfast, and rice and milk substituted for the bread and cheese dinners on two days a week. The Guardians were told that in the preceding nine months 30 of the 94 inmates had died, whilst in the preceding year, ending March 1836, on the old dietary, only 9 had died out of thirty inmates out of an average of 66 inhabitants. This was dismissed and the medical officer told that he was exceeding his authority by wishing to change the diets of inmates not on his list. The Guardians were more concerned to avoid a complaint from London should they make an alteration to the diet.

As a footnote Bowen cited correspondence of 1823 when a similar outbreak occurred among the prisoners of Millbank Penitentiary, London, and the government called in medical advice, then changed the diet. Bowen remarked: "*while the wretched victims, who were left to perish by pestilence, in the Bridgwater Workhouse, were helpless children, and worn-out labourers, who had, by a life of unmitigated toil, helped to enrich the persons who persisted in racking out their entrails with the Commissioners' gruel.*"

He then provided a table listing the sick in the workhouse between April 11 and April 24 1837, with their names and ages. Out of the 22 listed 10 died. and noted *Such was a part of the awful catalogue subjected to the inspection of the Committee, while the gruel pot had scarcely ceased bubbling for the day. The fetid stench throughout the whole house was so intolerable that an intelligent and humane member of the visiting committee, who had commenced an examination of the house, declared himself "utterly unable to inspect the wards," and reluctantly gave up*

*the attempt. He assured me that nothing could induce him to repeat the effort, "as he was entirely overcome." The wards were however minutely inspected, and seldom has a more distressing and offensive exposure of human infirmity been exhibited. The loathsome and heart-rending spectacle defied all description. A number of persons of all ages suffering intense agony : others involuntarily voiding their faeces, apparently worn out by the operation of the disease. Those who were not yet affected bearing in their countenances the strongest marks of terror and apprehension ; and all breathing and absorbing a heavy fetid atmosphere, saturated with the poisonous effluvia of putrid excrements. The effect of this mass of suffering was heightened by the consideration, that it was to be ascribed to a wilful and deliberate disregard of representations repeatedly made by the surgeon, and by members of the Visiting Committee.*

The Visiting Committee approached the Guardians again, and this time their request was acceded to – but this was six months after the medical officer's first report, in October 1836, about the effect of the gruel diet. The Guardians wrote to the Commissioners in London, and the alteration was accepted, and from April 21 when the diet changed, the inmates' health improved.

Bowen provided a table listing all the deaths between September 1836 and March 1837. Of the 27 deaths noted, 19 were children under 4 years of age.

Letter X,

Bridgwater, February the 5th, 1838

In this letter Bowen discussed the scope of the enquiry by Mr Weale, noted in letter VII. Only Mr Poole the surgeon, who deputised for Mr King the medical officer, when the latter was sick – from diarrhoea, Mr Underdown, Clerk to the Guardians, and Mr Gover, the Workhouse Governor, were interviewed.

Bowen complained that neither Mr King, nor the Matron, nor any members of the Visiting Committee nor any surviving inmates were interviewed. The interviewers were highly selective in the questions they asked.

Letter XI,

Bridgwater, February the 24th, 1838

This letter includes eye-witness testimony by William Baker. one on the Visiting Guardians. It was written in January 1838. He noted that as he

lived nearby, [in St Mary Street, Bridgwater, about 100 yards from the workhouse] he was often called upon. He noted that despite the workhouse being held infectious, none of the Guardians visited it for two or three months. The medical officer advised him not to go into the bedrooms, and he advised the Governor and Matron to go there as seldom as possible. Despite this the governor and his children were infected and were allowed leave of absence to recover. Efforts to hire nurses and other workers failed.

Baker noted the incidence of mortality there before the old system changed and the increase since, and implored the Guardians to send no more, but without success. He was told it could house more inmates. Baker implored that new inmates should have out-door relief instead.

In the middle of December, 7 or 8 children were moved to North Petherton, due to overcrowding, but on that day a man, wife and eight children were moved to the workhouse. Beds having been sent to North Petherton with the children, there were no spares, so at eight o'clock at night the Matron asked Baker to find alternative accommodation, but he failed. Instead accommodation was found by moving the corpse of a female pauper from the bed on which she had just died.

Baker commented that tea and sugar were granted by the Governor to paupers who helped with chores as neither nurses or servants could be found to work there, but this was stopped by the Guardians as being illegal.

Bowen commented that 127 paupers were sent to Bridgwater and North Petherton at this time of which 31 died, so contributing to the saving on the poor rate for the Bridgwater Union on £4,712 7s. 1d.

In a footnote Bowen commented that the Union was formed in May 1836. but it was not until 29 December 1837 that the Guardians authorised the payment of an annual salary in £15 for a nurse. In that time 73 inmates died. He quoted extracts from the North Petherton Visitors' book where the Guardians were dubious in paying 2/6 for the children's hair to be cut to prevent itch. Instead they wanted a pauper to be sent from Bridgwater to do it – for nothing!!

## Letter XII,

Bridgwater, March the 11th, 1838.

In this letter Bowen discussed the payment of the doctors employed by the Guardians who had found their remuneration insufficient. Two doctors were employed and instead of meeting their request for better terms, the Guardians requested they treated them as private patients until a replacement might be found. They appointed John Rodney Ward who was clearly an unqualified man, despite the grandiose claims he made.<sup>12</sup>

Bowen commented: *The managers of the Board plumed themselves beyond measure, at having attracted to Bridgwater this constellation of dignities<sup>13</sup>, from Newcastle, by the tempting bait of £130. per annum. Thus, to add £17 11s. 9d. a year to their savings, they deprived the diseased poor of the important advantages to be denied from a united Medical staff, well known to the whole neighbourhood, generally disposed to assist each other, and intimately acquainted with the wants, habits, character, and circumstances of the laboring population.*

He noted that from here on references to diarrhoea disappeared from the Obituary and the Medical Weekly Return. Instead anodyne terms were used like " fever." "fever (simple)." "inflammatory fever." "scarlet fever." "fever with eruption," "fever with cough." "fever with Debility." "Fever with great debility ." "typhus fever." "putrid fever." &c. &c.

Bowen railed against the inaction of the Guardians whose responsibility it was, and concluded by commenting of the medical state of the NEW workhouse, where between 17 January and 1 March 17 inmates died, and over 50 were recorded as suffering from various diseases, and an unknown number of children confined to bed, as Mr Parsons, the visiting Magistrate noted:

*I went round the house with Mr. Ward, the Medical Officer, on the 31st of December, and found that no less than 63 children were afflicted with the Itch, some of them in a great degree*

H. PARSONS."

Bowen included several tables with figures for the numbers of inmates. He concluded:

*Here we have the true " Workhouse test of destitution," sanctioned by authority, and reduced to practice ! The requisite instructions are equally brief and compendious. Employ the cheapest Medical aid you*



can procure;—get the Typhus Fever, and an assortment of other Plagues into your Workhouse ;—be careful that no Medical survey be allowed;—call no second advice or assistance; thus may your Fevers stand a better chance of having a clear course, and your returns be easily managed. In addition to the direct savings of this system by deaths, you will find, if your Fevers happen to work well, that even under the pressure of the most inclement season, out of 203 applicants for bread, 128 may be so terrified, by your offering them this new test of destitution, that they will prefer begging, pilfering, or famishing out of the house, to the more immediate destruction by Pestilence which threatens them within.

Here is a practical explication of the principles which the Poor Law Commissioners deliberately established by sending a charge of blood-guiltiness to be enquired into by the very parties implicated in the crime;—by officially expressing their “satisfaction” at the self-acquittal of these parties, without having seen one word of the evidence ;—by withholding the report of their Assistant on the fatal transaction ; and by neglecting to express any disapprobation on the misconduct of those persons whose wilful perseverance in wrong brought so many of their helpless fellow creatures to an untimely grave. By this course of conduct deliberately adopted, the Poor Law Commissioners I repeat, virtually said to all the Boards of Guardians in the Kingdom ;—if you have a highly infectious and fatal disease raging in your Workhouse, send in as many of the helpless poor as you can to be subjected to the deadly infection ; and if any complaint should be made of their having been got rid of in this way, we will refer the charge to yourselves. Examine such witnesses as you “think necessary,” and when you have acquitted yourselves, as you will of course do, we will express our entire satisfaction at the verdict, and hush up the whole affair by refusing to grant any information on the subject.

Such is the lesson deliberately taught by the Legislative assembly of Somerset House. The fatal results having been carefully copied from their own records; it now remains to be seen, how long the lives of our helpless fellow creatures are to be entrusted to irresponsible mercenaries, who have adopted for their principle of action, not only the spirit, but the very letter of Timon’s malediction.<sup>14</sup>

Let the famished flesh slide from the bones  
Of the Needy ; or prisons swallow them,  
and diseases lick up their bloods.

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#### Afterwards

The Parliamentary Committee declined to adjudicate on the Bridgwater evidence but simply published it. It was never re-visited by them, so the affair was effectively hushed up.

In 1849 critical letters appeared in the local press about bad ventilation and overcrowding, as well as a shortage of water, at Northgate. A Parliamentary investigation found them to be true. The Board of Guardians was abolished in 1929 and local government administered the Poor Law until 1948 when the National Health Service was formed and the Social Security system established. The hospital block was retained, while the workhouse was demolished in the 1980s.

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#### Editorial note

The original letters often had footnotes. The notes to this introduction are indicated by superscript numbers.

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#### Sources

C. A. Buchanan, “John Bowen and the Bridgwater Scandal”. *Proceedings Somerset Archaeology and Natural History Society*. Vol 131, 1987, 181-201.

Peter Higginbotham, *The Workhouse Encyclopedia*, 2014 ed.

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Ruth Richardson, *Dickens and the Workhouse: Oliver Twist and the London Poor 2012*

Online:

A fine series of articles on The Victorian Web:  
<http://www.victorianweb.org/history/poorlaw/index.html>

And

<http://www.workhouses.org.uk/Bridgwater/>

Blake Museum information leaflet

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#### Editorial end notes

<sup>1</sup> *Second Report of the Poor Law Commissioners*, Vol 19, 2. 1836 The text begins with a list of witnesses in this part and the evidence starts at page 753. The first volume has Bridgwater material starting at page 525, with evidence about the medical facilities, and statistical material about the Bridgwater Poor Law Union.

<sup>2</sup> BWRAB: 1992/70/45

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<sup>3</sup> The Representation of the People Act 1832 (also known as the 1832 Reform Act, Great Reform Act or First Reform Act) was an Act of Parliament of the United Kingdom that introduced major changes to the electoral system of England and Wales. It abolished tiny districts, gave representation to cities, gave the vote to small landowners, tenant farmers, shopkeepers, householders who paid a yearly rental of £10 or more, and some lodgers. Only qualifying men were able to vote; the Act introduced the first explicit statutory bar to women voting, by defining a voter as a male person.

It was designed to correct abuses – to "take effectual Measures for correcting divers Abuses that have long prevailed in the Choice of Members to serve in the Commons House of Parliament". Before the reform, most members nominally represented boroughs. The number of electors in a borough varied widely, from a dozen or so up to 12,000. Frequently the selection of MPs was effectively controlled by one powerful patron. Criteria for qualification for the franchise varied greatly among boroughs, from the requirement to own land, to merely living in a house with a hearth sufficient to boil a pot.

<sup>4</sup> The text of the pamphlet has been digitised by the Internet Archive and may be read here:  
[https://archive.org/search.php?query=john+bowen+the+times&&and\[\]=year%3A%221838%22](https://archive.org/search.php?query=john+bowen+the+times&&and[]=year%3A%221838%22)

<sup>5</sup> <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/101710346>,

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/Parliamentary\\_Papers/ml8SAAAAYAAI?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=poor+law+commissioners+1838+bowen&pg=PA1058&printsec=frontcover](https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/Parliamentary_Papers/ml8SAAAAYAAI?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=poor+law+commissioners+1838+bowen&pg=PA1058&printsec=frontcover)

<sup>7</sup> Lesley Sutcliffe, *Dr Jonathan Toogood*, 2017, Chapter 10 – Jonathan Toogood and the Law.

<sup>8</sup> John Bowen, *A Brief Memoir of the Life and Character of William Baker*, ... 1854.

<sup>9</sup> <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.c0000031724&view=2up&seq=9>

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid* pp 695-606

<sup>11</sup> Charles Mott, (bap. 1788, d. 1851), assistant poor law commissioner, was to obtain contracts to manage paupers under the old poor law, first in the parish of Newington, Surrey, and later in the neighbouring parish of Lambeth. He became joint proprietor of the Peckham House Asylum, a private lunatic asylum for 300 mixed private and pauper patients, into which he directed the paupers from the parishes he was managing, and another private lunatic asylum at Haydock Lodge, near Newton-le-Willows in

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Lancashire. The latter became the object scandal due to mistreatment of an inmate. He was later sued by his creditors. (ODNB). The facts of his biography show he was little more than a crook.

<sup>12</sup> Ward was of great interest to the Commissioners, and time was spent examining his *bona fides*. He does not seem to have been qualified in surgery, and later was before the Assize at Wells on medical negligence in his treatment of a pauper. (Sutcliffe, p 73), Later still, he was there again for procuring an abortion of Hannah Chidgey, who was pregnant by him. *The Times* 28 May 1840.

<sup>13</sup> *Constellation of Dignities* – This relates to the series of spurious medical qualifications Ward claimed for himself.

<sup>14</sup> An allusion to Shakespeare's play *Timon of Athens*, 1606