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
Edited by Tony Woolrich
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Bridgwater, January the 27th, 1838.

LETTER IX.

"There is DEATH in the Pot."

2nd Kings, chap. 4,

— Go, boast of this ;
And **if** thou tell'st the heavy story right,
Upon my soul, the hearers will shed tears ;
And say,—Alas, it was a piteous deed !

Henry 8th, part 3rd.

SIR,

The first meeting of the present Board of Guardians was held on the 31st ,of March 1837; the routine business consequent on the commencement of a New-year occupied the day. The second meeting was, with slight exceptions, of a similar character.[1] Having been appointed a member of the visiting committee, and informed myself, by personal inspection, on the state of the Poor then in the Bridgwater Workhouse, I went carefully through the obituary, the visitors' hook, the Medical Weekly Return, and such other documents as would fairly bring under my 'dew the past and present condition of the inmates of the Workhouse.

At this time the general appearance of the Poor in the house was haggard and emaciated beyond description. On the 14th ol April there were twelve cases of Diarrhoea on the Medical Weekly Return ; several of the wretched sufferers had been seized in the course of the week. Under these alarming circumstances the Visiting Committee requested the Medical Officer to attend them at the Workhouse; when that gentleman again strongly urged the necessity of making an alteration in the diet. He proposed that gruel should he no longer administered, but that instead of it milk should he used for breakfast, and that rice and milk should he substituted for bread and cheese dinners, on two days in the week. The Visiting Committee unanimously agreed to recommend the suggestions of the Medical Attendant to the Board of Guardians, and a reverend member of the Committee, who was the appointed visitor for the week, made the following entry in the Visitors' book in reply to one of the printed questions,

Question.—Are the inmates generally healthy, or is there any sickness prevalent among them? If so, state particulars, and especially if any dangerous or highly infectious case of illness exists in the house.

Answer.—'There is still Diarrhoea and a disposition to increase. The .Medical Officer recommends rice and milk as a substitute for bread and cheese dinners, on two of the days.

The members of the Visiting Committee proceeded to the Board of Guardians to support the recommendation of the Medical Officer. The reverend gentleman who was the for the week, was considered the most proper person to state the reiterated opinion of the Surgeon, and the distressing condition of the inmates, to the Board. This he did with the temper and earnestness of a Christian pastor urging his brother men to the performance of a solemn duty. The recommendation of the surgeon was strongly and feelingly advocated and the fact stated, that the old people who were allowed tea had suffered less from Diarrhoea than the other inmates. Another member of the Visiting Committee, with documents in his hands, to which he referred in proof of his assertions, urged on the board the appalling fact, that 30 persons had died in the Workhouse in nine months, out of an average of 94 inmates, while in the same house, on the old dietary, only 9 persons had died in the parochial year ending March 1836, and the same number in the previous year, out of an average of 66 residents. He further insisted on the strong probability afforded by the rapid progress of the disease, during the previous fortnight, that it would soon acquire all its former virulence.

So far were these statements from effecting any amelioration in the condition of the unfortunate inmates of the Workhouse, that the recommendation of the surgeon was not even put to the meeting, or any communication made to him on the subject! The matter was not only passed by, as altogether unworthy of attention, but it was authoritatively declared from the chair,

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that a resolution embodying such a recommendation could not he entertained;—that the Medical man had *gone out of his course* in making such a recommendation;—that although it was competent for him to prescribe diet for the sick, he could not he permitted *to make experiments on the diet of (hose who were not actually on his list*;—that the dietary was an important part of the regulations of the Poor Law Commissioners, and that the Board might as well talk of altering the Poor Law altogether, as of making any alteration in the dietary.[2] 'The inability of the Commissioners' dietary table being thus authoritatively propounded by the Chairman, was reluctantly received by the Board as a *legal* decision on the subject. No vote was taken, and thus a number of helpless men, women, and children, were deliberately given up to the further operation of the fatal gruel.

Not being disposed to acquiesce in that reading of the Law which had been so solemnly propounded, I attended the Workhouse on the next Board day, Friday 21st of April, as one of the Visiting Committee. The disease had now made so fearful a progress that the forebodings of the past week had fallen short of the awful reality. The Medical Weekly Return recorded the following, among other cases, some of them of a complicated character, and several of them appearing to be past all hope of recovery.

Extract front the Weekly Return of the Sick in the Bridgwater Workhouse, during one week, from April 14*th to April* 21*st,* 1837.
N.B. The first eight were complicated cases, accompanied by, or connected with, severe Diarrhoea,

Names	Age	Disease	Subsequent Remarks
Burge, Henry	10	cough and diarrhoea	
Feltham, John	11	colic	
Cox, George	3	cough and diarrhoea	died May 4th
Kidner, Betty	44	colic and fever	
Cogle, John	44		died April 16th
Tucker, Mary	77	cough and debility	died July 28th
Coombes, (Infant)		bowel affection	died July 11th
Pocock, James	80	bowel affection	died July 11th
Board, William	2	diarrhoea	
Adams, Margaret	24	diarrhoea	
Bailey, Sarah	23	diarrhoea	
Wilkins, Flora	4	diarrhoea	died May 16th
Caddick, James	7	diarrhoea	
Caddick, Thomas	4	diarrhoea	
Parker, James	60	diarrhoea	
White, Mary	40	diarrhoea	died May 16th
Rowsell, James	57	diarrhoea	died December 14th
Bulpin, Betty	66	diarrhoea	
Crate, George	37	diarrhoea	
Sellick, Martha	55	diarrhoea	died November 13th
Perry, Henry	85	diarrhoea	died October 11th
Harden, Mary	24	diarrhoea	

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[3] 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 member of the Committee who undertook to inspect the wards reported on his return the pitiable condition of-the inmates, and distinctly declared that the Committee would be sanctioning a further wholesale destruction of the helpless Poor, if they *permitted* their own urgent representations, and those of the Medical Attendant, to be again smothered and passed over;—that they were bound to make another, and an importunate, appeal to the Board, on behalf of the wretched sufferers; and that if they again failed to procure a decent attention to the frightful condition of their perishing fellow creatures, that they should solemnly protest against the course so obstinately pursued, and withdraw from any further participation in the crime. I declared, on my own part, that, whatever the determination of the Committee might be, "if decisive means were not taken to check this murderous system, in which by acquiescence we should all become accessories," I would on that day withdraw from the Committee, .and appeal in the strongest manner I was able to the Public.

The course of proceedings thus urged upon the Committee, was readily adopted by them. They went directly from the Workhouse to the Board of Guardians ; where, the Chairman not being present, they escaped the infliction of another long lecture on the incompetency of the surgeon to propose, and of the Board to entertain, any resolution condemnatory of such an important element of the new Poor Law, as the Commissioners' gruel. After a lengthened discussion, which principally turned upon what the Poor Law Commissioners might possibly say and do, in case their dietary regulations were infringed, it was determined, as appears by the following extracts rom the Minute Book, to give up the deadly compound.

Minute Book, April 2lst.

On reading the minutes on the Bridgwater Visitor's Book, it appeared that Diarrhoea still prevailed in the House, and that the inmates were not generally healthy. It was thereupon moved by Mr. William Pitman King, and seconded by the Rev. Noblett Ruddick, that the Medical Officer be requested to attend the Board, for the purpose of giving information as to the state of the health of the paupers relative to the minute above stated.

Mr. Abraham King, Medical Officer, was thereupon sent for, who soon after attended the Board, and confirmed the report of the Visiting Committee, and stated that the paupers above sixty who were allowed tea and sugar, did not suffer from Diarrhoea as much as those who were dieted on gruel, and recommended that, for the present, rice be substituted for gruel, which the Board agreed to.

Thus, by the decided tone of the Visiting Committee, after many months of strenuous exertion on the part of others, and even six months after the Medical Attendant had solemnly called the attention of the Board to the fact that the

Commissioners' gruel had produced a most distressing complication of diseases ;—after this long and frightful period of torture and death, a reluctant permission was extorted to abate the deadly nuisance. The effect, as recorded in the Visitor's Book, on the next Board day, surpassed the most sanguine anticipations.

Question.—Is the established dietary duly observed?

Answer.—Milk has been substituted in lieu of gruel, for breakfast, and rice (for bread and cheese) for dinner, two days in the week, by order of the Medical Officer.

Question.—Are the inmates generally healthy, &c. &c. ?

Answer.—The inmates are not generally healthy; but there is a great improvement since the last report, occasioned by the change of diet. Diarrhoea hat decreased from 18 to 3 cases since the last report.

April 28th, 1837.

Signed) W.P KING,

The proposal, for relieving the helpless Poor from the torture inflicted by the gruel system, having been so long considered as being too daring to be entertained, the result of such relief, after eight months awfully crowded with suffering and death, was carefully watched by the Visiting Committee ; and on the 12th of May, the following entry appears in the Minute Book.

Bridgwater Union, May 12th, 1837.

In consequence of an alteration in the diet of the inmates of the Workhouse' having been considered necessary for the improvement of their health, by the' Medical Officer, and such alteration having been acted on with good effect,

It was moved by Mr. W. P. King, and seconded by the Rev. N. Ruddock, that in future, a dietary be substituted agreeable to the annexed table, in lieu of table No. 3, now in use, and that the Clerk be directed to write to the Poor Law Commissioners for their sanction to such alteration.-—-Carried unanimously."

The Commissioners were pleased to comply with this request. From the' 21st of April, when the fatal gruel ceased to be administered, the health of the inmates of the Workhouse progressively improved, and although Diarrhoea has since returned on several of the former victims, and carried them off, there have been scarcely any recent cases. The following persons were among the sufferers by the deadly disease which was so pertinaciously kept up[45]

Names	Age	Reported Disease	Remarks	From Sept ,1836, to May, 1837
Brown, Elizabeth	2½	measles	These were cases of Diarrhoea coming within the remarks in the letter of the Medical Attendant "Many of the children were affected with the white	died Oct. 21st
Palmer, Elizabeth	2	measles	mouth the result of irritation of the	died Oct. 26th
Synies, James	1	measles	stomach & bowels, in this state they were seized measles.	died Oct. 29th
Bown, John	1	measles		died Oct. 29th
Vokius, Mary Ann	4	measles		died Nov. 2nd
Hoyle, Emma	1	measles		'died Nov. 9th
Davey, John	2	inflammation of lungs		died Jan. 2nd
Wride, John	1	inflammation of lungs		died Jan. 4th
Cox, George	2	tubercles on the lungs	These were cases preceded by, or	died May 4th
Wilkins, Flora	2	ulcer in the bowels	accompanied with severe Diarrhoea	died May 16th
Woolcott, George	½	**marasmus		died Feb. 8th
Woolcott, Theresa	4	**marasmus		died Feb. 11th
Furber, James	1½	**marasmus		died March 4th

Stacey, Mary	78	natural decay		died Oct. 18th
Mullins, Sarah	23	consumption	Excessive debility from Diarrhoea	died Nov. 11th
Partridge, Thomas	62			died May 18th
Cogle, John	44	rupture of blood vessel		died April 16th
Sheppard, Martha	68	diarrhoea		died Mar. 14th
White, Mary	39	diarrhoea		died March 4th
Arthur, William.	1	diarrhoea	Some of these cases died at the North Petherton Workhouse where many persons afflicted a with Diarrhoea	died Sept .28th
Pyke, William	67	diarrhoea	were sent from the Bridgwater House.	died Nov. 7th
Diment, Henry	24	diarrhoea		died Nov .24th
Farthing, George	60	diarrhoea		died Nov. 27th
Biss, Loman	2½	diarrhoea		died Jan. 21st
Adams, William	¼	diarrhoea		died Jan. 23rd
Dowden, Mary	26	diarrhoea		died Feb. 28th
Bindon, John.	1½	diarrhoea		died March 2nd

** *[Editorial note: Marasmus is extreme malnutrition and emaciation (especially in children); can result from inadequate intake of food or from malabsorption or metabolic disorders]*

This list of victims, awful as it is, only indicates a part of the suffering inflicted. Since the date of the latest death recorded above, several of the old cases have died in the house, and the ravages of the disease have been partly concealed, by ascribing such deaths to "debility of old age" &c. Some died after having left the house, and others have, in the words of Cuvier, used on a similar occasion, "exchanged an active disease for a mortal languor." Let this melancholy calendar be contrasted with the statement made by Lord John Russell, (in his speech of the 23rd of March last) on the abolition of the punishment of death in certain cases. His Lordship congratulates himself and the nation, on the fact, that only seventeen persons had been executed in all England and Wales, during the year 1836. Thus the number of executions for murder, rape, incendiarism, and robbery; for all the awful and destructive crimes that ravage society, falls far short of the deaths occasioned by meal and water, and a poisonous atmosphere in ONE Workhouse; under the dietary and regulations of the Poor Law Commissioners. Such were some of the statements which were directed by these Commissioners to be enquired into by the very parties who had wilfully persisted in this destructive system after it had been demonstrated that there was "DEATH IN THE POT."

Bridgwater, January the 27th, 1838.

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[1] At this Meeting I took an opportunity of stating, that, as I was known to be opposed to the principle of the Bill, I considered myself bound to declare the course which I should pursue at that Board, where nothing but a painful sense of duty could have induced me to appear, labouring, as I was, under great bodily and mental suffering. I declared that whatever my opinion of the measure, abstractedly considered, might he, no man at that Board was more determined to assist in working the New Law fairly, to uphold the proper authority of the Chair, and to labor In the business of the Board earnestly,'and honestly. But, opposed as I was to the principle of the Law, I .would not .call out suspicion on any measure, by becoming the proposer of a resolution.

This silly doctrine is as much opposed to common sense as it is abhorrent to humanity. Cases, like the above, involving questions of immediate life and death, are taken out of the beaten path : such awful

visitations are not only held to justify, but imperiously to demand, a deviation from ordinary rules. When the introduction of the gruel system bad infected the inmates of the Penitentiary with Diarrhoea; although the deaths were only in the proportion of about one-fourth of what they were in the Bridgwater Workhouse; not only were two additional Physicians appointed, who instantly changed the diet, but the Secretary of State directed, as may be seen in the following letter, the case of the unhappy sufferers to be fully enquired into.

"Whitehall, June 23rd, 1823.

Sir,—In consequence of the illness which has long prevailed in the Penitentiary, and the difference of opinion which has been expressed by medical men of considerable eminence, will respect to the causes of the disorder, and the nature of the remedies which it is proper to apply, I am induced to request that you will bring the subject under the consideration of the College of Physicians, and that you will have the goodness to move the appointment of a Committee, for the purpose of visiting the Penitentiary, and of reporting to me their opinion upon the nature of the disorder which prevails in that Establishment, and upon the probable efficacy of the present course of medical treatment.

Sir H. Halford, Bart.,

I have,&c.,

&c. &c. &.c.

(Signed K. PEEL."

"In compliance with the request of the Right Honourable Secretary of State for the Home Department, we the undersigned members of a committee, appointed by the College of Physicians, have visited the Penitentiary at Millbank, examined the state of the patients there, heard the accounts given by tbe medical attendants ; and do report upon the two questions submitted to our investigation, as follows; &c. &c. &c.

(Signed) HENRY HATFORD., W. G. MATON.
HENRY AINSLIE, THOMAS TURNER.
EDWARD ASH, PELHAM WARREN.

College of Physicians,

June 27th, 1823.

The objects of this just consideration were, be it remembered, convicted criminals; 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 poisons who persisted in racking out , their entrails with the Commissioners' gruel.

[3] I partly concur with the following observations on the above detail recently made by an able writer on the working of the New Poor Law; but in course of this, our pilgrimage, there are sometimes offensive duties to be performed.

" We find ourselves unable to go on with these details. They are of a species of horror so nauseous and disgusting — they are so degrading to the sufferers, and infer such inhumanity to the perpetrators, — they are altogether so disgraceful to the country, and so humiliating to human nature itself, that on better thoughts we find it more advisable to throw a pall over the hideous spectacle, and leave it to the general conceptions of our readers." — *Church of England Quarterly Review,* January, 1838

[4] During the time that Diarrhoea raged in the Penitentiary most violently, Dr. Granville states the deaths to have been about 7 per cent, of the prisoners confined in the house:—while that disease was instrumental in carrying off about 30 percent, of the average number of inmates of the Bridgwater Workhouse in eight months.

[5]