

The Bridgwater Poor-Law Union evidence to the Lords select Committee of 1838
on the Operation of the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834.

By Tony Woolrich 28/03/2021

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The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, known widely as the New Poor Law, was passed by the Whig government of Earl Grey. It completely replaced earlier legislation based on the Elizabethan Poor Law of 1601 and attempted to fundamentally change the poverty relief system in England and Wales. It resulted from the 1832 Royal Commission into the Operation of the Poor Laws, which included Edwin Chadwick, John Bird Sumner and Nassau William Senior. The Act was passed two years after the 1832 Reform Act extended the franchise to middle class men.

Its theoretical basis was Thomas Malthus's principle that population increased faster than resources unless checked, the "iron law of wages" and Jeremy Bentham's doctrine that people did what was pleasant and would tend to claim relief rather than working.

The Act was intended to curb the cost of poor relief and address abuses of the old system, prevalent in southern agricultural counties, by enabling a new system to be brought in under which relief would only be given in workhouses, and conditions in workhouses would be such as to deter any but the truly destitute from applying for relief. Under the Old Law, some financial relief and perhaps a bread dole was given to the poor in their own houses, and was known as Out-door relief. The Act was passed by large majorities in Parliament, with only a few Radicals (such as William Cobbett) voting against. The act was implemented, but the full rigours of the intended system were never applied in Northern industrial areas, due to the apprehension that they would be a contributor to the social unrest of the period. (Condensed from *Wikipedia*.)

There were 18 Poor-law Unions established in Somerset. The Bridgwater Union was established on 11 May 1836 and covered 40 parishes: it had 48 Guardians.¹

In the Bridgwater Union, the old Bridgwater Poorhouse, on Taunton Road, with North Petherton Poorhouse as an auxiliary, were retained, while the new workhouse at Northgate was being built. Other village poorhouses in the Bridgwater Union were closed and sold off and the paupers concentrated in the remaining two – which resulted in gross over-crowding and consequent epidemics of disease among the paupers, chiefly dysentery and measles. The reports refer throughout to diarrhoea, with bleeding from the intestines and bowels – but this is a symptom of dysentery.²

John Bowen had previously written a pamphlet hostile to the application of the new Poor Law:

Letter to His Late Majesty; containing a refutation of some of the charges preferred against the poor: with some account of the working of the new poor law in the Bridgwater Union ... 1835, 2nd ed 1837.

He wrote with justifiable anger two more pamphlets about the effect the New Law was having on paupers of the Bridgwater Union, in particular:

The Reform Poor Law, with some account of its working in the Bridgwater Union. 1837.

Twelve Letters to the Editor of The Times – The New Poor Law ... Bridgwater Union. 1837. The latter may be seen on this web-site.

As part of the new system, the doctors in the Union were to be reduced to 7 from 17, and some of the Parish doctors felt it would damage the quality of the service they could offer the poor. There was also the question of inferior surgical care provided by a newly appointed doctor, whose *bona-fides* were suspect. so also, in 1837, they published a pamphlet called, *Facts connected with the Medical Relief of the Poor in the Bridgwater Union*. Dr Jonathan Toogood, a leading Bridwater doctor, and much involved with the Infirmary, was one of the authors. For more about Toogood, see *Wikipedia*.³



They were not alone, for many more letters were published from other concerned citizens in the national and provincial press about problems elsewhere. These were later drawn together and published by George Robert Wythen Baxter (1815 – 1854),⁴ in *The book of Bastiles, or working of the new Poor Law, 1841, 609 pages.*

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The book has no list of contents, or index,so making it very hard to use. However, he grouped the pages into the following sections:

iii-x). Introduction.

xi-xiii) List of Subscribers. [Which includes John Bowen.]

1) Letters, Sketches,Petitions Addresses.etc.

*Note Page 112 is followed by a series of pages running from *113 to *119 and followed by 3 un-numbered pages. The page numbering begins again at:*

115) Antipathy of destitute paupers to go into the Union Workhouse.

125) Bastile treatment and tyranny.

184) Union Bastiles are prisons and worse.

191) The Friends and favourers of the newPoor-Law.

320) The new Poor-Law opposition.

438) Bastile food.

468) Medical treatment of the pauper poor.

483) Decrease in wages and the destitute conditionof the working-man
under The new Poor-Law.

517) The boasted economy of the newPoor-Law.

539) Increase in crime under the Administration of the newPoor-Law.

546) New Poor-Law Parliamentary Divisions.

553) New Poor-Law Statistics, Returns, etc.

569) Bastardy – Its increase &c. under the Administration of the newPoor-Law.

576) Mortality in the Bastilles.

586) New Poor-Law Miscellenies.

608) Poor-Law Sonnets.

There are occasional references to the Bridgwater Union, mostly in letters to *The Times*, from John Bowen and Jonathan Toogood, some written into the early 1840s.



Parliament appointed a Lords Select Committee on the Operation of the Poor Law Amendment Act in 1838, to hold an enquiry into various complaints that had been published in the Press and elsewhere about the new law.

The inquiry was held under the Chairmanship of Lord Wharncliffe of Wortley, (1776-1845). Originally a Conservative, he became more left-leaning in his views. The full list of names of the rest of the committee has not yet been discovered, (they were not identified in the Report)⁵, but it is known it included: the 3rd Earl Radnor, (1779– 1869) a firm supporter of 1834 Poor-Law Amendment Act. His brother, the Hon P. P. Bouverie of Brymore House, near Cannington, had succeeded George Warry as chairman of the Bridgwater Board, in March 1838. Those hostile to the Act included Lord Stanhope (1805– 1875), and Lord Wynford. (1767 – 1845), who was a Law Lord, and who was born at Haslebury Plucknett.⁶

The first four complaints were were heard over fifteen days between 8 May and 8 June,1838: and the published evidence occupied 524 pages of the report. The Committee adjudicated on the cases and included their findings. Only the briefest summary is given here, but interested reseachers may use the accompanying full List of Witnesses and full General Index to examine the complete evidence, which is online:

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,⁷ and part 2 may be seen online here.⁸

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Volume 1 began with the evidence about 4 complaints:

1) Upon the Subject of the Correspondence between the Guardians of the Bourne Poor Union and General William Johnson 1777 – 1863, who was a soldier and Member of Parliament.(see Wikipedia)

He was educated at Rugby School, was Commissioned 1793, and promoted captain in 1794. He served in the campaign of 1808–9 in the Peninsular War, as Major in the 32nd Regiment, and was present at the battles of Roliça, Vimiero, and Corunna. Johnson then served through the Walcheren expedition in 1809. In 1810 he became lieutenant-colonel in the 3rd Ceylon Regiment.

Johnson inherited the Witham on the Hill estate in Lincolnshire from an uncle in 1814 and left active duty on half-pay to run the estate. He retired from the army in 1842.

He was a Magistrate, Deputy Lieutenant of Lincolnshire and Northamptonshire, and High Sheriff of Lincolnshire for 1830

He was member of Parliament for:

Boston February 16, 1821 - June 10, 1826

Leicestershire Northern December 10, 1832 - January 6, 1835

Huddersfield January 6, 1835 - July 24, 1837

Oldham July 24, 1837 - June 29, 1841

This relates to a report of Johnson's Speech at the Crown and Anchor⁹ in the Month of February 1837 that Edward Marvin came by his Death from "Starvation," whereas, according to the Verdict of the Coroner's Jury, his Death was caused by the "Inclemency of the Weather."

He complained also about the case of John Cam who had no house of his own to shelter himself and Family, and who refused to accept an offer as if he went into the Workhouse his Pension of 6d. per day would be attached by the Parish under the Provisions of the Act 9 Geo. 3. Cap. 12.

General Johnson asserted between thirty and forty able-bodied labourers, as had applied together for Relief, but, in fact fifteen persons did and the next day were offered work by the Surveyor of the Highways, a Rate having been agreed upon by the Parishioners for the express Purpose of enabling him to employ them, but only a small Proportion of that Number availed themselves to accepted the work.

He complained of the case of John Kettle of the Bourne Union, who was refused Medical Relief, except on loan, for his sick Wife, unless he came into the Workhouse with his whole Family.

The Committee regreted that General Johnson had not attended the Board of Guardians of the Bourne Union in which he resides and acts as a Magistrate, which Attendance would have enabled him to judge of the Accuracy of the Inferences which he drew from the Statements made to him ; to make himself acquainted with the Reasons which induced that Board to refuse Relief in these Cases; to have pressed upon the Board his Objection to the Course pursued, and to have induced them to correct any thing in the Treatment of the Paupers in the Workhouse or its Management which he might have conceived to have given rise to the Unwillingness of the Paupers to go into the Work house, of which he asserted the Existence at a Meeting expressly called to excite the Public Mind against the System established by the new Poor Law.

2) Upon the Subject of a letter from the secretary of the Poor Law Commissioners to the Reverend George Stringer Bull (1799–1865) (See Wikipedia)

He had served in the Royal Navy, then went to Sierra Leone for the Church Missionary Society in 1818, working there as a teacher. He was principal of the Christian Institution of Sierra Leone of the Society, near Freetown. Bull returned to England in 1820 for health reasons. He was ordained deacon in the Church of England in 1823 by, taking a position at Hessle in the East Riding of Yorkshire. The following year he was ordained priest. In 1825 he became curate at Hanging Heaton; and in 1826 he took the position of perpetual curate at Bierley Chapel, then just outside Bradford.

He complained about maltreatment of Mary and John Howes in the Nottingham Workhouse, and of their having been forcibly separated there.

And the case of John Brown, the Cripple pressed the Mother frequently, by Threats of stopping her Allowance and taking the Boy into the Workhouse, to let him be bound Apprentice.

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And That a Girl named Jane Adams had been flogged in the Towcester Workhouse with a Whip.

And of John Minto, who, having committed Suicide, was declared by the Verdict of the Coroner's Jury to have done so under a Fit of temporary Insanity.

The Committee found that: *Mr. Bull knows nothing upon the Subject beyond what he has read in a Newspaper, although he took upon himself to state at that Meeting that the Verdict should have been "Wilful Murder against the Oppressors of the Poor," in consequence of what he had read in that Newspaper attributing this Man's Death to his Dread of going into the Bedlington Workhouse.*

3) Upon the Subject of the Correspondence between Earl Stanhope and the Poor Law Commissioners; This related to information sent to Lord Stanhope by Mr. John Lewin, a Farmer and Miller at Wickham Market in Suffolk, who had been Overseer or Churchwarden of that Parish under the old Law, and concerned the discretion that local Guardians had in varying welfare rates.

4) Upon the Subject of the letter to the Poor Law Commissioners from the Minister, Overseers, and Ratepayers of Shalbourne.

This concerned the view that Persons with very large Families could not maintain their Families upon the present rate of wages in Shalbourne, and that the offering to take a part of their Families into the Workhouse would be better and cheaper than to force the father and the whole family into it when they were driven to Extremities.



The committee of twenty four Peers took Bridgwater Union evidence in London on nineteen days between 26 June to 27 July, 1838, and heard 43 witnesses, from the Guardians, Medical staff, Relieving officers to the washer-women who did the laundry and some pauper inmates. John Bowen was called, as was his friend, William Baker, a Bridgwater carrier. Both had been Overseers under the Old Law and were then Guardians.

They all travelled to London by coach, and Charlotte Allen noted in her evidence that they made the trip there in one day.¹⁰

The evidence was published verbatim, and extends to 815 pages of the two volumes. It was accompanied by a most thorough General Index, which makes easy the finding of texts. The capitalisation of the text looks somewhat eccentric to modern eyes, as this extract shows:

p753

Die Martis , 26^o Junii 1838 .

The Lord WHARNCLIFFE in the Chair . .

Evidence on the Operation of the Poor Law Amendment Act .

Mr . JONATHAN TOOGOOD is called in , and makes the following Statement : There were some Questions I was asked Yesterday which I could not answer correctly . I have since referred to Documents , and can answer them more distinctly now . I was asked whether I could state that the Sixteen People who had died in the Union House had not been Patients in the Bridgwater Infirmary, and had not been discharged from thence ; I have gone through the List since , and can positively assert that none of them were ever Patients in the Bridgwater Infirmary ; the great Majority were Children , who were inadmissible from their Age.

Do you know how many Persons there are now in the Workhouse at Bridgwater ?

I do not .

You observe the Return of the Deaths takes in more than March and April ?

It takes in Two Months ; I have not gone through it so exactly as that ; but I speak of Sixteen Deaths . On the Case of Charlotte Allen I have found the Papers which I promised I would bring To-day, the Letters from Mr. King and Mr . Ruddock on which I founded the Statement in my Pamphlet . . .

The questioning was somewhat repetitive and also disjointed, undoubtedly because a group of Peers was involved, each wanting to make their point.

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The modern transcript of local material, made for the Bridgwater Heritage Group, runs to more than 500 A4 pages, and the transcription of the General Index to the whole work is 61 pages.

There is clearly a very convoluted tale here with several strands being investigated at once:

- The Bowen anti poor-law pamphlets

Letter to His Late Majesty; containing a refutation of some of the charges preferred against the poor: with some account of the working of the new poor law in the Bridgwater Union ... 1835. 32ned 1837

The Reform Poor Law, with some account of its working in the Bridgwater Union. 1837.

Twelve Letters to the Editor of The Times – The New Poor Law ... Bridgwater Union. 1837.

- The pamphlet published in 1837, *Facts connected with the Medical Relief of the Poor in the Bridgwater Union*. It was written by a group of parish doctors on the change to the system which reduced their number to 7 from 17, so affecting the service to the rural poor.

- The medical mis-treatment of Charlotte Allen.

- The way John Rodney Ward was appointed as a doctor and doubt about his *bona-fides*.

- The numerous deaths from Diarrhoea.

- The general story of Bridgwater poor relief.

- There is much incidental information about rural poverty and local medical practice in the forty parishes that made up the Bridgwater Union.

After the enquiry, Bowen published three more pamphlets:

The New Poor Law, with some account of its fatal operation on the sick and helpless poor in the Bridgwater Union. 1838.

New Poor Law : the Bridgwater case : is killing in an union workhouse criminal, if sanctioned by the Poor Law Commissioners? A question raised on certain facts deposed to on oath before a late committee of the House of Lords, and humbly submitted to the serious and early consideration of both Lords and Commons 1839.

The Union Work-House and Board of Guardians System, 1842.



Whilst the Committee adjudicated on the first four complaints and published their findings in their report, they noted that in the case of Bridgwater Union:

With regard to the Correspondence between the Poor Law Commissiosers and the Guardians of the Bridgwater Union and others respecting the Insufficiency of the Dietary in the Workhouse, and respecting any alleged improper Conduct upon the Part of the Guardians or Surgeons of that Union in the Treatment of the Poor; The Committee have been occupied for a considerable Time in taking Evidence upon the several Matters contained in that Correspondence.

The great Length of Time which that Inquiry has occupied, and the Quantity and Nature of the Evidence, have necessarily produced great Difference of Opinion in the Committee, and require a more careful and attentive Consideration than they have found it possible at this late Period of the Session to give to that Evidence, with a view of arriving at a satis factory Conclusion upon it.

The Committee therefore have thought it their Duty to report the whole of the Evidence, to which they have added an INDEX; and it will be for the House in the next Session of Parliament to decide whether the Labours of the Committee shall be resumed for the Purpose of reporting their Opinion upon that Evidence, as well as of

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inquiring into the Facts contained in the other Papers and Petitions which have been referred to them, but to which they have been unable, during this Session, to direct their Attention.

As far as can be discovered, Parliament took the matter no further interest in the matter, and it was not discussed in any of the *Annual Reports of the Poor Law Commission* of the period.

So, the affair was effectively brushed under the carpet, leaving the voluminous testimony as the only record of what occurred.



The lockdown of the Somerset Heritage Centre during the Coronavirus -19 crisis of 2020-2021, has made it impossible to consult the collection of John Bowen's paper there, or to obtain copies of the various pamphlets. Once normality returns it will be possible to visit the archive and to expand the material on this webpage.



POST SCRIPT. 31/03/2021

After this article was written, a copy of John Bowen's Pamphlet *The Union Work-House and Board of Guardians System*, 1842, was obtained. It begins with an "Address to Robert Peel", (the Prime Minister), which discusses Bowen's opinions on the evils of the centralised system set up by the amended Poor-Law Amendment Act of 1834, and setting out some suggestions for improving them. Bowen went on with the text of a letter to *The Times* about the over-crowding deliberately introduced into the modern design of workhouses, which caused disease, and the inferior diet supplied, compared with prisons. He gave a valuable narrative summary of the events concerning the diarrhoea outbreak in the Bridgwater Union, workhouse, which culminated in the Lords Enquiry of 1838, and commented on the absence of any adjudication of the evidence.

He concluded with the events in the newly-built Northgate Workhouse from then on. He described the refusal the Guardians to build a hospital in the workhouse grounds at the request of the medical officer, made in August 1838, the same month the Lords committee reported. In January 1839, there were 111 cases of disease mingled with clean inmates, and that fifty children slept in a room 27ft 9in by 17 ft. He gave a narrative of the events in the spring of 1842, when diarrhoea, smallpox and itch occurred again, and the badly ventilated place was overcrowded again. There was not enough space to isolate the sick, but another appeal to build a hospital there was vetoed again.

So little had changed in the eight years since the Bridgwater Union was established.

The full text of Bowen's pamphlet will appear on this web-page in due course.

¹ Peter Higginbotham, *The Workhouse Encyclopaedia*, 2014 ed, p 380.

² Many thanks to Dr Lesley Sutcliffe.

³ Dr Lesley Sutcliffe. *Dr Jonathan Toogood. The story of the 19th century Somerset surgeon who founded the Bridgwater Hospital*, 2017

⁴ Robert Wythen Baxter (1815 – 1854), wrote *The book of Bastiles, or working of the new Poor Law*, 1841, with the aim of creating a record so Posterity might have a permanent account of the iniquities inflicted on the poor through the introduction of the 1834 law. He evidently published it by subscription. It includes numerous extracts from letters and articles in the Press from all over the country, as well as extracts from Parliamentary Papers and statistics. The lack of a table of contents and index makes it very hard for modern readers to navigate, however. It has been digitised and may be found online, where a PDF may be downloaded for further study at: <https://archive.org/details/bookofbastilesor00baxt>.

⁵ In the case of Committees of the House of Commons of the time, it was common for them to be listed, with a note that a specific number was a Quorum. Questioners' names were sometimes given in the published evidence: this is not the case here,

⁶ C. A. Buchanan, "John Bowen and the Bridgwater Scandal", *Somerset Archaeology and Natural History*, (Proc., SANHS, Vol, 131), p 194

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⁷ <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/101710346>

⁸ https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/Parliamentary_Papers/ml8SAAAAYAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=poor+law+commissioners+1838+brown&pg=PA1058&printsec=frontcover

⁹ The Crown and Anchor, also written Crown & Anchor and earlier known as The Crown, was a public house in Arundel Street, off The Strand in London, famous for meetings of political and various other groups. The first tavern built on the site sometime before 1710, A second tavern was built in 1790, and both this and its earlier incarnation may have been called The Crown. Its rooms were large and able to accommodate 2,500 people, leading to its use as a venue for political meetings, particularly by the Radicals, including John Cam Hobhouse and Charles James Fox. (Condensed from *Wikipedia*.)

¹⁰ Day 11, 5 July 1838, p 947