

THE
REFORM POOR LAW;
WITH SOME
ACCOUNT OF ITS WORKING
IN THE
BRIDGWATER UNION.

BY JOHN BOWEN,
ONE OF THE GUARDIANS.

“Woe unto them that decree unrighteous decrees, and that write a grievousness which they have prescribed; To turn aside the needy from judgment, and to take away the right from the Poor of my people.”

Isaiah, Chap. 10th.

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THE “Refutation of some of the Charges; preferred against the Poor” is again submitted to the Public, under circumstances essentially differing from those which determined its first appearance. It was then considered desirable to pass over details, and to deal with the statements and arguments on which the principles of the Reformed Poor Law were said to be established. The measure being now in full operation, these details and their consequences are become all in all with a numerous class of Readers; and it is only through the medium of such details that public attention can be fixed on the character and consequences of the new measure.

In the course originally taken no allusions were made to the circumstances of the District in which the Author resided; the question was treated broadly, in reference to the whole body of the Poor of England and Wales. It is now proposed to examine, in a Preface, some points in detail, connected with the introduction and operation of this Measure in the District which comprises the

BRIDGWATER UNION. Such an intention being specifically avowed, it is incumbent on the avower to show that he possesses such means of information as will justify his intention; for although general reasoning requires but little aid from local experience, such experience is essential in matters of detail.

To satisfy a moderate expectation on the part of the reader, it will perhaps be sufficient to state, that with a view of obtaining information on the operation of the Poor Laws under the old system, and with a hope of somewhat improving their administration, the Author consented to act as one of the Overseers of the Poor for the Parish of Bridgwater for four Years; although no duty could be more irksome to his feelings, or more opposed to his habits and pursuits. On the formation of the Bridgwater Union in May 1836, he was solicited by some influential persons to consent to act as one of the Guardians, which he then declined. At the close of the Parochial year, some of the Guardians, both elected and ex-officio, who had zealously advocated the cause of the Poor, expressed to him their extreme disgust at the course pursued by some determined partizans of the new system, and their unalterable determination to withdraw from the Board. Under these circumstances he reluctantly consented to take his turn as Guardian for one year, was unanimously elected for the Parish of Bridgwater, and took his seat at the Board accordingly. He did this under a deep conviction of the responsibility incurred, and with a determination to perform the duties of the Office to the best of his abilities. Whilst he has scrupulously refrained from any unnecessary interference with the course of business, he has, more than once distinctly avowed to the Board — that he utterly denies being in any manner bound to secrecy on its proceedings. He has asserted, as one of the Representatives of nine thousand persons, at that Board, his unquestionable right to inform those persons, individually or collectively, on any points connected with the duties which he was sent there to perform. As an Englishman he has openly claimed, and will exercise, the right of appealing through the Press, not to the prejudices of his Countrymen; — not to their passions; not even to their feelings; — but to their sense of justice. Such are the circumstances under which “a Refutation of some of the Charges preferred

against the Poor," is again brought before the Public.

Previously to proceeding with details the general reader is respectfully reminded that although the administrators of the Reformed Poor Law have, as will be shewn, the tremendous power of life and death in their hands, their proceedings, like those of the secret tribunals of the Inquisition, are concealed from the Public. Their doors are closed. Thus while the Poor are deprived of the salutary influence of public opinion, impediments of no common magnitude, are opposed to enquiry. That ex parte proceeding, now in progress, before a section of a certain Reformed Assembly, which must not be more particularly alluded to, affords a pregnant example of the insuperable obstacles which are at present opposed to the justice of the case. On the one side, are the helpless poor, on the other, the aggregated property of the kingdom, acting by pledged delegates, and aided by a band of stipendiaries, whose faculties are sharpened by the apprehension of being driven from the spoils of the Poor, which they have so lately clutched. This host of mercenaries are marshalled at the expense of the working people of England, to organize evidence, and move en masse, against persons or points opposed to the cruelties inflicted under the Reformed Poor Law. If during the enquiry in progress, a benevolent witness deposes to the existence of overwhelming suffering, he is called upon to produce individual cases. If he attempts to collect the details of such cases, from the sufferers themselves, he is taunted with being an encourager of complaint and an abettor of discontent. If unappalled by this insolent proscription, he does bring forward examples, the whole compendious machinery, at the disposal of the mercenaries, is put in motion to rake up some charge, or suspicion, against the wretched peasant who has dared to complain. Under circumstances so degrading to the national character, the author will not subject his humble neighbours to the mortification of adding to the number of poor victims who have had their birth, parentage, and education, life character, and behaviour, distorted by the familiars of the new Inquisition, as an excuse for the torture to which many of these Poor sufferers have been subjected. This determination will necessarily narrow the ground of inquiry to a

few practical points; and first as to the temper and spirit in which this measure was introduced into an Agricultural District, where the remuneration for labour was materially below the average of the kingdom, and where the labourers were generally as industrious, as provident, and as orderly, as any body of men on the face of the earth.

The first meeting of the Board of Guardians of the Bridgwater Union was held on the 12th of May 1830 : the third meeting on the 31st of May: "PRESENT ROBERT WEALE, ESQ., ASSISTANT POOR LAW COMMISSIONER." A string of eleven rules passed at this meeting, were prefaced by the following introduction

" Resolved that the following Rules as to Relief are consistent with sound principles, and that this Board will, when in a situation to do so, carry them into effect as far as practicable."

The 9th and 10th Rules sufficiently demonstrate the barbarous spirit in which the new system was introduced.

Rule 9th. "That in all cases where persons require assistance, towards burying their deceased relations, the Board determine that they will in no case give partial assistance, but that they will in such cases have the entire management of such funerals, and that arrangements shall be made forthwith for the purpose of establishing one uniform system of pauper funerals throughout all the Parishes in the Union.

10th. That in a pauper funeral the following articles shall be provided —

A Coffin and Shroud, (No Pall), Men to carry the Coffin, All Legal Fees."

Here was a ruthless war at once declared against the best feelings of the unfortunate living, which were to be operated on, among other modes of torture, by subjecting the ashes of their dead relatives to indignity and reproach. All external marks of respect, which had received the sanction of ages, all reverend associations hallowed by time into religious observances, were to be trampled under the hoofs of sordid calculators, as not being "*consistent with sound principles.*" Fortunately, for the honour of human nature, outrages which appear safe in the conception, are sometimes dangerous in the execution. It appeared in some of the daily Papers that similar Resolutions introduced into other Unions had occasioned serious disturbances; and on the 25th of the following August it was-

11th. " Resolved that this Board agrees to allow the

Tolling of the Bell, and the use of the Pall, in the legal expenses of pauper funerals." Carried unanimously.

Great pains are now taken in the course of a certain examination, to remove the impression of the Poor Law Commissioners having been instrumental in casting this foul stigma on the ashes of the humble dead. These benevolent souls, it is said, never contemplated such an act. Where then were these desecrating resolutions concocted? How was it they were carried unanimously by the same body which, in less than three months afterwards unanimously rescinded them? Because they were introduced surreptitiously. The Assistant Poor Law Commissioner was either furnished with them or concocted them himself, and succeeded in making Cat's paws of two ex-officio Guardians, who moved and seconded this ready cut and dried string of eleven resolutions, which were said to have been carried, without examination, without enquiry, and almost without remark. On the Minute Book of the Board they are ascribed to the mover and seconder, the actuary behind the curtain, who pulled the string does not appear on the record. When in due course this infamous supplement to the Reformed Code was submitted to the Poor Law Commissioners at Somerset House, for their sanction, they were pleased to reply as follows—

"The Poor Law Commissioners for England and Wales have to acknowledge the receipt of your letter of the 5th inst., enclosing a copy of proceedings of the Board of Guardians of the Bridgwater Union, at their meeting on the 31st ult.

The Commissioners confirm the resolutions which were

	Expended on the poor	Population in 1831	Labourer's wages per week
Eastbourn,	4,250	2,726	12/0
Lenham,	4,299	2,197	13/6
Brede,	2,666	1,046	13/6
Northam,	2,180	1,448	13/6
Ewhurst,	1,630	1,200	13/6

Other cases were cited, in which the Poor Rates materially exceeded the Rack Rent, to say nothing of some property being "entirely swallowed up." Here was a state of things for firm, if not for "strong" measures, particularly as it was said to be coupled with outrageous conduct on the part of the Paupers. The Report states that in these

then passed." &c. &c.

Thus they condescended to confirm, as the "proceedings of the Board of Guardians of the Bridgwater Union," a string of Resolutions which had been concocted by one of their own body and surreptitiously introduced. It is thus that outrages are perpetrated, and injuries inflicted on the helpless Poor, under the cover of Law, which no Law would directly sanction, and which, few, if any, persons would dare to advocate, either in Parliament, or before an assemblage of their Countrymen, in the open light of heaven.

Such barbarous regulations as those of which a sample has been produced, seem to suggest two distinct subjects for consideration;— first, on what general grounds can this persecution of the Poor be palliated; and secondly, do the circumstances of this District furnish any special excuse for outraging the feelings of the laborious Poor, and harassing the helpless and the wretched. On the first point, it has been asserted before Parliament that all property was on the point, of being "swallowed up for the support of the Poor and that nothing could save the country from utter destruction, but "strong measures," and a rigid "uniformity of system." Cases in support of these assertions, were elaborately drawn out by the Commissioners of Poor Law enquiry, and these cases have been ever since adopted and pleaded, in Parliament and out, by the advocates of the Reformed system. Some of the cases which are put most prominently forward, are the following:

Districts "Incendiarism prevailed to a frightful extent." And that "in the month of December, 1832, four healthy young men, receiving from 12s. to 14s. per week from the parish, refused to work at threshing for a farmer at 2s. 1d. and a quart of ale per day" All this certainly required a remedy, perhaps coercion, hut why should a large part of

the labouring population, who never participated in the guilt, be involved in the punishment? Why should such persons be coerced, for the crimes of others, under the tyrant plea of "uniformity of system"?

How far the special circumstances of the District comprising the Bridgwater Union, called for the introduction of coercive measures, will

Name of Union.	No. of Parishes.	Population in 1831.	Annual Value in 1815	Annual Expenditure on the Poor.	Amount per Pound on the Rental. <i>s/d</i>
Eastbourn and & Midhurst Unions	40	20,062	£96,371	£29,500	6/11
Bridgwater Union; excluding B. Water	39	20,759	£164,950	£10,471	1/4¼

Here are two Agricultural Districts not materially differing in Population, the one of them with a rental of nearly sixty thousand pounds a year *more*, than the other, actually paying nineteen thousand a year *less* in Poor Rates ! The one of them paying upwards of six shillings in the pound, the other only one shilling & fourpence farthing. This would seem to a stranger inexplicable on any other hypothesis than that the low amount of Poor's Rate in the Bridgwater District was balanced by a higher rate of wages, by large and liberal allowances, which lifted the Labourer above the need of parish pay. But what is the melancholy fact? Why that the weekly rate of wages of the able-bodied labourer, in the Bridgwater Union, is admitted by the Board of Guardians to be only seven shillings with an allowance of cider!

On data supplied by the Poor Law Commissioners themselves, it admits of proof, that the Labouring Population of the Bridgwater District received in wages and Poor's Rate, at least at the rate of £50,000 a year less, on the rental of 1815, than was paid in some other Districts, consequently other persons must have received at the rate of £50,000 a year more! It likewise admits of proof, that among this ill paid population, serious crimes were of unusually rare occurrence, and that petty offences were less common than in most other parts of the kingdom. Such was the state of the labouring Poor, on whom an Assistant Commissioner was let loose, to subject even their

sufficiently appear by contrasting the amount of Poor Rates in that Union, with the sums levied for the relief of the Poor in another part of the country. Let a comparison be made with 40 Parishes in Sussex formed into two Unions, and containing together a Population about equal to that of the 40 Parishes of the Bridgwater Union, excluding the town of Bridgwater.

ashes to insult, and to bring the unhappy living under the grinding operation of Machinery constructed to meet extreme cases of idleness, fraud, and extortion, which were said to exist in a distant part of the kingdom.

It would have seemed reasonable to expect that poor men, receiving so miserable a pittance for themselves, and contributing in so un-exampled a degree to the abundance of others, would not have been further subjected to the immediate operation of the screw. But not so. The Reformed system is inexorable; it admits of no relaxation except in favor of Commissioners, and their pampered train. These Commissioners declared that forty or fifty per cent had been saved from the sums levied for the use of the Poor in other places, and it was now to be seen how much could be screwed out of the wretched Poor of this District, although it was evident that not one farthing could be honestly taken from their collective receipts. A Workhouse on the Penitentiary system was contracted for; and eager to enter on the career of saving, the Parish Poorhouse of Bridgwater, and that of North Petherton were hired, for the whole 40 Parishes of the Union, until the completion of the new house. The other Parish Poorhouses were then untenanted and a number of Paupers congregated in the two hired houses, although these Houses were only intended to accommodate the Poor of their respective Parishes. The new system was now firmly established, with the Commissioners' Dietary and Regulations, and Instructions and

Visitor's Books, and Medical Journals and Reports, and all the complex machinery with which mere pen and ink men presume to supersede the Charities and other duties of life.

The manner in which this complex Machinery has been worked in the Bridgwater Union, under the eyes of the Board of Guardians, may be rendered sufficiently obvious by a few short extracts from the Medical and Visitor's Books.

October 20th. About half the Children confined to their beds in the Measles.

The Matron states that the Medical Officer attends them regularly every day. He has ordered different diet for them.

28th. The Matron wants the assistance of an able-bodied washer woman without delay.

A similar application is frequently repeated, for Months.

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March 28th, The Matron is in *great want* of an able-bodied female to help do the work.

April 17th, Two women going out of the house, consequently there will be only two able-bodied females to do the work.

At this time there were in the house, Adults	8
Children above 9 years	27
——— under 9 years	<u>33</u>
	68

October 25th. 1836 Twenty Children in the Measles. These Children cannot use the common diet of the House, should therefore be allowed a little tea and sugar.

28th. Tea and sugar has been ordered by the Medical Officer, but it has not been supplied. And again "The orders of the Medical Officer respecting a different diet for the Invalids" have *not been attended to*.

(Visitors' Book.)

February 14th. Harriet Bindon should be allowed tea and butter, and three children should have milk.

February 17th. Harriet Bindon still continues ill in bed. The tea and sugar ordered by the Medical Officer *has not been provided*.

(Visitors' Book.)

March 10th. There has been occasionally much delay in sending the articles entered as "Necessaries" for the patients. In *many instances*, although ordered by the Board, a week or more has elapsed, and I believe in one case, at least, they were not sent at all.

(Medical Weekly Return.)

Here are the Matron's reiterated applications for assistance to clean, and nurse, the wretched sufferers under her care; here are the Surgeon's

pleadings for a little tea or some such indulgence, for those whose enfeebled stomachs reject the nauseous meal and water; and here is indubitable proof that "*a week, or more, in many instances*" passed over the pining child, or bedridden adult, without bringing to their parched lips, the prescribed relief.

Awful as all this is, there are other facts, connected with the working of the Machinery for Grinding the Poor, in the Bridgwater Union, of a still darker character. For some time after the introduction of the new system, it appears from the "Visitor's Book" that the prescribed Dietary was not rigidly observed. Milk was used instead of Gruel," at the recommendation of the Medical Officer," and during this time the inmates are reported GENERALLY HEALTHY. But the indulgence of Milk was violently opposed as being too great a deviation from the Regulations of the Commissioners to be tolerated. Rigid obedience was enforced, and the following entries appear in the Visitors' Book.

"August 23rd. Inmates generally healthy. Gruel is *now* used instead of Milk. Gruel is *now* used strictly according to the Dietary"

That fatal Diarrhoea which appears to have followed the introduction of the Commissioner's Gruel in some other places, soon appeared in the Bridgwater Workhouse, alternating with, and increasing the violence of, other diseases. The Medical Report for September contained several cases of Diarrhoea, and the Visitor's Book thus alludes to the fact.

"September 27th. The Aged Poor are affected with Colic and Diarrhoea, and the Children suffering from the same complaint.

October 25th. There is much sickness amongst the Children and the Old People. There are 33 cases under the care of the Medical Gentleman. 96 Inmates in the House.

The Bridgwater Workhouse was now to afford an awful illustration of the fact, that diseases having their origin in local causes, become infections, wherever many unfortunate sufferers are congregated in a mass. A large proportion of the inmates became reduced to mere skeletons by this loathsome disease. The sufferers, however cleanly in their former habits, involuntarily voided their fæces. A nauseous pestilence pervaded the House. The family of the Governor were attacked: the Governor himself although previously a

healthy and a powerful man, became unable to go into the Paupers' apartments without being violently affected; and the Medical Attendant after repeated attacks and temporary respites, was at length obliged to relinquish his post to another. The following letter from that Gentleman, appears on the Records of the Board.

"To the Board of Guardians of the Bridgwater Union.

Gentlemen,

On resuming my duties at the Workhouse I found that the Board had ordered that Oatmeal should be used for the Children instead of Milk. For some days I watched the result, which was given to the Visiting Committee at producing *Diarrhoea*. Some days after, many of the Children became affected with the white mouth the result of irritation of the stomach and bowels. In this state many were seized with the measles; the complication made the cases very serious and troublesome. In this condition the Children required constant attention and good nursing, this they had *not*, and many suffered severely in consequence. Taking the above into consideration I proposed, sanctioned by the kindness of Mr. W. Baker" (one of the Visiting Committee,) "that the Children should return to milk diet, that proper nurses should be in attendance day and night; that the sick should be separated from the healthy, and that the sick wards should not be scrubbed. The alteration I am certain, will tend to the recovery of most and the future comfort of all. Trusting that the Board will be pleased to sanction it,

Signed by the Surgeon of the Bridgwater District."
Bridgwater, October the 20th, 1836.

It will scarcely be believed, that under such frightful circumstances, all the indulgence that could be obtained by the representations of the Surgeon and some active members of the Visiting Committee, was confined to the victims who were *actually attacked*. The Gruel was still to be used by others, although it had been distinctly stated that it produced *Diarrhoea* and that the irritation of the stomach and bowels produced other distressing effect! A considerable number of these cases terminated fatally, yet the Commissioner's deleterious Compound was perseveringly administered to those who were not yet seized with the disease. The wretched inmates of the Workhouse were GRUELLED up to the very day of attack, when the poor sufferers were considered to be legally entitled, under the regulations, to the Rice Milk, &c., prescribed by the Surgeon for the sick! The Rules, Regulations, and Dietary table were to be inexorably observed, in respect to those who were not actually on the Sick List, although the House had been so frightfully ravaged by

Diarrhoea, produced by the Commissioner's Dietary; and from the 25th of October to the 27th of December, answers to the following effect were entered weekly on the Visitor's Book.

Ques. "Is the Established Dietary duly observed!"

Ans. Yes, with respect to *the healthy inmates*; but for the sick, Rice Milk, and Arrowroot have been substituted for Gruel, by order of the Medical Officer."

During the winter the disease became less prevalent, but was again gaining ground when the new Board of Guardians came into Office. On the 14th of April there were 12 cases on the "Medical Weekly Return," several of the wretched sufferers had been seized in the course of the week. The Medical Attendant strongly recommended a trivial alteration to be made in the Diet, and a Rev. Member of the Visiting Committee, whose weekly turn it was to examine the Workhouse, and who had been a constant and zealous attendant during the past year, thus entered the recommendation of the Surgeon in reply to one of the printed Questions in the "Visitor's Book."

Ques. "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.

Ans. 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."

This proposed alteration in the Diet, with the additional one of Milk being allowed for breakfast, in lieu of Gruel, was with perfect temper and earnestness, submitted to the Board by the Rev. Gentleman who had made the entry in the "Visitor's Book," — and who had inspected the Workhouse during the past week. 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 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 in 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 last 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 being altogether unworthy of notice, but it was said, 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 be permitted *to make experiments on the diet of those who were not actually on his list;*¹ 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. Thus a number of wretched and helpless men, women, and children, were deliberately given up to the further operation of the fatal Gruel, although it had been proved on the experience of many months, that there was "death in the pot."

On the next Board day, (Friday the 21st of April), the Author attended the Workhouse, as one of the Visiting Committee. The disease had made so fearful a progress that the forebodings of the past week had fallen short of the awful reality. No less than nineteen cases of Diarrhoea, with others of a complicated nature, were entered on the "Medical Weekly Return," some of them appearing to be past all hope of recovery. The foetid stench was so intolerable, that an active 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. The Wards were however inspected by another person, and the distressing condition of the inmates reported to the Committee by the Visitor, who 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. This course of proceeding was agreed upon. The Surgeon was requested by the Committee, to attend the Board of Guardians, where, after a lengthened discussion, which principally turned upon what their Highnesses the Commissioners might possibly say and do, in case of their Dietary Regulations being infringed, it was determined, as appears by the following extracts from the Minute Book, to give up the deadly compound.

Minute Book, April 21st.

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 Ruddock, 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 after many months of strenuous exertion, and even six months after the Medical Attendant had solemnly called the attention of the Board to the fact that the Commissioner's 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. From this time the health of the inmates of the Workhouse improved, and although some old cases have since died, there has not been, lately, any recent case of Diarrhoea. The Poor Law Commissioners were pleased to sanction the proposed change of Diet on May the 20th, 1837. The names of persons who were carried off by the immediate operation of Diarrhoea, and of those who laboured under it, previously, or subsequently, to their being attacked by some other disease, to which their death may be ascribed in part, are registered as follow,

Name	Age Years	References in the Surgeon's Book	Remarks
Brown, Elizabeth	2 ½	Measles	These were cases of Diarrhoea coming within the Remarks contained in the Letter to the medical attendant. "Many of the Children were afflicted with the White Mouth the result of the irritation of the bowel, in this state they were seized with measles"
Palmer, Elizabeth	2	Measles	
Symes, James	1	Measles	
Bown, James	1	Measles	
Vokins, Mary Ann	4	Measles	
Hoyle, Emma	1	Measles	
Davey, John	2	Inflammation of the lungs	These cases were preceded by, or accompanied with severe Diarrhoea
Wride, John	1	Inflammation of the lungs	
Cox, George	2	Tubercles of the lungs	
Wilkins, Flora	2	Ulcer on the Bowels	
Woolcott, George	½	Marismus	
Wollcott, Teresa	4	Marismus	
Furber, James	1 ½	Marismus	
Stacey, Mary	78	Natural Decay	Excessive debility from Diarrhoea
Mullins, Mary	23	Consumption	
Partridge, Thomas	62	Rupture of the blood vessel	
Cogle, John	41	Diarrhoea	
Sheppard, Martha	68	Diarrhoea	Some of these cases died at the North Petherton workhouse; where many diseased persons were sent from the Bridgwater house.
White, Mary	39	Diarrhoea	
Arthur, William	1	Diarrhoea	
Pyke, William	67	Diarrhoea	
Diment, Henry	2 ½	Diarrhoea	
Farthing, George	60	Diarrhoea	
Biss, Loman	2 ½	Diarrhoea	
Adams, William	¼	Diarrhoea	
Dowden, Mary	26	Diarrhoea	
Bindon, John	1 ½	Diarrhoea	

This List only indicates a comparatively small part of the suffering inflicted. Some died after leaving the House, and others have, in the words of Cuvier, "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 Robberies;—for all the awful and destructive crimes which ravage society, falls short of the executions by Meal and Water, and a tainted

atmosphere in one Workhouse, —under the Dietary and Regulations of the Poor Law Commissioners. Sentence of death is passed on the Murderer, in an open court, with awful solemnity, after an impartial investigation, and unanimous conviction, by a jury of *disinterested* Englishmen; while an *interested* assembly, secured by closed doors, and claiming the seal of secrecy, are permitted to immure helpless old age, and innocent childhood, in a Pest House, to be subjected to a lingering death, for the crime of requiring a relief to which, for 250 years, they have had a legal right.

It will perhaps be asked, why was not a part, at least, of this wholesale destruction prevented, by an appeal from the Board of Guardians to some

competent authority? The crisis, be it remembered, was a new one, for which the minds of good men, disposed to reverence the Laws of their Country, were not prepared. Parliament had struck at the Poor by the hands of sordid mercenaries. They had vested in a Junta, the unconstitutional power of making, under the name of Regulations, Laws, necessarily affecting the lives of thousands. A new Estate, anomalous in character, and terrific in effect, had been thus formed in the Realm, which perplexed men's judgments, and disturbed the current of their thoughts. Had the admirable provision, which places the lives of Prisoners in Gaol, under the special safeguard of a Coroner's Inquest, been *specially* extended to the helpless inmates of Workhouses, this stream of slaughter would have been checked in its course.² Had the first case of Death by Diarrhoea, which occurred in the Bridgwater Workhouse, been made the subject of solemn enquiry, the verdict would doubtlessly have been "died by the visitation of God." A second, and perhaps a third case, might have been so disposed of. But when fatal cases pressed on, in rapid succession; — when it appeared that a competent Medical Attendant had denounced the cause of the disease; that that alleged exciting cause was wilfully and deliberately kept in action, and that a fresh stream of victims were, month after month, poured into the Workhouse, and unsparingly subjected to the deadly operation of that cause, can there be a doubt on the verdict which would be, at length recorded? Whether at the fifth or sixth, or tenth death, it is impossible to say; but surely there must be some point, at which, shutting up helpless persons in a tainted atmosphere, restricting them to a prescribed diet, with a fatal disease raging, ascribed to the operation of that diet, there must be some point, at which such a destructive course, wilfully persevered in, would call down the heaviest sentence of the Law.

However barbarous this treatment of the Poor may appear in the abstract, its atrocity becomes more conspicuous by contrasting it with the treatment of the Convicts in the Penitentiary at Mill bank, under similar circumstances of disease. These Convicts, like the Inmates of the Bridgwater Workhouse, were Gruelled into Diarrhoea or Dysentry, and a considerable number of them died. The Physicians who were called in, Doctors

Latham and Roget, commenced an immediate reformation of the Dietary, and as this did not stop the progress of the disease, the Penitentiary was cleared of its inmates; while in the Bridgwater Workhouse, under similar circumstances, the use of the deadly Gruel was obdurately persevered in, and a succession of fresh victims supplied; not convicted Felons, as at Mill bank; but the infirm, and the helpless, and the wretched. The surviving female Convicts of the Penitentiary were pardoned, on the ground that, a short time spent amidst alarm and disease was equivalent to several years of ordinary punishment; while a wretched man, who escaped from the Bridgwater Pest House, without taking with him his wife and children for whom he had no shelter of any description whatever, was, by the Chairman and Deputy Chairman of the Board of Guardians, in their Magisterial capacity consigned to a Prison and the Tread Mill!³ Let the whole course of such monstrous proceedings be contrasted with the manly and Christian-like course pursued towards Convicted Felons; — let it be further considered, that it is the broken down Labourer; — that it is decrepid old age, wretched Widows and helpless Orphans, who are so treated, and then some faint idea may be formed of the working of the New Poor Law, with its secret Tribunal, and pampered Inquisitors.

From the fatal course pursued under the eyes of the Board of Guardians, the mass of suffering inflicted on the Poor out of the House, may be inferred, although it can never be adequately described. The foregoing remarks have been principally made on the authority of the Records of the Board, which Records could not be so exclusively used in bringing the sufferings of the out-door Poor before the Public. But the difficulty, inseparable from that undertaking, shall not deter the Author from the task of examining, at a fitting opportunity, the operation of the New Poor Law in the Bridgwater Union, over a somewhat larger surface than the mere Workhouse. The field, alas, is too ample a one to be rapidly explored; even the very steps of the Building used for the Meetings of the Board, present more of misery and suffering, than could be detailed in a volume. Worn-out creatures may there be seen, who having, after a life of labour, or an attack of disease, crawled many tedious miles to tell their tale of woe, are

kept faint and shivering, hour after hour, while the time which ought to be devoted to their relief, is wasted by the Orators of the Board, in frivolous and irrelevant harangues⁴ in propounding schemes, or screwing something out of the necessities the Poor, most unjust and detestable in principle, and as impracticable as Swift's proposal for extracting sunbeams from cucumbers.

A more extended notice of the proceedings of the Board of Guardians of the Bridgwater Union is specially called for by the following correspondence, from which we learn that it is actually distinguished as a Pattern Board.

Clifton, 29th May, 1837.

Gentlemen,—I had much satisfaction in forwarding to the Poor Law Commissioners a copy of the Report presented to your Board by your excellent Chairman at the expiration of the last parochial year, & I have now the pleasure of forwarding to you a copy of a letter I have received from them on the subject, &c. &c. &c.
(Signed) ROB. WEALE.

To the Board of Guardians of the Bridgwater Union.

Poor Law Commission Office, Somerset House, 22nd May, 1837.

Sir,—I am directed by the Poor Law Commissioners for England and Wales to acknowledge the receipt of your letter on the 19th instant, forwarding a Report on the present state of the Bridgwater Union.

I am directed in reply to inform you that this Report has been read by the Commissioners with great satisfaction; and I am further instructed to request you will convey to the Board of Guardians the Commissioners' sense of the efficient management and orderly working of the Bridgwater Union. (Signed)

GEORGE COODE, Assistant Secretary.

To Robert Weale, Esq., Assistant Poor Law Commissioner.

The nature of the Report which has called out this laudatory matter is unknown to the Author, as, strange to say, the document said to be "a Report on the present state of the Bridgwater Union" does not appear, among the Records of this "efficient and orderly" Board. Whether this Report apostrophises the Gruel system, with its imprisonments and torture and deaths; or whether it simply congratulates the Commissioners on the "Thousands," which are said to have been *saved*, by being wrenched from the necessities of the Poor for the benefit of others, must of course be unknown to the Author. But as this Report, although not to be found among the proceedings

of the Board, will doubtlessly appear among the Puffs which are annually published by the Legislators of Somerset House, at the expence of the People of England, a fair opportunity will then be afforded of examining somewhat more in detail, the miseries inflicted by these "*savings*." It may then be demonstrated, that if the average rate of Wages throughout England, is to be considered as the equitable rate of remuneration for labour, then have the Labourers of this District been deprived of more than £20,000 per annum; while they have used their legal claim for relief, in their necessities, with such unexampled moderation as not to have called for more than the pitiful fraction of 1s. 4¼d. in the Pound, on the Rental of 1815! Such are the provident and laborious persons who are consigned, in a mass, to imprisonment, disease, and death!

It should be specially remembered that although but few plagues or famines on record have, within a confined circle of operation, thinned out mankind at a more fearful rate than the Workhouse Diarrhoea has, and although the ravages inflicted have been regularly reported in the fine Gold letter books provided for that purpose; not a single observation has been called out by this wholesale destruction from the Gentlemen Commissioners or their train. But give the suffering Poor one sup of Small Beer, or one extra ounce of Food, and such Missiles as the following are discharged without mercy.

Sir,—I am directed by the Poor Law Commissioners for England and Wales to request that you will call the attention of the Board of Guardians to the practice of increasing the allowance of food to Paupers employed in the domestic and household work of Union Workhouses with a view of its discontinuance if it exists in the Taunton Union. Signed, by Order of the Board,

E. CHADWICK, Secretary.

Thus while the Russells and the Melbournes, insist, night after night, on the injustice of withholding from Ireland a complete system of "SELF-GOVERNMENT";—while the Humes, the O'Connells, and their degraded tail threaten the dismemberment of the Empire, if this said "*self-government*" is longer withheld; they tyrannically withhold from all the Landed Proprietors of England and Wales, the power of legally giving one extra ounce of food to a fainting wretch in the Poor House, and insolently command the

“discontinuance” of the practice if it exists. But let the factious Neros who uphold this persecution, while they bawl for self-government, beware. They have, with impunity, struck at the Rank, and authority, and venerated establishments of the State: they are now dabbling in the heart's blood of the people. Let them remember the fate of their detested prototype, when he struck at the herd.

“Sed periit, post-quam cerdonibus esse timendus Cœperat. Hoc nocuit Lamiarura cæde madenti.”

The Author will not drag this awful warning, from under the veil of its appalling original. Let it remain there for the benefit of those whom it may concern. On his brethren of the working classes he would urge the duty of a patient submission to the existing laws of their country. He would earnestly press on their consideration, the fact, that outrages of any description would prodigiously increase the difficulties opposed to that alleviation of their sufferings which must ultimately be effected, for justice and truth are mighty and will prevail. If urged to violence by ruffian mendicants, or factious demagogues, let them resist the insidious proposition, even if propounded under the privilege of Parliament. Let them beware of such deluders, and feel assured, that to attain all which is consistent with justice, — (and more than this they should not wish to attain), they must continue to submit themselves patiently to the laws, to fear God and honor their Sovereign; and, when assailed by the tempters, earnestly ejaculate, “O my Soul, come not thou into their secret; unto their assembly be not thou united: for in their anger they slew a man, and in their self-will they digged down a wall. Cursed be their anger for it was fierce, and their wrath for it was cruel.”

Bridgwater, July 1837.

END NOTES

These were Footnotes in the original

¹ In a Letter read in the House of Commons, from the Rev. T. Pitman, Vicar of Eastbourn, it appears that, the above monstrous doctrine was held by the Commissioners themselves. The Rev. Gentleman says; “The Lewes House of Correction dietary allows 5oz. more of bread, besides one pint of soup daily, than that of our Workhouse. I have make known these things to the Poor Law Commissioners, and have also superadded the astounding fact, that though, in the memory of the oldest inhabitant, fever of a malignant and fatal character has not been known in our

Workhouse, yet since the introduction of the dietary now used very many have died of typhus. To this they have replied, that they cannot alter the dietary; and as to the fever, they consider that they have sufficiently provided against any evils, by allowing the medical man to order what he pleases in case of sickness. With due deference to them, this appears like saying a man need not be afraid of the consequences of setting fire to his neighbour's house because there is plenty of water hard by.”

² The Coroner ought to inquire of the death of all persons who die in prison, that it may be known whether they died by violence or any other unreasonable hardships; for if a prisoner, by the duress of the gaoler, come to an untimely death, it is MURDER, and the Law implies malice in respect of the cruelty. *Burn's Justice*.

³ Justice, it is said, should not only be pure, but appear to be pure. Does it so appear when persons in a Magisterial capacity, acting at once as Judge and Jury, commit a helpless creature to Prison, on whom they have previously sat in Judgement at a secret Board as Guardians? The man, so imprisoned, had been working for six shillings a week, being about the price of a bushel and half of Oats, for himself and family! His Goods had been seized for twenty three shillings, arrears of Rent; and, on application for relief, himself, his wife, and five children, were ordered into the Workhouse; where infectious Diarrhœa was raging; and the Visitor's Book attested the fact that “Much Sickness was prevalent in the House”. He left this den of disease to endeavour to support himself by his labour, and to assist his family as far as he could; for this crime he was consigned to a Prison, and the torture of a Tread Mill! And all this too, not at Morocco, or Algiers, but in that which was once “Merry Old England.” “The Land of the Brave and the Free”

⁴ While the Author deeply regrets that the Orators of the Board should have deluded so many Members, into a course which their better nature must, on reflection, condemn; he is bound to express his admiration of the conduct of other Members of that Board, with whom he has been proud to co-operate. He is likewise bound to put on record his honest, although humble, testimony to the admirable manner in which the Medical duties have been performed under most trying circumstances. The conduct of the Medical Men, the zeal, liberality, and humanity evinced by them, has been in direct contrast, with the peddling and calumnious spirit by which they have been assailed. It is within the Author's knowledge, that they have frequently, from their own funds, (for their salaries could not have defrayed their expenses) supplied their suffering Patients with necessaries not furnished by the Board. Under the pretence of “saving the Rate Payers,” the Medical Men, and the Poor through them, have been subjected to a disgraceful persecution; which, whatever may to its immediate effects, must ultimately bring down shame, on those who would further oppress the suffering Poor by defrauding Professional Men of a fair remuneration for their invaluable services.