

The ‘*Bury-al Board*’: Poverty, Politics and Poor Relief
in the
Brixworth Union Northamptonshire
c. 1870 – 1900.

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Abstract

The crusade against outrelief, which was promoted by the Local Government Board in the late-Victorian era, is a neglected topic of nineteenth century poor law studies. This thesis examines the crusade against outrelief that was implemented in the Brixworth Union of Northamptonshire because this board of guardians was one of the strongest and most renowned supporters of central government's anti-outrelief policy between 1870 and 1896. For over twenty-five years guardians implemented a series of progressively harsh strategies to try to eradicate outrelief spending. Those anti-outrelief measures had a profound social cost with far-reaching political repercussions. From the start of the crusade campaign, working people organised to fight for the reintroduction of outrelief. When the poor law was democratised in the 1890s the working-classes succeeded in becoming guardians of the poor for the first time and they outvoted the anti-outrelief policy. The political contest over outrelief provides fresh insights into the complex nature of labour relations in the countryside and the impact of democratisation in the late-nineteenth century. It traces the role of the poor law in rural society and how policy was shaped by central and local factors. The study, therefore, examines the politics of poor relief, the forces that shaped poor law policies and the impact those policies had on rural society in the context of the crusade against outrelief and its overthrow. In the process it questions some of our assumptions about working class political and social welfare aspirations before the advent of Welfare State legislation in the early twentieth century.

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Chapter One.

Introduction.

1.1: Historiographical debates.

This thesis examines two neglected aspects of nineteenth century poor law history, namely the crusade against outdoor relief, in the years circa 1873 to 1893, and the process of democratisation, which was a key factor that enabled working people to successfully reverse the anti-outrelief crusade of the late-Victorian period. In recent years many studies have examined the origins and impact of the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834.¹ Unquestionably this work has enhanced our understanding of mid-Victorian social

¹ There is a vast secondary literature on the New Poor Law. The major studies published post-1970 are quoted here: M.E. Rose (ed.), The English Poor Law, 1780-1930, (1971); N.C. Edsall, The Anti-Poor Law Movement, (1971); A. Brundage, 'The Landed Interest and the New Poor Law: a reappraisal of the revolution in government', Economic History Review, 87, (1972), pp. 27-48; M.E. Rose, The Relief of Poverty, 1834-1914, (1972); J. Harris, Unemployment and Politics, 1886-1989, (1972); D. Fraser, The Evolution of the British Welfare State, (1973); N. Longmate, The Workhouse, (1974); A. Brundage, 'The English Poor Law and the Cohesion of Agricultural Society', Agricultural History, XLVIII, (1974), pp. 405-17; P. Dunkley, 'The Hungry Forties and the New Poor Law: A Case Study', Historical Journal, 17, (1974), pp. 329-46; A. Digby, 'The Labour Market and the Continuity of Social Policy after 1834: The Case of the Eastern Counties', Economic History Review, 2nd series, XXVIII, (1975), pp. 69-83; D. Fraser (ed.), The New Poor Law in the Nineteenth Century, (1976); E. P. Hennock, 'Poverty and Social Theory in England: the experience of the eighteen eighties', Social History, 1, (1976), pp. 68-91; D. Ashforth, 'The Urban Poor', in D. Fraser (ed.), The New Poor Law in the Nineteenth Century, (1976), pp. 128-148; A. Digby, 'The Rural Poor', in D. Fraser (ed.), The New Poor Law in the Nineteenth Century, (1976), pp. 149-70; P. Keating (ed.), Into Unknown England, 1866-1913, (1976); M.E. Rose, 'Settlement, Removal and the New Poor Law', in D. Fraser (ed.), The New Poor Law in the Nineteenth Century, (1976), pp. 32-6; R. F. Cowherd, The Political Economists and the English Poor Laws, (1977); J. Fido, 'The C.O.S. and social case-work in London, 1869-1900' in A. P. Donajkowski (ed.), Social Control in Nineteenth Century Britain, (1977), pp. 207-30; A. Brundage, The Making of the New Poor Law: the politics of enquiry, enactment and implementation, 1832-39, (1978); E.J. Evans, Social Policy, 1830-1913, (1978); A. Digby, Pauper Palaces, (1978); M. Caplan, 'The New Poor Law and the struggle for union chargeability', International Review of Social History, 23, (1978), pp. 267-300; U.R.Q. Henriques, Before the Welfare State: Social Administration in Early Industrial Britain, (1979); D. Roberts, Paternalism in Early Victorian England, (1979); J.H. Treble, Urban Poverty in Britain, 1830-1814, (1979); P. Dunkley, 'Paternalism, the Magistracy and Poor Relief in England', International Review of Social History, XXI, (1979), 5, pp.371-97; D. R. Mills, Lord and Peasant in Nineteenth Century Britain, (1980); F. K. Prochaska, Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth Century England, (1980); D. Fraser, 'The English Poor Law and the Origins of the British Welfare State', in W. Mommsen and W. Mock (eds.), The Emergence of the Welfare State in Britain and Germany, 1850-1950, (1981), pp. 9-31; M.E. Rose, 'The Crisis of Poor Relief in England, 1860-1900', in W. Mommsen and W. Mock (eds.), The Emergence of the Welfare State in Britain 1850-1950, (1981), pp. 50-70; A. Digby, 'The Rural Poor', in

welfare debates and practices, but at the same time it has established a broad poor law chronology that marginalises late-nineteenth century welfare policy changes. A typical modern textbook will discuss various aspects of New Poor Law administration before 1870 and the development of Welfare State legislation after 1900, but the intervening

G.E. Mingay (ed.), The Victorian Countryside, (2 volumes, 1981), pp. 591-601; P. Thane The Foundations of the Welfare State, (1982); A. Digby, The Poor Law in Nineteenth Century England and Wales, (1982); A. W. Vincent, 'The Poor law reports of 1909 and the social theory of the Charity Organisation Society', Victorian Studies, 27, (1983-4), pp. 343-65; D. Fraser, The Evolution of the British Welfare State, (1984 edn.); R. M. Smith, 'The Structured Dependence of the Elderly as a Recent Historical Development: Some Sceptical Thoughts', Ageing and Society, 4, (1984), 4, pp. 409-428; J. Lewis, Women in Britain, 1870-1950, (1984); G. S. Jones, Outcast London: A Study of the Relationship between Classes in Victorian Society, (1984 edn.); K. Snell, Annals of the Labouring Poor: Social Change in Agrarian England, 1660-1900, (1985); P. Ryan, 'Politics and poor relief: East End unions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries', in M.E. Rose (ed.), The Poor and the City: The English Poor Law in its Urban Context, 1834-1914, (1985), pp. 130-172; W. Apfel and P. Dunkley, 'English Rural Society and the New Poor Law: Bedfordshire, 1834-47', Social History, 10, (1985) pp. 37-68; K. Gregson, 'Poor Law and Organised Charity: The Relief of Exceptional Distress in Northeast England, 1870-1914', in M.E. Rose (ed.), The Poor and the City: The English Poor Law in its Urban Context, 1834-1914, (1985), pp. 94-131; A.J. Kidd and K.W. Roberts (eds.), City, Class and Culture, (1985); D. Ashford, The Emergence of the Welfare States, (1986); M.E. Rose, The Relief of Poverty, 1834-1914, (1986); E. Hennock, British Social Reform and German Precedents: the case of social insurance, 1880-1914, (1987); E. Royle, Modern Britain: a social history, 1750-1985, (1987); R. Mitchinson, 'The Poor Law', in T.M. Devine and R. Mitchinson (eds.), People and Society in Scotland, Volume 1, (1988), pp. 252-67; C. Bellamy, Administering Central-Local Relations, 1871-1918, (1988); A. Digby, British Social Policy: From Workhouse to Welfare, (1989); A. Brundage, 'The Making of the New Poor Law Debate: Redivivus', Past and Present, 127, (1990), pp. 183-86; F.K. Prochaska, 'Philanthropy', in F.M.L. Thompson (ed.), The Cambridge Social History of Britain, 1750-1980, Volume 3, (1990), pp. 357-395; P. Thane, 'Government and Society in England and Wales, 1750-1914', in F.M.L. Thompson, (ed.), The Cambridge Social History of Britain, 1750-1980, Volume 3, (1990), pp. 1-63; G.R. Boyer, An Economic History of the English Poor Law, 1750-1850, (1990); P. Mandler (ed.), The Uses of Charity: The Poor on Relief in the Nineteenth Century Metropolis, (1990); H. Southall, 'Poor Law statistics and the geography of economic distress', in J. Foreman-Peck (ed.), New Perspectives on the late-Victorian Economy: Essays in quantitative Economic History, 1860-1914, (1991), pp. 180-217; A.J. Kidd, 'The invention of poverty', Labour History Review, 56, (1991), pp. 39-43; F. Driver, Power and Pauperism: The Workhouse System, 1834-1844, (1993); G. Finlayson, Citizen, State and Social Welfare in Britain, 1830-1990, (1994); D. Eastwood, 'Rethinking the Debates on the Poor Law in Early Nineteenth Century England', Utilitas, 6, (May 1994), I, pp. 97-116; D. Eastwood, Governing Rural England. Tradition and Transformation in Local Government, 1780-1840, (1994); G. Himmelfarb, The Demoralisation of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values, (1995); J. Harris, Private Lives, Public Spheres: a social history of Britain, 1870-1914, (1995); D. Englander and R. O'Day, (eds.), Retrieved Riches: Social Investigation in Britain, 1840-1914, (1995); R. Humphreys, Sin, Organized Charity and the Poor Law in Victorian England, (1995); M. Katz and C. Sachsse (eds.), The Mixed Economy of Social Welfare, (1996); P. Thane (ed.), The Foundations of the Welfare State, (1996 edn.); P. Thane, 'Old people and their families in the English past', in M. Daunton (ed.), Charity, Self Interest and Welfare in the English Past, (1996), pp. 113-38; D. Englander, Poverty and Poor Law Reform in 19th Century Britain, 1834-1914 - From Chadwick to Booth, (1998); L. Hollen Lees, The Solidarities of Strangers. The English Poor Laws and the People, 1700-1948, (1998); A. Kidd, State, Society and the Poor in Nineteenth Century England, (1999).

three decades, during which the crusade was tried and failed, are 'handled uncomfortably or glossed over' by most poor law historians.² The crusade against outrelief is seldom the focus of research in its own right, instead it tends to be discussed in connection with a related aspect of late-Victorian welfare provision, such as the expansion of workhouse services.³ As a result most modern textbooks continue to repeat previous mistakes and misinterpretations, by emphasising the insignificance of the crusade against outrelief. Consequently, the secondary literature on the outrelief campaign is limited when compared with the vast amount written on the mid-Victorian poor law.⁴ However, the crusade against outrelief merits detailed attention for five reasons.

Firstly, few welfare textbooks highlight that the late-nineteenth century was a

² D. Thomson, 'Welfare and the Historians', in L. Bonfield, R.M. Smith and K. Wrightson (eds.), The World We Have Gained: Histories of Population and Social Structure, (1986), p. 373. Thomson is critical of standard welfare textbooks that are used on most university social policy courses in 19th century studies because they adopt this approach. For example, Fraser, The Evolution. Even one of the most recent texts in this field - Kidd, State - devotes just pp. 45-64 to the subject of the late-Victorian poor law and of that only pp. 48-52 to the crusade campaign.

³ G.M. Ayers, England's First State Hospitals and the Metropolitan Asylums Board, 1867-1930, (1971), chps. 1 & 2; J.E. O'Neill, 'Finding a policy for the sick poor', Victorian Studies, (1974), 7, pp. 265-84; M.W. Flinn, 'Medical Services under the New Poor Law' in D. Fraser (ed.) The New Poor Law in the Nineteenth Century, (1976), pp. 45-66; M.A. Crowther, The Workhouse System, 1834-1929, (1981); A. Scull (ed.), Madhouses, Mad-Doctors and Madmen, (1981); J. Pickstone, Medicine and Industrial Society: A History of Hospital Provision in Manchester and its Regions, 1752-1946, (1985); S. Cherry, Medical Services and the Hospitals in Britain, 1860-1939, (1986); F.F.S. Driver, 'The English Bastille: Dimensions of the Workhouse System, 1834-1884' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge, 1988); G. Bock and P. Thane (eds.), Maternity and Gender Politics: Women and the Rise of the European Welfare States, 1880s -1950s, (1991); H. Hendrick, Child Welfare: England, 1872-1989, (1994); F. Crompton, Workhouse Children, (1997).

⁴ K. Williams, From Pauperism to Poverty, (1981); D. Thomson, 'Provision for the Elderly in England, 1834-1908', (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge, 1981); D. Thomson, 'Workhouse to nursing home; residential care of elderly people in England since 1840', Ageing and Society, 3, (1983), pp. 43-69; D. Thomson, 'I am not my father's keeper; families and the elderly in nineteenth century England', Law and History Review, 2, (Fall, 1984), pp. 265-286; D. Thomson, 'The decline of social security; falling state support for the elderly since early Victorian times', Ageing and Society, 4, (1984), pp. 451-82; D. Thomson, 'Welfare', pp. 255-378; M. Mackinnon, 'Poor Law policy, unemployment and pauperism', Explorations in Economic History, 23, (1986), pp. 229-336; M. Mackinnon, 'English Poor Law policy and the crusade against outdoor relief', Journal of Economic History, 47, (1987), pp. 603-25; D. Thomson, 'The welfare of the elderly in the past, a family or community responsibility?', in M. Pelling and R. M. Smith (eds.), Life, Death and the Elderly Historical Perspectives, (1991), pp. 194-222; D. Thomson, World Without Welfare: New Zealand's Colonial Experiment, (1998).

pivotal period of poor law history, although that period had a vibrancy in its own right, which shaped the evolution of the Welfare State in the early twentieth century.⁵ The radical nature of the crusade campaign is often overlooked because the history of social policy in the nineteenth century has been dominated by Sidney and Beatrice Webbs' Whiggish approach, which we will return to later in this introduction.⁶ Geoffrey Finlayson likens studying the Whig theory of poor law history to embarking on 'a great collective train journey into the future'.⁷ En route the reader is directed 'to stop at certain "significant" stations – such as 1830 to 1850, 1874 to 1880, 1906 to 1911...' until our 'historical journey' ends in the predestined terminus of the Welfare State post-1945. Finlayson adds that the chief problem with this approach is that the reader is encouraged to view each phase of poor law history 'in terms of the development or evolution of the Welfare State', rather than in its historical context. As a result any periods of major poor law disjunction, notably the crusade decades, are neglected because they do not fit the Whiggish paradigm. For this reason many welfare textbooks concentrate on the antecedents of current welfare policies, both at a national and local level, which indicate that poor law provision was more enlightened as the nineteenth century progressed. They overlook the fact that although by the early twentieth century more advanced welfare policies did evolve as the result of progressive local measures that were introduced by forward-thinking guardians, those policies were also a reaction against the harshness of the radical poor law ideology of the late-Victorian period.⁸ Extremist policies during the

⁵ This point has been most forcibly made by Thomson, 'Welfare', pp. 372-375.

⁶ S. and B. Webb, *English Poor Law Policy*, (1910). Mackinnon, 'English Poor Law'; Thomson 'Welfare'; Williams, *Pauperism*, are very critical of the Webbs' Whiggish approach.

⁷ Finlayson, *Citizen, State*, pp. 2-3.

⁸ Thomson, 'The Welfare of the Elderly', pp. 212-3.

crusade decades, as David Thomson explains, led to a 'working back...to a more normal balance' of social responsibilities and objectives, that we now term the rise of the early Welfare State.⁹ Therefore, if we want to broaden our historical understanding of public welfare systems in the twentieth century we have to begin by studying the impact of the late-Victorian crusade to abolish outrelief. We need to examine how popular protest changed public perceptions about the causes of poverty in an era when the process of democratisation unfolded, creating a more liberal social policy consensus in central government circles after 1900.¹⁰

Secondly, examining the crusade campaign provides a new insight into aspects of late-Victorian rural society. Nowhere is this more evident than in the history of collective working class politics in the countryside. The shibboleths of Swing and agricultural trade unionism have dominated the field of rural studies for some time.¹¹ Recently, historians such as John Archer, Alun Howkins, D.H. Morgan and Keith Snell, have published more general 'labour' histories of the nineteenth century countryside.¹² This study aims to

⁹ Ibid., p. 194.

¹⁰ It should be noted that elsewhere new methods of social investigation helped to change perceptions of poverty, but these did not influence those who controlled the policy of the Brixworth Union board of guardians during the crusade campaign, 1873-93

¹¹ J.P.D. Dunbabin, ' "The Revolt of the Field": The Agricultural Labourers' Movement in the 1870s', *Past and Present*, 26, (1963), pp. 68-97; A.J. Peacock, *Bread or Blood: A Study of the Agrarian Riots in East Anglia in 1816*, (1965); E. J. Hobsbawm and G.E. Rudé, *Captain Swing*, (1969); J.P.D. Dunbabin, *Rural Discontent in Nineteenth Century Britain*, (1974); R. Arnold, 'The "Revolt" in the Field in Kent, 1872-1879', *Past and Present*, 64, (Aug. 1974), pp. 71-95; P.L.R. Horn, *Labouring Life in the Victorian Countryside* (1976); R. Wells, 'The development of the English rural proletariat and social protest, 1700-1850', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 6, (1979), pp. 115-139; P.L.R. Horn, *The Rural World and Social Change in the English Countryside, 1780-1850* (1980); J.P.D. Dunbabin, 'The incidence and organisation of Agricultural Trades Unionism in the 1870s', *Agricultural History Review*, 16, (1986), II, pp. 114-41; N. Scotland, 'The National Agricultural Labourers' Union and the demand for the stake in the soil, 1872-1896' in E.F. Bagini (ed.), *Citizenship and Community: Radicals and Collective Identities in the British Isles, 1865-1931* (1996), pp. 151-167.

¹² D. H. Morgan, *Harvesters and Harvesting 1840-1900: A Study of the Rural Proletariat* (1982); A. Howkins, *Poor Labouring Men. Rural Radicalism in Norfolk, 1870-1923*, (1985); K. Snell, *Annals*; J. Archer, 'By a Flash and a Scare': *Arson, Animal Maiming and Poaching in East Anglia, 1815-1870*, (1990); A. Howkins, *Reshaping Rural England A Social History, 1850-1925*, (1991); K. Snell,

show that the crusade campaign can make a positive contribution to this historiography.

The deeply impoverishing poor law retrenchment experiment aroused intense resentment where it was imposed, often producing a strong political reaction. Although that opposition was embedded in a cluster of grievances (poor labour relations, low wages, charity rights, customary parish pensions, etc.), it was often the outrelief cause that was the primary force which mobilised local political activism in some rural communities. Thus, a study of the crusade campaign can shed light on the nature of political conflict in the countryside and key aspects of its complexities, which are often overlooked.

Thirdly, analysing late-Victorian welfare initiatives allows us to explore the relationship between agricultural trade unionism and the crusade against outrelief. In the 1870s rural trade union agitation against the crusade ethos was more extensive than some general labour histories of the countryside convey.¹³ Although only a total of forty-one poor law unions maintained the crusade campaign, circa 1873 to 1893, between 1873 and the onset of the agricultural crisis in the countryside around 1879 a considerable number of rural poor law unions did adopt the new anti-outrelief guidelines. Thus, in some rural areas there was a link between the crusade campaign and the advent of agricultural trade union combination. Many working people joined local and national agricultural trade unions, such as the National Agricultural Labourers' Union (NALU), not just to organise to increase wages, but also to reintroduce outrelief provision because it was a key income

'Deferential bitterness and the social outlook of the rural proletariat in eighteenth and nineteenth century England and Wales' in M.L.Bush (ed.), Social Order and Social Classes since 1500: Studies in Social Stratification, (1992), pp. 158-179; A. Howkins, 'Peasants, servants and labourers: The marginal workforce in British agriculture, 1870-1914', Agricultural History Review, 42, (1994), I, pp. 49-62.

¹³ Since the crusade is neglected, its links to wider changes in rural society is often overlooked. Though some agricultural historians have noted its importance in relation to rural trade union activity. For example, A.F.G. Brown, Meagre Harvest: The Essex Farm Workers' Struggle Against Poverty, 1750-1914, (1990).

supplement. Even though their political fight was not successful until the 1890s when guardian elections were democratised following local government franchise extension, they tried to challenge the crusade from its inception. Thus, poor law contests became a mobilising force harnessing grievances about economic hardship, social tensions and political exclusion, during the crusade decades. By exploring the pivotal role that the crusade campaign played in the history of collective rural working class politics, this study will contribute to late-Victorian labour history and complement the wealth of work on urban industrial labour relations in this period.¹⁴

Fourthly, in the early 1980s Mary Mackinnon was one of the first historians to highlight the social cost of the crusade campaign, though like her predecessors she concentrated on central government records.¹⁵ She stressed that during a period of rapid economic change withholding outrelief provision accentuated the impoverishment of some of the most vulnerable members of society. However, very few historians have studied the political reaction that such harsh policies engendered, despite the fact that Derek Fraser indicated over twenty years ago that this was a neglected aspect of poor law

¹⁴ There is vast historiography on the subject of 19th century urban industrial relations. A selection of major texts are quoted here - T.R. Tholfsen, Working Class Radicalism in Mid-Victorian Britain, 1840-1880, (1976); S. Meacham, A Life Apart: The English Working Class, 1890-1914, (1977); E. Hopkins, A Social History of the English Working Classes, 1815-1945, (1979); J. Clarke, C. Critcher and R. Johnson (eds.), Working-Class Culture: Studies in History and Theory, (1979); F. McKenna, The Railway Workers, 1840-1970, (1980); E. H. Hunt, British Labour History, 1815-1914, (1981); R. Gray, The Aristocracy of Labour in 19th-century Britain, 1850-1914, (1981); K.D. Brown, The English Labour Movement, 1700-1951, (1982); C. J Wrigley (ed.), A History of British Industrial Relations, 1875- 1914 Volume I, (1982); J. Winter (ed.), The Working Class in Modern British History: Essays in Honour of Henry Pelling, (1983); J. Benson (ed.), The Working Class in England, 1875-1914, (1984); E. Roberts, A Woman's Place: An Oral History of Working-Class Women, 1890-1940, (1984); H. McLeod, Religion and the Working Class in Nineteenth Century Britain, (1984); R. Price, Labour in British Society: An Interpretative Essay, (1986); E. Roberts, Women's Work, 1840-1940, (1988); J. Benson, The Working Class in Britain, 1850-1939, (1989); P. Joyce, Work, Society and Politics: The Culture of the Factory in Later Victorian England, (1991 edn.).

¹⁵ Mackinnon, 'English Poor Law', pp. 603-4.

studies.¹⁶ Recently, a number of urban political historians have made important contributions to late-Victorian poor law studies. For example, John Garrard's studies of major northern Victorian industrial towns have advanced our knowledge of the nature of local government politics, including the poor law system, as late as the mid-1880s.¹⁷ Garrard found that, as urbanisation accelerated, voters were more interested in the local, rather than the national, political scene. Although Fraser emphasised this factor in the mid-Victorian period, Garrard has shown that historians can think more conceptually about the structure and performance of late-Victorian local government. He stresses that poor law historians need to engage with some of the debates that political scientists have raised about the nature of regional power and how it operates. Pat Ryan has explored the political impact of the crusade campaign in poor law unions in the East End of London.¹⁸ He did not find evidence of a strong political reaction but conceded that his study had 'raised more questions than it resolved' because the unstable migrant population of the East End of London may have been responsible for a lack of interest in local politics. He suggested that more regional studies were needed before we could clarify what impact the crusade campaign had on working people's lives and politics, and it is precisely that issue that this study aims to explore.

Fifthly, it is often stated in current welfare and political history textbooks that

¹⁶ Fraser (ed.), The New Poor; D. Fraser, Urban Politics in Victorian England; The Structure of Power in Victorian Cities, (1978 edn.).

¹⁷ J. A. Garrard, Leaders and Politics in Nineteenth Century Salford: An Historical Analysis of Urban Political Power, (1977); Garrard, 'The middle classes and nineteenth century national and local politics', in J. A. Garrard, D. Jary, M. Goldsmith and A. Oldfield (eds.), The Middle Class in Politics, (1977), pp. 35-67; Garrard, 'Parties, members and voters after 1867: A local study', Historical Journal, 20, (1977), pp. 145-63; Garrard, Leadership and Power in Victorian Industrial Towns, 1830-80, (1983); Garrard, 'Social history, political history and political science: the study of power', Journal of Social History 3, (1983), pp. 105-123.

¹⁸ P. Ryan, '“Poplarism” 1894-1930', in P. Thane (ed.), The Origins of British Social Policy, (1978), pp. 56-83; Ryan, 'East London', pp. 130-172.

there was very limited popular participation in local government politics by working people during the late-nineteenth century.¹⁹ Yet, the crusade campaign and the strong political reaction it engendered pre-dates twentieth century welfare legislation. As a result, it challenges current orthodoxy about the level of interest in local government in that period. Some poor law historians, notably Pat Thane, tend to undervalue the social and political aspirations of working class rural voters in the late-Victorian era. Thane claims that 'the scattered evidence from local elections' reveal that 'turnouts were usually low even after the local franchise changes in 1894'.²⁰ She concludes from these findings that 'nowhere did working men flood out to support such reforming candidates, or indeed any others', who supported social welfare issues associated with municipal socialism.²¹ Thane admits that 'the variety and implications of interest in municipal socialism in this period deserve more detailed attention', but she does not concede that further research needs to be carried out on poor law politics because she regards the

¹⁹ The following selection of texts downplay the extent of suffrage extension (some older references are still set texts in their field) - V.D. Lipman, Local Government Areas, 1834-1945, (1949); B. Keith-Lucas, The English Local Government Franchise: A Short History, (1952); J. Redlich and F.W. Hirst, The History of Local Government in England, (1958 edn.); J.M.Lee, Social Leaders and Public Persons: A Study of County Government in Cheshire since 1888, (1963); J.P.D. Dunbabin, 'The politics of the establishment of county councils', Historical Journal, 4, (1963), I, pp. 238-50; J.P.D. Dunbabin, 'Expectations of the New County Councils and their Realisation', Historical Journal, 8, (1965), pp. 354-73; K.O.Morgan, 'The Liberal Unionists in Wales', National Library of Wales Journal, 16, (1969), pp. 165-7; J.P.D. Dunbabin, 'British local government reform: the nineteenth century and after', English Historical Review, 92, (1977), pp. 777-805; N. Blewitt, 'The Franchise in the United Kingdom, 1885-1918', Past and Present, 32, (Dec. 1965), pp. 27-56; F.W.S. Craig, British parliamentary election results 1885-1918, (1974); K.O. Morgan, Rebirth of a Nation State: Wales, 1880-1980, (1981); K.T. Hoppen, 'The Franchise and Electoral Politics in England and Ireland, 1832-1885', History, 70, (1985), pp. 202-217; I.G.C. Hutchinson, A Political History of Scotland, 1832-1914: Parties, Elections and Issues, (1986); P. Hollis, Ladies Elect: Women in English Local Government, 1865-1914, (1987); P. F. Clarke and K. Langford, 'Hodge's Politics: The Agricultural Labourers and the Third Reform Act in Suffolk' in N. Harte and R. Quinault (eds.), Land and Society in Britain, 1700-1914: Essays in Honour of F.M.L. Thompson, (1996), pp. 119-137.

²⁰ P. Thane, 'The Working Class and State "Welfare" in Britain, 1880-1914', Historical Journal, 27, (1984), 4, pp. 877-900. This has recently been reprinted without revision in D. Gladstone (ed.), Before Beveridge. Welfare Before the Welfare State, (1999), pp. 86-113.

²¹ Thane, "Welfare", p. 892.

crusade campaign as insignificant. Thane emphasises that only 41 poor law unions (6.6 per cent) adopted the crusade initiative rigorously. However, as Williams points out, it is worth remembering that 16 per cent of the total population in England and Wales lived in areas where the strict anti-outrelief strategy was maintained for over twenty years.²² Yet, we still know very little about what made these poor law unions different and why they chose to follow the strict anti-outrelief guidelines. Moreover, the policies of these ‘model’ boards of guardians had a knock-on effect, if only briefly, on many other unions. Therefore, it is possible that the crusade campaign produced a strong political reaction on a broad front because it was too extreme. If so, this would modify our understanding of the nature of local government politics and the social welfare aspirations of new voters in this period.

This thesis will test Thane’s views by exploring the degree of working class involvement in poor law politics, seeking to qualify her generalisations. A major objective of the study is to investigate the nature of political activity in the Brixworth Union. It will explore whether political activism followed a pattern of linear development, starting with agricultural trade unionism and culminating in working class political representation in local government. The study will also examine whether Liberalism, which dominated Northamptonshire politics, managed to contain and address working people’s aspirations. If it failed to do so that finding would suggest that political historians, who debate the drift away from Liberalism in the late-Victorian/ Edwardian era, might need to take into account the political ramifications of the crusade campaign

²² Williams, Pauperism, p. 104.

when they assess the impact of municipal socialism.²³ It would also mean that welfare historians, such as Thane, would have to revise their view that working class political activity only emerged as a force in British politics when Labour strengthened its 'chances of attaining local or central power...post 1920'.²⁴ We clearly need to try to identify any antecedents of that process to evaluate the political impact of the crusade campaign and democratisation. Although Fraser recognised the importance of taking this approach in the mid-Victorian period, little work has been done post-1870 in England. Irish poor law historians, such as Bill Feingold, have stressed the importance of boards of guardians in rural society, establishing that they were significant political arenas in the late-nineteenth century.²⁵ Through this case study we can test whether this is true of some of their English counterparts too, and if that re-evaluation runs in tandem with Whiggish views of the crusade decades.

²³ There is a wealth of literature on the subject of the demise of Liberalism - G. Dangerfield, The Strange Death of Liberal England, (1966 edn.); P. Thompson, Socialists, Liberals and Labour: the Struggle for London, 1885-1914, (1967); P.F. Clarke, Lancashire and New Liberalism, (1971); J. Vincent, The Governing Passion: Cabinet Government and Party Politics, 1885-6, (1974); P.F. Clarke, Liberals and Social Democrats, (1978); M. Freedon, The New Liberalism: An Ideology of Social Reform, (1978); P. Weiler, The New Liberalism: Liberal Theory in Great Britain, 1889-1914, (1982); M. Bentley and J. Stevenson (eds.), High and Low Politics in Modern Britain, (1983); M. Bentley, Politics Without Democracy, Great Britain, 1815-1914, (1984); K. Laybourn and J. Reynolds, Liberalism and the Rise of Labour, 1890-1918, (1984); J.P. Parry, Democracy and Religion: Gladstone and the Liberal Party, 1867-1875, (1986); G. L. Bernstein, Liberalism and Liberal Politics in Edwardian England, (1986); J.P. Parry, 'High and low politics in modern Britain: review article', Historical Journal, 29, (1986), III, pp. 753-770; M. Bentley, The Climax of Liberal Politics: British Liberalism in Theory and Practice, 1868-1914, (1987); K. Laybourn, The Rise of Labour: The British Labour Party, 1890-1979, (1988); M. Freedon, 'The New Liberalism and its Aftermath', in R. Bellamy (ed.), Victorian Liberalism: Nineteenth Century Political Thought and Practice, (1990), pp. 175-193; J. Turner, British Politics and the Great War, (1992); E. F. Biagini, Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform, (1992); G. R. Searle, The Liberal Party: Triumph and Disintegration, 1886-1929, (1992); D. Powell, 'The Liberal Ministries and Labour, 1892-1895', History, The Journal of the Historical Association, 63, (1993), pp. 408-426; E.F. Biagini (ed.), Citizenship and Community: Liberals, Radicals and Collective Identities in the British Isles, 1865-1931, (1996); S.J. Lee, British Political History, 1815-1914, (1996 edn.); A. Sykes, The Rise and Fall of British Liberalism, 1776-1988, (1997).

²⁴ Thane, "Welfare", p. 900.

²⁵ S. Clarke and J.S. Donnelly (eds.), Irish Peasants and Political Unrest, 1780-1914 (1983); W. L. Feingold, The Revolt of the Tenantry: The Transformation of Local Government in Ireland, 1872-1886, (1984).

Nineteenth century poor law history has been dominated by Sidney and Beatrice Webb's work, which started this Whiggish tradition (notably in their three-volume overview of welfare developments published between 1927-9).²⁶ They set out to prove that in the post-1850 period central government began to move away from the misguided principles of the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, adopting instead a more enlightened set of welfare policies. The Webbs supported their paradigm by concentrating on a number of welfare beacons, which indicated that social policies became more advanced after a mid-Victorian watershed. The problem with this agenda was that whilst there were a number of factors that they could use to support this argument, such as new methods of social investigation, they had difficulty reconciling the crusade decades with their schema. They could not explain why the crusade period of poor law history 'was marked by a deliberate attempt to keep all formal collective welfare activity to a minimum, and to maximise individual, family and informal neighbourly assistance when need arose'.²⁷ As the Webbs were members of the Fabian Society, which promoted collectivist ideals, this reversal in central government's welfare objectives was very problematical. They resolved this quandary by focusing on indoor, rather than outdoor, policies in the late-Victorian period, but this resulted in four problems that this introduction has already touched upon.

First, by overlooking studies of outrelief many modern scholars neglect or undervalue the crusade campaign. Second, this neglect created the mistaken impression that the crusade against outrelief played only a peripheral role in the history of the rise of

²⁶ S. and B. Webb, English Poor Law History, (1927-29).

²⁷ Thomson, World Without, p. 18.

the early Welfare State. Third, stressing the importance of indoor policy developments created a fashion for sub-specialism that fails to convey a sense of the broader historical process because research is seldom related to the wider context of the crusade campaign. Finally, the Webbs helped to create a league table of poor law studies, with the crusade decades relegated to the bottom, and this has been perpetuated in most modern scholarship.

There are currently four discernible trends in the secondary literature in this field that are related in various ways to the Webbs' legacy. First, a number of articles were published in the 1980s, by historians like Fraser and Rose, which summarised the key features of the crusade decades but did not go on to do substantial case-study research, so it is difficult to appraise whether their viewpoints are salient.²⁸ Second, the crusade campaign is usually studied in connection with a related poor law topic, such as Humphreys' studies of the Charity Organisation Society (C.O.S.). This approach obscures the radical nature of poor law policy during the crusade decades by focusing on ideological debates and central government records, rather than the local context.²⁹ Third, studies that focus on the expansion of indoor relief care have created a very 'specialised literature' where poor law strategy and practice after 1870 is broken into pieces'.³⁰ These historians often fail to convey that indoor policies were usually a form of crisis management that developed more by default than by design in response to diverse anti-outrelief initiatives.³¹ Finally, since the early 1980s the focus of research in Victorian

²⁸ See footnote 1 above for this type of poor law genre.

²⁹ Humphreys, Sin.

³⁰ Williams, Pauperism, p. 94.

³¹ See footnote 3.

poor law studies has shifted in favour of the crusade campaign. Three historians, Mary Mackinnon, David Thomson and Karel Williams, have sought to redress the Webbs' legacy by studying the crusade decades. They agree that the crusade campaign is a neglected and important topic of poor law history that is linked to the rise of the early Welfare State because policies in the twentieth century were a reaction against 'brutal dispauperisation' in the late-Victorian era.³² This thesis builds upon the work of these three historians, by exploring the reality of the crusade campaign locally and the impact of democratisation in the Brixworth Union. Since Williams still dominates the field we will return to a more in-depth discussion of his work in part two of this introduction.

This thesis focuses on the rural poor law union at Brixworth for four primary reasons. First, none of the 'strict' model rural unions that supported the crusade initiative have been the focus of detailed research before, so we have little understanding of the impact of this policy change in the late-Victorian countryside.³³ Second, although several studies are available of the major 'strict' urban unions like Manchester, most research on the crusade campaign concentrates on central government policy initiatives, ideology and pauperism statistics.³⁴ Generally this is the result of an inability to find good local records to explore the context of local performance and achievement. This is not the case in this study because leading participants left a wealth of material recounting the reasons why and how they supported the crusade campaign. Third, the Brixworth Union in Northamptonshire played a leading role in the anti-outrelief campaign and reactions to it.

³² See footnote 4 and Williams, *Pauperism*, p.107.

³³ There are no thesis studies of the seven rural 'model' unions at Brixworth (Nhants), Bradfield (Berks), Tenterden (Kent), Wallingford (Berks), Milton (Kent), Faversham (Kent) and Atcham (Salop).

³⁴ Humphreys, *Sin*, pp. 39-41 discusses Manchester Poor Law Union; Ryan, 'East London', pp. 130-172; L.J. Feehan, 'The Relief of Poverty in Liverpool, 1850-1914', (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Liverpool, 1988).

In the late-Victorian period the Local Government Board created a league table of the best performing poor law unions in England and Wales, which helped it to enforce its outrelief abolitionist policy for twenty years or more (circa 1873 to 1893). In total thirty-four urban and seven rural 'model' unions competed annually for a top ten-league table position.³⁵ The Brixworth Union was consistently ranked amongst these high achievers. The Local Government Board regarded it as one of its chief allies in the campaign to abolish outrelief provision. In central government annual reports, poor law conference proceedings, national newspapers and most major journals it featured whenever the subject of the crusade campaign was discussed.³⁶ Additionally, leading members of the Brixworth Union board of guardians ensured that this rural union had a high profile.

In the Brixworth Union a powerful cohort of prominent local individuals, including Albert Pell (Conservative MP for south-Leicestershire) and the 5th Earl Spencer (senior Whig peer and leading member of the Liberal party), were national figures at the centre of late-Victorian welfare debates. These men were successful publicists who used their positions of authority in both houses of parliament and their status on the ruling councils of powerful charitable lobbies, such as the C.O.S., to promote their retrenchment ideology. They organised a formidable 'marketing campaign', creating the impression that they had an unassailable reputation as the poverty experts of their day. They were so successful, explains Thomson, that they made an important contribution to Imperial welfare debates as far afield as New Zealand, even though many poor law

³⁵ Local Government Board league table positions of 'model' unions are cited in C. Booth, The Aged Poor in England and Wales: Condition, (1894), pp. 58-98.

³⁶ C. Booth, Pauperism and the Endowment of Old Age, (1892); W. Chance, The Better Administration of the Poor Law, (1895); G. Lubbock (ed.), Some Poor Relief Questions: For and Against, (1895); P.F. Ashrott, The English Poor Law System, (1902); T. MacKay, History of the English Poor Law Volume III, 1834-1898, (1904); Webbs, English Poor Law; Webbs, English Poor Law History.

unions were importing their ideas from overseas between 1865 and 1906.³⁷ Thomson stresses that the degree of influence and lobbying skills of leading members of the Brixworth Union should not be underestimated. It is no coincidence that in most contemporary welfare textbooks this rural ‘model’ union is cited as emblematic of the crusade ideology and yet its record of poor law administration has never been studied in detail before.³⁸

Fourthly, the presence of so many eminent figures on the Brixworth Union board of guardians gives us a rare opportunity to explore central-local relations in late-Victorian society. These men were determined to implement a full-scale welfare retrenchment experiment to prove that their ideology worked in practice and to make major cost-savings. Likewise, the Local Government Board needed a strong ally to prove that its crusade initiative was a success. Thus, it was in both sides’ interests to develop a close working relationship. The thesis will examine this central-local alliance to ascertain whether it became strained as the late-Victorian era progressed, when the pressures of economic and political change might be expected to impair their poor law partnership. Tracing the dynamics of central-local relations during the crusade campaign will give us a fresh insight into such issues as the nature of state intervention by the late-nineteenth century. Additionally, we can analyse the forms of power that the office of guardian of the poor, based on property qualifications, created in rural society. These findings will allow us to explore whether some guardians supported the crusade initiative in order to

³⁷ Thomson, *World Without*, pp. 15-18.

³⁸ It is conventional for poor law historians to note that there was an outrelief campaign in the Brixworth Union and a pamphlet debate about its policies. However, its record of administration is always analysed from central government records. Humphreys, *Sin*, pp. 36-38 is the latest text to adopt this traditional methodology.

protect their political interests once the process of democratisation threatened their traditional role as leaders in rural society.

This case study has also been chosen because it can be used to explore a series of six broader inter-related questions. First, it tests Williams' view that the crusade campaign was a policy of 'brutal dispauperisation by any and every means', by analysing whether that statement characterises the nature of the local poor law decision-making process. In doing so, it enables us to evaluate the Webbs' more evolutionary view of the late-Victorian poor law.³⁹ Secondly, it examines whether the crusade was a reversion to the original objectives of the New Poor Law, or, as Thomson and Williams asserts, a fundamental disjunction in nineteenth century poor law practices.⁴⁰ Thirdly, the impact of the process of democratisation will be investigated to determine whether the transfer of poor law power gave ordinary working people the means to influence the decision-making process and if they took that opportunity to oppose the crusade against outrelief by organising to overthrow it. In other words, did these new voters support extensive social welfare provision or were they apathetic, failing to oppose the crusade campaign. As a result, we will be able to determine whether local politics were more accessible and flexible than contemporaries were prepared to admit and conventional modern scholarship appreciates.⁴¹ Fourthly, the relationship between central and local poor law authorities post-1870 will be analysed to verify whether the outrelief campaign gave guardians the opportunity to exploit poor law regulations. If so, the study will examine in

³⁹ Williams, *Pauperism*, p. 102.

⁴⁰ Rose, 'Crisis', p. 62; Thomson, 'Welfare', p. 374; Williams, *Pauperism*, p. 99. We will return to this theme in the second half of this introduction when we discuss Williams in more detail.

⁴¹ Thane, "'Welfare'", p. 892; Howkins, *Poor Labouring*, p. 178, highlights that rural politics were very complex and more diverse than conventional labour studies often convey.

what ways they took advantage of central government policy initiatives to promote their ideological viewpoint and cost-saving measures. Fifthly, the question of the changing nature of paternalism during the crusade decades will be explored to test whether the crusade ethos and its practical application undermined the complex local customary arrangements of traditional social duties and responsibilities.⁴² In this way we can analyse the impact of outrelief changes on the everyday lives of the labouring poor and begin to uncover, from the fragments of evidence that have survived, how this campaign felt from below. Sixthly, the study will examine the contribution of each social grouping and the part they played in the implementation, overthrow and aftermath of the crusade campaign in the Brixworth Union.

1.2 Outdoor relief funding in the Victorian era.

Having stated the key objectives of this study, we need to discuss the nature of outrelief provision in the Victorian period, which will outline the background to the crusade campaign for the reader. This section will also include an analysis of the one major text in this field, Williams' book entitled From Pauperism to Poverty, which has dominated studies of the crusade campaign for the past twenty years.

The origins and immediate impact of the New Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, as part one indicated, have been the subject of considerable historical research in the last thirty years.⁴³ For the purpose of this thesis we will concentrate on the issue of outrelief provision.⁴⁴ Under the terms of the New Poor Law guardians were instructed to

⁴² D. Roberts, Paternalism in Early Victorian England, (1979), p.2, characterises paternalism in this way.

⁴³ Refer footnote 1 above for a list of current work in this field.

⁴⁴ A recent useful summary of outrelief procedures can be found in Englander, Poverty, pp. 13-30.

refuse outdoor relief funding to able-bodied claimants who applied for parish assistance. Instead, they had to use the workhouse test to assess whether each pauper claimant was truly destitute and offer genuine applicants indoor care paid for by each parish from local rates. To ensure that workhouse provision was each pauper's less eligible option, indoor relief care was supposed to be very basic. It offered minimal support for destitute persons during periods of seasonal unemployment, illness or a family crisis.⁴⁵ Those who entered the workhouse and could work had to earn their keep. Men worked on various work schemes within the workhouse, usually in stone-yards, until their employment circumstances improved. Similarly, women were employed to do general menial tasks, such as oakum picking or domestic work, until they could afford to leave. Benthamite reformers believed that a disciplinary work regime would discourage able-bodied claimants from becoming welfare dependants and encourage them to adopt an ethos of self-reliance. Since outdoor relief was a key income supplement in many rural areas, these new regulations were designed to persuade farmers to raise wages, once they realised that customary outrelief benefits had been abolished.⁴⁶ A key objective of this legislation was that guardians would treat all able-bodied poor relief applications uniformly.⁴⁷ However, in practice, as numerous regional studies have shown, these principles were not fully implemented because legislation failed to define accurately what the term 'able-bodied' meant. Many guardians exploited this ambiguity, in order to

⁴⁵ M. Blaug, 'The Myth of the Old Poor Law and the Making of the New', *Journal of Economic History*, XXIII, (1963), pp. 151-84.

⁴⁶ P. Dunkley, 'Whigs and Paupers: The Reform of the English Poor Laws, 1830-34', *Journal of British Studies*, 20, (1980), p. 135; Blaug, 'The Myth', p. 124.

⁴⁷ Fraser, *Evolution*, p. 23; Englander, *Poverty*, pp. 9-13.

retain their traditional discretionary powers.⁴⁸ Guardians in urban areas in the north of England, as Rose has shown, struggling with the twin difficulties of high rates of unemployment and inadequate workhouse capacity, often ignored outrelief regulations because if they had been implemented they would have caused considerable social unrest.⁴⁹ Similarly, in rural districts many farmer guardians ignored the new directives and used medical outrelief orders to retain labour reserves to meet seasonal farming demands.⁵⁰

In the early years of the New Poor Law central government accepted that in order to get its' new system underway it would have to diffuse local resentment by accepting a measure of non-compliance. This resulted in a high degree of continuity between the Old and New Poor Law in many poor law unions, where outrelief was administered pragmatically.⁵¹ However, once the New Poor Law system was in operation senior civil servants were instructed to review outrelief procedures again and unsurprisingly they found considerable diversity between poor law unions. Central government concluded that it should assert its authority over these boards of guardians by defining what it meant by the term 'able-bodied'. As a result, a decision was taken to issue three new outrelief directives.

First, in 1842 an Outdoor Labour Test was sent to all poor law unions in England and Wales.⁵² This was a pragmatic gesture on the part of central government who

⁴⁸ Ashforth, 'The Urban Poor Law', in Fraser (ed.) *The New*, pp. 128-48; Rose, 'The allowance', pp. 609-20; Ward (ed.), *Popular*, (1970); Digby, *The New Poor* - all argue this point. Williams, *Pauperism*, pp. 81-90 is the only historian to have challenged this view. We will return to this theme later in this review.

⁴⁹ Refer footnote 1 for Rose's case studies of northern industrial towns, such as Huddersfield.

⁵⁰ Digby, 'Labour Market', pp. 69-83.

⁵¹ Digby, 'The Rural', p. 593; Rose, 'The allowance' pp. 609-20 are just two historians that make this point.

⁵² Rose, 'The allowance', p. 618.

conceded that seasonal work patterns forced high numbers of unemployed able-bodied labourers to apply for parish funding. This new directive gave guardians the option of employing these claimants during the day within the workhouse in return for a small outrelief dole. Most guardians welcomed the directive because poor law unions that were still building their workhouse relied on this type of labour. However, in reality they tended to subject men, rather than women, to this labour test. Consequently another directive was issued two years later with a view to achieving greater compliance. In 1844 an Outdoor Relief Prohibitory Order was sent to every rural poor law union in England and Wales.⁵³ It stipulated that outrelief regulations were to be tightened. Its primary objective was to ensure that all able-bodied applicants (primarily males and independent females) and their dependants had to enter the workhouse or support themselves independently. It was hoped that this would remedy the confusion about poor relief entitlements and bring about more uniform practices. However, this second directive contained a key phrase that undermined its purpose.

One of its sub-clauses stated that guardians had the discretion to award outdoor relief to able-bodied applicants in cases of ‘sudden and urgent necessity’. Obviously this wording could be interpreted in a number of ways and it quickly became a key outrelief administrative loophole. Many rural guardians, as Anne Digby has shown, construed that this gave them the powers to award outdoor relief on medical orders to able-bodied applicants and their dependants at times of family crises.⁵⁴ Those who had an accident, were disabled at work, fell ill temporarily or could not afford to bury a relative without

⁵³ Englander, *Poverty*, pp. 15, 97, 100.

⁵⁴ Digby, ‘Labour Market’, pp. 69-83.

parish assistance often received outdoor medical funding. The directive also gave guardians the powers to treat vulnerable poor relief applicants more liberally. Widows with children on low incomes and independent childless widows with no visible means of support could apply for outrelief funding for up to six months after their spouse's death. Guardians had the discretion to relieve the resident family of an absent or removable father. They could decide to treat the dependants of a member of the armed forces leniently. Many guardians paid rent on behalf of low-income families experiencing a temporary family crisis. In total the Webbs estimated that some 371 rural poor law unions by 1871 were governed by this second Order.⁵⁵ It appears to have accentuated, rather than resolved, the problem of diverse outrelief administrative practices in rural areas of England and Wales. Rose states that most people living in the workhouse were non-able bodied and they only entered at times of family crisis or as a result of severe ill health. The majority of poor relief claimants received some form of outrelief on a regular basis.⁵⁶

In 1852 a third directive was issued, an Outdoor Relief Regulation Order, to every urban poor law union in England and Wales.⁵⁷ It tried, like its rural predecessor, to clarify the issue of outdoor funding for the able-bodied, but failed because it also contained a number of sub-clauses that gave guardians additional discretionary powers. The new regulations stipulated that poor law unions should have the option of awarding outrelief allowances to all categories of female poor relief claimants. Women, unlike men, were officially no longer subjected to the Labour Test of 1842, even if they were

⁵⁵ Webbs, English Poor Law, p. 91.

⁵⁶ Rose, 'The allowance', pp. 607-10.

⁵⁷ Digby, The New Poor, p. 21.

able-bodied. Central government conceded that guardians were justified in not institutionalising female outrelief claimants unless it was absolutely necessary on the grounds of ill health. Similarly, the directive gave guardians an opportunity to treat able-bodied male poor relief applicants more leniently. As well as transferring able-bodied men under the Labour Test directive of 1842 to a parish work scheme, guardians now had the right to increase their meagre outrelief doles with payments in kind (usually bread, meat, etc.). Central government only made one proviso, that not less than 50 per cent of each claimant's total outrelief allowance should be given in a non-monetary form.⁵⁸ However, this created a new official scale of outrelief in kind with a minimum threshold but crucially no upper limit. This meant that although guardians were not allowed to pay an able-bodied male claimant's rent, give relief in aid of wages, or increase their meagre outdoor dole cash payment, they could increase payments in kind at any time. These three successive outrelief directives (1842, 1844 & 1852) encouraged many guardians, who believed that the 'line of demarcation between poverty and destitution was often imperceptible', to act even more pragmatically.⁵⁹ They officially governed outrelief provision in England and Wales, until the Local Government Board passed another Outdoor Relief Order in July 1896. However, for twenty years between 1873 and 1893 a set of outrelief recommendations, known as the Longley strategy, dominated government thinking on welfare provision and exemplified what became known as the crusade against outrelief.

The origins of the crusade campaign began in the recessionary climate of the

⁵⁸ Kidd, *State*, pp. 32-33.

⁵⁹ Digby, 'The Rural', p. 593.

1860s. In 1863 and 1864 outrelief provision came under a renewed attack following a series of trade slumps and industrial crises in Lancashire and London, which caused poor relief expenditure to rise by about 20 per cent nationally.⁶⁰ Many guardians who feared that higher levels of unemployment and a lack of outrelief provision might result in social unrest ignored regulations concerning able-bodied males, and outdoor pauperism expenditure rose as a result. For a time that threat appeared to be very real, particularly in the capital when during trade slumps in the years 1855, 1860-1 and 1866-7 food riots broke out in the East End of London.⁶¹ However, the Local Government Board did not recognise that trade problems and a 16 per cent rise in London's population in the decade 1861 to 1871 were responsible for the rise in poor law expenditure. Instead they blamed recalcitrant boards of guardians who gave liberal outrelief or charity to unemployed claimants. Thus, a decision was taken to promote the efficacy of the workhouse test by instigating three policy changes.⁶²

First, senior civil servants negotiated with large organised charitable bodies in London, most notably the C.O.S. (founded 1869), to try to prevent indiscriminate almsgiving.⁶³ Senior civil servants aimed to create a welfare partnership with private charitable organisations to try to eradicate liberal outrelief expenditure and random acts of charity. This objective was outlined in a new central government outrelief circular known as the Goschen Minute of 1869, named after a future President of the Local Government Board, who penned it. Goschen proposed that each board of guardians in

⁶⁰ Rose, 'Crisis', pp. 50-70 – Rose calculates that during 1862 poor relief applications increased 'some 300 per cent' in the Lancashire cotton districts (p. 57).

⁶¹ Engländer, *Poverty*, p. 20.

⁶² Humphreys, *Sin*, pp. 20-21.

⁶³ Kidd, *State*, pp.45-48.

London should form an administrative partnership with members of the C.O.S. Senior civil servants were given the power to co-opt any C.O.S. member onto boards of guardians for this purpose. Each poor law union would then act as a sort of pauper 'clearing house'. Relieving officers were instructed to report outrelief claimants to boards of guardians fortnightly, but each case came before a full board meeting only after it had been investigated thoroughly by a number of local poor law officials, generally a guardian, and a C.O.S. representative.

If an outrelief application merited assistance guardians were encouraged to withhold rate relief and instead were directed to refer the case onto their local C.O.S. branch via their co-opted C.O.S. member. The C.O.S. authorities then re-interviewed each case and compiled a home case-study report before making a recommendation for temporary charitable relief for a fixed period of around four weeks. If the claimant's circumstances did not improve after one month they were referred back to their poor law union, where they had to accept indoor relief. In London, central government co-opted many leading C.O.S. members onto boards of guardians. These included Albert Pell MP and George Crowder in St-George-in-the-East. The profile of C.O.S membership has been likened to a 'new urban squirearchy' of middle-class professionals who strongly emphasised 'leadership and deference'.⁶⁴ They envisaged that their role was to separate the 'respectable poor' from the undeserving. This would ensure that genuine claimants would be supported and the work-shy would be disciplined in workhouses.

Central government then tried to address the growing revenue crisis in large urban unions. This problem began following the passing of the Poor Law Removal Act

⁶⁴ Englander, *Poverty*, pp. 21 - 22.

of 1846 and the Irremovability Act of 1861 when residency qualifications for parish relief were reduced from five to three years respectively, increasing rates in districts where pauper numbers swelled because the rural unemployed migrated in search of work.⁶⁵ Prior to 1865 each individual parish paid for the costs of its own poorer residents from local rates levied amongst residents to spread the cost of poor law expenditure. Central government felt that this system was unfair because smaller householders were paying a disproportionate amount of their income on poor rates, compared to larger wealthier householders. So two further important pieces of legislation were passed - the Parochial Assessment Bill of 1862 and the Union Chargeability Act of 1865. These stopped wealthier landowners interfering with rating procedures and revised rateable assessments by making 'property rather than poverty, ... the basis of parish contributions to the common expenses of the union'.⁶⁶ The second revenue change was very significant because it led to the crusade against outrelief.

The Union Chargeability Act of 1865 stipulated that parish rates had to be pooled into a union wide fund to pay for high levels of pauperism in poorer districts.⁶⁷ Creating a larger revenue base made all parishes responsible for the paupers within a poor law union area. It also provided more income to fund public works loans to finance improvements to workhouse facilities, such as medical dispensaries. This was the beginning of the separate financing of medical provision under the poor law. Eventually illness and pauperism would be treated as separate social problems. London's problems were resolved by passing a Common Metropolitan Poor Act in 1867 that pooled rates

⁶⁵ Rose, 'Settlement', pp. 26-38.

⁶⁶ Englander, *Poverty*, p. 21.

⁶⁷ Rose, 'Crisis', pp. 50-70, discusses 1865 revenue changes.

into a Common Poor Fund to pay for the construction and maintenance of workhouse property in the capital, which finally brought eleven metropolitan districts under the New Poor Law.⁶⁸ Senior civil servants hoped the 1865 and 1867 enactments would stop parishes acting like a number of 'quarrelling member states' both in the provinces and the capital, with the expanded workhouse capacity preventing high levels of outrelief funding.⁶⁹ In reality, wealthier ratepayers scrutinised outrelief expenditure because they resented having to pay for their neighbour's pauperism. Central government could not have predicted this outcome but it was not unwelcome. It was a catalyst that led to the crusade against outrelief in many unions before central government's retrenchment campaign got underway officially.

In 1871 the Poor Law Board merged with the newly created Local Government Board (LGB) to create a new ministry of state to govern most aspects of local government administration.⁷⁰ The LGB was more powerful than its predecessor because its President had a seat in Cabinet and it ranked amongst the most senior government departments. From its inception a decision was taken to try to raise the LGB's profile by reviewing all outrelief procedures again. Immediately, alarm was expressed when senior civil servants calculated that only about 15 per cent of paupers were being relieved within workhouses nationally, despite the revenue changes that had been instigated after 1865 to improve indoor relief capacity.⁷¹ The Secretary of the LGB, Henry Fleming, re-examined outrelief procedures personally. He concluded that a new set of guidelines

⁶⁸ Englander, *Poverty*, p. 21.

⁶⁹ Rose, 'Crisis', p.59.

⁷⁰ Bellamy, *Administering*, gives the most comprehensive account of the LGB's record of administration.

⁷¹ Humphreys, *Sin*, pp. 21-28.

should be issued to every poor law union in England and Wales outlining revised outrelief procedures.

The Fleming Circular of December 1871 stated that ‘neither locality, trade, seasons, weather, population’ trends or a 10 per cent retail price growth during the 1860s had been the cause of higher levels of outrelief funding.⁷² Recalcitrant boards of guardians in London and the provinces were held responsible for the spiralling cost of poor relief expenditure. Fleming’s report presented the outrelief issue in moral terms. Guardians had failed in their duty to protect the interests of local ratepayers because their lax administrative methods accentuated levels of pauperism nationally. The review recommended the propriety of the workhouse test, stating that it was a safeguard that addressed the social evil of poverty. However, its chief objective was to introduce a system of greater financial accountability. It stressed the need to introduce cost-saving outrelief initiatives. Under the new directive guardians were authorised to grant outrelief only in very exceptional circumstances and for a maximum period of three months.⁷³ This had an immediate impact on the makeshift economies of large numbers of traditional poor relief claimants. For example, some females whom guardians chose to relieve under the 1844 and 1852 Orders now had their outrelief funding withdrawn. These included single able-bodied females with or without illegitimate children, as well as women deserted by their spouses. All mothers with young children were now expected to accept indoor relief. They were encouraged to hand over the care of their children to the workhouse authorities who would arrange to board them out and educate them,

⁷² Ibid, p. 24.

⁷³ Humphreys, *Sin*, pp. 24-25, analyses the Fleming Report.

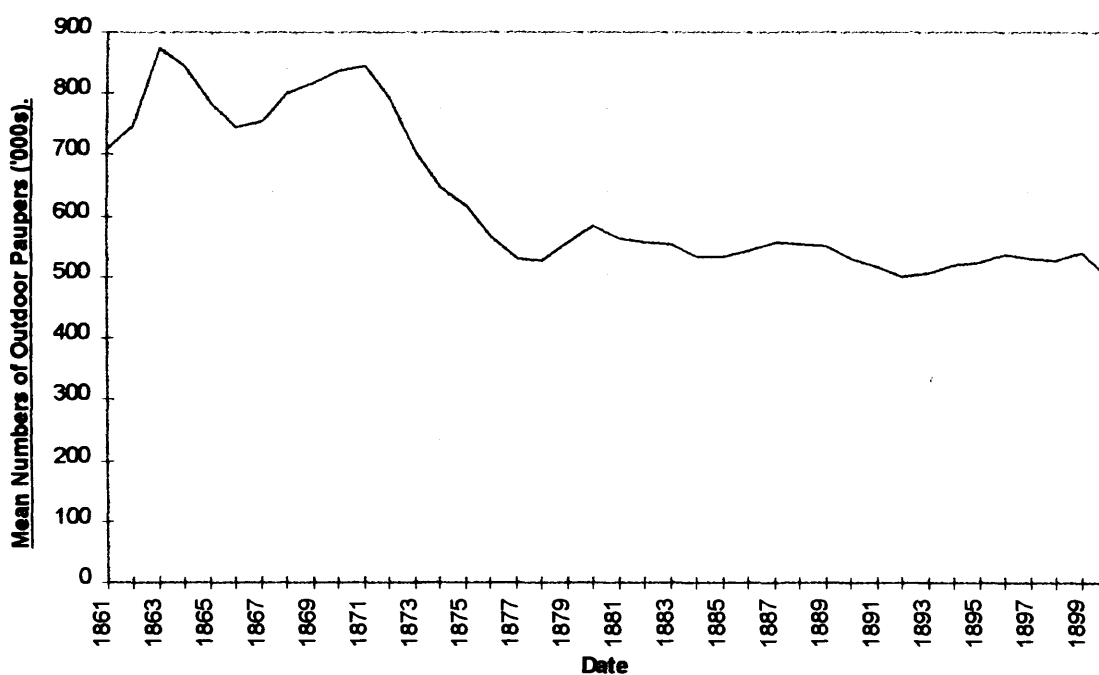
giving women the freedom to seek employment. Similarly, older unemployable men were judged to be burdens on the community and their outrelief funding was withdrawn. All outrelief cases had to be inspected on a regular basis, by means of a home visit from either relieving officers or medical poor law officers, although only the former now had the authority to grant outrelief. Able-bodied cases were reviewed weekly and medical cases not less than once a quarter (including payments in kind, such as meat, milk, bread, or alcohol). This was the beginning of what became known as the crusade against outrelief.

In 1873 the Local Government Board commissioned another report on outrelief procedures. It investigated whether Fleming's directive was being implemented uniformly. This review was undertaken by one of the most eminent senior inspectors at the LGB, Henry Longley.⁷⁴ He found that there was still a high degree of local autonomy and so a third anti-outrelief initiative was issued, entitled the Longley Report. It reiterated the themes of the Goschen Minute of 1869 and the Fleming Circular of 1871, but also proposed more radical outrelief deterrence initiatives. The Longley Report advocated that outrelief procedures should be tightened in a more pragmatic manner. Longley believed that Goschen and Fleming's recommendations were appropriate, but failed to increase compliance because they did not state explicitly that all types of outrelief funding should be abolished. Longley asserted that only by stating that outrelief funding was illegal would poor relief expenditure be reduced. Guardians might disagree in principle with a ban, but abolition would expose those who refused to co-operate and central government could then concentrate on eradicating non-compliance. Once

⁷⁴ Williams, *Pauperism*, pp. 96-107, gives the most comprehensive analysis of the Longley strategy.

offending poor law unions had been identified, pressure would be brought to bear on them to conform. Longley believed this was the only way to eradicate local autonomy and cut poor relief expenditure nationally.

Graph 1.1: The Mean Number of Paupers in Receipt of Outrelief in England and Wales, 1860-1900.



Source: K. Williams, From Pauperism to Poverty, (1981), Appendix, Section B, Table 4.5, pp. 159-161.

The Longley strategy, or the crusade campaign as it became known, was a 'brilliant short-run success' in statistical terms.⁷⁵ Williams estimates that from 1871 until 1876 the total number of paupers relieved nationally on outrelief fell by around 33 per cent (Graph 1.1), thereby reducing the percentage of the total population claiming

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 102. It should be noted that economic historians often disagree about central government pauperism statistics. Overall though the pattern of outrelief reductions quoted here is broadly agreed in welfare textbooks quoted in footnotes 1&4.

outrelief from 3.8 to 2.4 per cent, with expenditure decreasing by some £276,000.⁷⁶

Outdoor pauper numbers fell steeply from an average of 791,000 in the 1860s to just 567,000 nationally in 1876. Thereafter numbers stabilised to an average of 542, 000 claimants nationally between 1877 and 1892, although it should be noted that regional patterns of relief were often quite diverse. For example, in many of the rural areas that experienced an agricultural crisis in the late-1870s, outrelief provision was re-introduced to alleviate widespread impoverishment. Nevertheless, between 1871 and 1893 outdoor pauper numbers fell by 338, 000 (40 per cent in real terms), despite rising population figures.⁷⁷ Williams calculates that this reduction was achieved on a broad front, with 39 per cent fewer women and children, and 33 per cent fewer non able-bodied paupers (elderly, disabled, infirm) claiming outrelief by 1893. He estimates that ‘in 1871, 3.8 per cent of the population drew outrelief and by 1893, only 1.7 per cent of the population drew outrelief’ (Graph 1.2).⁷⁸ However, as Thomson points out, Williams does not take account of the changing age composition of the population. The significant point about these outrelief reductions is that despite the fact that the proportion of elderly persons in the total population in England and Wales was increasing, the number receiving ‘some form of public assistance’ in 1890 ‘was less than half of what it had been in 1870’.⁷⁹ This attack on provision for the elderly had never been tried before on such a scale and this is what makes the crusade campaign so different.

Those who opposed central government’s retrenchment experiment feared that

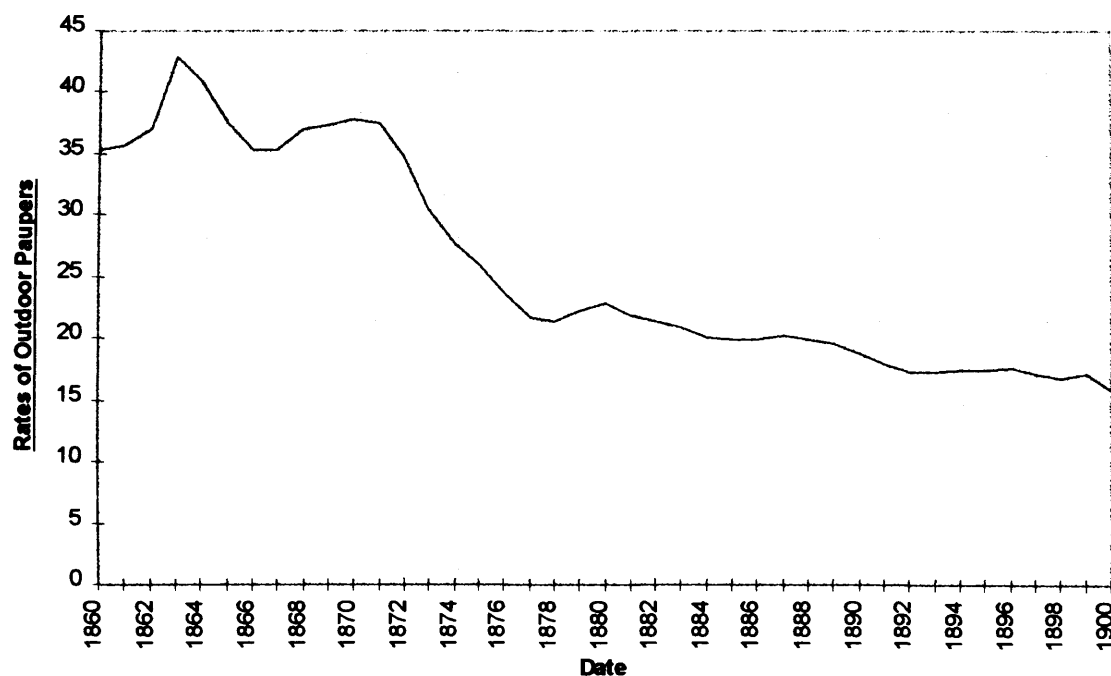
⁷⁶ Williams, *Pauperism*, p. 104.

⁷⁷ These figures are broadly agreed in Williams, *Pauperism*, pp. 102–4, 107 and Englander, *Poverty*, p. 23. Although Humphreys, *Sin*, p. 28 calculates that outdoor relief costs nationally fell by 28.6 per cent between 1871–1876.

⁷⁸ Williams, *Pauperism*, p. 107.

⁷⁹ Thomson, ‘Welfare’, p. 374.

Graph 1.2: The Rates of Outdoor Paupers per 1,000 of the estimated total population in England and Wales, 1860-1900.



Source: K. Williams, From Pauperism to Poverty, (1981), Appendix, Section B, Table 4.5, pp. 159-61.

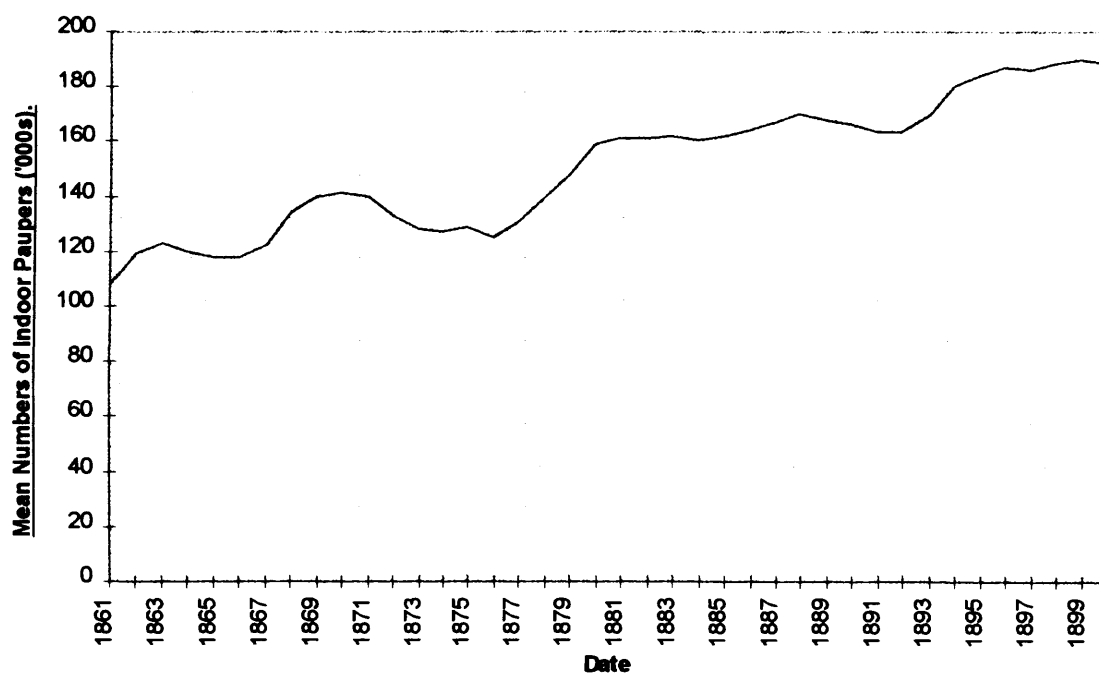
indoor relief numbers would rise proportionally to outdoor reductions, increasing rates.

Initially these fears were unfounded as indoor relief numbers fell between 1871 and 1876 by about 11 per cent, or 15,000 nationally (Graph 1.3).⁸⁰ Although, as Mackinnon points out, improvements in living standards and the fact that real incomes rose after 1870 were also contributory factors.⁸¹ However, after 1876 guardians began to send in returns to

⁸⁰ Williams, Pauperism, p. 102.

⁸¹ Mackinnon, 'English Poor Law', p. 299.

Graph 1.3: The Mean Number of Paupers in Receipt of Indoor Relief in England and Wales, 1860-1900.



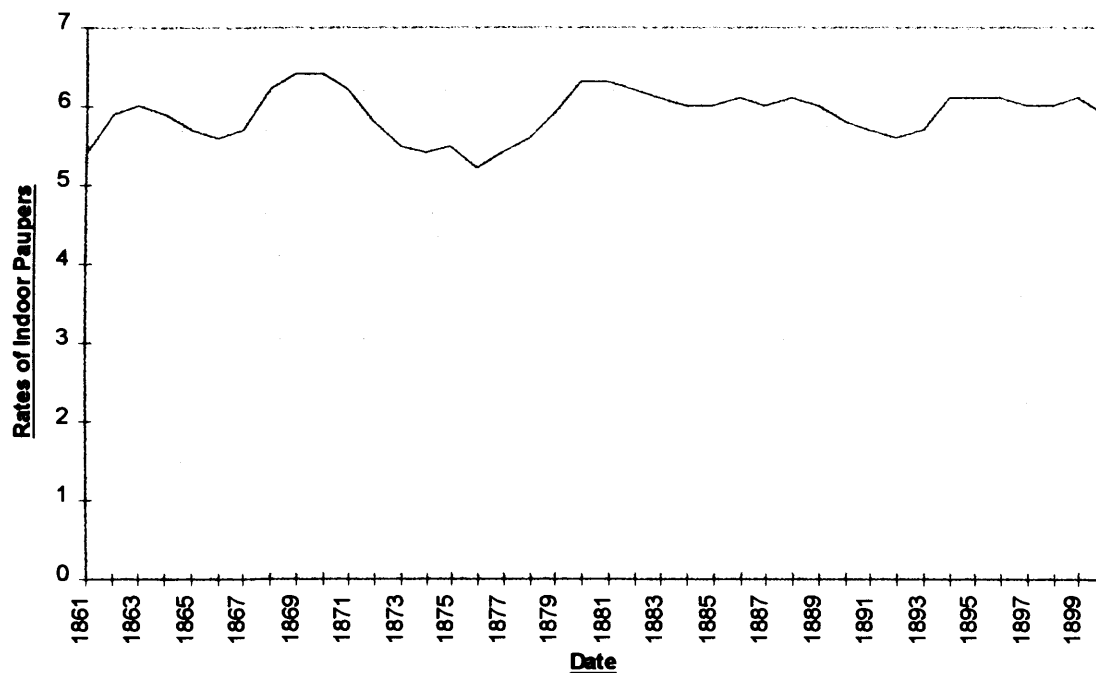
Source: K. Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty*, (1981), Appendix B, Table 4.5, pp. 159-161.

central government recording higher numbers of indoor relief claimants. Official records show that indoor relief levels increased by 44,000 or 35 per cent between 1876 and 1893 (Graph 1.3), which meant that despite general population growth, rates of indoor relief per head continued to rise slightly (Graph 1.4).⁸² However, if we compare the cost of outdoor to indoor relief we find that the latter did increase rates in real terms.⁸³ In total outrelief expenditure fell by £903, 000 or 25 per cent between 1871 and 1876, and then

⁸² Williams, *Pauperism*, p. 102, Table 3.1.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

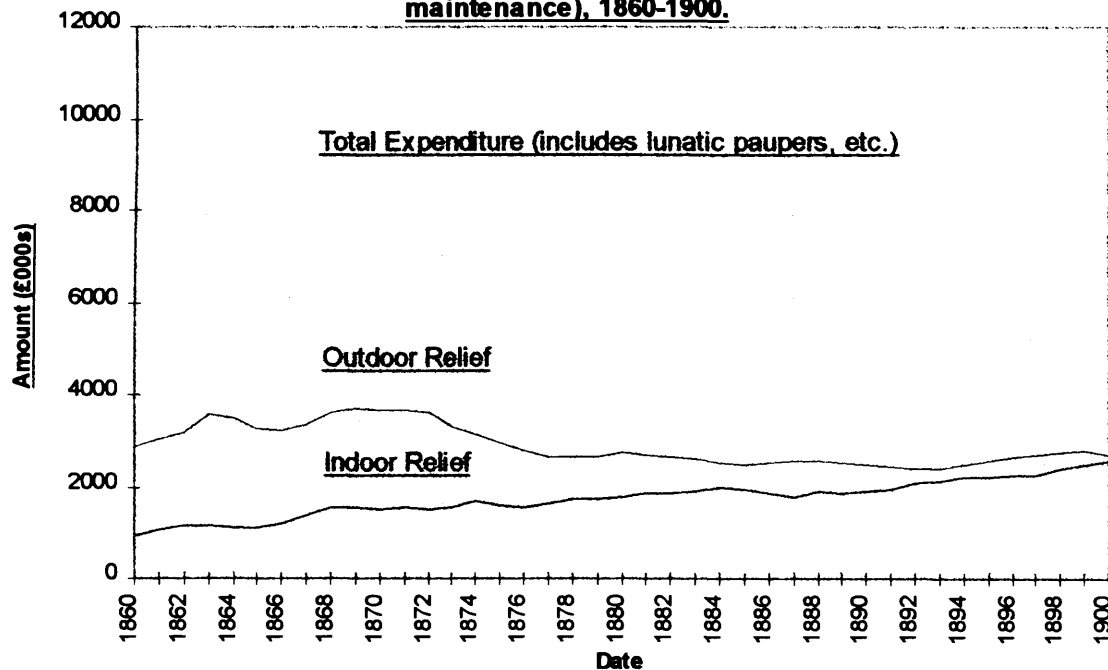
Graph 1.4: The Rates of Indoor Paupers per 1,000 of the estimated total population in England and Wales, 1860-1900.



Source: K. Williams, From Pauperism to Poverty, (1981), Appendix, Section B, Table 4.5, pp. 159-161.

by a further 390,000 by 1893. Yet, as critics feared, although the total cost of poor relief expenditure decreased by £551, 000 or 7 per cent between 1871 and 1876, overall it increased by £1, 331, 000 or 17 per cent in the period between 1871 and 1893 (Graph 1.5). Williams points out that total expenditure ‘increased substantially’ because the ‘direct and indirect costs of building and running’ larger workhouses was more expensive. If we include ‘“in-maintenance”, maintenance of lunatics, and loan charges’,

Graph 1.5: Amount Expended on Indoor & Outdoor Relief, Compared to the Total Cost of Poor Relief in England and Wales (which includes the cost of lunatic paupers, loan charges, salaries and workhouse maintenance), 1860-1900.



Source: K. Williams, From Pauperism to Poverty, (1981), Appendix, Section C, Table 4.6, pp. 169-171.

they 'together increased by 62 per cent or £1, 577, 000' between 1871 and 1893.⁸⁴ At the same time expenditure per head of population fell only slightly from 6s. 11 ½ d. to 6s. 6 ¼ d. between 1871 and 1893.⁸⁵ If the crusade's underlying aim was to save money, then it was not an unqualified success.

Thirty-four urban and seven rural unions were the engine of this new policy.

They registered less than 30 per cent of paupers in receipt of outrelief funding until

⁸⁴ Williams, Pauperism, p. 108.

⁸⁵ Williams, Pauperism, p. 170, Appendix, Section C, Table 4.6.

1893.⁸⁶ In numerical terms this appears to be a small proportion of the total number of unions, around 6.6 per cent (i.e. 41 out of a total of 622). However, 'the group of forty-one achieved a 57 per cent reduction in outdoor numbers against a national reduction of 35 per cent' in the period between 1871 and 1876 and an overall '68 per cent reduction...against a national 37 per cent reduction' between 1871 and 1893.⁸⁷ Overall, these unions contained 16 per cent of the total population in England and Wales and they accounted for a 28 per cent national reduction in outdoor numbers' between 1871 and 1893. Consequently, these 'model' unions were influential, but the crusade would have not got underway nationally without the initial support of a significant proportion of other poor law unions, who later relaxed anti-outrelief regulations. The reason that the forty-one restricters were different is that they were more determined to retain their policies in the face of considerable hardship for ideological and cost-saving reasons. Therefore, we should not underestimate the ruthlessness of their deterrent policies, especially the seven strict rural unions that maintained an anti-outrelief policy during the late-Victorian agricultural crisis.⁸⁸

There were two further outrelief directives issued in the late-Victorian period. First, in the 1880s when urban areas experienced a severe trade slump the LGB conceded that guardians should provide schemes of work for respectable male labourers and artisans. Most were not stereotypical poor relief claimants and it seemed unreasonable to expect these men to enter the workhouse. A fear of social unrest, particularly in London

⁸⁶ Booth, *The Aged Poor*, compiled figures on 'model' unions, pp. 58-98.

⁸⁷ Williams, *Pauperism*, pp. 106-7.

⁸⁸ It should be noted that pauperism calculations are problematical and need to be used carefully. For instance, a rudimentary check of some of Williams figures in *Pauperism*, p. 106 Table 3.3 reveals basic miscalculations.

in the 1880s where mass agitation was more common, started to alter attitudes regarding unemployment-related poor relief. In March 1886 Joseph Chamberlain, President of the LGB, issued a new circular outlining that guardians were authorised to provide schemes of work for 'steady and respectable' labourers.⁸⁹ This welfare to work initiative coincided with changing attitudes in society about the nature of poverty, as exemplified in social investigations by Charles Booth. It is difficult to gauge its general reception in rural unions as we have so few studies to make comparisons.

The ending of the crusade campaign is conventionally fixed in 1893, the year when property suffrage qualifications in poor law elections were reduced to just £5 per annum.⁹⁰ This was followed by the Local Government Act (1894) that introduced the principle of universal suffrage in poor law elections for the first time by abolishing property qualifications. Magistrates' *ex-officio* guardian status was repealed and women were officially allowed to stand for office for the first time, which formalised female participation in poor law administration. Finally, each poor law union became a democratically elected urban or district rural council. At the same time central government issued a new outdoor relief circular in July 1896, which stated that the LGB accepted that guardians were justified in granting outrelief to 'deserving' pauper claimants. There was now widespread recognition that most workhouses had become care homes for the elderly.⁹¹ At the close of the nineteenth century welfare debates centred on the need for social measures 'to raise living standards', in order to 'promote

⁸⁹ G.S. Jones, *Outcast London*, gives overview of unemployment riots in London in 1880s; Englander, *Poverty*, pp. 27-28.

⁹⁰ Williams, *Pauperism*, p. 103.

⁹¹ Thomson, 'Workhouse', p. 47.

industrial and social efficiency essential to the maintenance of British imperial power'.⁹²

Only one welfare historian in the last twenty years has put a major focus upon the crusade campaign. The author, Karel Williams, argued that our view of the crusade decades hinges on our perception of central government intention regarding outrelief funding post-1834. Historians, such as Ashforth, Digby and Rose, state that central government legislated in 1834 to try to eradicate all types of outrelief funding, particularly able-bodied female and male provision.⁹³ They assert that the Outdoor Labour Test of 1842, the Outdoor Relief Prohibitory Order of 1844 and the Outdoor Regulation Order of 1852 were genuine attempts by central government to reassert its authority, in order to implement outrelief objectives that were being ignored. However, since those directives were so badly drafted with numerous sub-clauses this allowed guardians to retain a high degree of autonomy and they exploited their discretionary powers fully. Consequently, the New Poor Law did not succeed in its original outrelief objectives until the introduction of a crusade against outrelief. Thus, the New Poor Law, concludes Rose, was the creation of the late-1860s, not the 1830s.⁹⁴ The crusade experiment was an extension of the original ethos of 1834, a backward looking policy initiative.

Williams criticises this conventional view. He believes that too many poor law historians embarked on research in the 1970s without first questioning the Webbs' premise that the New Poor Law's outrelief directives in the mid-Victorian era were

⁹² Englander, *Poverty*, p. 73.

⁹³ Refer footnote 1.

⁹⁴ Rose, 'Crisis', pp. 50-70.

imprecise.⁹⁵ The result was a genre of poor law study where welfare historians set out to uncover patterns of resistance to central government policy, but their conclusions were often misleading because the context of outrelief directives was overlooked. Williams asserts that the Webb's approach had a critical bearing on the way that historians evaluated the impact of the crusade against outrelief. He believes that the outrelief directives between 1834 and 1870 were not 'colander-like', but designed to eradicate male outrelief funding only.⁹⁶ Those guardians that continued to support other pauper categories on outrelief orders were following central government's guidelines, not opposing them. Therefore, the crusade initiative was not a reiteration of the ethos of 1834, but a new, far more radical strategy to abolish outrelief. Williams agrees with Rose that welfare retrenchment evolved against the background of industrial crisis, rating changes and the expansion of workhouse capacity, but feels that he underestimates the extremist nature of the crusade ethos.⁹⁷

Williams adopted a rather unusual methodology for a welfare historian to support his viewpoint. He examined the context of the language chosen to frame outrelief directives in the mid-Victorian period to prove that his fellow poor law historians misunderstood central government's intention.⁹⁸ His close reading of the 1834 strategy concludes that from the outset legislators intended 'to differentiate the kind of relief given to one class and another' because provision was made for the 'remedial' treatment

⁹⁵ Williams, *Pauperism*, pp. 91-96.

⁹⁶ Two recent texts that repeat this claim of the Webbs are Humphreys, *Sin*, p. 17; Kidd, *State*, pp. 31-32.

⁹⁷ Williams, *Pauperism*, pp. 59-90 outlines his views on able-bodied funding 1834-1870.

⁹⁸ Williams is a cultural materialist who has been influenced by the methodology of French critical theorists, like Saussure, who emphasis the need to study linguist analysis. His theoretical credentials are outlined in *Pauperism*, pp. 3-4.

of female able-bodied and other non able-bodied pauper claimants.⁹⁹ He found that the original poor law commissioners 'simply assumed that the workhouses of a reformed poor law would contain *some* old and sick persons', but *not all* and this was why guardians retained the right to award outrelief in cases of 'sudden and urgent necessity'. He then compared the language of the outrelief directives of the mid-Victorian period with the Goschen, Fleming and Longley recommendations. Williams found these did not reiterate the 1834 ethos, as Rose claims, but were far more radical statements.

Williams believes that the Longley strategy personifies the crusade ideology and its profound social cost has been overlooked. It contained several radical policy strands that brought about significant changes in central government policy and local poor law administration.¹⁰⁰ He explains that after 1834 guardians were given responsibility for deciding poor relief cases in poor law unions by developing 'a knowledge of the poor', in order to assess their eligibility for outrelief funding. Often they referred cases to poor law officials, such as doctors, to guide them in best practice. The Longley strategy represented a momentous shift in policy because it reversed previous administrative guidelines by emphasising 'knowledge by the poor' of their poor law predicament. They now had to prove to guardians, who were encouraged to ignore advice from outside professionals, that they were entitled to outrelief.¹⁰¹ Paupers were to be educated to adopt self-help by a series of new recommendations published in the form of an anti-outrelief charter placed in every workhouse waiting room. Williams stresses that this authorised guardians to ignore the fate of paupers struck off outrelief registers, since it was assumed

⁹⁹ Ibid., pp. 56-58 summarises Williams' reading of the strategy of 1834.

¹⁰⁰ Williams, *Pauperism*, pp. 96-102.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 99.

that they had been educated not to become welfare dependants and no further enquiry was needed to establish the social cost of the crusade policy. Central government only asked guardians to report the outcome of certain medical cases that refused to enter the workhouse for treatment. For example, guardians were responsible for ensuring that a pauper on medical outrelief suffering from a communicable disease that might infect the wider community entered the workhouse isolation wards. One of the Longley strategy's more radical recommendations was that it encouraged guardians to recover all poor relief costs, by prosecuting the adult children of elderly or sick paupers to force them to contribute to their destitute relative's maintenance.¹⁰² Therefore the Longley Report contained a more proactive deterrence policy than the 1834 ethos.

Williams explains that Longley set out to create a new poor law climate by fostering a 'crudely repressive' competitive atmosphere amongst poor law unions in London and the regions.¹⁰³ Poor law conferences were established to share best practice, which acted as a forum for central government to promote its anti-outrelief policies. Annual performance league tables were published praising those who adopted the Longley strategy and damning those who did not. Rather astutely the Longley directive was not published as a legally binding order, as the mid-Victorian outrelief directives had been. Instead it was issued as a set of recommendations to diffuse popular resentment to far-reaching changes. Unfortunately, this gave extremist guardians greater autonomy because they were not limited by official orders. Longley stressed the need to educate the poor, but those determined to cut costs ruthlessly ignored that ethos, and the new

¹⁰² Williams, Pauperism, p. 99.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

strategy 'turned into another kind of event', with many guardians pursuing 'brutal dispauperisation by any and every means'. The impact of that policy at the local level is one of the key issues which this thesis tests.¹⁰⁴

Recently Williams has been criticised by welfare historians, such as Englander, who, while not doubting the important contribution that he has made, have questioned three aspects of his work.¹⁰⁵ First, Williams produced such a wealth of statistical information to support his claim that male able-bodied outrelief provision was almost eradicated by 1850 and adopted a very unusual methodological approach for an historian, in his detailed analysis of language, that no one has checked his calculations or interrogated his theoretical perspective. 'The profession', as Englander observes, 'has in general praised the statistical resource which has been created but ignored the conclusion derived from it'.¹⁰⁶ Englander notes that Williams work has yet to be scrutinised by a suitably qualified historian and this is regrettable since he raises some challenging lines of enquiry. Second, Williams takes a contradictory approach to poor law research. On the one hand he downplays the value of local studies because he is very critical of those historians who study poor law unions to uncover patterns of resistance to central government policy in the mid-Victorian era. On the other hand he asserts that the crusade decades must be studied in context. Williams, like Mackinnon, believes this can only be done by reference to central government indicators, but these are often a rather crude way to gauge the impact of poor law change regionally.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Williams, *Pauperism*, p. 102.

¹⁰⁵ Englander, *Poverty*, pp. 85-86.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

¹⁰⁷ Mackinnon, 'Poor law' and 'English Poor Law', see footnote 4.

Third, Williams checks his analysis of the language used to frame outrelief orders against central government pauperism returns to ascertain policy trends. The problem with this methodology is that whilst it recognises that language should be contextualised, it neglects to do the same with centrally collected statistics. Pauper returns, like a poor law discourse, need to be understood in the context in which they were produced and the reasons for their production. Often poor law statistics were the product of local elite transmission and could be manipulated in various ways, a factor that criminal historians, such as Howard Taylor, emphasise.¹⁰⁸ Digby criticises Williams for accepting pauperism returns at face value.¹⁰⁹ This thesis takes up this theme, as the first part of this introduction outlined, by exploring why it is important to examine the way that pauperism returns were compiled locally. It analyses the extent to which guardians manipulated their outrelief statistics to meet central government performance indicators and the ways in which this manipulation enabled poor law authorities to hide the true extent of local destitution.

To summarise, there are broad areas of agreement amongst some poor law historians who view the New Poor Law as an act of ‘misguided’ legislation that was not implemented fully on a regional basis.¹¹⁰ There has been considerable debate between these historians and Williams about central government’s intentions in relation to outrelief funding after 1834, which has a critical bearing on how we view the crusade decades. Was Williams correct in asserting that the anti-outrelief crusade was a more

¹⁰⁸ H. Taylor, ‘Rationing crime: the political economy of criminal statistics since the 1850s’, *Economic History Review*, 3rd series, LI, (1998), 3, pp. 569-590.

¹⁰⁹ Digby, *The New Poor*, p.23; Thompson, ‘Cumbria’, p. 128 also make this point.

¹¹⁰ Footnote 1 outlines key texts that take this position.

radical strategy than Rose appreciates? Was it a devious attempt to abolish outrelief on a scale that had never been tried before? Using the Brixworth Union as a test case this thesis will examine the validity of these views.

1.3: Structure of the thesis, nature of sources and chapter outline.

This thesis has been structured chronologically because its primary aim is to trace the dynamics of the anti-outrelief campaign in this rural community over the course of the late-nineteenth century. This will make the history of the crusade decades in the Brixworth Union easier to decipher, with each chapter focused on specific themes of economic change, social tensions and political activism. However, these will only be examined insofar as they relate to the crusade campaign. For instance, the thesis does not claim to give the reader a comprehensive survey of the impact of the agricultural crisis on Northamptonshire; nor will it recount in detail the progress of Liberalism or nonconformity in town and county politics. Those subjects would require theses in their own right. Yet, a key objective is to explore the relationship between poor law administrative practices and wider developments in rural society over three decades. Consequently, a diverse range of primary sources has been researched. These have been deliberately chosen because the limited work so far done on this neglected topic within poor law studies tends to concentrate on central records.

The core primary sources for this study include the records of the C.O.S., poor law conference reports, major journals and mainstream national newspapers. Similarly, material has been consulted in central government records, primarily Local Government Board files, Hansard, and the reports of several Royal commissions. These public records

contain very full accounts of local reaction to the crusade campaign. Letters, memorandums and petitions from traditional outrelief claimants have survived and are invaluable sources for a poor law historian interested in the structural changes that the crusade campaign brought about in rural society. Local records include guardians' minute books, parish council records, and vestry minutes. However, to deepen our understanding of poor law events other types of locally produced sources were examined, such as land agents' labour books. These have been used to investigate critical elements of working class life - allotment provision, charity, housing, labour relations and poor relief expectations - as well as to uncover the local political context of the crusade campaign. Most leading guardians in the Brixworth Union corresponded on a regular basis with their land agents, who were party to the dynamics of poor law boardroom politics and this is why these sources have been very valuable. This private correspondence gives us fresh insights into aspects of rural life that are often missing in the mundane official record of poor law events in guardians' minute books, which is often the reason for a lack of local studies on this poor law topic. Additionally, the private correspondence of major national figures, leading guardians and numerous residents who became involved in the local poor law campaign in the Brixworth Union have been consulted in collections of family papers held in either public or private hands. These include, the Althorp, Chamberlain, Dilke, Gladstone, Harcourt, Isham, Jeyes, Mandell-Creighton, Milton, Pell, Phelps, Spencer and Walker papers. Some of these collections contain local pamphlets, sermons, political manifestos and treatises about the crusade campaign. Finally, local newspapers were sampled to gauge public reaction to the crusade campaign, with editorial bias highlighted throughout where it has been

identified. The high level of reporting of the events in the Brixworth Union, particularly in the 1890s when reporters were permitted to publish the proceedings of guardians' meetings verbatim for the first time, gives us fresh insights into the complexities of poor law politics. Even though these newspaper sources are useful they have been used selectively to complement other primary material, in order to achieve a more balanced appraisal of the crusade campaign.

One very specific set of methodologies used later in the thesis needs to be explored here, in order to avoid lengthy digression in the relevant chapter. It has not been possible to analyse the class composition of the Brixworth Union board throughout the crusade campaign because the local records are deficient. Regrettably, accurate records of guardians' voting patterns were not kept in the minute books until the 1890s, when new poor law regulations compelled the union clerk to register each person's votes and gave newspaper reporters in Northamptonshire full access to fortnightly meetings for the first time. Previously, guardians' votes were cast behind closed doors and newspapers usually reported a summary of each poor law union's proceedings from a prepared summary of the minutes that was released by the clerk after the guardians had approved it. Consequently, in the period between 1870 and 1885 it is not possible to analyse voting patterns. However, post-1875 the union clerk did keep an annual record of the occupation of guardians who were appointed or elected to serve in each parish and these have been used to trace the class composition. These have been checked against local trade directories and census returns to verify their accuracy. This information gives us an overview of the class profile of the board of guardians and the two sub-committees, which administered outrelief and finance matters. The local records reveal that farmers

dominated the board of guardians. However, the fragmentary nature of individual farm records did not facilitate any further analysis on farmer guardians.

In the period between 1885 and 1890 the Chairman of the Brixworth Union instructed the union clerk to keep accurate records of guardian attendance levels and votes cast during controversial motions. This information can be used to trace party allegiances by checking voting patterns against the complete set of voting records post-1890. It has only been possible to do this because a cohort of guardians who supported the crusade campaign served for over twenty years and they seldom deviated in their commitment to the anti-outrelief cause. In addition, guardian attendance figures have been utilised to ascertain whether the turnover of farmer guardians was higher after the onset of the agricultural crisis. They show that farmers attended around one third of the fortnightly board meetings and approximately 80 per cent served only one term of office (usually three years). This placed greater strains on the anti-outrelief party who relied on the tenant farmer block vote, as they held on average two thirds of the seats.

A key objective was to try to identify what type of farmer was elected between 1885 and 1890. However, as few rateable assessment returns have survived this was problematical. The only way to overcome this problem was to try to classify the farmers from what little information has survived in local records. Thus, the farmer guardians were divided into three categories. The first category contains those tenants who worked for the Spencer family's land agent on one of the three major landed estates in the Brixworth Union, which he controlled. The second category of farmer guardian is comprised of larger independent farmers, taken from information recorded in the Royal Commission on Labour (1894) which examined farming practices in the Brixworth

Union. The third category contains the remaining farmers who often changed allegiance.

Unfortunately little is known about their working patterns or farm sizes and how those factors might have influenced their poor law decisions. Regrettably it has not been possible to adapt the methodology of another welfare historian who has studied the Brixworth Union's counterparts, since none have been researched in any detail.

Therefore, although this methodology is rather crude, given the lack of research material on farmer guardians' incomes and having little comparable work, it was the only way to gain an insight into boardroom politics during a period of rapid economic change. Had this analysis been omitted the complete set of voting patterns post-1890 would lack context.

The chapter structure of this study reflects its aims by concentrating on what happened when, to whom, for what reasons and with what consequences. It is primarily concerned with the changing configurations of poor law power. Chapter 2 begins with a brief account of the history of poor law administration in the Brixworth Union 1834-1870. It introduces the reader to the nature of the local economy, social relationships and the political landscape of this area around 1870. This is followed by a discussion of the broader ideological framework of the crusade campaign. The main theme of this chapter is the relationship between agricultural trade unionism and the crusade against outrelief. It analyses how farmers used the crusade ideology to take a pre-emptive strike against union combination. Chapter 3 explores how the Brixworth Union board of guardians reduced their outrelief levels to meet central government targets. It is primarily concerned with the realities of performance and achievement. It analyses the outrelief

deterrent strategies that were introduced, their social cost and the political reaction they produced. This chapter also investigates the extent to which working people used semi-democratic outlets in rural society, such as vestries, to challenge the crusade against outrelief.

Chapter 4 looks at the impact of the agricultural crisis in the Brixworth Union. It examines how this board of guardians was able to retain its crusade against outrelief despite dire economic conditions. A policy of cutting welfare assistance to the core revitalised political activism, which had become rather muted after the demise of agricultural trade unionism. This chapter analyses the political journey of working class people impoverished by the crusade in the 1880s. Chapter 5 considers the impact of local government changes and democratisation changes in the late-1880s, which threatened to erode the power of traditional leaders in rural society. This made guardians act in a very conservative manner because they feared that further local government change would cascade down to lower local authorities. Leading guardians proposed that central government should make poor law unions the new unit of county government, a scheme that almost succeeded. The chapter also analyses how the class composition of the board of guardians changed following the third Reform Act of 1884. This created coalition politics on the board of guardians and intense infighting about outrelief issues.

Chapter 6 explores what happened when universal suffrage was introduced in guardian elections in the 1890s. The chapter opens by explaining that a public health controversy following a series of fatalities mobilised cross-community opposition and was the last stage in the political journey of working people. It then examines how residents anticipated democratisation changes, establishing a local political pressure

group to get working men elected guardians of the poor for the first time. Their goal was to reverse the anti-outrelief policy. A key theme of the chapter is that political activism from the crusade's inception culminated in this period, revealing that working people used democratisation to pursue local welfare issues that affected their everyday lives. Finally, chapter 7 considers the significance of this denouement and the broader themes that this study has raised about the politics of poor relief, about the forces that shaped poor law policies and about the impact that those policies had.

Chapter Two.

Agricultural Trade Unionism and a Crusade Against Outrelief, 1865-1875.

Introduction:

This chapter focuses on the early stages of the crusade against outrelief. It examines the main factors that undermined the relationships between landowners-farmers-labourers in the Brixworth Union at the start of the crusade campaign and reveals how parish politics and Westminster interacted in poor law matters. It begins (2.1) by examining economy, politics and society in the Brixworth Union prior to the crusade campaign. The second section (2.2) explains why medical outrelief was a vital income supplement for parlous families and explores why some guardians threatened to withdraw it before the crusade got underway officially. Section three (2.3) then analyses the ideas about poor relief of those who led the crusade against outrelief on the board of guardians for over twenty years, and examines how the centre, because of a local Charity Organisation Society (C.O.S.) inspired initiative, influenced this rural poor law union. The fourth section (2.4) brings us to the core theme of this chapter, namely the relationship between agricultural trade unionism and the full-scale crusade against outrelief. Finally, section five (2.5) discusses an aspect of the social cost of the anti-outrelief strategy and examines how several cases of medical neglect in the workhouse gave the anti-outrelief party an opportunity to consolidate.

2.1: Economy, Politics and Society in the Brixworth Union.

The Brixworth Poor Law Union was situated in the middle of Northamptonshire, a county located in central England about seventy miles from London. In 1835, following the passing of the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, Northamptonshire was divided into 318 parishes distributed amongst twelve newly created poor law unions (Table 2.1).¹ The first appointed Poor Law

¹ A. Brundage, 'The landed interest and the New Poor Law: a reappraisal of the revolution in government', *Economic History Review*, 87. (1972), pp. 27-48.

Commissioner for the area, Richard Earle, was assigned the delicate task of negotiating poor law union boundaries and guardian election procedures with local elites in the county. The largest landowner in mid-Northamptonshire, the 3rd Earl Spencer, scrutinised the New Poor Law arrangements influencing how the Brixworth Union boundaries were drawn. As a leading member of the Whig government and Lord Lieutenant of Northamptonshire he pressurised the relevant authorities to allocate his Althorp estate parishes (17, 030 acres) to a rural poor law union he could control. Consequently, the Brixworth Union comprised a rather oddly shaped geographic area, stretching from the edge of Northampton, northwards to the outskirts of Market Harborough and in a westerly direction towards Daventry (Map 2.1). It did not adhere to the official criteria for poor law union areas because it was not located around a market town; instead a workhouse was built in 1835-6 in Brixworth parish, the logical centre of the district, where fortnightly guardian meetings were held.

The population of the Brixworth Union was 13, 571 in 1834-5 and residents lived in thirty-three parishes (each of which elected at least one guardian of the poor).² The Assistant Poor Law Commissioner allocated guardian seats to each parish under section 38 of the New Poor Law. Although that legislation stipulated that a minimum of one seat should be distributed to each parish, it made no special provision for more populous districts. In the Brixworth Union this meant that larger parishes, such as Moulton (1,319 inhabitants), were represented by the same number of guardians as smaller villages, like Hanging Houghton (13 inhabitants). Since these smaller parishes were usually controlled by major landowners this gave the rural elite proportionally greater power on the Brixworth Union board of guardians. Anthony Brundage estimates that 'the twenty least populous parishes' in the Brixworth Union 'provided twenty elected guardians' which gave them

² N[orthamptonshire] R[ecord] O[ffice], Kelly's Directory, (1894), summarises Brixworth Union's features 1834-94. The number of parishes was later increased to 36 under boundary changes.

Map 2.1: Mid-Northamptonshire showing the location of Brixworth and the surrounding villages of the Brixworth Union in the 19th century.



Source: N[orthampton] L[ibrary] L[ocal] S[tudies] R[oom], Map Collection, Map of Mid-Northamptonshire from the 1842 original.

Table 2.1: Poor Law Unions of Northamptonshire, 1835-6.

<u>Poor Law Union</u>	<u>Ex-officio Guardians</u>	<u>Elected Guardians</u>	<u>Parishes</u>	<u>Population</u>
Pottersbury	4	18	11	5, 954
Towcester	6	31	23	12, 142
Brackley	11	33	33	13, 351
Brixworth	3	38	33	13, 571
Hardingstone	4	22	20	8, 019
Wellingborough	5	36	26	18, 383
Northampton	2	31	17	21,761
Kettering	6	33	30	15, 502
Daventry	7	34	28	19, 137
Thrapston	2	30	25	11, 105
Oundle	4	40	32	12, 120
Peterborough	8	45	40	20, 934

Source(s): Compiled from N[orthampton] R[ecord] O[ffice], Kelly's Minute Books, Census Returns and Population Ledgers, 1831-1841; Brundage, 'New Poor Law', p. 43.

'a majority of the elective part of the board', but they only represented around '24 per cent of the total population' of the district.³ This discrepancy was not resolved until the Local Government Act of 1894 distributed seats equitably. It was a key political grievance in the district for much of the nineteenth century. At the same time a plural voting system was introduced, under clause 40 of the New Poor Law. Brundage explains how it operated in rural Northamptonshire:

Landowners could cast one vote for the first £50 of annual land value, and a further vote for each £25, up to a maximum of six. Furthermore, owners were allowed to vote by proxy. The new ratepayer franchise was one vote for land valued up to £200, two votes for land between £200 and £400, and three votes for land valued over £400. Thus power in the parish

³ Brundage, 'New Poor Law', p. 42.

was transferred to the large proprietors and tenants and away from small farmers and tradesmen who often controlled the democratically elected parish vestry. An individual could vote both as owner and ratepayer, and thus it was entirely possible for a large resident proprietor to cast nine votes.⁴

These electoral anomalies were further exacerbated by the automatic appointment of Justices of the Peace to sit as *ex-officio* guardians. Consequently, like many rural districts, the landowners and their tenant farmers in the Brixworth Union, by virtue of their economic strength, controlled the local social and political scene.

Farming dominated the economy of the Brixworth Union and went through four distinct phases of agricultural change in the nineteenth century. Ron Greenall in his history of Northamptonshire life roughly dates these as: the era that culminated in the ending of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815; the Corn Laws period 1815-1846; the High-farming experience 1846-1874; and the agricultural crisis and its aftermath 1874-1914.⁵ Whilst agricultural historians dispute the timings of each shift and their impact on different communities, these were the general farming trends that influenced the local economy. The Brixworth Union was a mixed-farming district due to the richness of its soil. Major cereal crops, such as wheat, were grown profusely, but the area was also a large-scale producer of wool and meat, with animal skins being sold to the local shoe-making industry. Accurate statistics on farming were not collected until 1866, when it was recorded that Northamptonshire had a total of 271,000 acres of arable land and 252,000 acres under grass for pasture.⁶ Although we have no equivalent data for the Brixworth Union, farming in the area appears to have reflected county trends.

Throughout the nineteenth century there were five resident major landowners in the Brixworth Union who dominated farming life. These included, Earl Spencer (Althorp estate 17,030

⁴ Brundage, 'New Poor Law', pp. 29-30; see also -V.D. Lipman, Local Government Area, 1834-1945, (1949); B.Keith-Lucas, The English Local Government Franchise: A Short History, (1952); K.B. Smellie, A History of Local Government, (1968, 4th edn.); J. Redlich and F.W. Hirst, The History of Local Government in England, (1970, 2nd edn.); B.Keith-Lucas, English Local Government in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, (1977).

⁵ R. Greenall, A History of Northamptonshire and the Soke of Peterborough, (1979), p. 89.

⁶ BPP, Royal Commission on the Employment of Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture, (1867).
Mr.F.H.Norman inspector for Northamptonshire, pp. 110-121.

acres), Lord Overstone (Overstone estate 15, 045 acres), Sir J. Langham (Cottesbrooke estate 9,118 acres), Viscount Clifden (Holdenby estate 4,774 acres) and Sir C. Isham (Lamport estate 3,112 acres), (Map 2.1). Collectively these landowners controlled 49, 079 acres of land, out of a total acreage of 60, 376 in the Brixworth Union area (Table 2.2 gives 1871 acreage details by parish). However what was unusual about this pattern of land ownership was that three of the largest estates were united under the Spencer family's land agent. When the 5th Earl Spencer succeeded to the title in 1857 he agreed to unite the control of his estate with those of his brother-in-law Viscount Clifden⁷ (who lived abroad) and Lord Overstone (a family friend, political ally and London banker) under Spencer's land agent. The agent's brief was to manage the three estates by co-ordinating farming practices to maximise profits. The land agent informed Northamptonshire's Royal Commission inspector in 1866 that he was in the rare position of having *de facto* control over the whole district. In fact, he managed about one thousand tenants (farmers and cottagers).⁸ Therefore, Spencer's land agent's practices set the farming tone for the rest of the Brixworth Union, dominating the local economy.

During the High-farming era the Spencer family employed a renowned mid-Victorian agriculturalist as land agent, John Beasley. He helped his employer found the English Agricultural Society in 1838 (later the Royal Agricultural Society of England) and began to transform farming practices in the Brixworth Union.⁹ Beasley promoted new scientific farming techniques by writing handbooks on drainage, crop rotation and fertilisation methods, stressing the importance of larger capital investment on farm improvements.¹⁰ He was fond of quoting the following work maxim

⁷ C. Spencer, *The Spencer Family*, (1999), p. 260 explains that Viscount Clifden was married to Lilah Seymour, eldest sister of the 5th Earl Spencer's wife, Charlotte Francis Frederica Seymour.

⁸ BPP, *Royal Commission*, (1867), J. Beasley, q.19, p. 430-31.

⁹ N. Goddard, *Harvests of Change. The Royal Agricultural Society of England, 1938-1988*, (1988).

¹⁰ J. Beasley, *A Lecture Delivered to the Members of the Faringdon Agricultural Club on the Duties and Privileges of the Landowners, Occupiers and Cultivators of the Soil*, (1860), pp. 1-48; R. Greenall, 'Three Nineteenth Century Agriculturists', *Northamptonshire Past and Present*, 7, (1988/9), 6, pp. 457-9; Beasley worked for the Spencer family from the 1840s until his death in 1874, when he was succeeded by his son Joseph Noble Beasley (1874-1885) and then John Morley (1885-1910).

Table 2.2: Parishes of the Brixworth Union, Northamptonshire, 1871.

<u>Parish</u>	<u>Area in Acres</u>	<u>Inhabited Houses</u>
Cold Ashby	1940	101
Naseby	3690	148
Thornby	1212	54
Guilsborough &	3080	140
Hollowell	as above	61
Cottesbrooke	2780	48
Great Creaton	790	112
Spratton &	2810	201
Little Creaton	as above	13
Ravensthorpe	1330	104
Coton	860	20
Teeton	681	22
Holdenby	1855	34
East Haddon	2572	155
Brington &	3761	188
Althorp	as above	16
Harlestone	2530	136
Church Brampton	1100	34
Chapel Brampton	1330	43
Pitsford	2700	136
Boughton	1850	87
Moulton	1680	394
Moulton Park	450	2
Overstone	1940	47
Holcot	1670	96
Brixworth	3410	246
Scaldwell	1060	92
Lamport &	1440	29
Hanging Houghton	as above	26
Haselbech	1648	34
Maidwell	1650	51
Draughton	1477	37
Faxton &	2120	18
Mawsley	as above	2
Old	1650	99
Walgrave	2040	154
Harrington	1270	45
Totals	60, 376	3225

Source: NRO, Census of Great Britain, 1871, Northamptonshire, Tables I, 1871. NB: Parishes do not equate with guardian seats.

when farmers asked him about best work practice –

A little less indulgence in the bed,

A little more arrangement in the head,
 A little more devotion in the mind,
 Would quite prevent your being so behind.¹¹

Beasley's influence, with his employer's support, persuaded many tenant farmers in the Brixworth Union to instigate major farm improvements and building works in the mid-Victorian period. These were usually financed from large loans through the new farming bank in the area, the Northampton Union Bank Ltd.¹² This capital outlay was offset against improved crop yields and buoyant meat or wool prices at market to repay loan interest. Farming steadily became a larger scale business enterprise on High-farming lines, practised to a great extent across the Brixworth Union. The development of High-farming in the Brixworth Union caused significant changes in local wage relations by the late-Victorian period. Spencer's land agent's records show that tenant farmers employed a diverse rural workforce to work the land. In common with nearby East Anglia counties like Norfolk, workers were paid on a sliding wage scale, with skilled workers paid more than their unskilled counterparts.¹³ However, in this mixed farming location arable and animal husbandry skills were valued equally. The team man who drove the horses to plough or harvest crops was usually paid the same wage rate as the stockman who looked after cattle. Similarly shepherds, carters and yardmen were generally better paid than common labourers, as the table on the next page reveals (Table 2.3).

Further analysis of comparable land agent's records would need to be completed before we could assess how representative this wage structure was, but it does give an insight into pay scales on the largest landed estate in the area. A leading guardian in the district described the occupational

¹¹ Beasley, *Lecture*, p. 37.

¹² The archive of the Northampton Union Bank Ltd. has recently been opened by its predecessor the National Westminster Bank plc to scholars at their headquarters in Cornhill, London.

¹³ A. Howkins, *Poor Labouring Men. Rural Radicalism in Norfolk, 1870-1923*, (1985), Chapter 2, pp. 15 – 38.

Table 2.3: Wage levels in Brington parishes in the Brixworth Union, Northamptonshire, 1870-1.

<u>Occupation</u>	<u>Weekly Wage Levels</u>	<u>Charitable or Outrelief Supplements.</u>
Skilled labourers –		
Grazier & stockmen	20 shillings	No.
Game underkeeper	17 shillings	No.
Stableman	15 shillings	2 weeks bread&meat&shoes.
Waggoner & carter	14 shillings	2 weeks bread&meat&shoes.
Shepherd	14 shillings	2 weeks bread&meat&shoes.
Groom	12 shillings	No.
Skilled artisans-		
Mason	20 shillings	No.
Carpenter	16 shillings	No.
Blacksmith	16 shillings	No.
Brickmaker	15 shillings	Gift of shoes per annum.
Sawyer (woodsman)	15 shillings	No.
Fence Carpenter	13 shillings 6 pence	1 week meat
Unskilled labour-		
Labourers	12 shillings	2 weeks bread&meat&shoes + outrelief 2 s. 6 d. per week.

Source: NRO, Spencer MS, Misc. Volume, Shelf ref. 7f 5, J. Beasley, *The Number of the Poor and Working Class People in Brington Parish taken in December, 1871.*

profile in the district in 1870 as follows:

The union in which I acted as a guardian might be termed a rural one in 1870. I do not remember a factory at that time in it; each village, except the smallest, had a shoemaker or cobbler, a hedge carpenter, a baker, a publican, a tailor, possibly a butcher, and many skilled labourers, clever thatchers, hedge-cutters, and drainers, of whom it might be said that most took a pride in their work....but...if you paraded all the inhabitants – peers, parsons, squires, yeomen, farmers, gentleman at large, and the residue, big and little – one out of every twelve in the assemblage was a pauper.¹⁴

For this reason gifts of bread, meat and shoes on the Althorp estate were important income supplements even for better paid skilled workers, although skilled artisans appear to have been slightly better off than their fellow workers because they received less charity.¹⁵ In general farm ‘labourers’ did the majority of daily agricultural tasks, but this generic term encompassed a very

¹⁴ T. MacKay (ed.) and A. Pell, *The Reminiscences of Albert Pell Sometime MP for South-Leicestershire*, (1908), p. 163. This book was an autobiography but McKay agreed to write the introduction as a favour to Pell for his C.O.S. work.

¹⁵ These were usually given at Xmas.

diverse range of workers.¹⁶ Little is known about their scales of pay because no detailed work has been done on mid-Victorian Northamptonshire farm records. Sampling Spencer's land agent records reveals that most were annual, common, and day labourers paid according to their skill and local wage agreements with individual tenant farmers. The Royal commission on women, young persons and children employed in agriculture (1867) recorded that on average male labourers earned 12s. per week and so were the lowest paid agricultural workers. However, Spencer's land agent commented that there was one crucial difference in their pay structure compared with skilled or artisan labour after the advent of High-farming. Gradually a higher proportion of general labouring wages comprised piecework rates of pay.¹⁷ These varied considerably according to seasonal requirements and the nature of the task. Spencer's land agent noted that wage relations became rather tense and antagonistic because of the growth of this wage pattern. This was one reason why they received more income supplements on the Althorp estate. The unpredictability of seasonal wage rates, loss of work on rainy days and disagreements about productivity rates strained wage relations. To try to diffuse these tensions in the interests of profitability some tenant farmers in the Brixworth Union agreed to revive a series of poverty safety nets, just as they appear to have done in the 'Swing' era before the advent of the New Poor Law.

Keith Snell comments that 'rural antagonism' in the East Anglia Victorian countryside was 'predominantly landlord/farmer/clergyman versus labourer' over issues, such as 'unemployment, farm machinery, enclosure,...the game laws, low wages, tied cottage insecurity, the operation of the poor law' and the control of charities.¹⁸ There is little current research available on the nature of antagonism during the first half of the nineteenth century in rural Northamptonshire. Hobsbawm and Rudé found that there were a total of only 19 'Swing' incidents in the county prior to the New

¹⁶ A. Howkins, 'Peasants, Servants and Labourers: The Marginal Workforce in British Agriculture, 1870-1914', *Agricultural History Review*, 42, (1994), pp. 49-62, makes this point about the diversity of labourers' work.

¹⁷ BPP, *Royal Commission*, (1867), q. 19, pp.429-431.

¹⁸ K. Snell, 'Deferential bitterness: the social outlook of the rural proletariat in eighteenth and nineteenth century England and Wales', in M. L. Bush (ed.), *Social orders and Social Classes in Europe since 1500: Studies in Social Stratification*, (1992), p. 160.

Poor Law, compared to 208 in Hampshire, 88 in Norfolk and 40 in Suffolk.¹⁹ Although Northamptonshire figures are small, 5 of those major 'Swing' incidents, or 26 per cent, occurred in the Brixworth Union. The reasons why rural antagonism was more marked in this part of Northamptonshire remains unclear. However as Greenall suggests, the Brixworth Union had a definite nonconformist character because Baptists and Congregationalists had a strong presence throughout the nineteenth century.²⁰ In addition, 'Old Dissent and even older strains of Puritanism' from the Cromwellian era had deep roots in the area, which may have been linked to a strong radical tradition. Recent work on the allotment movement in the 1830s, by Bridget Lewis, reveals that some landowners, like Sir James Langham of Cottesbrooke estate in the Brixworth Union, feared the growth of this type of radicalism and responded by promoting allotment schemes to diffuse social tensions.²¹ That reaction to social unrest seems to have set a precedent which farmers reverted to whenever relations were more strained. For instance, sampling Spencer's land agent's correspondence and labour books in the mid-Victorian period reveals that when relationships between farmers and labourers started to deteriorate as a result of poor law and farming changes, a series of income supplements were revived to try to disperse social grievances.²²

Snell explains that the reaction of landowners and farmers in the Brixworth Union was common. Most recognised that the New Poor Law represented a harsh change in official poor law practices because overseers of the poor after 1834 administered outrelief as a gift, when it had previously been seen as a parish birthright.²³ The New Poor Law decision-making protocol changed social relations to such an extent that by the 1850s the farming community was concerned endemic

¹⁹ E. J. Hobsbawm and G. Rudé, *Captain Swing*, (1969), pp. 148-9, Appendix 1.

²⁰ R. Greenall, *Northamptonshire*, p. 78.

²¹ I am indebted to Bridget Lewis for sharing her research on allotments with me from her forthcoming thesis 'Charitable Provision in Northamptonshire, 1785-1870', (unpublished, Ph.D., University of Leicester, 2000), chapter 7, cross reference NRO, L(C) 1163, Petition of Tenants, Cottesbrooke to Sir James Langham, 6th December 1830.

²² For example, NRO, *Spencer MS*, Misc. Vol. 7cl, Althorp Farm Labour Books, 1842-1857; Misc. Vol. 7c2, Brampton Farm Books, 1844-53; Misc. 7b3, Althorp Park Daily Journal of Labourers' Work, 1859-1876.

²³ K. Snell, *The Annals of the Labouring Poor. Social Change and Agrarian England, 1660-1990*, (1985), p. 227, argues that the loss of parish birthright created a 'heritage of distrust' in nineteenth century rural life.

social tensions might undermine their long-term economic interests.²⁴ In the Brixworth Union, therefore, a series of traditional poverty safety nets were revived to try to create greater consensus in rural social relations.²⁵ These included almshouse placements for widows, regular outrelief doles on medical orders for the most vulnerable members of rural society (disabled, elderly, infirm, sick and feeble) and charitable provision (gifts of clothing, food, fuel and shoes to the poor). In the 1860s larger landowners, like Spencer, often paid long serving estate workers small loyalty pensions in old age, usually the equivalent of average meagre outrelief doles of 2s. 6d. per week.²⁶ Guardians also paid funeral costs on behalf of poorer residents who wanted to bury their loved ones in a customary manner. A medical outrelief claim covered both the cost of a new woollen shroud to lay out a body for inspection during the period of brief mourning and the purchase of the basic wooden coffin, usually made by a local carpenter. Although the range and diversity of these benefits make it difficult to generalise about their effects on different parishes, they seem to have mitigated the worst aspects of the New Poor Law and profit driven farming. It is important to note that these benefits did not replace outrelief, but were viewed as much-needed income supplements. However, by the 1860s they also altered the tenor of economic relations in several significant ways.

The problem with reviving these older customary notions of social responsibility was that farmers in the area were trying to achieve two incompatible goals. On the one hand they rejuvenated customary expectations to ensure greater social stability and thus protect profitability. On the other hand they stressed that paternalistic gestures were gifts that could be withdrawn if profits plummeted, which undermined their first aim. This was a risky strategy for two reasons. First, farmers revived a series of poverty safety nets that had been a strong cultural influence in the area, setting a dangerous precedent by legitimising labourers' grievances about the loss of their

²⁴ A. Howkins, *Reshaping Rural England. A Social History, 1850-1925*, (1991), p. 74 comments that this was a common reaction in many rural areas during the High-farming era.

²⁵ B[ritish] L[ibrary] M[anuscript] D[eartment], *Althorp MS*, K383, Nethercote to Spencer, 31.10.1869 discusses importance of medical outrelief customary payments in the Brixworth Union by the 1860s.

²⁶ NRO, *Spencer MS*, Sox 571, Beasley to Spencer 1871-2, outlines these conventions – e.g. 14.2.1871, 15.2.1871, 7.5.1872.

parish birthright in 1834. Second, rejuvenating such powerful conventions only to later withdraw them in the interests of farming profits could potentially exacerbate, rather than resolve, deep-rooted social tensions. It also raised poorer residents' expectations by creating a calculus of entitlements that might prove difficult to eradicate. The poverty safety nets on the surface appeared to stabilise farmer-labourer relations, but these income supplements became a vital part of the subsistence calculations of poorer families. Any future farming developments that undermined the precarious makeshift economies of the labouring poor in the area which were comprised of a mixture of low paid wages, charity and medical outrelief payments, could cause considerable unrest. The complexities of unstable economic relations are difficult to tease out in the 1860s, but evidence indicates this was a key facet of rural life in the Brixworth Union prior to the outrelief campaign.

John Archer comments that revived notions of paternalism could only have been a partial success in the High-farming era otherwise agricultural trade unionism would not have emerged with such force in the early 1870s in rural England.²⁷ One of the key aspects of social tension during the 1860s that may have contributed to union combination by the early 1870s was the perennial problem of underemployment. A leading gentleman farmer in the district, Albert Pell, described employment difficulties in the High-farming period as follows;

I was soon settled in the Midlands, taking a farm dreadfully out of order, foul, wet and exhausted. A steam plough was just designed at Reading, so I squared up the fields into parallelograms ready for its use...I took a twenty-one years' lease of the land, 300 acres, and at once proceeded to make bricks and drain pipes. The clay was excellent, labour was cheap and good of its kind, and the new farm premises were soon up. When winter came, I began to put the pipes in the ground. Any number of men were at my disposal, though the parish and those immediately adjacent were 'close' parishes, and the men had to walk in some cases three or four miles to their work. Sometimes I had as many as thirty applicants for work in one day.²⁸

Pell stated that life for poorer families who lacked a major breadwinner in regular employment was parlous. Most lived in poor cottage accommodation that was cramped and lacked basic

²⁷ J. Archer, "By a Flash and a Scare". *Arson, Animal Maiming and Poaching in East Anglia, 1815-1870*, (1990), p. 256.

²⁸ Pell, *Reminiscences*, p. 163.

sanitation. These families fell ill easily because poor diet and infected water supplies made them vulnerable to diseases such as typhoid.

Pell gave evidence to the Royal Commission in 1867 outlining the budget of an average family who relied on regular outrelief (Table 2.4).²⁹ It showed that even though guardians awarded a regular medical outrelief allowance to Mr.G., who earned little because of long term illness, the family could not make ends meet. Donations of milk, firewood and clothing were important subsistence calculations. Children who were sent away to service to earn money and save food costs, such as Sarah aged 13, were still an economic burden because the family was liable for clothing costs. The older children lived and worked in town, but do not seem to have been able to afford to send money home regularly. It is evident that the right to glean was a vital income supplement, providing 17 stones of flour to feed the family over the winter period. This family had no opportunity to save their harvest monies to pay their rent over the winter period. Without outrelief compulsory admittance into the workhouse would have been inevitable.

Since Pell became a strong opponent of outrelief in the 1870s his evidence provides an intriguing perspective on the nature of life for ‘respectable’ poorer residents, which he later came to regard as ‘undeserving’. This family was living just above the poverty line by pooling their meagre resources and applying for whatever income supplements were available. Although the question of typicality needs to be taken into account here, since no record of an equivalent skilled labourer or artisan’s income levels were recorded, it is evident that changeable employment factors could seriously disrupt a family’s income. Generally agricultural wages were stable in spring to summer provided workers stayed healthy and inclement weather did not disrupt productivity, reducing piecework rates. However, working ‘6 to 6 in autumn and from 7 until dark in winter’ six

²⁹ *BPP, Royal Commission*, (1867), A.Pell, q. 12, p. 426.

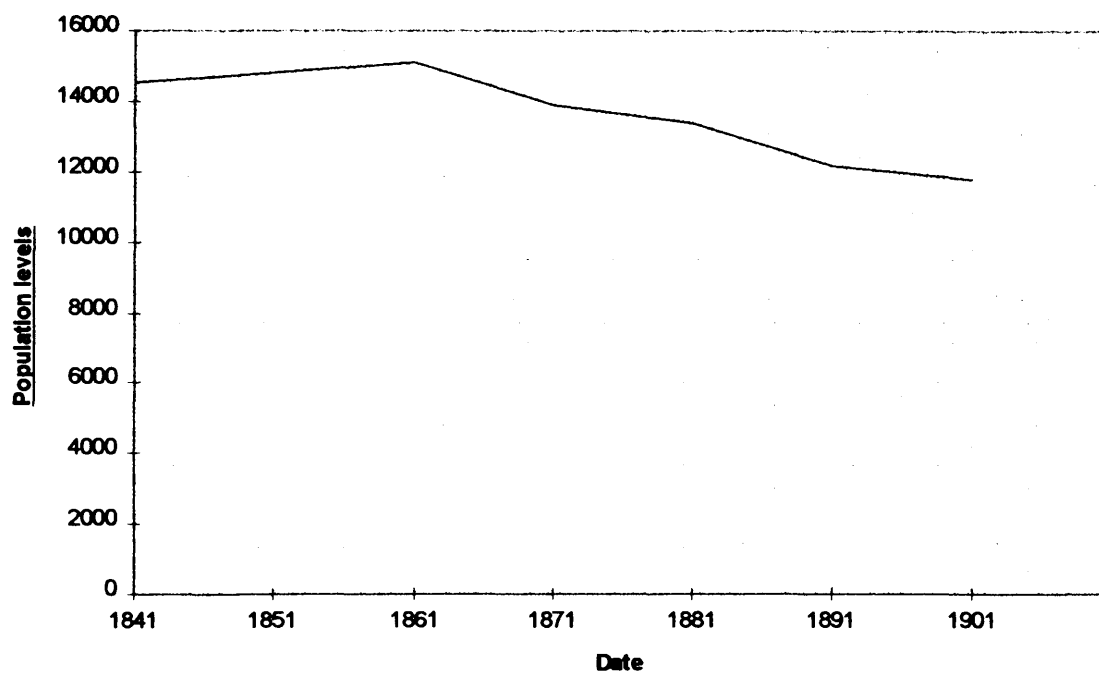
Table 2.4: Family Budget of an Average Labouring Family in Receipt of Medical Outrelief,**1867.**

Family members' weekly income -		£	s	d
Mr G	aged 55	ill and earned nothing		
Mrs G	aged 44	0	2	6
Elizabeth	aged 23	lived and worked in town		
Henry	aged 18	lived and worked in town		
Daniel	aged 15	0	8	0
Sarah	aged 13	worked in service		
Kate	aged 10	earned nothing		
John	aged 7	earned nothing		
Annie	aged 5	earned nothing		
Weekly income total		0	10	6
Additional annual earnings –				
Mrs G, gleaning (17 stone of flour) & food value		0	50	0
Daniel, harvest wages		0	32	0
Daniel, harvest beer wages		0	10	0
John, bird scaring wages		0	20	0
Donations –				
Value of milk		0	10	0
Value of firewood		0	5	0
Value of subscription to clothing club		0	10	0
Average weekly value of annual earnings & donations		0	2	8
Total family earnings per week on average		0	13	2
Family members' expenditure –				
Rent, food, food, clothing, linen and club subscriptions		1	6	2
Weekly budget deficit before poor relief		0	13	0
Add Value of weekly medical outrelief allowance for Mr G -				
Money		0	4	0
Five loaves (6lbs)		0	4	3 ½
Weekly budget deficit		0	4	8 ½
Annual budget deficit (weekly x 52)		12	4	10

Source: *BPP, Royal Commission on the Employment of Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture, (1867), A.Pell, q. 12-13b, 20-22, pp. 426-7, 431-4.*

days a week took its toll on many common labourers, like Mr.G.³⁰ They could not compete against fitter younger workers in the 1860s when labour was more plentiful. Population levels in the Brixworth Union started to decline in this period, from a high of 15,065 in 1861 to 13,866 by 1871, a reduction of 8.6 per cent (Graph 2.1).³¹ This should have improved older labourers' employment opportunities, but farmers, who were still continuing to focus on productivity rates, remained less willing to offer regular work. Thus, the traditional problems of seasonal work and wage reductions in old age were exacerbated by underemployment difficulties.

Graph 2.1: Population of the Brixworth Union, Northamptonshire, 1841-1901



Source: NRO, Census Returns, Brixworth Union, 1841-1901.

³⁰ BPP, Royal Commission, (1867), p.112, notes these difficulties.

³¹ NRO, Census Returns, Brixworth Union, 1841-1901.

In the 1860s this was the economic, political and social landscape of the Brixworth Union when High-farming was at its apex. Landowners and tenant farmers dominated the Brixworth Union board of guardians by virtue of their economic hegemony, holding on average two-thirds of the seats. The New Poor Law franchise protected their interests, by discriminating against small farmers, traders and artisans. Despite its harmonious appearance social relations in the area were tense because wage relations were antagonistic. Piecework and seasonal labour requirements forced many inhabitants to rely on regular medical outrelief. Some artisans, like shoemakers, and agricultural workers began to migrate to local manufacturing towns in the 1860s in search of higher-paid and more stable incomes to feed their families. For the disadvantaged in rural society who could not afford to migrate or chose to remain, outrelief in cash and kind was a necessity if they were to avoid the workhouse. High-farming prosperity from their perspective was an ‘illusion’ that gave way to ‘the pragmatic experience of pauperism’, particularly as they aged.³²

2.2: Medical outrelief debates, 1860s.

In 1866 the Royal commission inspector for Northamptonshire, who examined employment conditions for women and children, visited the Brixworth Union. He reported that irregular low wages and underemployment difficulties were the chief problems for poorer residents.³³ Labourers’ family economies varied according to individual skills and ages. However, for almost all families the key vulnerable periods in the life-cycle of working people were after young adults started a family and in old age when physical decline made it harder to work long and arduous hours in the field. Poorer families had very basic diets rich in carbohydrates but often lacking proteins. Diseases of the ‘bones, glands, eyes and skin [were] common’ because of vitamin deficiencies.³⁴ Damp fieldwork exacerbated common medical conditions, such as asthma, bronchitis and painful rheumatic conditions. Two eminent doctors who ran the Northampton and Peterborough infirmaries

³² J. Archer, “Flash”, p. 124.

³³ *BPP, Royal Commission*, (1867), Norman, pp. 110-21.

³⁴ *BPP, Royal Commission*, (1867), Dr (s). W. Paley & T. Walker, q. 14-15, pp. 427-8.

noted that in 1866, 'there is no question that the poor (especially women) are insufficiently fed and many of the diseases which they are subject to might be avoided if they had better food'.³⁵ The doctors commented that many women gave their food allowance to their children. For these reasons medical outrelief provision was a basic necessity in the area. These poorer families often lived in rather rudimentary cottages that were overcrowded and lacked proper sanitation. Most tried to rent an average allotment of six poles (about one quarter of an acre), where they grew vegetables and potatoes (the more fortunate kept a pig). Rents in parishes that were not controlled by a single landowner tended to be relatively high. Property speculators rented overcrowded tenements at exorbitant rents of around £4-5 per annum, compared to £2-3 on landed estate villages.³⁶ Work was often allocated to estate workers first and this meant that outside labourers sometimes had to walk three or four miles to work daily. If they were late for work the lost time was deducted from their wages if they were paid weekly, or they earned less piece-money. Spencer's land agent's records reveal that as working people aged, impoverishment outside the workhouse became a real threat. However, most were determined to avoid indoor relief at almost any cost.

In the 1890s a labourer who became a spokesman for working people explained why the elderly feared the workhouse:

Suppose say now, Sir, I have the privileges of liberty, a man who has lived in a cottage for years he has got a little home; it is a little castle to him, and they say when he has lived there over fifty years he and his wife have to break up their home and go into the house. He has to sell his furniture bit by bit before they go in, because if they have anything they will not give him a paper. He has to part with all, and then when he goes in he has to part with his clothing too...He was a man who...used to go about the fields all his lifetime...being confined there after having his liberty is very hard.³⁷

The loss of liberty, having to sell possessions accumulated over fifty years, and being made to wear a pauper uniform were to be avoided if at all possible. Therefore, charitable provision (bread, fuel, clothing, meat, and milk) and medical outrelief were prized by the labouring poor in the area.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 428.

³⁶ BPP, Royal Commission, (1867), Mrs. G., q. 162, pp. 456-7.

³⁷ BPP, Royal Commission on the Aged Poor, (1894), S. Ward, q. 15761-4.

Traditional intermediaries in rural society, such as land agents and clergymen, usually distributed these benefits. A typical request from Spencer's land agent in the early 1870s gives us a flavour of what life was like for older labourers:

John Manning. He is 78 years of age has worked all his life for Lord Spencer and is predominantly a good honest man. He is now left quite alone in the world and has nothing but his parish allowance and is literally starving. An addition to his income of 2 or even one shilling would be a great boon.... Thomas Worley... he has been a useful and valuable man. Whatever, however, he had saved is now gone. He suffers painfully from heart disease and has been unable to work but little for some time, indeed he cannot walk to work.³⁸

Worley worked as a mason and then a common day labourer on Spencer's Althorp estate throughout his working life. He was a conscientious man who saved hard and contributed to a sick club so he could remain independent in old age. Unfortunately his progressive heart disease incurred a 'doctor's bill of £40', his entire life savings. When he tried to claim sickness benefit from the Great Brington Friendly Society he discovered that it was bankrupt because it was inundated with claims in the 1860s when guardians started to cut back on medical outrelief expenditure. The land agent explained that Worley tried to work even in the depths of winter because he was determined to avoid the shame of workhouse admittance, but this only accentuated his ill health. Spencer agreed to give both labourers a small customary pension of 2s. 6d. per week, the equivalent of their small outrelief doles. However, these were only temporary allowances because he had already asked his land agent to review all estate pensions, with a view to cutting expenditure radically:

I wish some plan would be discussed for some superannuation fund for all whom I employ. I Would [sic] act as a Banker and pay a percentage to the Fund. It would not be difficult to draw a scheme out. Provision would be made for them to withdraw money. It would then be made that no parish pension would be thereafter granted.³⁹

There were two reasons why Spencer took this stance by the 1870s.

First, the Union Chargeability Act of 1865 had a significant impact on the local economy of

³⁸ NRO, Spencer MS, Sox 571, Beasley to Boyle, 30.4.1872. Quoted as in original.

³⁹ NRO, Spencer MS, Sox 571, Spencer to Beasley, 15.2.1871. Quoted as in original.

the Brixworth Union because it altered the way that rates were levied across the district. Previously each parish was responsible for the care of all those paupers who had settlement rights, and rates were levied amongst local rate payers by overseers of the poor appointed by the local vestry.⁴⁰ In richer parishes where a landowner might award generous charitable benefits to vulnerable members of the community, rateable expenditure on outrelief was low, compared to large parishes where fewer income supplements were provided. However after 1865, paupers throughout the Brixworth Union became the responsibility of all parishes and rates were pooled into one coffer administered by the whole board of guardians. Central government hoped expanding the revenue base in this manner would stop parishes acting like 'quarrelling member states', discourage the expulsion of paupers without settlement rights from one village to another, and enable guardians to use increased rateable income to pay for public works loans to improve workhouse capacity.⁴¹ In time this would lead to an overall reduction in outrelief numbers. In the Brixworth Union guardians who represented wealthier parishes with fewer paupers began to take a closer interest in outrelief expenditure. Spencer calculated that before 1865 it was in his interest to keep rates low by providing alternative sources of outrelief funding such as estate pensions and charitable provision. However, after 1865 this was no longer financially viable because his charitable commitments were passing cost-saving benefits onto ratepayers throughout the Brixworth Union. Thus, he began to re-examine the customary system of estate pensions on his land.

Second, landowners and farmers in the area began to experience a series of poorer harvests after 1865, reducing yields. There is evidence that 'the actual level of harvest earnings' fell across East Anglia in the late-1860s, alarming farmers who had become rather complacent about 'the relative prosperity' of the High-farming period.⁴² Albert Pell, a leading gentleman farmer in the

⁴⁰ D. Englander, *Poverty and Poor Law Reform in 19th Century Britain, 1834-1914. From Chadwick to Booth*, (1998), p. 3, 12-15, 18, 44, explains that settlement rights up to 1865 were complex and usually acquired on the basis of having been born in a parish or through the paternal line. They were stipulated on a settlement certificate that had to be verified by parish overseers.

⁴¹ M. Rose, 'The Crisis of Poor Relief in England, 1860-1900', in W. Mommsen and W. Mock (eds.), *The Emergence of the Welfare State in Britain, 1850-1950*, (1981), pp. 50-70, is one of the few welfare historians who emphasises the significance of the Union Chargeability Act of 1865.

⁴² Howkins, *Poor*, p. 62.

Brixworth Union district, commented that 1867-8 was a season of very poor yields.⁴³ Landowners and their tenant farmers who sat as guardians of the poor were anxious to keep rateable bills low at a time of falling profits and they began to scrutinise medical outrelief expenditure, which had risen steadily in the mid-Victorian period to nearly £6,000 per annum. It was no longer advantageous to use medical relief to stabilise social relations in the interests of profitability when yields were poor, nor did it make sense to use outrelief to retain surplus labour in the area during a period of underemployment. This signalled the start of the death knell of paternalistic gestures in the Brixworth Union, which would be almost eradicated by the 1890s, and the tentative beginnings of the crusade campaign.

The first significant indication that the basis of poor relief was being challenged in the Brixworth Union occurred in December 1866, when Pell raised the controversial issue of medical outrelief funding at a meeting of the Brixworth Union board of guardians.⁴⁴ He proposed that guardians should cut medical outrelief expenditure and replace benefits with sickness clubs and a workhouse medical dispensary. The schemes would be designed along the lines of similar ventures that Pell saw in operation in the Staffordshire potteries.⁴⁵ By April 1867 he had persuaded enough farmers to support a motion to review all medical outrelief procedures in the area with a view to making cost-savings on a broad front because rateable changes instigated by the Union Chargeability Act were now taking effect.⁴⁶ A committee was set up to re-examine all medical outrelief cases in the period 1846-1866 to ascertain, 'whether the feeling of the poor is as independent as it was, or whether they are abandoning their own resources for Medical Relief out of the rates'.⁴⁷ The review took over two years to complete, reporting in the autumn of 1869 that medical outrelief expenditure was excessive and recommending that this type of relief should be abolished. At this juncture a majority of farmers would not support such far-reaching

⁴³ Pell, *Reminiscences*, p. 233.

⁴⁴ NRO, P/L 2/14, Brixworth Union guardian minute books, 2.12.1866, 2.12.1866.

⁴⁵ BLMD, *Althorp MS*, K372, Pell to Spencer, 2.12.1866.

⁴⁶ BLMD, *Althorp MS*, K372, Pell to Spencer, 30.4.1867

⁴⁷ BLMD, *Althorp MS*, K372, Pell to Spencer, 30.4.1867.

recommendations but they agreed to withdraw medical extras and reduce both payments in kind and cash allowances on medical orders.⁴⁸ The threat this action posed to poorer families began to accentuate already strained social relations in the area. For instance a clergy guardian who opposed the changes in outrelief recalled that cuts in medical outrelief provision in the late-1860s were a key reason for unionisation in the area. He told Spencer privately, 'I have good reason to know that the most violent agitators of the Labourers' Union derived their main influence in this Parish [Scaldwell] from the apprehension of extreme measures on the part of Guardians' in the late-1860s [sic].⁴⁹ However, this does not explain why union combination specifically developed in the spring of 1872 in the district.

To understand the timing of union combination and its relationship to the crusade controversy it is important to appreciate that although a full-scale attack against medical outrelief was not instigated in 1869, by early 1871 attitudes amongst farmer guardians were hardening. Pell explained that in the intervening period there were further poor farming years - 'the drought in 1870 was excessive...It had been remarkable in 1868, but this year was hotter and drier...The grass did not furnish sufficient food for live-stock, and we had to lop trees for fodder'.⁵⁰ Whereas arable losses in the 1860s had been offset against buoyant wool or meat sales, by 1870-1 more expensive feeding costs reduced profits from stock. Therefore, around the same time that the Fleming report of December 1871 was issued recommending severe cuts in outrelief expenditure, farmers in the Brixworth Union were already considering taking similar local action to cut poor relief costs. This exposed the true nature of social relations. It demonstrated in a very visible manner that long held notions of communal responsibility were being undermined as the requirements of farming profits took precedence. However, although farmers were more amenable to radical outrelief changes, the three C.O.S zealots on the board of guardians convinced them that harsher actions were justified.

⁴⁸ BLMD, Althorp MS, K383, Nethercote to Spencer, 31.10.1869.

⁴⁹ BLMD, Althorp MS, K157, Roberts to Spencer, 20.3.1875.

⁵⁰ Pell, Reminiscences, p. 233.

2.3: Three C.O.S. zealots.

Albert Pell, *ex-officio* guardian of the poor for Haselbech parish, leased 685 acres of land in the Brixworth Union and jointly owned Wilburton Manor in Cambridgeshire with his two brothers, as well as property in St. George-in-the-East in London.⁵¹ Pell was one of the leading exponents of the crusade against outrelief, as exemplified by the C.O.S., in the late-nineteenth century.⁵² C.O.S. members believed that poverty was the moral fault of each individual and lax outrelief administration encouraged work-shy individuals to become welfare dependants. This type of self-help ideology, as Alan Kidd observes, originally ‘forged the New Poor...and located the prime responsibility for poverty upon those deemed able to help themselves’.⁵³ After 1870 the newly formed C.O.S. worked in close co-operation with central government to promote a crusade against all forms of outrelief funding. The C.O.S. were convinced that outrelief was a dangerous social evil and organised a formidable campaign to promote this viewpoint. Members, like Pell, were encouraged to publish articles on the subject, to raise the issue in the House of Commons and to seek office on any national body set up to debate welfare provision. Thus, Pell served as Chairman of the central committee of Poor Law Conferences from their inception in 1869, until his retirement in the late-1890s.⁵⁴ He was an obvious choice because he was a prominent national figure with good local connections. He was elected to parliament as Conservative MP for south-Leicestershire in

⁵¹ I am indebted to Sir. David Hughes Bart who gave me unlimited access to the Pell archive still in his family’s possession at Wilburton Manor Cambs. Pell rented the land in Northamptonshire from Sir Charles Isham of Lamport estate, who was his wife’s cousin (Elizabeth Barbara Pell, née Halford, daughter of Sir Henry Halford of Wistow Hall Leicestershire). He owned property in the East End because his father, Sir Albert Julian Pell, was a judge in the court review of bankruptcy in London.

⁵² The ethos and history of the C.O.S. is outlined in the following selection of core texts– C.L. Mowat, The Charity Organisation Society, 1869-1913: Its Ideas and Work, (1963); J. Harris, Unemployment and Politics: A Study of English Social Policy, 1886-1914, (1972); P.L.J.H. Gosden, Self-Help, (1973); U.R.Q. Henriques, Before the Welfare State, (1977); J. Fido, ‘The Charity Organisation Society and Social Casework in London, 1869-1900’, in A.P. Donajgradski (ed.), Social Control in Nineteenth Century Britain, (1977), pp. 207-30; F. K. Prochaska, Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth Century England, (1980); A.W. Vincent, ‘The Poor law reports of 1909 and the social theory of the Charity Organisation Society’, Victorian Studies, 27, (1983-4), pp. 343-65; G. Stedman-Jones, Outcast London, (1984); P. Johnson, Saving and Spending: The Working-Class Economy in Britain, 1870-1939, (1985); B. Dennis & S. Skilton, Reform and Intellectual Debate in Victorian England, (1987); E.J. Hobsbawm, The Age of Empire, 1875-1914, (1987); L. H. Lees, Poverty and Pauperism in Nineteenth Century London, (1988); R. Humphreys, Sin, Organized Charity and the Poor Law in Victorian England, (1995).

⁵³ A. Kidd, State, Society and the Poor in Nineteenth Century England, (1999), pp. 60-63.

⁵⁴ A. Digby, ‘The Rural Poor’ in G.E. Mingay (ed.), The Victorian Countryside, Volume 2, (1981), pp. 591-602, explains that the poor law conference movement began in 1868 in the west Midlands. A central conference was established in 1869 and then this led to district conferences in all other regions by 1877.

1868 (he gave up his seat in 1885 for personal financial reasons). At Westminster he was befriended by one of the original Assistant Poor Law Commissioners, Mr Stevens, who helped to frame the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. Stevens was a guardian of the poor at Bradfield in Berkshire who took a keen interest in the spiralling cost of outrelief expenditure. Stevens advised Pell that although he was a co-opted C.O.S. guardian of the poor in St. George-in-the-East Union in London and served as an *ex-officio* guardian in the Brixworth Union in Northamptonshire he needed to study outrelief regulations. Stevens recommended Pell read up on the subject in the House of Commons library by studying 'Walker, (The Original), Dr. Chalmers, Arthur Young and above all the Reports of the great Poor Law Commissioners in the 1830s'.⁵⁵ Pell's research convinced him that poverty was the moral fault of each individual and outrelief exacerbated impoverishment. Pell concluded that,

The administration of the Poor Laws is a matter of police, not sentiment, and should be applied unswervingly in obedience to fixed principles, and not become the haphazard display of sentiment and a counterfeit charity.... [otherwise] the incentives of industry are weakened; the fear of the consequences such as cold, hunger and distress, is diminished or vanishes; and a distinct and pernicious inducement offered to the practice of deceit and fraud, and the total abandonment of conscientious, honest effort for self-maintenance unfolds.⁵⁶

Pell was convinced that outrelief created welfare dependants and it was each guardian's duty to teach the poor that parish relief was not a customary right. He often referred to the writings of Arthur Young, whom he admired, repeating his oft quoted remark that, 'in England the more money is expended, even well, and humanely, the more poor are created, and that the degree of indigence and misery is exactly in proportion to the assistance given them by rates'.⁵⁷ Pell decided to implement a crusade against outrelief in the two poor law unions where he served as a guardian. In St-George-in-the-East in London he had the support of a number of national C.O.S. leaders, such as George Crowder, but in the Brixworth Union he had few supporters. He needed to convince a

⁵⁵ Pell, *Reminiscences*, pp. 236-7.

⁵⁶ B[ritish]L[ibrary], ref. 8277 d.e. 29, A. Pell, 'Out-Relief: A Paper read at a Poor Law Conference as Chairman of the Central Committee held at Crewe Arms Hotel on Tuesday October 14th 1890,' in *Tracts, 1843-1893* (1900), pp. 1-16.

⁵⁷ A. Pell, 'Arthur Young: Agriculturalist, Author and Statesman', *Journal of the Farmers' Club*, (April, 1882), p. 62.

number of leading guardians in the district that his retrenchment beliefs were correct.

In the late-1860s Pell developed a close working relationship with the 5th Earl Spencer, who was Lord Lieutenant of the county and a senior Whig peer, on a number of local charitable bodies.⁵⁸ Pell's failed attempts to abolish medical outrelief 1866 and 1869 convinced him of the need to win the support of a key guardian in the Brixworth Union who would raise the profile of the anti- outrelief debate. To the uninitiated it might seem rather curious that a Conservative M.P., like Pell and a senior Whig peer, such as Spencer, should become close poor law allies, but despite their different political outlook their views on outrelief were very similar. The C.O.S. historian Thomas MacKay described Pell's poor law convictions as follows;

As I have already said, upon all Poor Law matters he was a Whig of the highest economic orthodoxy, going rather beyond the famous Poor Law Commission Report of 1834, in his aversion to outdoor relief, and scouting [sic] all proposals for Old Age Pensions.⁵⁹

Once Pell came into the district in the 1860s Spencer started to take a closer interest in his rateable expenditure. The Union Chargeability Act of 1865 seems to have changed his paternalistic instinct, as his private pension scheme ideas attest, but this was discarded in favour of cuts in outrelief spending by early 1872. The chief problem with identifying Spencer's motivations and the timing of his conversion to the anti-outrelief cause is that he was a notoriously secretive man who guarded his privacy jealously. All his correspondents were asked to comply with a confidentiality agreement before he would discuss even the most mundane matters on paper. Two Irish poor law historians describe him as follows -

Spencer's public personality cast him as an extremely able man who lacked a public face. In the circumstances his failure to find a biographer was not particularly remarkable. He hid the private side of his character so successfully even his colleagues were led to wonder whether it existed. No one ever got to know Spencer well.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ BLMD, Althorp MS, K372, Pell to Spencer, 2.1.1861, 21.1.1861, 19.2.1861.

⁵⁹ MacKay in Pell, Reminiscences, p. xiv.

⁶⁰ A.B.Cooke and J.R.Vincent, 'Lord Spencer on the Phoenix Park Murders', Irish Historical Studies, 18, (1973), p. 585.

Edmund Gosse, librarian of the House of Lords in 1904, met Spencer and recorded that he was 'very intimidating...although I admire him intensely...he is certainly the most alarming figure I have yet encountered here'.⁶¹ Spencer personified the sort of Whig who was still attached to the Liberal party in 1870, in that he supported the rights of primogeniture inheritance, religious freedom and retrenchment. It is true that he has never attracted a biographer, but despite his best efforts to hide his private self he left a remarkable record of his convictions in his intimate family correspondence and amongst letters with his inner circle of fellow aristocrats. He was also frank with his trusted land agents. Spencer was an intensely shy man whose brusque manner was often the result of repeated bouts of ill health (due to severe eczema and a bad lung condition) rather than malice, but he was also a formidable opponent when roused. He has recently been described as a 'man of spotless character in public life', but given 'his hands-on style of management' such generalisations need to be balanced with a careful appraisal of his role in local government, especially during the crusade decades.⁶²

Spencer always believed in the strict application of the workhouse test but, like most Whig grandees, he preferred to delegate tedious poor relief management to his fellow guardians of the poor in the High-farming era.⁶³ However, during his first tenure as Lord Lieutenant of Ireland (1868-1874) he began to take a closer interest in the subject of poor relief management because one of his duties was to oversee a review of Irish outrelief regulations.⁶⁴ Spencer became convinced that outrelief accentuated pauperism and that he ought to support Pell's crusade in the Brixworth Union. It was in his political interests to do so, since Gladstone's first Liberal government (1868-1874) was promoting an outrelief retrenchment policy at the newly created Local Government Board to stave off the threat of 'advanced' Liberalism's extensive welfare reform programme.⁶⁵ Spencer believed

⁶¹ House of Lords, MS Gosse, L32, Gosse Diary, 14.3.1904.

⁶² Spencer, Spencer Family, pp. 263, 280.

⁶³ J.P.D. Gordon (ed.), The Red Earl: The Papers of the 5th Earl Spencer, 1835-1910, Volume 1, (1981), pp.1-20 outlines Spencer's C.O.S. ethos.

⁶⁴ BL, ref. C.T. 274 (6), Sir Alfred Power, A Paper on Out-door Relief in Ireland Prepared at Earl Spencer's Request, (1875), summarises review.

⁶⁵ A. Sykes, The Rise and Fall of British Liberalism, 1776-1988, (1997), pp. 75-87, outlines the first Liberal government's poor relief retrenchment priorities.

that central government should work with the C.O.S. on a local basis to reduce outrelief expenditure and he took a much closer interest in poor law matters. Even though Spencer was in Ireland until the Liberal defeat in 1874, his land agent acted on his behalf on the board of guardians. Instead of granting generous poor relief the agent began to promote 'Smilesian attitudes about individual motivation', such as hard work and thrift.⁶⁶ Exponents of the crusade against outrelief believed the poor law system ought to act as a moral corrective by teaching the poor that parish funding was 'not just one amongst a number of accumulated means of support'.⁶⁷ Pell now had a key supporter, a figure of national and local standing, who would use his influence both at the centre and the periphery to promote the C.O.S. ethos. However, Pell also needed to win the support of a local guardian who attended poor law board meetings regularly when he and Spencer were absent at Westminster. That guardian needed to be a conscientious administrator and skilled bureaucrat capable of out-witting opponents who would try to ignore poor law technicalities. Pell found that his local rector, Rev. William Bury, was the ideal candidate.

Rev. William Bury, rector and guardian of the poor for Haselbech parish in the Brixworth Union, was not Pell's natural ally. He believed in generous outrelief provision in the early 1860s and had considerable sympathy for the labouring poor. Pell was determined to convert Bury to his retrenchment cause. In 1870 he persuaded Bury to visit every pauper on their local parish overseer's lists and apply the workhouse test, hoping this would show that the labouring poor abused the poor law system. They found that many pauper families had meagre savings or family relatives who could support them. Bury argued that it was a clergyman's 'duty to protect these unfortunates, and that any confidences' about other sources of funding 'should not be betrayed' to the relieving officer.⁶⁸ Pell took him on a tour of the homes of elderly paupers in the neighbourhood and the appalling conditions that many lived in convinced Bury that outrelief was accentuating their pauperism. They visited one bed-ridden female pauper who lived 'in a miserable hut of only one

⁶⁶ Humphreys, *Sin*, p.24.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p.47.

⁶⁸ Pell, *Reminiscences*, pp. 238-9.

room, the wall of which was made of cobble or red earth'. She slept in a recess that had been cut out of the wall.⁶⁹ She was a lace-maker who had very poor eyesight, doing intricate work in a poorly lit cottage. Pell argued that as 'the pay, supplemented by the Poor Law dole, was starvation pay' she should be forced to enter the workhouse. Pell lectured Bury that clergymen 'aggravated the evil and assisted in the manufacture of pauperism'. A clergyman was in a position to 'guide and govern' his parishioners. Bury became a C.O.S. convert and a zealous exponent of the anti-outrelief cause. He defended his conversion on the basis that although

a reform so radical...cannot have been effected without a certain amount of suffering often endured in silence, escaping the notice of the most careful investigation and difficult to estimate as it is to prevent. Yet, as the same time it should be remembered that such consequences, however, much to be deplored, are really due not to the reform itself, but to the neglect in former years which rendered such reform necessary.⁷⁰

It is somewhat ironic that Bury took this viewpoint since outrelief abuses were the result of his administrative practices before 1870, but he was now prepared to ignore his former views and sympathy for the elderly poor. Bury, like Pell, published numerous papers outlining the reasons for his poor relief conversion. He argued that 'exceptional cases of hardship, can, ought to be, and are met by individual charity', which was a much more discriminating way of relieving the poor.⁷¹ This prevented guardians acting impulsively because 'kindness to an individual...often means cruelty to a class'. Charity was not a legal, civil or customary right. Its judicious management encouraged thrift and independence. Instead of giving generous outrelief allowances, which would be 'injurious', charity could be 'safely and widely exercised'. Bury was convinced that charity, not outrelief funding, was the only appropriate poverty safety net in society. He explained that 'the **desire** to do good is easy enough, but to **do** good was the hardest thing' because it meant taking unpopular decisions [emphasis in original]. Pell, he argued, taught him to act in a more discriminating

⁶⁹ Ibid., pp.240-1.

⁷⁰ *BPP, Third Annual Report Local Government Board*, (1873), Appendix B, W Bury, 'Report on outdoor pauperism in the Brixworth Union', pp.119-125.

⁷¹ W. Bury, 'Charity and the Poor Law,' *Poor Law Conference Report*, (1876), p.44; W. Bury, 'Poor Law Progress and Reform', *Poor Law Conference Report*, (1889), p. 319.

objective manner.

By 1871 these three C.O.S. exponents had decided to try to implement a crusade against outrelief in the Brixworth Union. Pell and Bury were primarily motivated by ideology, whereas Spencer believed in C.O.S. rhetoric but also supported the anti-outrelief cause because it was politically expedient to do so, both in the context of Liberal party politics and for personal economic reasons. At first they faced great opposition on the board of guardians. However, farmers changed allegiance in late-1871 because of the growth of agricultural trade unionism in the district. They used Pell's crusade to take a pre-emptive strike against union combination.

2.4: Agricultural trade unionism.

The timing and the growth of agricultural trade unionism in south-eastern England varied considerably.⁷² Pamela Horn's studies of Midlands counties suggest that agricultural trade unionism in Northamptonshire began around mid-1872.⁷³ By 1874 there were a number of small branches in the Brixworth Union, allied to the Market Harborough regional office of Joseph Arch's National

⁷² There is a large literature on agricultural trade unionism. A selection of major texts post-1960 are quoted here – J.P.D. Dunbabin, 'The "Revolt of the Field": the Agricultural Labourers' Movement in the 1870s', Past and Present, 26, (1963), pp. 68-97; J.D. Chambers and G.E. Mingay, The Agricultural Revolution, 1750-1990, (1966); E.L. Jones & G.E. Mingay (eds.), Land, Labour and Population in the Industrial Revolution, (1967); J.P.D. Dunbabin, 'The incidence and organisation of the Agricultural Trades Unionism in the 1870s', Agricultural History Review, 16, (1968), pp. 114-41; P.L.R. Horn, Joseph Arch (1826-1919) the Farm Workers' Leader, (1971); A. Everitt, The Pattern of Rural Dissent: The Nineteenth Century, (1972); R. Arnold, 'The "Revolt" in the Field in Kent, 1872-1879', Past and Present, 64, (August, 1974), pp. 71-95; J. Maynard (ed.), A Hundred Years of Farmworkers' Struggle, (1974); J.P.D. Dunbabin (ed.), Rural Discontent in Nineteenth Century Britain, (1974); P.L.R. Horn, Labouring Life in the Victorian Countryside, (1976); G.E. Mingay, The Gentry: The Rise and Fall of a Ruling Class, (1976); G.E. Mingay (ed.), Rural Life in Victorian England, 2 vols., (1977); H. Newby, The Deferential Worker, (1979); H. Newby, Green and Pleasant Land? Social Change in Rural England, (1979); D. R. Mills, Lord and Peasant in Nineteenth Century Britain, (1980); N. Scotland, Methodism and the Revolt of the Field – A Study of the Methodist contribution to agricultural trade unionism in East Anglia, 1872-96, (1981); D. H. Morgan, Harvesters and Harvesting, 1840-1900: A Study of Rural Proletariat, (1982); Howkins, Poor, (1985); Snell, Annals, (1988); A. Armstrong, Farmworkers: social and economic history, 1770-1980, (1988); Archer, "Flash", (1990); Brown, Meagre Harvest, (1990); Howkins, Reshaping, (1991); N. Scotland, Agricultural Trade Unionism in Gloucestershire, 1872 - 1950, (1991); M.L. Bush (ed.), Social Order and Social Classes since 1500: Studies in Social Stratification, (1992); N. Scotland, 'The National Agricultural Labourers' Union and the demand for the stake in the soil, 1872-1896', in E.F. Bagini (ed.), Citizenship and Community: Radicals and Collective Identities in the British Isles, 1865-1931, (1996), pp. 151-67; N. Harte & R. Quinault (eds.), Land and Society in Britain, 1700-1914. Essays in Honour of F.L.M. Thompson, (1996); B. Scarth, 'We'll all be union men'. The Story of Joseph Arch and his Union, (1998).

⁷³ P.L.R. Horn, 'Nineteenth Century Naseby Farm Workers', Northamptonshire Past and Present, 4, (1968-9), 3, pp. 167-73; P.L.R. Horn, 'Northamptonshire Agricultural Labourers and the Quest for Allotments', Northamptonshire Past and Present, 4, (1971-2), 6, pp. 371-7.

Agricultural Labourers' Union (NALU). For example, two hundred and twenty labourers from the village of Naseby met in 1874 to advance union combination and to celebrate the annual commemoration of Cromwell's defeat of Charles I in their parish.⁷⁴ However, the Spencer archive indicates that agricultural trade unionism began to develop in the Brixworth Union a little earlier than Horn's studies suggest, around March-April 1872. This confirms J. P. D. Dunbabin's findings that early union combination in 1871 mushroomed in 1872 in many corn-growing regions in south-eastern counties.⁷⁵ Labourers felt very aggrieved about their low wage levels of around 12s. per week, at a time when farmers were still making substantial profits, despite the poorer harvests of 1867-8 and 1870-1. They wanted an equitable share of the profits of their labour, a 'stake in the soil'. This movement grew at the end of the High-farming era of prosperity at a time when labourers believed farmers could afford to pay them higher wages.⁷⁶ The advent of union combination made a significant impact in the Brixworth Union because many farmers believed it undermined the traditional social order and challenged their authority.

In late-March 1872 a fellow Liberal squire, magistrate and guardian of the poor for Moulton parish, H.O. Nethercote, wrote to Spencer in Ireland that union combination was underway in the Brixworth Union. He noted that, 'the weather is winterly to a degree and the contemplated Labourers' strikes will probably be deferred to a more *convenient season*...how the farmers are to meet increasing wages and decreasing prices I do not see'[sic].⁷⁷ At the same time Spencer's land agent reported that in early April some labourers in the area had combined into small local unions – 'The Labourers are giving much trouble and forming Unions. Our own people have hitherto behaved well but I fear will get contaminated'.⁷⁸ These comments reveal that social relations in the district were strained by the spring of 1872 because of economic pressures. The issue of medical outrelief seems to have exacerbated farmer-labourer tensions, which were probably growing in

⁷⁴ Ibid., pp. 167-8.

⁷⁵ Dunbabin, "Revolt", pp. 68-97.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p 68.

⁷⁷ NRO, Althorp MS, K383, Nethercote to Spencer, 29.3.1872.

⁷⁸ NRO, Spencer MS, Sox 571, Beasley to Spencer, 8 4. 1872.

force throughout the High-farming period. By 1870 the labouring poor had started to experience cuts in both customary income supplements, such as the Althorp estate pensions, and in medical outrelief provision. Therefore, when Pell, with the support of a majority of farmer guardians, began to review medical outrelief for a second time following the poor harvest of 1870-1, the labouring poor reacted. Traditional poor relief claimants feared that guardians would act in a harsh manner because their decision to implement the review coincided with the issue of the Fleming report recommending severe cuts in outrelief on a broad front (Graph 2.2).

Many traditional medical outrelief claimants in the Brixworth Union seem to have judged that the only way to improve the material condition of their lives was to unite to fight for substantial wage increases to replace income supplements. If they did not do this they would have to migrate out of the area to get secure work or enter the workhouse during periods of underemployment. It is perhaps unsurprising that the agricultural trade union movement found such a willing audience in the Brixworth Union.⁷⁹ Spencer's land agent noted that the labourers' main complaint was that farmers expected them to put aside their differences during harvest, but in autumn farmers refused to listen to their legitimate wage demands.⁸⁰ Tenant farmers argued that labour rates were set by market conditions and this was why they introduced piecework wages, which paid a worker for their productivity. The land agent noted that parlous labouring families resented this seasonal wage pattern, which accentuated their insecurity. Local newspapers sided with the labourers' cause - 'Facts', as an editorial in the Northampton Radical warned, 'make short work of bombastic rhetoric, about happy and contented labourers'.⁸¹

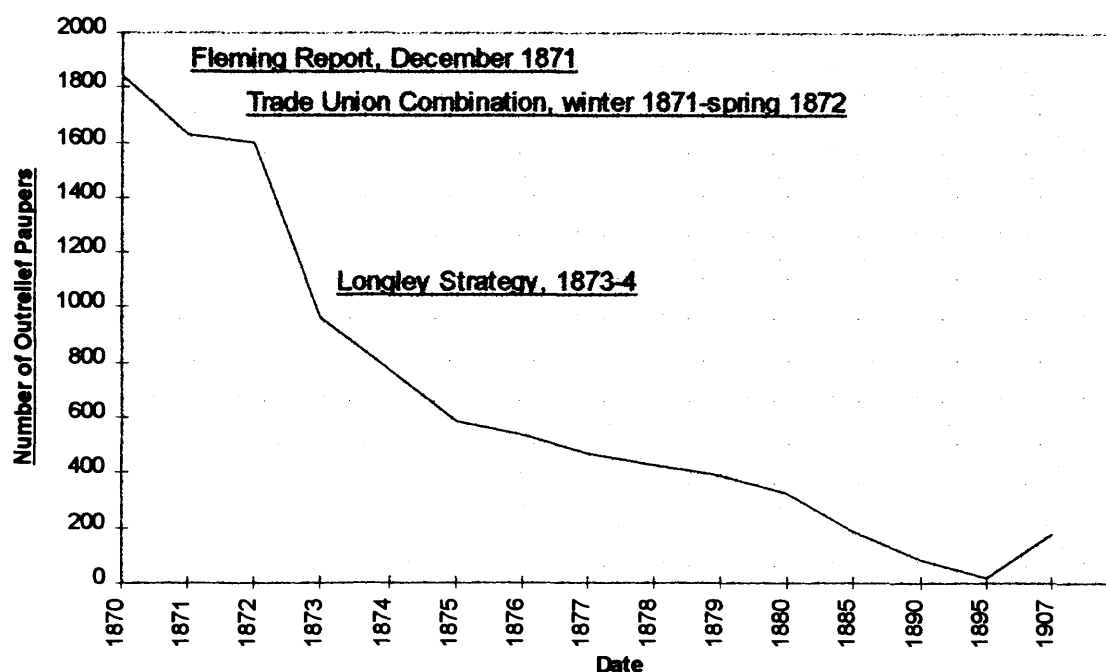
One of the first local unions to be formed on the Althorp estate was the 'Brington, Harlestone, Brampton and Whilton' branch, comprising 'over 200 members' in early 1872. There is no evidence that this branch was affiliated at this stage to the National Agricultural Labourers' Union (NALU) in Warwickshire, but a hand-written copy of a farm labourers' catechism penned by

⁷⁹ NRO, Spencer MS, Sox 571, Beasley to Boyle, 7.5.1872.

⁸⁰ NRO, Spencer MS, Sox 571, Beasley to Spencer, 1.4. 1873.

⁸¹ Northampton Radical, 11.11.1874.

**Graph 2.2: Number of Outrelief Claimants in the Brixworth Union
Northamptonshire, 1870-1907.**



Sources: NRO, Spencer MS, Sox 393, Brixworth Union Parochial Lists for the Half-Year Ending Lady Day, Statistics of Pauperism ; NRO, PL 2/15, Brixworth Union guardian minute books.

the Chairman of the North Essex district of the NALU has survived in the Spencer papers.⁸² It suggests that the NALU sent recruitment officers into the area in the spring of 1872 and found a ready audience. Spencer's land agent kept a copy of the national union's recruitment documentation at that time and he also monitored the growing tensions between farmers and labourers closely. The land agent informed Spencer that although a meeting had been convened between the two sides in late-March 1872 it had not been a resounding success, even though it stopped labourers going on strike *en masse* immediately. He anticipated further tensions in the summer of 1872 when it was

⁸² NRO, Spencer MS, Sox 393, 'The Farm Labourers' Catechism – prepared for special use of those agricultural labourers who are not in a Union by the Chairman of the North Essex District of the National Agricultural Labourers' Union, price one penny', (undated), but found in Beasley's land agent files for the Spring of 1872.

more prudent from the labourers' viewpoint to go on strike.

Your Lordships [sic] Tenants have all hired a sufficient number of men to get the Harvest and plenty more are to be had. They are giving higher wages and there have been some strikes but could not discover if the difficulty had been greater in this neighbourhood than elsewhere. I quite believe that if Farmers and labourers are left to make their own arrangements, the difficulty will soon subside. The labourers will get higher wages, which the farmers are able and willing to pay. If however busy bodies and men who want to make political capital out of anything, will unite here much mischief will be done.⁸³

Like the example quoted here, correspondence around this time between Spencer and his land agent reveals three important factors. First, one of the problems labourers faced was underemployment even during harvest, which decreased wage levels. Spencer's agent noted further on in the letter quoted above that some farmers were increasing wages during harvest and then using piecework rates to make cuts in real terms by autumn, which was deeply resented. Second, even though farmers were concerned about lower profit margins most conceded privately that higher wage demands were justified and they could afford to pay them. Third, farmers feared the growth of the NALU in the area and were determined to oppose union combination. They would not tolerate an intermediary in the district. Farmers were convinced that unionisation was encouraging labourers to make excessive demands and if they increased wages they would be setting a dangerous precedent.

The Brington union did not strike in the summer of 1872, but tried instead to negotiate a wage increase. When that was introduced temporarily during harvest and subsequently withdrawn, they sent a petition to Spencer personally in the following March 1873.⁸⁴ They asked him for 'an advance of wages of 2/- [s.] per week, owing to the price of bread and all other commodities' [sic]. Farmers in the area had offered a permanent 'extra 1/- [s.] per week' but the labourers rejected their offer because they wanted 'a fair days pay, for a fair days work' [sic]. They explained that if they could not earn a living wage of 16s. per week they would not be able to raise their families 'respectfully', that is it would be impossible to remain outside the workhouse without wage

⁸³ NRO, *Spencer MS*, Sox 571, Beasley to Spencer, 8.4.1872.

⁸⁴ NRO, *Spencer MS*, Sox 393, 'Brington, Harlestone, Brompton and Whilton Agricultural Labourer's Union branch petition to 5th Earl Spencer', 27.Mar.1873; Horn, 'Nineteenth', p.167.

increases to replace medical outrelief and charitable contributions. If guardians withdrew further outrelief provision then farmers would have to introduce a commensurate rise in wages, otherwise more labouring families would be impoverished. The petitioners explained that labourers could 'leave their employ to seek work at a better market' in town but that would have meant giving up their homes in tied estate cottages too, which families could not afford to do. Many young men were willing to migrate to urban locations, but married labourers with young families and older labourers refused to relocate, as it would be a very costly upheaval.

Eight Althorp estate workers who lived in tied cottages set up the Brington union. They risked losing their homes and jobs to fight for a much-needed wage increase. Spencer's land agent's records reveal that the union committee members earned an average wage of 12s. per week.⁸⁵ The highest paid man was a blacksmith aged 41, named John Manning, who earned 16s. per week. He had only a wife and one daughter to support. However he was an artisan/tradesman who tended to be paid on piecework rates so by the early 1870s his wages probably fluctuated considerably. One of the lowest paid men was an elderly labourer aged 74, called John Anderson, who earned just 10s. per week. He lived with his middle-aged son (also a common day labourer on the Althorp estate), his daughter-in-law and their five children all aged under nine. A labourer who lived in Pitsford village in the early 1870s recalled that 12s. per week was the average wage in most villages in the Brixworth Union, less than early 1860s wage levels, and most labouring families could barely make ends meet.⁸⁶ It seems likely that many agricultural workers who hoped to avoid compulsory workhouse admittance felt they had no option but to combine into unions in this period to fight for wage increases.

The Brington petitioners asked Spencer for the use of a schoolroom on his estate for their union meetings. Spencer reacted angrily telling his land agent to 'reply to the memorialists that I am unable to alter my position, decision as to the school-room' [sic]. He felt that 'it would be

⁸⁵ NRO, Spencer MS, Brington ledgers, (1870-1).

⁸⁶ T.G. Tucker, 'Memories of Pitsford One Hundred Years Ago', Northamptonshire Past and Present, 1, (1978), 4, p.51.

inconvenient to have the school-room used for meetings of various grouches' [sic].⁸⁷ Spencer, like his tenant farmers, believed unionisation upset the traditional social order and might have far-reaching repercussions. Therefore, he stressed the apolitical nature of his decision, hoping this would dispel any class tensions, but his tenant farmers took the opposite view. Spencer's land agent revealed that they decided to take pre-emptive action against the NALU by changing allegiance on the Brixworth Union board of guardians. They supported a full-scale crusade against outrelief, anticipating the Longley strategy (1874), in order to penalise labourers.

The Labourers have no doubt a right to form Unions, but they are doing an immense amount of mischief, and causing great disorganisation. The Farmers in several parishes have met and resolved not to increase wages at the dictation of any union. I regret this...I think it is best for employers to be passive...The farmers would be willing to meet the Labourers upon the question, but they will not meet the Union agents. It is intolerable that they should dictate terms...and that all men, skilled and unskilled, old and young, able or partly disabled, should have the same wages, is a condition to which I am sure the Farmers will never submit...One of the effects of the Unions is that many of the members have left off going to Church, and that the Poor Law Guardians have become very stringent, I think too stringent in administration of relief...the farmers have left off subscribing to clothing and Sick Clubs, to Coal Clubs, etc. All this is creating bad feeling.⁸⁸

Farmers retaliated against the growth of the NALU in the Brixworth Union in three significant ways. First, they refused to negotiate with union agents and this refusal meant that wage grievances were not resolved quickly, accentuating local tensions. This reaction was common, as Dunbabin observes, because 'there was an element of double-think in the farmers' response to unionism'.⁸⁹ They would negotiate with labourers but not intermediaries, stressing the latter were outside agitators. Farmers believed they were entitled to act defensively because they, not union agents, were labourers' true friends. Unsurprisingly, the labourers took the opposite view. Second, customary charitable payments, which were indispensable parts of labouring families' subsistence calculations, were being withheld to penalise labourers. Dunbabin notes that 'it was common to

⁸⁷ NRO, Spencer MS, Sox 393, Spencer's reply to the 'Brington petition', 3.4.1873 - the reply was written across the top of the petition in a memo. This was Spencer's characteristic means of instruction to his private secretary on how to deal with correspondence.

⁸⁸ NRO, Spencer MS, Sox 571, Beasley to Spencer, 1.4.1873. Quoted as in original.

⁸⁹ Dunbabin, "Revolt", p.87.

threaten to abandon paternalism for a rigid adherence to the dictates of economics'.⁹⁰ Most farmers in the Brixworth Union decided to take very harsh retaliatory action, regardless of the social cost. Third, farmers changed allegiance on the poor law union board and supported a crusade against outrelief. Although this was a short-sighted response, they were determined to make a pre-emptive strike against the NALU.

Regional studies, such as those by Arthur Brown and Pamela Horn, have shown that many farmer guardians reacted in this manner. For example, similar poor relief discrimination was so rife in Oxfordshire that boards of guardians in the Oxford area passed a motion at their annual conference in 1873 deploring this type of retaliatory behaviour.⁹¹ In Essex boards of guardians acted like farmer guardians in the Brixworth Union, refusing all outrelief applications until the NALU left the area and local branches were disbanded. One NALU Essex leader explained that this retaliatory poor law policy was an effective weapon - 'there lingers in their minds the cursed fear that they might be punished if they join'.⁹² However, this was a rather dangerous strategy too. On the one hand this parsimonious action demonstrated in a powerful manner the power of farmers, on the other hand it also accentuated the pace of unionisation. Spencer's land agent noted that Church of England congregation numbers declined because non-attendance was an effective way of registering protest. He also observed that labourers refused to compromise their demands when farmers acted harshly. It was probably unrealistic to demand one wage rate for every type of labourer regardless of their productivity rate, but the problem with farmers' stubborn attitude was that it made labourers' intransigence seem reasonable. The growing wage disputes made social relations in the Brixworth Union very tense by 1872/3. In Ravensthorpe parish, on the Holdenby estate owned by Spencer's brother-in-law, farmers even 'met and bound themselves in a £50

⁹⁰ Ibid., p.81.

⁹¹ Horn, 'Agricultural labourers' quotes *Labourers' Union Chronicle* 8.1.1873 reports on discrimination at Oxford, p. 199 footnote 3 ; *Royal Leamington Chronicle* 13.6.1874 cites similar cases; J. Dunlop, *The Farm Labourer*, (1913), p. 154, recounts discrimination in Warwickshire; Brown *Meagre*, pp. 86-87, details Essex cases.

⁹² Brown, *Meagre*, p.86.

penalty not to employ any Union man'.⁹³ Paradoxically, that sort of action created deep resentment and made labourers more determined to join the NALU.

The growth of unionisation in the Brixworth Union was both a problem and an opportunity for guardians who wanted to introduce a crusade against outrelief. Farmers feared that unionism threatened their oligarchy and so their action was extreme. Spencer worried this would have far-reaching repercussions, but Pell was delighted by this turn of events. Suddenly, he had won the support of disgruntled tenant farmers who, with around two-thirds of the available seats, held the largest block vote on the Brixworth Union board of guardians.⁹⁴ He could now forge ahead with his retrenchment experiment because farmers were pragmatists not ideologues and Pell knew how to inflame their worst NALU fears. If he could retain that support until his new anti-outrelief policy was in place it would be very difficult to overturn the revised regulations in the future. Pell had the opportunity to consolidate his position and acted decisively.

Pell gave notice at a Brixworth Union board meeting on 2nd January 1873 that he intended 'to ask for a Committee of the Guardians to consider the mode of administration of Out-door relief in this and other Unions'.⁹⁵ He extended his enquiries across the whole of the district. A committee was set up chaired by Pell and Bury and three large farmers in the area. They visited every pauper on the relieving officers' outdoor lists to test whether they should be entitled to parish funding. Two hundred and forty one outrelief cases were struck off the lists immediately.⁹⁶ This delighted central government because at the end of 1872 outrelief claimants in the Brixworth Union numbered 1062 out of a total population of just under 14, 000, at a cost of £5,899 (Graph 2.2).⁹⁷ The Poor Law inspector for the district drew up a series of maps of each parish and coloured them according to the scales of pauperism in each district. One senior Poor Law inspector, Courtney Boyle (Spencer's

⁹³ Northampton Guardian, 25.Nov.1876 Arch recalled in a speech to labourers at Ravensthorpe how farmers had made a £50 pact in 1872/3.

⁹⁴ Unfortunately voting patterns were not recorded in the guardian minute books, so it is impossible to analyse political allegiances accurately in this period.

⁹⁵ NRO, P/L 2/14, Brixworth Union guardians minute book, entry 20.1.1873.

⁹⁶ BPP, 'Outdoor', Bury, p.125.

⁹⁷ NRO, Spencer MS, Sox 393, 1873, 'Outdoor relief committee report of the Brixworth Union', (1874), [Spencer's copy]; Pell, Reminiscences, p. 357.

former private secretary), told Spencer that outrelief levels were highest in his Althorp estate parishes and his villages had been marked in 'black'. Boyle informed Spencer that, 'Brington is the highest of all, an inevitable result of where there is charity...the less the poor depend on relief the more valuable they are to the nation; Ergo: do all one can to diminish out relief' [sic].⁹⁸

Pell's committee of guardians also compiled a report, published in early 1874, which confirmed the Local Government Board's findings. The average ratio for outdoor to indoor paupers in England and Wales was 5:1 at a cost of 6s. 11d. per head. In the Brixworth Union that ratio was much higher, 17:1 at a cost of 12s. 1¹/₂d. per head. Pell claimed that in 'no other union is the disproportion so great'.⁹⁹ He recommended that guardians adopt central government anti-outrelief recommendations, as outlined in the recently published Longley Report (1874), which stated that outrelief should be totally abolished. Guardians published an anti-outrelief charter, which was placed in the Brixworth Union workhouse boardroom and on local church doors. The guidelines aimed to deter the poor, even the 'deserving' poor, from applying for outrelief. If the elderly, infirm, disabled and widowed wanted to avoid the workhouse they had to resort to their kinship and friendship networks. Medical outrelief was also abolished and medical extras were only given to workhouse inmates or members of sick clubs. In practice most paupers gave up applying for medical aid which had a profound impact locally. Brixworth Union expenditure on 'fevers and epidemics' rose in 1873-4. Reformers would not concede that this was related to the sudden withdrawal of medical relief but there must have been a correlation between changes in funding and increased illness.¹⁰⁰ Paradoxically, the withdrawal of medical relief increased poor relief expenditure in other directions. Paupers were ill for longer and were admitted to the workhouse infirmary, increasing indoor relief bills, which were more costly. In practice, as Karel Williams

⁹⁸ Regrettably despite extensive research these maps have not survived in government records. Boyle corresponded regularly with Spencer poor law matters and the problems of inspection - BLMD, Althorp MS, K398, Boyle to Spencer e.g. 1.May.1873, 20.Jun.1873, 2.Jul.1873, 21.Aug.1873, 28.Nov.1873.

⁹⁹ Pell, Reminiscences, p.291.

¹⁰⁰ BPP, 2nd Annual Report of the Local Government Board, XXIX, (1872-3), Bury, Appendix 32, c.748, p.74.

aptly explains, the new regulations were a form of ‘brutal dispauperisation.’¹⁰¹ They allowed guardians to purge outrelief recipients from their lists ruthlessly, whatever the social cost. It seemed that guardians were creating a ‘world without welfare’ outside the workhouse.¹⁰² However, after initial reductions had been achieved some guardians began to advocate a moderate policy.

2.5: Two suspicious workhouse deaths.

Once the outdoor relief crusade was underway in the Brixworth Union many guardians felt uneasy about making further reductions. Membership of the NALU had begun to level off and farmers realised that union combination was not as great a threat as they first feared. They also calculated that abolishing outrelief was damaging the local economy by forcing the labouring poor to migrate, creating labour shortages during harvest. The chaplain of the Brixworth Union workhouse became a spokesman for guardians who wanted to revert to a more moderate outrelief policy. He wrote to Spencer outlining his fellow guardians concerns over the period 1870 to 1874. He stated that whilst a majority of guardians were in favour of the ‘application of the House test in proved cases of improvidence or of notorious bad conduct’, most did not believe that ‘the aged or Infirm Labourer, & of his widow [sic]’ should be treated like able-bodied applicants. He argued that the law made provision for elderly paupers because legislators recognised that they had not had an opportunity to earn enough money to save for their old age:

at least for the closing generation, there has been an implied contract upon which the agricultural labourer has given his life’s work...And, at the end of their days for the employer, who has received his consideration to the full, to withhold from the poor man his equivalent, appears to me a most oppressive, if not actually dishonest course. In addition to this, the Workhouse is not and cannot be made, a substitute home for the declining years of the Labourers and their widows, who have a right to be considered, and in many cases are, to the full as respectable as the classes above them...The widow of the respectable cottager should not be compelled to eat, live, sleep and die in the same room of society, unreformed.¹⁰³

The chaplain stated that although he met ‘some of the roughest specimens’ of the agricultural

¹⁰¹ K. Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty*, p.107.

¹⁰² D. Thomson, *World Without Welfare: New Zealand’s Colonial Experiment*, (1998). This is Thomson’s phrase.

¹⁰³ BLMD, *Althorp MS*, K157, Roberts to Spencer, 20.3.1875. Quoted with original spelling and emphasis.

labouring class in the course of his poor law duties, he also encountered 'men and women whose honesty of principle and frugality of life and deep piety of character' filled him with 'admiration'. He insisted that 'the more intelligent Guardians know perfectly well' that most could not avoid the workhouse and a retrenchment policy accentuated impoverishment. Many farmer guardians had started to recognise that the sudden withdrawal of outrelief had created a 'bitterness among the suffering class which may change them into dangerous classes'. The farmers' harsh poor law actions were encouraging, rather than discouraging, working people to combine into unions. Regrettably no record of Spencer's reply has survived but the guardians' minute books indicate that a number of farmer guardians expressed concern about the severity of the anti-outrelief policy.¹⁰⁴ They may have been influenced by the bad publicity they were receiving in local newspapers. One outspoken letter gives a flavour of the criticism.

Sir- I was glad to see the account of the Brixworth Board of Guardians in your paper on Saturday last and feel quite certain the ratepayers of the Union cannot wish the poor to be oppressed in the way they are now. The letter contained several cases of oppression, but from what one hears and knows, it is not a tenth of a tithe of hard cases. Every one must regret to see one class set against another but what the guardians are now doing so most effects [sic]. Why could their alterations not be made in the same way as other Unions?...One thing is quite certain ratepayers should be very careful whom they entrust to administer the rates; some Guardians know how to deal with the poor justly and firmly; whilst others don't care how the poor suffer so long as they can save their pockets...I remain
– PAUPER on 1s. 6d. and LOAF.¹⁰⁵

As this newspaper sometimes had a Liberal bias, such criticisms might be expected and yet it was Gladstone's Liberal government that was promoting the anti-outrelief policy. The peculiar brand of radicalism in Northamptonshire seems to have regarded the outrelief retrenchment initiative as unacceptable.¹⁰⁶ An editorial in the same issue noted wryly that 'Guardians are going Pell-mell for economy' and it hoped that moderates would win the day. Unfortunately, the timing of this criticism coincided with a workhouse scandal, which seems to have persuaded moderate guardians

¹⁰⁴ NRO, PL2/15, Brixworth Union guardians' minute books, the issue was raised throughout 1875.

¹⁰⁵ *Northampton Mercury*, 10.5.1873. Quoted as in original.

¹⁰⁶ J. Howarth, 'The Liberal Revival in Northamptonshire; A Case-Study in Late-Nineteenth Century Elections', *Historical Journal*, 12, (1969), pp. 78-118, discuss Whig, Gladstonian, 'advanced' Liberalism and Braudlaugh.

to close ranks and continue to support Pell's policy changes.

In December 1874 local newspapers reported that two elderly paupers died in the workhouse under suspicious circumstances.¹⁰⁷ It was rumoured that the two men died from medical neglect. This created a furore in the district because the paupers had been forced to accept indoor relief after being struck off outrelief registers in 1873. Only the bare facts of the deaths were recorded in guardian minute books. However as the deaths were a result of medical negligence, central government demanded a full report, which has survived.¹⁰⁸ It reveals that local rumours were true. The Brixworth Union surgeon was guilty of duplicity. The facts of the case are as follows.

In the winter of 1874 two elderly male paupers, aged 60 and 78, were admitted to the workhouse. One late December Sunday evening the two men fell ill and the master of the workhouse asked the Brixworth Union surgeon to visit. The doctor examined the patients that evening and injected them with '8 minimums [milligrams] of morphine' each. On Monday morning at 7.00am a workhouse nurse checked both patients and reported that they were 'fast asleep'. The master asked her to keep checking the patients at two hourly intervals. At 9.00am she reported that the patients were 'thought queer'. The master sent for the doctor immediately. Meanwhile he tried to revive the patients with cold water at around 10 am, but failed, as they were unconscious. There were no further attempts to waken the patients. The doctor did not return to the workhouse until 5.30pm on Monday after completing his rounds. He found that one patient had already died at 5 pm and the other had sunk into a deep coma, dying at 7 pm.

At a subsequent inquest the local coroner cross-examined the union doctor about the chain of events and his treatment.¹⁰⁹ He asked him why he did not attend the patients immediately. The doctor explained that he called at the union workhouse at 2pm on Monday but no one answered the

¹⁰⁷ The case was given widespread coverage and reported verbatim throughout December 1874 in the Northampton Herald, Northampton Mercury, and Northampton Guardian, the Conservative, Liberal and 'advanced' Liberal local newspapers respectively.

¹⁰⁸ PRO, MH 12/8700, dated 'Dec. 1874', letter from 'RJP' marked 'private' to LGB; internal memos discussing facts of the case dated 4.12.1874 and decision 'to let guardians resolve the matter themselves'.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

bell so he completed his rounds and returned in the evening. This rather feeble excuse did not impress the coroner. The autopsies proved that both patients had been suffering from kidney disease, which the doctor had known, a common complaint in elderly worn-out labourers. Yet current medical opinion stated that morphine aggravated kidney disease. Also the doctor injected the patients with '8 minimums', instead of the prescribed maximum of '6 minimums' of morphine. The coroner concluded that the doctor's misdiagnosis and overdose of morphine killed the paupers. The doctor defended himself on the grounds that he 'thought 8 minimums would revive better' and he refused to accept medical culpability.

The case caused an outcry in the area because the vice-Chairman of the Brixworth Union board of guardians, a large farmer who supported Pell, chaired the inquest jury. He persuaded his fellow jurors to record a verdict of 'death from natural causes' in the face of the evidence as seen by the coroner. Local newspaper editorials, which were united in their condemnation and not split along traditional radical/Liberal/Conservative lines, stated that at the very least the doctor should have been reprimanded in a public statement by the Chairman of guardians for his medical neglect.¹¹⁰ Newspaper reporters complained about guardians' silence on the matter, commenting that they were not given full access to the court proceedings and suspected foul play of some description. Only central government and the Brixworth Union guardians knew the full facts but these were not recorded fully in local official records to ensure confidentiality because the case was so sensitive. However, correspondence from a relative of a local clergy guardian was placed in central government files, revealing what really happened.

My brother-in-law (who tells me the Enquiry made the case blacker than ever) has sent you the resolution which he and Lord Spencer and Mr Pell...proposed. The Doctor's Friends back him well; though there can be no earthly doubt that the Paupers were killed by the Opium (& in my opinion) might have been saved had proper attempts to save them been made. My reason for believing they would have been saved under the treatment is: that they lived for 20 hrs after the morphine was given. The Master on finding ... they would not wake up put some cold water on their faces and sent for the Doctor and this was the sum of the treatment. I have no doubt the 12 [guardians who supported the doctor on the jury] take an economical view...of the matter- holding that Paupers are relieved of their woes and the

¹¹⁰ See Northampton Herald, Northampton Mercury, and Northampton Guardian, throughout December 1874.

rates relieved the Paupers...and [they] join classes/chums.¹¹¹

Although this letter is a post-hoc rationalisation of events, the nature of the source, a private letter to central government, gives us a rare insight into the social cost of the medical outrelief changes. It suggests that Pell's party covered up the scandal and took an economic view of medical outrelief funding both within and outside the workhouse. This seems to challenge the Webbs' traditional schema of the social welfare progressivism of indoor relief management after 1870 in this location.¹¹² The doctor was responsible for the pauper's deaths. He never explained why he was not seen calling at a busy workhouse. He lied to the jury about the events of Monday because he admitted to central government that he prioritised a home visit to a wealthy client for business reasons. The medical regime within the workhouse also failed the paupers. A poorly paid nurse and a busy workhouse master tried to revive the patients but medical services were over-stretched. The evidence indicates that the doctor was not charged for two reasons.

First, Pell needed to retain the support of poor law medical officers in the area to implement his retrenchment experiment. Therefore, he and his supporters who sat on the jury appear to have prearranged before the inquest to exonerate the doctor. Second, moderate farmers seem to have judged that to protect their standing in the community it was in their interests to close ranks by putting on a united front, despite their reservations, otherwise they would have to accept partial responsibility for the pauper deaths. However critical they were in private, in public they supported a cover up. It is very difficult to assess what impact these two deaths had on the psyche of the elderly labouring poor locally because no record has survived of contemporary opinion amongst paupers. Local newspapers reported that the deaths and subsequent inquest heightened labourers' fears of workhouse incarceration. This was expressed in the radical biblical sentiments of non-conformity in the area –

He that oppreseth the Poor reproacheth his Maker, but he that honoureth him hath mercy on the Poor (Proverbs Chp. 14 v. 31)...Rob not the poor because he is poor, neither oppress the afflicted in the gate, for the Lord will plead their cause and spoil the soul of those that

¹¹¹ PRO, MH12/8700, 4.12.1874, memos concerning the medical deaths in the Brixworth workhouse.

¹¹² S&B Webb, English Poor Law History, 3 Volumes: The Last One Hundred Years, (1929 edn.).

spoiled them (Proverbs Chp. 22 v. 23)',¹¹³

This was a sensitive case and it seems unlikely that guardians would have closed ranks unless it had a profound impact locally. It was visible proof of the power of the retrenchment party and the powerlessness of the labouring poor.

Central government ignored letters from guardians, ratepayers and paupers complaining about the dehumanising implications of the retrenchment experiment.¹¹⁴ This gave Pell a unique opportunity to consolidate his power at a time when some of his supporters were wavering. The workhouse deaths gave him more time to introduce a number of administrative changes that would make it very difficult to reverse his policies. He created finance and outdoor relief sub-committees out of the board of guardians to deal with all poor law requests. These committees were dominated by committed retrenchment supporters, who ensured that few outrelief applications came before a full board meeting where they might be out voted. Some farmer guardians argued that medical procedures should be reviewed after the workhouse deaths, but Pell pre-empted this by persuading Spencer to personally set up sick and burial clubs to compel the poor to save for illness and funeral expenses. He also enhanced the role of the workhouse medical dispensary by reforming internal procedures. However, as he refused to increase indoor medical funding to implement these changes, the outcome was more bureaucracy for the master and nurses, who did not have the time or resources to introduce new procedural measures. Finally, Pell persuaded the Chairman of the board of guardians, an aged clergyman who administered poor relief liberally, to resign. He had been ill for some time and Pell argued that it was an opportune moment to appoint a successor.¹¹⁵ Unsurprisingly, his supporters voted in Bury. Pell was now in power and the stage was set for a bitter and protracted battle over poor relief.

¹¹³ Northampton Guardian, 12.12.1874.

¹¹⁴ PRO, MH12/8699, 7.Mar.1871, 13.May.1873, 2. Jun.1873; NRO, P/L 2/15, Brixworth Union guardians' minute books, 31.12.1874.

¹¹⁵ BLMD, Althorp MS, K154, Pell to Spencer 10.4.1874 - discusses chairmanship; Morton to Spencer, 15.8.1874, discusses Chairman's ill health.

Conclusion.

Late-nineteenth century residents of the Brixworth Poor Law Union principally ‘inhabited a world structured by their relationship to economic and social power’.¹¹⁶ It has been stated, notably by E. J. T. Collins, that the farm labour market began to deteriorate critically in rural England after 1860, ‘the chief problem being no longer to absorb a labour surplus but to obtain sufficient labour for key summer operations.’¹¹⁷ However, evidence in this chapter suggests that although migration was underway and farming profits had fallen in the 1860s, the labour market was by no means as flooded as it was later to become in the Brixworth Union. Underemployment was a key problem even during better harvest years as Spencer’s land agent’s reports reveal up to 1874. This meant that the poor needed a series of customary rights to make ends meet but the majority of farmers only revived notions of communal responsibility in the High-farming period to increase their profits. This factor altered the triangular matrix of economic relations – landowners, farmers and agricultural workers –accentuating already tense social relations in poorer harvest years.¹¹⁸ Although medical outrelief, as Anne Digby has shown, was very useful to the arable farmer as a device to maintain his labour supply, in the Brixworth Union it became a customary expectation too. Therefore, threats to withdraw it produced a strong reaction.¹¹⁹

When, following the Union Chargeability Act of 1865, guardians began to review medical outrelief expenses, that scrutiny upset the rural order. After a poor harvest in 1870-1 attitudes towards outrelief amongst farmer guardians, who dominated the Brixworth Union board, started to harden. That process of local poor law change coincided with moves nationally to reduce outrelief expenditure, as exemplified in the Fleming report of 1871, advocating reductions on a broad front. The threat to withdraw medical outrelief in the late-1860s seems to have heightened endemic social

¹¹⁶ S.Banks, ‘Open and closed parishes in Nineteenth century England’ (unpublished, Ph.D., University of Reading, 1982), p.426, quoted in Howkins, *Reshaping*, p. 28.

¹¹⁷ E.J.T.Collins, ‘Harvest technology and labour supply in Britain, 1780-1870’, (unpublished, Ph.D., University of Nottingham, 1979), p. 89, quoted in Howkins, *Reshaping*, p.96.

¹¹⁸ T. Hitchcock, P. King and P. Sharpe (eds), *Chronicling Poverty The Voices and Strategies of the English Poor*, (1997)- this notion of a triangular matrix of social relations is discussed by Peter King in the introduction.

¹¹⁹ Dunbabin, “Revolt”, pp. 68-96.

tensions, which were probably gathering force throughout the mid-Victorian period. When the anti-outrelief measures came to fruition in the winter of 1871, during a peak underemployment season, it was a major factor in the growth of agricultural trade unionism. It was very unfortunate that agricultural workers asked for wage increases at the end of an era of prosperity, as Dunbabin observes, because their demands seemed unreasonable in a hostile economic climate.¹²⁰ This convinced farmer guardians that their position as leaders of rural society was under threat and they took pre-emptive action withdrawing outrelief to penalise paupers for union combination, anticipating the Longley strategy (1874). Therefore, the crusade campaign involved a series of incremental steps in the Brixworth Union, influenced by rateable changes, poorer harvests, union combination and central government retrenchment recommendations. In addition, the unusual pattern of land ownership, the uniting of the three largest estates under one land agent and the unconventional poor law boundaries placed poor law power in the hands of a few key individuals. These factors made the Brixworth Union look 'different' and indicate reasons why the Longley strategy was adopted so ruthlessly over the next twenty years. However, the role of individual C.O.S. supporters like Pell was crucial, and this too seems to have been a pre-condition for getting the anti-outrelief campaign underway. Therefore, a series of inter-related factors played a vital role in stimulating the crusade against outrelief in this location. This gave C.O.S. zealots much needed support because their retrenchment policy was unpopular at first.

C.O.S. exponents, like Pell, ignored the social cost of their retrenchment experiment because they were convinced they had a duty to encourage the poor to act independently for cost-saving reasons. This suggests that Williams is correct to state that guardians used the crusade ideology to further their own interests 'by any and every means'.¹²¹ Labourers' reactions to those measures seems to indicate that the anti-outrelief cause had a profound effect on the whole labouring community, but particularly on the most vulnerable (the elderly, widows and infirm), penalising the

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Williams, *Pauperism*, p. 102.

already impoverished. In the eyes of the authorities those struck off outrelief lists were reduced to a statistical calculation, part of a tally of destitution hidden in bureaucratic jargon. These findings confirm Mary Mackinnon's view when she states that modern welfare historians may have 'underplayed the social impact of the 1870s crusade against outdoor relief'.¹²²

The crusade against outrelief and its relationship to the advent of agricultural trade unionism are seldom discussed in welfare textbooks.¹²³ This oversight is often the result of research being focused on central government records exclusively. Some agricultural historians, notably Horn and Brown, have made the connection between threats to withdraw medical outrelief in the late-1860s and the tentative beginnings of union combination.¹²⁴ Both of these historians' studies indicate that many guardians penalised labourers for NALU membership by withdrawing outrelief provision.¹²⁵ Farmers in the Brixworth Union were pragmatists, not ideologues, and Pell exploited their conservatism in three ways. At first he appealed to farmers' economic instincts, by introducing cost-saving measures at a time of falling farming profits. Then he appealed to their social position, by inflaming their fears that union combination threatened farming's oligarchy. Finally, he convinced them to close ranks after the workhouse scandal to protect their reputations. This gave him enough time to consolidate his position of authority on the Brixworth Union board of guardians. Although Pell came to office in the 1860s, farmer guardians let him consolidate his

¹²² M. Mackinnon, 'Poor law policy, unemployment and pauperism', *Explorations in Economic History*, 23, (1986), pp. 299-336; M. Mackinnon, 'English Poor Law policy and the crusade against outrelief', *Journal of Economic History*, 47, (1987), pp. 603-25; Humphreys, *Sin*, p. 21.

¹²³ There is no mention of the impact of medical outrelief changes and their links to union combination in the standard set texts in this rather limited field – Williams, *Pauperism*, (1981); Mackinnon, 'Poor law'; Mackinnon, 'English Poor Law'; D. Thomson, 'Workhouse to nursing home: residential care of elderly people since 1840', *Ageing and Society*, 3, (1983), pp. 43-69; D. Thomson, *I am not my father's keeper: Families and the elderly in nineteenth century England*, *Law and History Review*, 2, (Fall, 1984), pp. 265-286; D. Thomson, 'The decline of social security, falling state support for the elderly since early Victorian times', *Ageing and Society*, 4, (1984), pp. 451-82; D. Thomson, 'Welfare and the Historians', in L. Bonfield, R.M. Smith and K. Wrightson (eds.), *The World We Have Gained*, (1986), pp. 355-378; D. Thomson, 'The welfare of the elderly in the past, a family or community responsibility?', in M. Pelling and R. Smith (eds.), *Life, Death and the Elderly Historical Perspectives*, (1991), pp. 194-222; D. Thomson, *World Without*. However, A. Digby, *The Poor Law in Nineteenth Century England and Wales*, (1982); A. Digby, *British Social Policy: From Workhouse to Welfare*, (1988) stresses the importance of medical outrelief in rural society both for farmers and labourers.

¹²⁴ P.L.R. Horn, 'Agricultural labourers in four midlands counties, 1860-1900' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Leicester, 1968); P.L.R. Horn, *Labouring Life in the Victorian Countryside*, (1976); Brown, *Meagre Harvest*.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

power, which paradoxically reduced their influence. Pell used Spencer's reputation to convince guardians that outrelief levels should be re-examined in 1871, but it was the short-sighted reaction of farmers that gave him the mandate to create a formidable and complex administrative infrastructure designed to eradicate outrelief. That process was completed when he appointed Bury as Chairman of the board of guardians in late-1874.

The growth of agricultural trade unionism and the two pauper deaths in the workhouse were very important events in the formative years of the crusade campaign in the Brixworth Union. The pauper deaths, though unintended, motivated the local community to voice opposition against Pell's retrenchment party. We can only surmise what impact those deaths had on the psyche of the elderly in the area, but it seems likely that it heightened fears about entering the workhouse, and that it swelled NALU ranks. As a result class tensions rose, as farmers' reaction to union combination forced labourers to cross an important political threshold. This rural unionism signalled the tentative beginnings of a political journey for working people in the Brixworth Union, which later culminated in full political representation on the board of guardians in their own right after the advent of democratisation. The political context of the poor law in the Brixworth Union in the decade between 1865 and 1875 mediated the effect of three pivotal influences in this rural society – the profit driven dominance of the farming economy, the loss of medical outrelief and the pre-emptive attacks on agricultural trade unionism. That in turn changed the basis of social relations since, from the beginning of the crusade campaign, as the next chapter explains, working people resented these changes. The result was a prolonged contest over outrelief.

Chapter Three.

Deterrent Strategies and Vestry Politics, 1875-1885.

Introduction.

The aim of this chapter is to examine the anti-outrelief deterrent strategies of the Brixworth Union board of guardians in the decade between 1875 and 1885, and the political reaction those measures engendered amongst working people.¹ Although the majority of poor law unions followed the Longley remit, bringing about a decrease in national outrelief spending, little is known about how those reductions were achieved.² Since around 16 per cent of the total population in England and Wales lived in 'model' poor law unions like Brixworth, these unions were probably influential and analysing their decision-making in greater depth will enhance our understanding of the nature of the late-Victorian poor law, as well as allowing us to critique the Webbs' schema of social welfare progressivism.³ Thus, this chapter is divided into two sections. Section one (3.1) analyses who controlled the poor law decision-making process in the Brixworth Union. It explores what strategies guardians implemented and for what reasons. Section two, (3.2) examines the reaction of working

¹ The following selection of texts downplay the extent of suffrage extension and working people's reaction to welfare changes – V.D.Lipman, Local Government Areas, 1834-1945, (1949); B. Keith-Lucas, The English Local Government Franchise: A Short History, (1952); J.Redlich & F.W. Hirst, The History of Local Government in England, (1958 edn.); J.M.Lee, Social Leaders and Public Persons: A Study of County Government in Cheshire since 1888, (1963); J.P.D.Dunbabin, 'The politics of the establishment of county councils', Historical Journal, 4, (1963), 1, pp. 238-50; J.P.D. Dunbabin, 'Expectations of the New County Councils and their Realisation', Historical Journal, 8, (1965), pp. 354-73; K.O.Morgan, 'The Liberal Unionists in Wales', National Library of Wales Journal, 16, (1969), pp. 165-7; H.C.G. Matthew, R.I.McKibben and J.A. Kay, 'The franchise factor in the rise of the Labour party', English Historical Review, 111, (1976), pp. 732-52; J.P.D.Dunbabin, 'British local government reform: the nineteenth century and after', English Historical Review, 92, (1977), pp. 777-805; N. Blewett, 'The Franchise in the United Kingdom', 1885-1918', Past and Present, 32, (Dec. 1965), pp. 27-56; F.W.S.Craig, British parliamentary election results, 1885-1918, (1974); K.O.Morgan, Rebirth of a Nation State: Wales, 1880-1980, (1981); P. Thane, 'The Working Class and State "Welfare" in Britain, 1880-1914', Historical Journal, 27, (1984), 4, pp. 877-900; K.T.Hoppen, 'The Franchise and Electoral Politics in England and Ireland, 1832-1885', History, 70, (1985), pp.202-217; P. Hollis, Ladies Elect: Women in English Local Government, 1865-1914, (1987); P.F.Clarke & K. Langford, 'Hodge's Politics: The Agricultural Labourers and the Third Reform Act in Suffolk', in N.Harte and R. Quinault (eds.), Land and Society in Britain, 1700-1914: Essays in Honour of F.M.L.Thompson, (1996), pp. 119-37.

² K. Williams, From Pauperism to Poverty, (1981), p.102, outrelief reductions 1871 to 1876 (the years of the steepest numerical increase) were £276, 000 or 1.4 per cent nationally.

³ S. and B. Webb, English Poor Law History: Volumes I-III, (1927-9).

people in the area and how they tried to oppose the changes. It aims to discover whether there was considerable conflict within the late-Victorian poor law system despite its strongly hierarchical and stable appearance.

3.1 Four Deterrent Strategies; Penalising the Poor.

It is evident that the guardians who were elected to serve on the Brixworth Union board influenced the poor law decision-making process and before discussing the strategies which they implemented, it is important to trace their occupations and class in the decade 1875 to 1885. The guardians' minute books reveal that, in common with other rural areas, the leaders of the farming community dominated this poor law authority (Table 3.1).⁴ In 1875 there were 55 seats on the board of guardians that were divided between eleven non-elective magistrates, who were automatically appointed *ex-officio* guardians, and forty-four elective guardians. Few magistrates attended board meetings on a regular basis because most were too busy with business affairs, lived outside the district or had time-consuming political careers at Westminster. They tended to turn up once a year in April, following guardian elections to ensure that their interests would be represented by their client intermediaries (clergy, land agents and farmers) on the union's sub-committees over the coming year. However, three *ex-officio* guardians attended meetings regularly and were influential members of the board. The elected members of the board represented thirty-seven parishes, although seven parishes had two seats, increasing their total representation to forty-four. A major landowner, three land agents, several Anglican clergymen and thirty-five farmers (3 seats were held as a double nomination) held the forty-four elective seats in 1875. Since the farmers held on average

⁴ N[orthampton] R[ecord] O[ffice], PL 2/15-17, Brixworth Union guardians' minute books.

Table 3.1: The occupational distribution of guardians of the poor in the Brixworth Union, 1875-1885.

Date(s):	1875	1876	1877	1878	1879	1880	1881	1882	1883	1884	1885
Non-elected:											
<i>Ex-officio</i>	11	10	13	13	13	13	15	15	16	14	14
Elected:											
Landowners ⁵											
Householder	1	2	2	3	3	3	3	3	1	1	2
Land Agent	3	3	2	2	2	2	3	2	4	2	2
Clergy	2	3	5	2	2	2	4	4	6	5	3
Farmer	35	34	30	32	32	35	32	38	32	34	33
Tradesmen	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	3
Artisans	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Labourers	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Other:											
Double/ Nominations	3	1	4	2	2	1	1	0	0	0	1
Sub-total Elected:	44	44	44	44	44	44	44	44	44	44	44
Total Votes	55	54	57	57	57	57	59	59	60	58	58

Source: NRO, PL 2/15-17, Brixworth Union guardians' minute books.

thirty-three seats in the period 1875-85 they had a strong majority on the board of guardians, which was accurately described by local people as the "farmers'" parliament.

It is not possible to categorise the farmers on the basis of their land or property

⁵ Note: Householder category contains some of the largest private property owners in the area.

holdings in this period because rateable assessments have not survived that would have facilitated this type of analysis.⁶ Similarly neither voting patterns, nor attendance figures can be correlated because these were not recorded regularly until the 1890s, which is unusually late compared to northern poor law areas.⁷ However, guardians' minute books reveal that on average around 85 per cent of farmers, (on average 28) in the period between 1875 and 1885 were tenants on one of the five major landed estates in the area (refer Map 2.1, Chapter 2). The remaining 15 per cent of farmers, (on average 5), were men with large farms, probably financed by bigger capital reserves than their tenant farmer counterparts. This financial freedom appears to have given the larger farmers more independence on the board of guardians, since from the outset of the crusade campaign they were amongst the most outspoken critics of the policy. The unorthodox nature of the boundaries of the Brixworth Union, which were not drawn around a market town because of the influence of the Spencer family, meant that this was a rural board of guardians dominated by the farmers. Few tradesmen were elected to the board of guardians in this period, but their presence was an important precursor of more far-reaching political changes in the 1890s. As part two of this chapter (3.2) explains the first tradesman guardian was elected to office following a number of controversial vestry contests. In this period no artisans or ordinary agricultural workers served as guardians because they were disenfranchised under the poor law property qualifications.⁸

⁶ The only rateable assessment book that has survived is for the village of Lamport, a very small parish, with only twenty-four residents. Such a small sample base makes it impossible to assess accurately farm sizes throughout the Brixworth Union – NRO, Misc. Vol., Lamport rate book, 9.4.1875.

⁷ The chief reason for this was that Pell insisted newspaper reporters abided by poor law regulations, which did not permit publication of guardians' meetings verbatim until the 1890s. In other areas, reporting differed and was often extensive because of local arrangements.

⁸ The rating qualifications for guardians in poor law unions were complex. There were two classes of ratepayers who could stand for election, landowners and property owners. In the Brixworth Union both types had to pay £15-40 rates per annum in 1875-85. See Lipman, *Local Government Areas*, (1949); Redlich & Hirst, *Local Government*, (1971 edn.); A. Brundage, 'The landed interest and the New Poor Law: as reappraisal of the revolution government', *English Historical Review*, 87, (1972), pp. 29-30.

In the period 1873-4 Pell set up two sub-committees out of the boards of guardians, finance and assessment. Pell briefed his supporters to review borderline outrelief applications that were ‘deserving’ and ensure that none came before a full board meeting where they might be out voted.⁹ The finance committee had eight members who managed the budget of the Brixworth Union, overseeing workhouse expenditure and outrelief funding levels. The twelve members of the assessment committee managed all outrelief applications. If we look at the profiles of these committees in an average year, 1881, they reveal how Pell’s party dominated proceedings:

Table 3.2: Class Profiles of the Finance Committee out of the Brixworth Union board of guardians, 1881.

Ex-officio	<u>Pell’s party.</u>	<u>Pell’s opponents.</u>
	0	0
Landowner/ Householder	0	0
Land Agent	0	0
Clergy	1	0
Farmer	6	1
Tradesmen	0	0
Artisans	0	0
Labourers	0	0
Totals	7	1

Source: NRO, PL 2/17, Brixworth Union guardians’ minute books.

⁹ B[ritish] L[ibrary] M[anuscript] D[epartment], Althorp MS, K269, Pell to Spencer & Bury during 1884 discusses priorities of supporters on these committees; NRO, PL2/15-17, Brixworth Union guardians’ minute books, 1875-1885 also detail speeches he made to committees about administrative goals, namely to prevent ‘all outrelief’.

The guardians' minute books reveal that three key tenant farmers which supported Pell and

Table 3.3: Class Profiles of the Assessment (Outrelief) Committee out of the Brixworth Union board of guardians, 1881.

	<u>Pell's party.</u>	<u>Pell's opponents.</u>
Ex-officio	4	0
Landowner/ Householder	1	0
Land Agent	1	0
Clergy	0	0
Farmer	5	1
Tradesmen	0	0
Artisans	0	0
Labourers	0	0
Totals	11	1

Source: NRO, PL2/17, Brixworth Union guardians' minute books.

sat on the finance committee always served on the assessment committee too. This meant that Pell only needed to secure two and four additional votes respectively to obtain a majority on both committees. He had little difficulty in doing this because on each committee there was only one token farmer guardian opponent who, though an outspoken critic of Pell, was outnumbered 7:1 and 11:1, respectively. This complex administrative system and duplication of personnel gave Pell *de facto* power authorising his party to reduce outrelief numbers from a high of 1068 in January 1873 to 658 by July 1873.¹⁰ As the previous chapter explained,

¹⁰ T.MacKay (ed.) & A.Pell, The Reminiscences of Albert Pell Sometime M.P. for South-Leicestershire, (1908), p.357.

numbers steadily fell each half-year, by approximately fifty claimants, as guardians purged their out-relief registers, but those reductions began to level off around 1875 (refer Graph 2.2, Chapter 2).

Outrelief numbers in the Brixworth Union started to stabilise around 1875 because it was difficult to sustain the momentum of reductions to meet central government targets. Some guardians were more critical of the social cost of the crusade initiative. Those who began to waver argued at successive boards of guardians' meetings in early 1875 that the anti-outrelief policy was further impoverishing the labouring poor in the area. Several of the more independent farmer guardians proposed that the anti-outrelief regulations should be relaxed, but a majority out voted their suggestion.¹¹ That majority was comprised of Pell's strongest supporters who were motivated by a variety of factors, most notably deep convictions, the desire to keep rateable bills low, and personal aggrandisement. Consequently, Pell decided that by implementing four deterrence strategies his party could continue to consolidate their power on the Brixworth Union board. These included four major, formal and informal, strategies that were implemented to prevent the reintroduction of outrelief. The retrenchment party decided to prosecute the adult offspring of elderly paupers to force them to maintain their relatives and they refused outrelief to those in receipt of charity or resident in an almshouse. Guardians also passed a motion reducing the number of relieving officers to give them greater control of the local poor law decision-making process. The Chairman and a number of his key supporters asked the remaining relieving officer (a Pell supporter) to refer all outrelief applications from elderly deserving paupers to a private charity fund, which they set up and financed. Unsurprisingly, as the second half of this chapter makes clear, the labouring classes reacted against these deterrent stratagems.

¹¹ NRO, PL2/15-17, Brixworth Union guardians' minute books.

After initial reductions in outrelief had been achieved in 1873-4 the guardians of the Brixworth Union debated privately how they could go on achieving their Local Government Board targets. Despite posting an anti-outrelief charter in the waiting room of the workhouse and on local church doors to deter elderly applicants, the decline in the numbers of outrelief recipients had started to slow down. Nevertheless, as the Chairman of the board explained they were determined to make further reductions:

Of course it is said why it is no fault of theirs. To this I think one might reply to say maybe then the question and effect be their fault as they say only *reap as they have sown*- but if it be purely their misfortune, it is a misfortune, not of our making. I've only found them in misfortune and it is our own duty to help them in the way least impervious to the community; and the rates were never meant to relieve misfortune but only to relieve destitution and I am experienced enough to think that very many of the abuses prevalent among us, are the result of so called caring attempts to be more merciful than God. [sic]¹²

A majority proposed that the Brixworth Union should prosecute the adult offspring of elderly paupers who failed to support their parents. Post-1870 court records, as David Thomson explains, are 'filled with similar reports of prosecutions of sons, and a few daughters as well'.¹³ The retrenchment party, however, needed Spencer's support if the scheme was to succeed. They hoped Spencer would use his influence to persuade three *ex-officio* guardians to convict cases when they came before them at Northampton Petty Sessions.

At first magistrates supported the policy because seventeen out of twenty-six cases were convicted at Northampton Petty Sessions between April 1872 and April 1877.¹⁴ Magistrates adjudicated that adult children should be responsible for the upkeep of parents and they ordered families to pay a maintenance allowance for their pauper parents, generally fixed at 2s. 6d. per week, between 1875 and 1877. This was to be paid to the court officer,

¹² BLMD, Althorp MS, K156, Bury to Spencer, 10.3.1874, quoted with original spelling and emphasis.

¹³ D. Thomson, 'The Welfare of the Elderly in the Past: A Family or Community Responsibility?', in M. Pelling and R. Smith (eds.), Life Death and the Elderly: Historical Perspectives (1991), p.217.

¹⁴ NRO, ML 44, V2911, Northampton Petty Session Records, Northampton Division.

who would then pay it to the poor law union where the pauper resided. The relieving officer granted a concomitant outrelief allowance to each elderly pauper once guardians received confirmation from the court officer of monies being received to cover maintenance costs. However, around 1875 magistrates began to express concern about co-operating with the Brixworth Union because they believed that numerous complaints sent to the Local Government Board protesting about this legal action were justified. Magistrates, as Thomson notes, 'chose not to exercise their legal, social and economic powers' because they believed the strategy was 'alien and offensive'.¹⁵ They illustrated their concerns by referring to a number of cases that had been successfully prosecuted, despite clear extenuating circumstances, during the period 1873 to 1875. For example, a labourer from Holcot complained in 1873 that he had been ordered to pay one shilling per week for the maintenance of his mother, even though he was in need of outrelief too. He explained:

I am not A Able boyd [able-bodied] man myself have had one rib fractured and one shoulder dislocated which fails me very much at times I have lost one eye I get my living by doing a little shoework but as I was not brought up to it I cannot get much. I have not had much to do this last few weeks nearly fifty years old my wife is over fifty years of age. I have house rent to pay and everything to find towards living out of what I get and barely make both ends meet.[sic]¹⁶

The complainant's elderly mother was awarded a temporary allowance of '2s. 6d. and 1 loaf' for four weeks but once the publicity died down that outrelief was cancelled. When the pauper's son complained again to central government they refused to intervene, replying that they could not interfere with the due process of the poor law locally.¹⁷

There was considerable debate in one local newspaper, the Northampton Guardian, during 1876 and early 1877 about this controversial prosecution strategy.¹⁸ Since it was a

¹⁵ Thomson, 'The Welfare', p. 200.

¹⁶ P[ublic] R[ecord] O[ffice], MH 12/8699, Brixworth Poor Law Union Correspondence, (1871-73), George Faulkener to LGB, 19.4.1873. Quoted with original emphasis, phrasing and spelling.

¹⁷ PRO, MH 12/8699, internal memorandum on how best to reply to George Faulkener, dated April 1873.

¹⁸ Northampton Guardian, 5.8.1876.

more radical 'advanced' Liberal newspaper it gave widespread coverage to issues affecting working people in the area. A National Agricultural Labourers' Union (NALU) spokesman from Brixworth advised guardians to withdraw the prosecution strategy because it was inhuman, urging 'Mr Bury [the Chairman] not to war against the poor but against the system, which makes them poor and dependent'.¹⁹ He warned that NALU membership had steadily grown in the Brixworth Union since 1871, so that the union had affiliated some 2,407 members by 1874 to the politically active Market Harborough District office.²⁰ The prosecution strategy was swelling their ranks because the NALU offered to represent members in court when they had been summoned to appear before magistrates in connection with a poor law prosecution. A 'poor labouring man from Moulton' was one of the first local members to be defended by counsel for the NALU in Northamptonshire. His defence team warned magistrates that NALU members were determined to oppose the policy by fighting for 'their social and political rights...[because] every man had a right to a voice in the making of the laws he was called upon to obey' and this law was 'unjust'.²¹ Guardians' minute books and the Spencer papers reveal that Pell's party was very wary of continued NALU involvement in the Brixworth Union outrelief controversy.²² He knew that he had exploited unionisation in 1871-2 to instigate his crusade against outrelief and he was aware that some farmer supporters felt uneasy about their rather short-sighted action by 1874. These critics only agreed to continue supporting the anti-outrelief cause to protect their reputations after several cases of medical neglect in December 1874 (section 2.5, Chapter 2). Pell seems to have been concerned that further NALU scrutiny might convince those farmer guardians who

¹⁹ Northampton Guardian, 17.3.1877.

²⁰ P.L.R. Horn, 'Northamptonshire Agricultural Labourers and the Quest for Allotments - The 1870s', Northamptonshire Past and Present, 6, (1971/1972), 4, p. 372.

²¹ PRO, MH 12/8700, Charles Stevenson to LGB, dated February 1874. There was a lengthy inter-departmental correspondence following Stevenson's observations about NALU defence strategies in Norfolk and Northamptonshire.

²² BLMD, Althorp MS, K159, Pell to Spencer, 19.1.1877, 28.1.1877 & 3.2.1877.

started to waver in late-1874 to change allegiance once more. They might support the reintroduction of outrelief if they felt that the NALU was capable of harnessing the labouring poor's animosity and creating further undesirable publicity. Certainly the prosecution strategy coming so soon after the bitter NALU feuds had the potential to deepen working people's sense of injustice and further damage social relations.

In the years circa 1875 to 1877 there was considerable disagreement on the Brixworth board over the prosecution strategy. Some farmers calculated that as prosecution cases were expensive, at an average cost of 10s. per summons, it was no longer worth pursuing such a controversial policy. *Ex-officio* guardians were divided over the issue, but Pell's supporters believed the strategy was justified. The three sitting *ex-officio* magistrates who opposed his policies found themselves in a minority on the board of guardians, but they were able to undermine the prosecution policy in court by using their discretionary sentencing powers.²³ In the period 1875 to 1877 they did not refuse to convict cases, instead they tactically adjudicated minimum fines, of 6d. in 59 per cent of cases and refused to fine defaulters, adjudicating that those who could pay did pay and those who could not did not. After 1877 they decided to throw all cases out of court because the English courts, as Thomson explains, decided that the crusade against outrelief was an unofficial policy that was based on recommendations, not official directives, which gave magistrates considerable discretion to interpret the law leniently.²⁴ Reluctantly Pell's party had to accept that it was necessary to use alternative deterrent strategies.

In 1875 Pell's party set up a committee out of the Brixworth Union board to investigate whether charity was indiscriminately awarded to poor relief claimants. The committee reported that it was customary to allow paupers to claim both outrelief and charity,

²³ BLMD, Althorp MS, K382, Bury to Spencer, 28.7.1878, reveals magistrates' actions.

²⁴ Thomson, 'The Welfare', pp.198-9.

and this practice had to stop. Pell lectured guardians that numerous almshouse trusts misappropriated their funds, by allowing pauper residents to claim outrelief. He stated that technically paupers should not have been allocated an almshouse place unless they could prove that they had independent means.²⁵ Consequently, after 1875 in the Brixworth Union elderly applicants were not granted outrelief if they were living in an almshouse or in receipt of a charitable benefit. A block vote of five larger independent farmers reacted against this deterrent policy. Although they were in a minority of other farmer guardians, around five on average, they decided to vote against the policy when it was raised before a full board meeting. However, although Pell's opponents knew of the pending motion they did not get the chance to speak out against it because the new measure was passed at sub-committee level before coming to their attention, where it was voted for by ten members to one against (one *ex-officio* did not attend).²⁶

Each board meeting of the Brixworth Union in this period became a battle-ground over the issue of outrelief provision. Yet, although in public supporters of retrenchment were determined to retain regulations, in private they started to argue about the pace of change in the locality. Spencer explained his position to Pell:

The indiscriminate bestowal of out-door relief [is an] encouragement to improvidence...in the question of Widows houses my views do not differ from your own ...but reform must be slow when dealing with old people [sic].²⁷

This private letter indicates that even those who led the campaign to eradicate outrelief provision were ambivalent about how to fund deserving elderly paupers. Yet, like central government, they took the view that despite these reservations, 'only by cutting assistance to

²⁵ NRO, 49p/46, Report of the Brixworth Union Charities Committee, (1875).

²⁶ This average is calculated from the meetings when sub-committee votes were registered in the guardians' minute books. Usually this was after a controversial series of outrelief applications. Quoted as in original.

²⁷ BLMD, Althorp MS, K159, Spencer to Pell, 28.1.1877.

all, even the welfare core, could the policy emphasising self-responsibility be successful'.²⁸

For example, the Spencer family built a number of almshouses in the early nineteenth century in the Brixworth Union to house long-serving estate workers and policy regarding these became contested. Supporters of retrenchment felt that it was imperative that these almshouses were administered according to the strict letter of the poor law, with no resident receiving outrelief because this would indicate throughout the district the benefits of applying stricter poor law regulations. The labouring poor, however, believed that residency was a customary right that should not be subject to a means test. Spencer disagreed. He proposed that a grant-in-aid scheme of residency should be introduced, with each resident required to prove to his land agent that they could support themselves with a minimum weekly allowance of 2s. 6d. Spencer agreed to contribute a temporary concomitant dole to ease the almshouse funding changes. However, if any resident defaulted, their almshouse would be repossessed by Spencer's land agent, thus preventing almshouses from becoming 'refuges for paupers'.²⁹ Eventually Spencer hoped to raise the means test threshold to three shillings and then to withdraw his share of the dole. This would ensure that only labourers of independent means applied for a place, thereby discouraging applications from paupers whose only alternative would be compulsory admittance into the workhouse.

There was considerable disagreement amongst clergy guardians about this policy. Their spokesman warned Spencer that his proposals would 'destroy the special paternal character [of almshouses], which was particularly valuable because it promoted a bond between landowner and dependants' [sic].³⁰ He stated that almshouse provision improved community relations at a time when the crusade against outrelief was damaging traditional

²⁸ Thomson, 'The Welfare', p.217.

²⁹ BLMD, Althorp MS, K382, Bury to Spencer, 15.1.1880, 11.11.1880, K382; K144, Calverley to Bury & Spencer, 1.12.1880, 13.12.1880, 8.3.1881.

³⁰ Ibid.

relationships in a significant manner. He warned Spencer that the cumulative impact of these changes might have far-reaching political repercussions in the future. Certainly guardians' minute books reveal that on a number of key votes when *ex-officio* attendance was low Pell's majority block fell to seventeen in mid-1878. His party still held a majority but their opponents had won the respect of a growing number of farmers and of the labouring classes in the district, as the issue of outrelief and the almshouse changes crossed traditional class boundaries. However, this seems to have only made Pell more determined to forge ahead with further deterrent schemes. The new measures were designed to prevent local debates about deserving applications, which were on the increase. Those debates came to a head in the years 1876 to 1878.

In May 1878 John Howard, a blind widower aged 79 from Harlestone parish, applied to the Brixworth Union board to grant him a small outrelief allowance because he could no longer work. Two farmers proposed that Howard should be allocated an additional weekly outrelief allowance of 2s. 6d. The retrenchment supporters out voted the motion, instructing Howard to apply to a local charity in Harlestone for funding. The chairman of the Harlestone charity was outraged at this proposal.

The Great Question to be decided between the Brixworth Guardians and the Parish of Harlestone is this: - Is such a man as Howard who is nearer 80 years of Age...and now blind...without any means of his own, after having worked all his days whilst he was able, on the Land at Harlestone to be supported by the occupiers of the Land or merely to be sympathised with and sent for help to the Trustees of a Fund the Donors of which never imagined that their gifts would be used to lessen the burden imposed on ratepayers.³¹

He explained that the charity could not afford to fund outrelief pensions for elderly paupers in the parish because its income was only £125 per year and it was required by law to use its funds for education purposes and to clothe the poor primarily. It gave £50 to fund the local

³¹ NRO, PL 2/16, Brixworth Union guardians' minute book, Morton to guardians, 9.5.1878. Quoted with original punctuation, spelling and emphasis.

school to educate the children of the poor and spent £75 on shirting, blankets, sheets and flannel to support low-income families.

The case was widely publicised because the charity's Chairman wrote to the Local Government Board, the Local Government Chronicle, and both local and national newspapers.³² These publications reported that Howard had been categorised by the relieving officer in the Brixworth Union as 'able-bodied so long as he could walk'. This further adverse publicity coming so soon after the medical scandal, as outlined in chapter 2, divided supporters of retrenchment. A NALU spokesman in the district alarmed guardians when he wrote a lengthy article to a local newspaper, which sparked a debate in 1876 to 1878 about the proper uses of charity by the Anglican clergy guardians and the controversial issue of replacing outrelief with charitable schemes. He stated that

The clergy in most parishes have the dispensing of charities. We know some are wrongfully applied, and some not applied at all...That the Church shows no sympathy with the people is acknowledged in all quarters, except by those narrow sycophants who are too ignorant of history and too prejudiced to learn for themselves the true state of things...But a reckoning day is at hand and woe unto them who cannot give a good account of themselves. When the Church, for instance, has to stand on her own merits against the vote of the people, it will stand in a very precarious position...it is only a question of time when we will have our own political rights granted to us and then the Establishment will go...the Church and the aristocracy are no friends of the people...³³

Spencer was also displeased that guardians ignored his earlier advice regarding the pace of change. He loathed bad publicity and wanted cases like Howard's and the ongoing charitable debates resolved as quickly as possible. Pell acted decisively and offered a private weekly pension to Howard of 2s. 6d.³⁴ His former opponents asked if the charitable donation had been granted in perpetuity but no details were given. The Local Government Board refused to

³² E.g., NRO, ZA 2246, 'Brixworth –Power of the Chairman Questioned', Local Government Journal, 27.7.1878.

³³ Northampton Guardian, 2.9.1876.

³⁴ PRO, MH 12/8701, Alfred Jeffrey Brixworth Union clerk to LGB, dated July 1878 complained about this.

make further enquiries on their behalf, relieved that the issue had been resolved.³⁵

The retrenchment party decided that the only way to exercise greater control over outrelief administration was to appoint one relieving officer to oversee all applications. A majority passed this third deterrent scheme on the board '17 against 11' but the minority refused to accept that outcome. A petition was sent to the Local Government Board who investigated the new bureaucratic measure.³⁶ Poor law regulations laid down that in populous districts it was essential to employ a minimum of two relieving officers to ensure the efficient and uniform administration of outrelief. The Local Government Board wanted to know how one man could oversee such a large geographic area with a population of '13,866' and travel a distance of 200 miles throughout the district every week. The Chairman of the board reported that by appointing a 'competent' and 'energetic' officer on a large salary of '£160' all the logistical difficulties would be overcome and outrelief would be administered uniformly. Central government told the Chairman that as his request was very unusual, it would have to be authorised at the most senior level of the Local Government Board. In fact, the Brixworth Union was the only poor law union in England and Wales in the late-nineteenth century that decided to reduce its relieving officers to just one. Numerous internal memos discussed the proposal at length and their tone suggests that central government did not want to sanction the measure. A senior civil servant commented to the President of the Local Government Board that it was:

Anything but sound policy to reduce the number of Relieving Officers and if the present proposal is applied [sic] to, the District of the Relieving Officer ...will contain over 60,000 acres...this is Pell's union and I own I am surprised that the proposal should come from such a quarter.³⁷

³⁵ PRO, MH 12/8701, memo dated July 1878 in reply to clerk that they could not interfere with 'due process of the poor law'.

³⁶ PRO, MH 12/8701, 'Petition by Rev. John Drake J.P., Mr Richard Lee Bevan J.P., Mr Francis Eady and Mr Francis Chevalier Jeyes all guardians of the poor in the Brixworth Union protesting against policy of having only one relieving officer', 13.12.1879.

³⁷ PRO, MH 12/8701, Brixworth Union correspondence, see memos by - 'Southam, Lambert and The President', 3.1.1879.

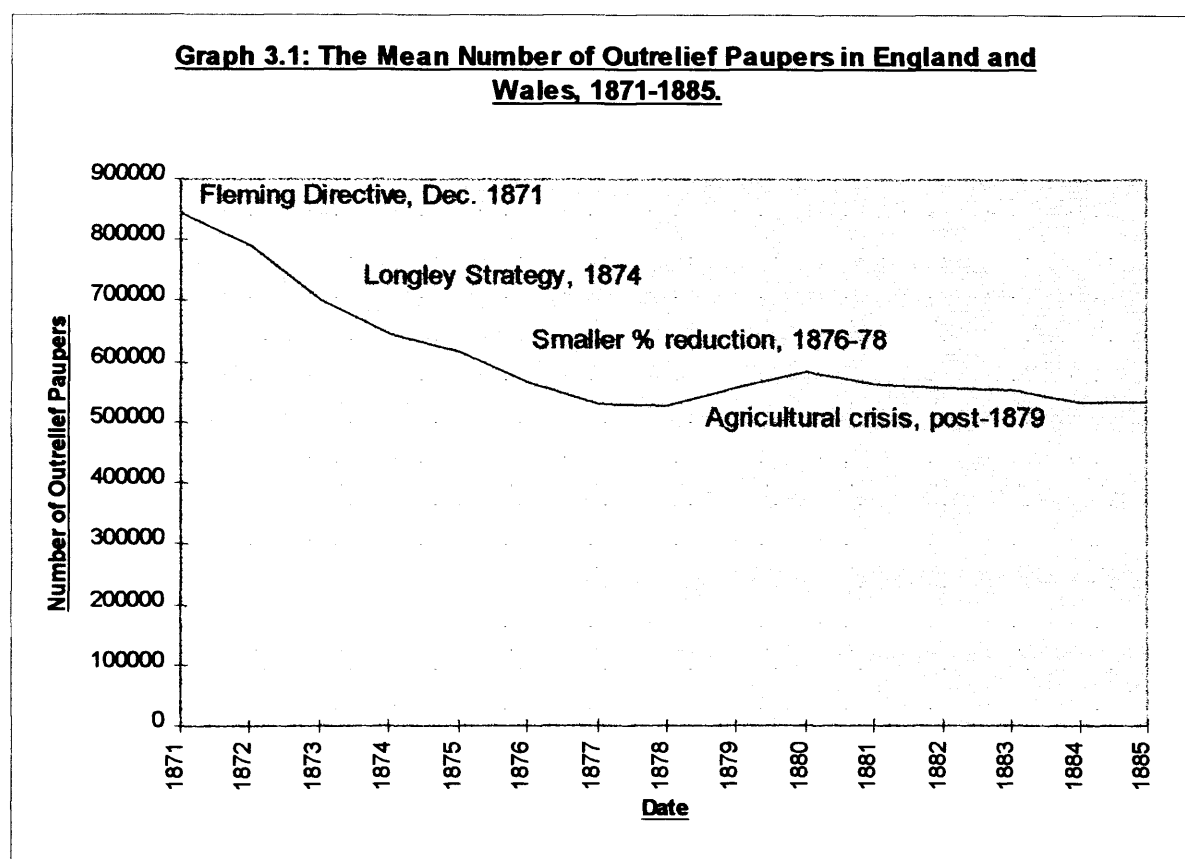
Nevertheless the Local Government Board authorised the new experiment for twelve months and if the scheme worked it could become permanent.

The Local Government Board took this decision because it did not want to lose such a valuable ally in its fight against outrelief because by 1877 the pace of national reductions in outrelief expenditure had slowed and was threatening to increase in the context of a developing crisis in agriculture (which the next chapter will explore) (Graph 3.1). It was so concerned about this upward trend in outrelief expenditure that a memo was sent out by senior civil servants to each poor law inspector in England and Wales asking them to give details of outrelief cases on their registers. They were asked to report whether they thought central government should issue a new outrelief statement, reiterating the Longley strategy of 1874, stressing the need to continue to try to eradicate outrelief. Most inspectors replied that, ‘all that can be done is being done’ and it would be futile to issue another anti-outrelief circular.³⁸ The majority of inspectors reported that most outrelief recipients were elderly and guardians refused to institutionalise such claimants in the workhouse because indoor relief was more expensive than outrelief and this type of pauper would have needed long term medical care. Some guardians also argued that outrelief was more humane because it did not involve splitting up elderly couples into separate wards. The inspector noted that the hardship of older people was accentuated by the anti-outrelief recommendations, which stated that the destitute had to sell their possessions before entering the workhouse. This meant that even if any dispossessed paupers wanted to leave the workhouse in the future most could not afford to make a fresh start. The inspector for the south midlands region, where the Brixworth Union was situated, reported that apart from one or two strict ‘model’ unions, most were

³⁸ PRO, MH 32/8, contains various internal memos dated 1877-9 on this subject between inspectors and Poor Law department at Local Government Board.

reluctant to make further economies. He explained that, 'so much additional work has been thrust upon Guardians [they] are becoming a little impatient of duties imposed upon them'.³⁹

The work was rather tedious and time-consuming, with many farmer guardians



Source: *BPP, 11th Annual Report of the Local Government Board, (1881-2), p. xvi, Table iv.*

preferring to delegate duties to those who had the time and inclination to administer poor relief. In poor law unions like Brixworth, where Charity Organisation Society (C.O.S.) supporters dominated the board further reductions might be achieved. However, elsewhere farmer guardians tended to support a moderate outrelief policy because rural depopulation was now a growing problem in arable areas creating labour shortages that could only be

³⁹ Ibid., W. Peel and C. Boyle memos dated 1877.

overcome by using outrelief once more to retain a pool of labour during winter. The south-midlands inspector warned that, 'seed sown in a Circular falls mainly on stony ground...further restrictions or recommendations would be inappropriate and possibly cause resentment', undermining central government's anti-outrelief strategy.⁴⁰

For these reasons it was imperative that the Local Government Board persuaded well-known strict 'model' unions to continue making reductions in their outrelief numbers. The south midlands' inspector was instructed to revisit the Brixworth Union during the review process to persuade guardians to increase the momentum of outrelief reductions. He informed Pell that although outrelief numbers had fallen by 54.31 per cent during the period 1872 to 1876 his party still 'administered their relief very laxly', since 'the proportion of out[door] to in[door] is nearly 10 to 1', with only '33 inmates in the Workhouse against 301 poor'[sic].⁴¹ Pell and his supporters felt very aggrieved at being singled out for criticism in this manner, but rather than relax regulations in retaliation, like their poor law union neighbours, this made them more determined to make further changes. Pell had his reputation to consider as one of the prominent 'welfare' experts of his day and for this reason he reacted in a more ruthless manner, using the Brixworth Union's anti-outrelief campaign to enhance and to protect his prestige. That tacit agreement to continue championing the crusade ethos persuaded central government to agree to the reduction in the number of relieving officers, even though it contravened current regulations. This reveals how the centre and the periphery interacted in one location in the context of the crusade campaign. Central government used the Brixworth Union to try to increase compliance in rural areas, but paradoxically that involved endorsing unorthodox administrative practices that increased guardian's autonomy in this location. Thus, Pell's party used the crusade as political leverage to further their own interests at the

⁴⁰ PRO, MH 32/104, W. Peel, 20.3.1877.

⁴¹ PRO, MH 12/8701, copy of report by W. Peel to Brixworth Union guardians, 14.3.1878.

expense of central authority. Senior civil servants remarked on the awkward position they were placed in at Brixworth, but they appear to have taken the view that they had no reason to distrust the political motives of committed ideologues. Thus, they supported the relieving officer reductions, but they were unaware that a fourth deterrent scheme was pending.

It soon became apparent why Pell's party wanted to reduce the number of relieving officers in the Brixworth Union to just one. After 1876 every time a deserving claimant made a claim for outrelief in the Brixworth Union the relieving officer by prior arrangement with Pell's party referred the case to a local charity fund, which they privately financed. The Chairman of the board of guardians administered the charitable scheme, assessing each deserving application brought to his attention and awarding them an equivalent minimum parish dole, usually 2s.6d., for a fixed period of four weeks. The charity was given on the understanding that after four weeks the claimant had to accept compulsory admittance into the workhouse if they could not support themselves by independent means. The applicant accepted they would not be allowed to reapply for outrelief before they received the charitable assistance. The charitable fund ensured that the majority of deserving outrelief cases that might cause controversy never came before the Brixworth Union's sub-committees. Any that were brought to the attention of the full board of guardians because of the intervention of an individual guardian, were always dismissed on the technicality that as the pauper was in receipt of private charity by the time their case was heard they were not destitute and therefore not entitled to outrelief funding. Pell's supporters implemented this informal fourth deterrent scheme in 1876 because it was too controversial to bring before the board or central government to be endorsed officially. It was a rather devious ploy to allow them to continue to meet their performance indicators, in order to retain their top ten league table position. However, by 1883 the charity lacked funds because it was inundated with

applications and its trustees had to organise a fund raising drive. This forced them to go public and they asked Spencer to become patron to encourage others to subscribe. As the Chairman of the board, Bury, wrote, he was:

Sure the time [had] come when we could do away altogether with out-door relief in the Union...the really deserving cases and destitute cases are very few... a small sum ...raised as a charity fund...administered by a select committee on certain fixed principles would work. [He had] talked to a good many intelligent people [but we] must have your support to set the ball rolling. [sic] ⁴²

Since Spencer insisted that the scheme remained a private unaffiliated venture it was dubbed, 'The Secret Service Fund'. ⁴³

The *Secret Service Fund* was a local version of the C.O.S and therefore it was characteristic of most late-nineteenth-century organised charity because it was implemented by an upper-middle class committee, which adopted a case study method of investigation to categorise the labouring poor. Guardians who, like Pell, were C.O.S. members were 'convinced of the efficacy of voluntary solutions to social problems'. ⁴⁴ In fact, Pell set up a similar charitable poor relief venture with a fellow C.O.S. zealot, George Crowder, in St.George-in-the-East poor law union in London, where he also served as a guardian of the poor until 1885. That scheme was known as the Tower Hamlets' Pension Committee and its regulations were very similar to the *Secret Service Fund* in the Brixworth Union. ⁴⁵ Although it is unclear which fund was established first, both were introduced to eradicate outrelief

⁴² BLMD, Althorp MS, K382, Bury to Spencer, 6.3.1883. Quoted as in original.

⁴³ Spencer hoped that *ex-officio* guardians would enthusiastically welcome the new scheme because the C.O.S. had recently been established in nearby Leicester by Albert Pell. See L[eicestershire] C[ounty] R[ecord] O[ffice], DE/2340, No. 1, Leicester Charity Organisation Society minute books, 1876-1881; LCRO, L361.7, J. D. Martin, The Leicestershire C.O.S. , 1876-1976: A Contemporary Review, (Leicester, 1976).

⁴⁴ A. Kidd, State, Society and the Poor in Nineteenth Century England, (1999), p.98.

⁴⁵ The Tower Hamlets' Pension Committee advertised on a regular basis in the Times for funds in the 1880s. For example, 15.5.1883 letter page. There is no published account of its procedures, but passing reference is made to it in P. Ryan, 'Politics and poor relief: East London Unions in the late-Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries', in M.E.Rose (ed.), The Poor and the City: The English Poor Law in its Urban Context, (1985), pp. 130-72.

funding. The charitable fund gave subscribers control of poor law decision-making by preventing indiscriminate gifts of charity to the poor or outrelief funding.

The *Secret Service Fund*, which was in operation between 1875 and 1895, was Pell's most despised initiative. The gift relationship that it tried to establish was resented deeply by the labouring poor, who still regarded outrelief as their parish birthright. The labouring classes refused to express gratitude for the loss of reciprocal community funding.⁴⁶ A spokesman for working people in the 1890s explained why the *Secret Service Fund* was so despised.

It takes the manliness out of men; they are obliged to humble themselves where they would not, and go to places where they would not, against their own convictions and beliefs...I think that if a man is worthy of having relief he might have it direct, without having to bow to different people for it...⁴⁷

He went on to explain that the charity produced an unjust status quo in the district because it demanded deference from claimants and refused them access to public funds. He believed guardians were using the charitable fund for political reasons because Pell's party recognised that whoever controlled outrelief held the reigns of power locally.⁴⁸ Pell's party hoped that this fourth deterrence stratagem would finally consolidate their power.⁴⁹ However, in 1877 Pell wrote anxiously to Spencer that working people were 'revolting' against their policies - 'there is a frightful mischief going on'.⁵⁰ A reaction amongst the labouring poor was underway.

⁴⁶ BLMD, Althorp MS, K382, Bury to Spencer, (undated draft notes of a proposed speech at the inaugural meeting of the *Secret Service Fund* on 15.3.1882 in Northampton) noted working people's objections.

⁴⁷ BPP, Royal Commission on the Aged Poor, (1894), S. Ward, q.15748-9, p. 847.

⁴⁸ Unfortunately despite extensive research no detailed records of the *Secret Service Fund* have come to light. John Morley, 5th Earl Spencer's land agent, recorded that Spencer paid an annual subscription of £10 to the fund. See NRO, Spencer MS, Sox 551, Morley's financial statement of Earl Spencer's private accounts, 26.10.1895; BMLD, Althorp MS, K345, *Secret Service Fund* Circular to Spencer, January 1894.

⁴⁹ BPP, Aged Poor, S. Ward q. 15764-653, gave evidence Jeyes, the Guardian of the Brixworth parish, was asked by the Chairman to subscribe to the *Secret Service Fund*. Jeyes replied that he would contribute provided he was given a detailed explanation in writing of how the fund was administered. The Chairman returned Jeyes' cheque and withdrew his membership application.

⁵⁰ BLMD, Althorp MS, K159, Pell to Spencer, 3.2.1877, and Bury to Spencer, 7.2.1877.

3.2: Vestry Contests: A Political Reaction.

Most ordinary working people in the Brixworth Union in 1875 were unable to influence the outcome of local poor law contests because the complex property qualifications, based on a plural voting system related to the value of rateable property, disenfranchised them from taking part in guardian elections. That situation was exacerbated by the fact that under the terms of the New Poor Law, guardians were authorised to meet in private behind closed doors during their fortnightly board meetings. Only guardians of the poor were party to voting during local poor law proceedings, though reporters could attend meetings, but were not permitted by law to report the minutes verbatim until the 1890s. The general public did not have formal access to proceedings until the local government changes post-1894.⁵¹ However, despite being excluded in this manner, working people in the Brixworth Union were interested in local politics. A participatory culture appears to have survived in local vestries in the district, probably in response to being excluded from the poor law decision-making process. Working people gravitated to local vestries partly because they were important traditional semi-democratic outlets in rural society, where they could exploit the chaotic nature of local government bureaucracy by manipulating guardian election procedures. If an individual wanted to serve as a guardian of the poor in England and Wales after 1834, they first had to be nominated to stand for election in his local vestry. This remnant of parish government gave the labouring poor an important source of political leverage in the Brixworth Union during the crusade campaign. Although working people were excluded from the poor law union boardroom, unless they were required to make an outrelief

⁵¹ Rural labourers were disenfranchised in parliamentary elections until the Franchise Extension Acts of 1884-5 equalised county with borough qualifications. In poor law elections most labourers remained disenfranchised until the passing of the Local Government Act, 1894, which abolished property qualifications. See B. Keith-Lucas, The English Local Government Franchise, (London, 1952), chapter 3, pp. 97-101 - this is still the standard text in its field.

application in person, they were entitled to attend local vestry meetings. Although they could not vote they could voice their opinions and influence local politics.

In 1876 to 1877 a coalition of larger independent farmers, ratepayers, traders, artisans and agricultural workers who were pro-outrelief supporters tried to oust three members of Pell's party from office in a number of local vestry contests. In the first contest in the parish of Brixworth a majority of ratepayers selected two farmers who owned large farms to stand for election as guardians of the poor, ousting a key Pell supporter from office through the de-selection process. The Northampton Guardian explained what happened:

The election of Guardians has stirred this village to an unwonted excitement. There has long been a feeling that those who have lately been the representatives of the parish have not attended to the poor, whose interests they were appointed to guard. Several cases of treatment, considered by the villagers to be very hard, having produced a strong feeling of enmity, which has chiefly been directed against Mr. Elworthy...a [vestry] poll being demanded all parties entered upon a most energetic canvas...The return was as follows:- Mr Jeyes, 212; Mr Eady 209; Mr Elworthy 39.. a very severe defeat.⁵²

The article explained that in guardian elections in April both farmers who opposed Pell were elected with very substantial majorities. However, it was unclear how many residents had been allowed to vote in both the vestry and guardian election contests, even though many were technically disenfranchised. The incumbent who lost his seat was the acting vice-Chairman and a former Chairman of the Brixworth Union board of guardians in the 1860s at the time of the first reductions in medical outrelief (refer Chapter 2). His defeat delighted the local populace. The outcome was embarrassing for Spencer, a leading county Whig, since the two farmers who were elected were well-known Liberals and outspoken critics of the retrenchment policy. Spencer's reputation in the district had been crucial when the crusade was instigated but even he could not prevent opposition from developing.

In the second vestry contest the acting Chairman of the board, Bury, fell victim to a

⁵² Northampton Guardian, 15.4.1876.

plot in his own parish that was instigated by Viscountess Milton (a large landowner), one of her tenant farmers and disgruntled working people in the village, who deeply resented the crusade against outrelief. Lady Milton was angry that Bury did not consult her before withdrawing outrelief in the parish even though she was patron of his living and she believed that the anti-outrelief policy was inhumane because it forced many of her loyal tenants to enter the workhouse. She also had a personal grievance against Bury because he had had the temerity to ask for her only daughter's hand in marriage, which she refused.⁵³ Consequently during the vestry contest in Haselbech parish pro-outrelief supporters manipulated election procedures to ensure that the Chairman of the board missed his re-selection notice. Lady Milton instructed her tenant farmer, who happened to be a churchwarden, to arrange with the Brixworth Union clerk to post guardian re-selection notices at midnight on the church door and to remove them at dawn the following day to ensure the Chairman did not see his re-selection notice. As predicted he did not turn up to be re-nominated in the vestry in March and a farmer who opposed his policies was nominated in his place. The farmer went on to win the Haselbech guardian seat in the following April elections.⁵⁴

During the third vestry contest at Scaldwell parish in 1877 a key supporter of retrenchment, Mr William Hamshaw, was ousted from office because the Brixworth Union clerk falsified electoral registers so that a local publican who was a more popular candidate was elected with a large majority.⁵⁵ The clerk could not prevent Hamshaw's re-nomination in the vestry because his candidacy was sponsored by a number of prominent landowners in the

⁵³ NRO, F/S/24/78, Bury to Fisher and Sanders land agents, 6.5.1874; F/S/24/77, Lady Milton to Fisher and Sanders land agents, 14.1.1880, 14.2.1880, 23.2.1880, 15.3.1880, 9.4.1880, 7.6.1880, & 22.6.1880, outline history of Lady Milton's grievances with Bury.

⁵⁴ Background and aftermath of Haselbech contest analysed from PRO, MH 12/8701, Bury to LGB, 26.3.1871; NRO, FS/24/77, Lady Milton to Fisher and Sanders land agents, 3.5.1876.

⁵⁵ Background and aftermath of Scaldwell contest analysed from PRO, MH 12/8701, Hamshaw to LGB, 13.4.1877; MH 12/8701, Brixworth Union clerk replies to LGB, 1.6.1877, 4.6.1877, 6.6.1877, 8.6.1877, 26.6.1877, 29.6.1877, & 9.7.1877.

district and he regularly attended meetings so he was unlikely to forget to attend. However, he could ensure that the tradesman was selected to stand with Hamshaw by falsifying vestry ballot papers and he decided to distribute voting papers during the guardian election in April to a number of artisans who did not pay rates. He also left voting papers at the homes of paupers who were in receipt of outrelief and should have been disqualified from voting. He even manipulated procedures to allow the publican to stand. The publican should have been disqualified as he had not paid rates for twelve months and was also an overseer of the poor for the parish.⁵⁶ The Local Government Board implemented an official inquiry following a complaint by the acting Chairman, which read:

I am anxious if possible to spare the poor and union the expense of a contest and the further expense of legal proceedings, which my friends will take upon certain informalities in case of my defeat -... I think it is desirable to avoid a defeat, for not only am I Chairman of the Board, but I have been instrumental in effecting substantial reforms for the carrying out of which my presence is very necessary.⁵⁷

Despite extensive investigations, central government was unable to invalidate the election of the popular candidates, since procedures were chaotic and the clerk had too many discretionary powers. Only the clerk could provide evidence of his own mismanagement because the Ballot Act (1872), which gave civil servants and ratepayers the right to examine electoral registers, was not applicable in guardian elections until 1879.⁵⁸ If a poor law union clerk chose to falsify elections there was nothing central government could do to prevent election mismanagement. Senior civil servants could only express 'great surprise' about a 'very unsatisfactory' chain of events.⁵⁹ These guardian electoral anomalies seem to have been

⁵⁶ Poor Law Commissioner's order 24.7.1847 article 1 stipulated that ratepayers had to be rated for one year immediately preceding elections and paid poor rates assessed for one year to qualify to vote. Also a paid overseer or collector of rates could not apply to become a guardian of the poor under Vict. 20. C.19. s.5. – refer H.J.Owston, Overseers Manual Showing their Duties and Responsibilities, to which are added an Index of Cases, Tables of Statutes and a Copious General Index, (1864), pp. 4, 84-8.

⁵⁷ PRO, MH 12/8701, Bury to LGB, 26.3.1877. Quoted with original emphasis.

⁵⁸ Note: The Corrupt and Illegal Practices Prevention Act (1883) had also not been passed yet. It made guardian election procedures subject to full public accountability.

⁵⁹ PRO, MH 12/8701, LGB to Brixworth Union clerk, 9.7.1877.

common before 1879 because central government records reveal that many boards of guardians, including the Northampton union, complained about similar malpractice.⁶⁰ It was, therefore, imperative for Pell that his key supporters were re-elected in the April elections. He hatched two plans to achieve this.

First, magistrates technically still had the right to veto any vestry appointment if it was deemed to be not in the public interest. They could insist that a guardian of the poor was not selected to stand for office if the candidate refused to administer outrelief efficiently by supporting the retrenchment policy. Pell asked Spencer to persuade magistrates who supported the anti-outrelief policy to re-select key supporters by using their discretionary powers.⁶¹ However, Spencer did not want to override popular votes but he did insist that incumbents' names were added to vestry nomination lists to allow them to stand at the forthcoming guardian elections in April 1877. Second, landowners who supported the crusade against outrelief ensured that incumbents were re-nominated several times in both their local parish and in safe seats, which they controlled. For example, Spencer ensured that the acting Chairman of the board, Bury, was re-selected at Halselbech where Bury was ousted and for Althorp, which Spencer controlled. Unsurprisingly Bury was not elected in Halselbech but he did win the Althorp guardian contest and held this safe seat for over twenty years on Spencer's authority. Similarly the acting vice-Chairman, Elworthy, who had been ousted in Brixworth, was nominated for three seats (Brixworth, Hanging Houghton and Moulton Park) to ensure that this key supporter was not ousted from office. He was not elected in Brixworth parish where he had been de-selected but held onto a double nomination in the other two safe seats. What do these vestry contests reveal about the nature of rural politics and the social

⁶⁰ NRO, Misc. Vol., Northampton Poor Law Union guardians' minute books, 20.4.1875 & 11.5.1875

⁶¹ BLMD, Althorp MS, K382, Bury to Spencer throughout 1876 to 1878 discuss these arrangements and Spencer's reaction; K159, Pell to Spencer, 2.3.1877 discusses re-nomination plans. Refer also NRO, 287p/50, Scaldwell vestry minute books, 1876-77.

welfare aspirations of the labouring classes in the Brixworth Union?

These vestry contests appear to presage a shift in rural politics in the Brixworth Union before further democratisation was introduced following the third Reform Act, 1884.⁶² This finding raises questions about David Eastwood's view that 'the vestry ceased to be a theatre of local government' once poor law unions were established in the 1830s.⁶³ Eastwood believes that the New Poor Law of 1834 destroyed the participatory ethos of the Old Poor Law because vestries lost the right to administer poor relief expenditure. He claims that vestries were downgraded in rural society post-1834 and their vibrant political culture was destroyed because labourers were effectively ousted from parish government. The vestry contests discussed in this chapter demonstrate that the crusade against outrelief penalised the poor who opposed it by asserting a political will of their own. This is instructive since historians, such as Pat Thane, have tended to undervalue the political ambitions and social welfare aspirations of the rural labouring classes in the late-nineteenth century.⁶⁴ Further comparative work is needed if we are to establish just how common this type of vestry activity was in the mid-1870s, but that should not prevent us considering the wider implications of this finding.

Derek Fraser in the 1970s observed that 'the politicising of local government was not the creation of the caucus politics of the 1870s', instead vestries had been politicised for much of the nineteenth century.⁶⁵ When the Liberal party in the late 1870s wanted to strengthen its support base it tried to consolidate its position by aligning with those radical forces which were already present in local vestry politics. Fraser noted that the significance of

⁶² Note: technically this legislation should be referred to as the Franchise and Redistribution Acts of 1884-5, but they are commonly known as the third Reform Act, 1884, which will be used throughout this thesis.

⁶³ D. Eastwood, 'Rethinking Debates on the Poor Law in Early Nineteenth Century England', *Utilitas* 6 (1994), pp. 97-116; D. Eastwood, *Government and Community in the English Provinces, 1700-1870*, (1997), p.126.

⁶⁴ Thane, "Welfare", pp. 892-3.

⁶⁵ D. Fraser, *Urban Politics in Victorian England: the structure of politics in Victorian England*, (1976), p.30.

the vestry, at least before the Franchise Extension Acts of 1885, has been neglected.

Fortunately other historians have made important contributions to this field of poor law studies, by following Fraser's lead. For example, John Garrard's studies of Victorian industrial towns furthered our understanding of the significance of urban vestries as late as 1880. He explained that a 'high level of social and political autonomy' was created over the course of the nineteenth century, which had earlier been overlooked.⁶⁶ There was a high degree of devolution within the poor law system, often more than contemporaries chose to admit, which was achieved in a number of ways. For instance, vestries that continued to select guardians of the poor to stand for election had a significant amount of political leverage. Local overseers of the poor who liaised with relieving officers had a considerable amount of power at a grass roots level. The creation of sectional committees within boards who controlled key decision-making processes also created a highly discretionary system. Unfortunately, there have been few published local studies of these aspects of rural poor law politics in the late-Victorian period. Admittedly, it is often very difficult to analyse how local rural politics operated because good source material is hard to find and for this reason current historians still do not fully understand the nature of rural politics among the labouring poor. A good starting point, however, is to seek out evidence of where a reaction may have been engendered during the crusade decades, since this case-study has traced high levels of political activity amongst working people.⁶⁷ The labouring poor in the Brixworth Union may have been uninterested in national party politics but that did not mean that they were not

⁶⁶ J. A. Garrard, 'Parties, Members and Voters after 1867: A Local Study', *Historical Journal*, 20, (1977), pp. 145-63; J.A. Garrard, *Leaders and politics in nineteenth century Salford: a historical analysis of urban political power*, (1977); J.A. Garrard, 'Parties, members and voters after 1867', *Historical Journal*, 20, (1977), pp. 145-63; J.A. Garrard, *Leadership and Power in Victorian Industrial Towns 1830-80*, (1983); J. Garrard, 'Social History, Political History and Political Science: The Study of Power', *Journal of Social History*, 3, (1983), pp. 105-23.

⁶⁷ P. Ryan, 'Poplarism, 1894 -1930' in P. Thane (ed.), *The Origins of British Social Policy*, (1978), pp.56-83; Ryan, 'East London Unions', pp. 130-72 are rare examples of studies that examine the impact that the crusade on poor law politics had in 'strict' East London unions.

actively involved in political issues of their own. Many labourers in the Brixworth Union in the 1870s ignored the national political scene because they felt that it did not impact directly on their lives, but the crusade against outrelief did. It penalised those who could afford it least and for this reason they reacted forcibly.

The recent cataloguing of the Spencer papers has given us fresh insights into the local poor law political scene. A strong NALU presence in the district seems to have altered the tenor of local politics because working people came forward to air their grievances in a much more overt manner during the early stages of the crusade campaign.⁶⁸ Labour historians and agricultural historians, such as Alun Howkins have shown, that the NALU in many areas of East Anglia held meetings to instruct members how to use their collective voice effectively in local vestries during poor law and school board elections.⁶⁹ The NALU encouraged its members to become more politically active by seeking election to key local authorities. A prominent supporter of the NALU advised labourers that:

Every occupier of a rateable cottage in every village in England, no matter whether the rates are paid by himself or his landlord, has the same right...to attend every vestry and parish meeting, and vote for or against this or that man being churchwarden, guardian of the poor, waywarden [sic], or on the School Board.⁷⁰

It was a sentiment that had widespread appeal in the Brixworth Union. For instance, one NALU leader from Pitsford told local residents during a vestry contest in that village that,

The time was come to nominate constables and overseers but the law, like a great many laws, was a strange one. A vestry called and they nominated whomsoever they liked in the usual way; then it was left to magistrates and they put into office whom they thought right...Thus there was a farmers board of Guardians...The poorest ratepayer should be able to serve as the representatives of his fellows. Money and not brains had ruled too long in poor law matters.⁷¹

⁶⁸ NRO, Spencer MS, Sox 393, 'Brington, Harlestone, Brampton and Whilton petition to the 5th Earl Spencer', 27.3.1873.

⁶⁹ A. Howkins, Poor Labouring Men. Rural Radicalism in Norfolk, 1870-1923, (1985), pp. 72-73, table 3, notes high level of vestry activity in 1877. These were the probably the first triennial guardians' elections following the Longley strategy of 1873/4.

⁷⁰ Canon Girdlestone, 'The Farm Labourer', Macmillan Magazine, (1872), p.261.

⁷¹ Northampton Mercury, 11.3.1876.

Pamela Horn explains that by 1878 NALU membership in Northamptonshire had stabilised, but it is significant that its members looked to the union to protect their interests on a broad front, not just in relation to better wage levels (as Chapter 2, 2.5 discussed). In the period between 1875 and 1877 the NALU defended the labouring poor in court against poor law prosecutions and by doing so the union seems to have enhanced its standing. It is evident that the NALU in this area encouraged labourers to participate in poor law politics.⁷² The prosecution strategy polarised local opinion, creating a vacuum, which the NALU readily filled. The labouring poor who took part in the years 1876 to 1877 vestry contests seem to have been determined to fight against the crusade that penalised them. The NALU recognised that it was important to support their fight because the crusade against outrelief had arguably become the single most important issue in the local area. In a number of poor law unions elsewhere regulations were relaxed around 1879 because of the impact of the agricultural crisis (refer Chapter 4), but where the crusade was maintained, as it was in Brixworth, St. Neots, and Bradfield, it dominated local politics.

The depth of the reaction to the way that the Brixworth Union board of guardians acted indicates that the anti-outrelief policy created a strong sense of injustice, changing both social and political relations. From as early as 1876, only three years after its inception, the retrenchment policy faced opposition in the local community. This occurred predominantly in local vestries because they were accessible political forums, with a democratising influence that provided a source of political leverage for those disenfranchised under the New Poor Law. It would be useful to know whether the higher levels of political activity in other rural areas, like Norfolk, in the years 1876 to 1877 also coincided with the first triennial guardians'

⁷² P.L.R. Horn, 'Northamptonshire Agricultural Labourers', p. 371; P.L.R. Horn, 'Agricultural Labourers' Trade Unionism in Four Midland Counties, 1860-1900', (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Leicester, 1968), pp. 204-5, gives details of NALU conditions in Northants; J.P.D. Dunbabin, 'The "Revolt" of the Field: The Agricultural Labourers' Movement in the 1870s', *Past and Present*, 26, (1963), pp. 68-93.

election contests following the Longley strategy.⁷³ It is possible that other boards of guardians may have acted in a harsh manner and engendered a similar reaction amongst working people with encouragement from the NALU. There was evidently a correlation between the harsh crusade and the NALU campaign in this study, which encouraged the poor to take a more active interest in guardian elections. Further comparative work would enhance our knowledge of the broader context of the crusade campaign in rural society in the 1870s. Local Government Board files indicate that civil servants knew some procedural loop-holes were being exploited by disgruntled residents in rural areas, but central government had to ignore this type of malpractice because they had no powers to compel poor law union clerks to comply with their recommendations. A Select Committee was set up in 1878 to examine the issue of guardian election corruption, concluding that chaotic procedures undermined regulations. However, they recommended that election procedures should remain unchanged because they 'would have the effect of causing elections now determined by other considerations to be regarded as political'.⁷⁴ The Select Committee was determined to stress the apolitical nature of guardian elections even though its members knew that the crusade against outrelief was polarising public opinion in many 'model' rural unions, such as Brixworth. This supports Keith Snell's contention that the parish 'remained a strong cultural focus amongst the poor into the later nineteenth century'.⁷⁵ Before the advent of formal suffrage changes these vestries had proved to be 'a quite sufficient background against which class feelings could develop' during guardian election contests.⁷⁶ The labourers' desire to

⁷³ Howkins, *Poor Labouring*, (1985), pp. 70-73 discuss that the NALU campaigned nationally to raise awareness of the importance of vestry politics and how their democratising influence could be used to air a series of grievances about charity, education, low wages and poor relief.

⁷⁴ *BPP, Report of the House of Commons Select Committee on Elections of Poor Law Guardians in England, Scotland and Ireland*, IV, (1878), Appendix XVII, p.268.

⁷⁵ K.D.M. Snell, 'Deferential Bitterness: The Social Outlook of the Rural Proletariat in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth- Century England and Wales' in M.L. Bush (ed.), *Social Orders and Social Classes since 1500: Studies in Social Stratification*, (1992), p.178.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p.179.

reintroduce outrelief provision attests that they had social welfare aspirations and, if provoked, were prepared to fight for them. They did not look ‘past the poor laws to another conception of welfare’, as Lynn Hollen Lees claims. Instead they were determined to reclaim lost welfare rights within the poor law.⁷⁷ Those who supported retrenchment knew this and reacted accordingly to halt this challenge.

Conclusion.

This chapter has explored the impact of the crusade against outrelief and its social cost in the years circa 1875 to 1885. The strong reaction of working people seems to indicate that the crusade did not produce ‘an inexorable tide of progress sweeping the beach of destitution’, instead it ‘bequeathed an uneven cross-current, which left many islands of poverty behind’.⁷⁸ It also suggests the rural labouring classes in this location were politicised in ways that have often been underestimated by current historians.⁷⁹ One of the problems with using election data produced in the Victorian period to examine working people’s political affiliations is that it is so imprecise. Elections were still very volatile and localised in the 1870s, despite the passing of legislation to stop corrupt practices in parliamentary elections. This suggests that it is necessary to integrate local sources with central government records to ascertain the reality of poor law politics. In this case-study the Brixworth Union clerk who managed poor law elections had a high degree of power, which he exploited fully because he opposed Pell’s policy. Inhabitants were prepared to follow suit even though they risked imprisonment for three months with hard labour if central government traced their deception. However, given

⁷⁷ L. Hollen Lees, *The Solidarities of Strangers. The English Poor Laws and the People, 1700-1948*, (1998), p. 298.

⁷⁸ D. Fraser, ‘The English Poor Law and the Origins of the British Welfare State’ in W.J. Mommsen and W. Mock (eds.), *The Emergence of the Welfare State in Britain and Germany, 1850-1950*, (1981), p.10.

⁷⁹ Refer footnote 1.

the number of procedural anomalies they probably judged that the risk was minimal. Certainly Local Government Board files are full of similar complaints about irregular guardian elections in other areas. Further work needs to be undertaken on how extensive election malpractice was and for what reasons. In this location it was in response to an anti-outrelief issue that impacted directly on the lives of traditional poor relief claimants.

It is evident that the anti-outrelief deterrence strategies angered local magistrates, disenchanted farmers and further radicalised the labouring classes. Three of those deterrent strategies were formal expressions of the retrenchment party's power, authorised by the Local Government Board. The fourth strategy, however, concerning charity for the elderly deserving poor, was an informal and very creative measure.⁸⁰ It was an adroit form of social control that aimed to force the poor to act independently and gave guardians the means to go on cutting outrelief rolls. It was the only way that the retrenchment party could achieve their central government targets and this emphasises the need to analyse pauperism levels at the point of creation not collection. Guardians in the Brixworth Union used a number of 'non-political channels' of power, like the charity fund, to consolidate their authority. These unorthodox methods of managing outrelief, as Garrard explains, often reveal much more about the true motives of those who sought to control a local authority.⁸¹ Ideologues ignored their own economic principles pursuing expensive deterrent policies, such as prosecutions and the *Secret Service Fund*, as they were determined to retain power at all costs. This raises the question about why Pell's party felt so threatened in the 1880s because that fear shaped their determination and the ruthlessness of their actions.

The economic outlook of the landed interest in the Brixworth Union was beginning to

⁸⁰ My conclusion has used many of John Garrard's exemplary conceptual ideas about the nature of power in local authorities in the late-nineteenth century. See Garrard, 'Social History, Political History', pp.113-15.

⁸¹ Ibid., p.116.

change in significant ways by 1885, as Spencer's grant-in-aid almshouse scheme attests. With the onset of the agricultural crisis in the area the power of the landed interest seemed threatened, since land had always been the basis of their authority in rural society.⁸² The crusade against outrelief from their perspective offered them a political life-raft to halt temporarily a shift in the local balance of power. They did not appreciate that although the nature of rural society was changing they could still retain power by agreeing to a more lenient outrelief strategy, which was seen to be just. Instead they chose to retain power by acting in a very harsh manner, which engendered a reaction amongst the labouring poor and that did not auger well for the future. These vestry contests, like agricultural trade unionism, were formative political experiences for working people, who sought out semi-democratic political institutions in this rural community to air their grievances. That process of political confrontation, as the next chapter outlines, was an antecedent of further conflict that grew during the agricultural crisis when guardians tried to retain their anti-outrelief crusade at all costs. Events in this chapter seem to provide evidence that the labouring classes were resolved to use a local government framework to realise their social welfare ambitions. They chose the vestry because it was an important accessible political forum. They were not indifferent to, nor did they accept, the poor law hegemony of the retrenchment party. When we examine what Garrard terms 'power in action' in the Brixworth Union we discover there was considerable conflict within the poor law system despite its strongly hierarchical and stable appearance.⁸³ Formal democratisation after 1885 would in due course provide working people with the means to overthrow Pell's party, but such changes only completed a process that had begun during the conditions of the decade 1875 to 1885, and which had been facilitated above all by the continuing democratising influence of the vestries.

⁸² D. Cannadine, *The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy*, (1996 edn.), pp. 13-15, explores this trend.

⁸³ Garrard, 'Social History', p. 109.

Chapter Four.

A Rural Recession, 1880s: **Welfare to Work Schemes and Begging for a Burial.**

Introduction:

This chapter explores how and why the Brixworth Union board of guardians retained their crusade against outrelief during the first stage of the late-Victorian agricultural crisis which began in Northamptonshire around 1879. Although historians have engaged in lengthy debates about the timing and reasons for the crisis in agriculture,¹ few welfare textbooks examine the impact of rapid economic change on poor law practices in the late-Victorian

¹ There is a vast literature on the late-Victorian agricultural crisis, a selection of the major texts is quoted here – T.W. Fletcher, 'The Great Depression in English Agriculture, 1873-96,' *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, 13, (1961), pp. 417-32; T.W. Fletcher, 'Lancashire livestock farming during the Great Depression', *Agriculture History Review*, 10, (1961), I, pp. 17-42; E.L. Jones, 'The changing basis of agricultural prosperity, 1853-73', *Agriculture History Review*, 10, (1962), II, pp. 102-9; F.M.L. Thompson, *English Landed Society in the Nineteenth Century*, (1963); C.S. Orwin and E.H. Whetham, *A History of British Agriculture 1846-1914*, (1964); E.L. Jones, *Seasons and Prices: The Role of the Weather in English Agricultural History*, (1964); J.D. Chambers and G.E. Mingay, *The Agricultural Revolution, 1750-1880*, (1966); F.M.L. Thompson, 'The second agricultural revolution, 1815-1880', *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, 21, (1968), 1, pp. 62-77; R. Perren, 'The landlord and agricultural transformation 1870-1900', *Agriculture History Review*, 18, (1970), I, pp. 36-51; C.H. Feinstein, *National Income, Expenditure and Output of the United Kingdom, 1855-1965*, (1972); P.J. Perry, 'Where was the "Great Agricultural Depression"? a geography of agricultural bankruptcy in late Victorian England and Wales', *Agriculture History Review*, 20, (1972), I, pp. 30-45; P.J. Perry (ed.), *British Agriculture, 1875-1914*, (1973); P.J. Perry, *British Farming in the Great Depression, 1870-1914: An Historical Geography*, (1974); D. Taylor, 'The English dairy industry, 1860-1930', *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, 24, (1976), 4, pp. 585-601; P.J. Atkins, 'The growth of London's railway milk trade, c. 1845-1914', *Journal of Transport History*, 4, (1977-8), pp. 208-26; R. Perren, *The Meat Trade in Britain, 1870-1914*, (1978); C. Ó Gráda, 'The landlord and agricultural transformation, 1870-1900: a comment on Richard Perren's hypothesis', *Agriculture History Review*, 27, (1979), I, pp. 40-2; C. Ó Gráda, 'Agriculture in decline 1860-1914' in R. Floud and D. McCloskey (eds.), *The Economic History of Britain Since the 1700s, Vol. 2: 1860 to the 1970s*, (1981), pp. 175-97; G.E. Mingay (ed.), *The Victorian Countryside*, 2 volumes, (1981); J. Marsh, *Back to the Land: the Pastoral Impulse in Victorian England 1880 to 1914*, (1982); P.L.R. Horn, *The Changing Countryside in Victorian and Edwardian England*, (1984); J. Brown, *The English Market Town: A Social and Economic History 1750-1914*, (1986); D. Taylor, 'Growth and structural change in the English dairy industry, c. 1860-1930', *Agriculture History Review*, 35, (1987), I, pp. 47-64; A. Armstrong, *Farmworkers: A Social and Economic History, 1770-1980*, (1988); M. Tracy, *Government and Agriculture in Western Europe, 1880-1988*, (1989, 3rd edn.); D. Grigg, *English Agriculture: An Historical Perspective*, (1989); J. Brown, *Agriculture in England: A Survey of Farming, 1870-1947*, (1989); A.D.M. Phillips, *The Underdraining of Farming in England During the Nineteenth Century*, (1989); S. Wilmot, 'The Business of Improvement': *Agriculture and Scientific Culture in Britain, c. 1700-c. 1870*, (1990); F.M.L. Thompson, 'The anatomy of English agriculture, 1870-1914', in B.A. Holderness and M. Turner (eds.), *Land, Labour and Agriculture, 1700-1920*, (1991), pp. 210-40; M.E. Turner, 'Output and prices in UK agriculture, 1867-1914, and the Great Depression reconsidered', *Agriculture History Review*, 40, (1992), I, pp. 38-51; N.F.R. Crafts and S.N. Broadberry (eds.), *Britain in the International Economy, 1870-1914*, (1992); E.J.T. Collins, 'Why wheat? Choice of food grains in Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries', *Journal of European Economic History*, 22, (1993), 1, pp. 7-38; R. Perren, *Agriculture in Depression, 1870-1940*, (1995).

countryside.² Our knowledge of the policy decisions that strict 'model' rural unions like Brixworth took during the agricultural crisis is still limited because central government records do not reveal how anti-outrelief targets were achieved and at what social cost.

Regrettably there is no comprehensive study of the impact of the agricultural crisis in Northamptonshire during the 1880s.³ It is evident that it would be impossible to redress that historiographical neglect within this word limit. However, although the focus of this thesis is the crusade campaign, it is necessary to reflect on how the farming community reacted during the agricultural crisis. Consequently, section one (4.1) introduces the reader to the general economic trends in agriculture during the 1880s, both nationally and in Northamptonshire. It then looks in detail at farming conditions in the Brixworth Union by using the recently catalogued Spencer Papers to give the reader a flavour of farming life. The second section (4.2) explores how the rural elite, who were experiencing farming problems and poorer profit margins, reacted during the agricultural crisis. It analyses how the members of the Brixworth Union board of guardians avoided reintroducing outrelief and continued to sustain the rate of their outrelief reductions. Finally, section three (4.3) examines one of the most controversial policy decisions that guardians introduced during the agricultural crisis, namely the cancellation of customary funeral payments. This policy change had a profound social cost

² None of the set texts in this limited field discuss its impact in any detail - K. Williams, From Poverty to Pauperism, (1981); D. Thomson, 'Workhouse to nursing home: residential care of elderly people since 1840', Ageing and Society, 3, (1983), pp. 43-69; D. Thomson, '*I am not my father's keeper*: Families and the elderly in nineteenth century England', Law and History Review, 2, (Fall, 1984), pp.265-86; D. Thomson, 'The decline of social security, falling state support for the elderly since early Victorian times', Ageing and Society, 4, (1984), pp. 451-82; D. Thomson, 'Welfare and the Historians', in L. Bonfield, R.M.Smith and K. Wrightson (eds.), The World We Have Gained, (1986), pp. 355-78; M. Mackinnon, 'Poor Law policy, unemployment and pauperism', Explorations in Economic History, 23, (1986), pp. 299-336; M. Mackinnon, 'English Poor law policy and the crusade against outrelief', Journal of Economic History, 47, (1987), pp. 603-25; D. Thomson, 'The welfare of the elderly in the past, a family or community responsibility?', in M. Pelling and R.M. Smith (eds.), Life, Death and the Elderly Historical Perspectives, 91991), pp. 194-222; D. Thomson, World Without Welfare: New Zealand's Colonial Experiment, (1998).

³ R. Greenall, A History of Northamptonshire and the Soke of Peterborough, (1979), gives an overview of conditions; some academic articles, most notably by Thompson, 'Agriculture', pp. 225-240, assess conditions in Northamptonshire. However, there is no comprehensive study of farming in mid-Northamptonshire where the Brixworth Union was situated.

because it forced the poor outside the workhouse to beg in order to bury their dead. It also deeply offended the cultural mores of the working classes in the area and rallied a wider cross-section of the local community against Pell's party. These three themes will allow the reader to begin to 'mingle with the crowd' in the Brixworth Union at a time of rural recession when further anti-outrelief policies laid the foundation for future political change.⁴

4.1: Farming in a Rural Recession, 1880s.

Since the 1960s there has been considerable debate amongst agricultural historians about the timing and extent of economic change in British farming during the late-Victorian era.⁵ A key unanswered question has been whether the agriculture sector experienced a 'depression' or 'recession' post-1880. Today most historians agree that 'the last quarter of the nineteenth century was a period of agricultural crisis' and that regional studies are a more accurate way of testing farming conditions.⁶ When assessing the nature of the agricultural crisis a number of variables need to be taken into consideration. For instance, one of the chief features of the crisis was falling rental incomes because of low cereal prices and unpredictable meat and stock sales, which resulted in poorer profit margins and increased bankruptcies. Thus, farming began to specialise and diversify its practices often by converting arable land to grassland and implementing market gardening experiments. Historians also study the impact of rural depopulation and the problems that agricultural workers faced when they were asked to increase their productivity rates in order to replace lost labour. The main problem with summarising farming conditions in the Brixworth Union during the 1880s is that without a detailed analysis, which is currently unavailable, it is very difficult to arrive at a satisfactory

⁴ This phrase is taken from R. Jeffries, Hodge and his Masters, (1992 edn.), p. xv.

⁵ Refer footnote 1.

⁶ Perry, British Agriculture, p. xi.

definition that describes accurately the degree of economic change farming experienced.⁷ However, like most southern English counties farmers were affected by general economic trends in the agricultural sector.

Agricultural historians often refer to the late-1860s as the 'Indian summer' of British agriculture, a time when high profits seemed to have been guaranteed because farming benefited from a lack of overseas competition and good weather patterns.⁸ Most textbooks stress the relative affluence of farmers in the 1860s, before agriculture became a 'contracting sector of the economy in both relative and absolute terms'.⁹ Some basic statistics reveal the effect that a lack of competition had on British markets. It is estimated that in 1870 Britain relied on imports for only around 14 per cent of its meat and 25 per cent of its total cereal requirements, providing farmers with a buoyant market.¹⁰ F.M.L. Thompson comments that this produced a 'money illusion' in the heartland of High-farming on 'the light land, mixed farming regions of lowland Britain'.¹¹

Although there has been considerable debate about the fate of farming in the 1880s most historians concur that an agricultural crisis began to unfold in areas where farming over capitalised in the High-farming period.¹² Huge quantities of cereal crops from the Americas and Australasia, began to flood British markets. The rate of grain imports increased from an average of around 47.4 million tonnes per annum in 1872 to just over 107.9 million tonnes by 1902, with an average of about 60-70 million tonnes being imported from the Americas in the crisis period between 1882 and 1902. The growth of overseas competition came about after

⁷ This chapter will use the working term recession when referring to farming conditions in the Brixworth Union because of these historiographical problems. The Oxford dictionary defines recession as 'the slowing down of an economy that leads to an economic downturn, which may, but does not always, deepen into a depression at a later stage' - *Oxford English Dictionary*, Volume R, (1995 edn.), p. 312. Until further work is undertaken on the Brixworth Union this appears to be the most appropriate definition to use.

⁸ Perry, "Great Agricultural Depression", p. 31.

⁹ Thompson, 'Agriculture', p. 212.

¹⁰ Perren, *Agriculture*, p. 3.

¹¹ Thompson, 'Agriculture', p. 214; Perren, *Agriculture*, p. 5. This included areas such as East Anglia, the East Midlands regions and Yorkshire in England and the Lothians in Scotland

¹² A. Howkins, *Reshaping Rural England. A Social History, 1850-1925*, (1991), pp. 134-152.

the American civil war when railway and shipping improvements drastically cut transportation costs.¹³ In addition, improved refrigeration techniques meant that meat produce could be exported to European customers. The growth in American and Australasian exports coincided with a series of 'adverse seasons' at home that 'drained farming reserves'.¹⁴ Exports and poor weather started to have a major impact on agriculture in the Brixworth Union because it was a mixed-farming district. Spencer's land agent noted that those farmers who had over-capitalised in the mid-Victorian period found it difficult to absorb losses in both grain and meat prices, particularly during inclement seasons.¹⁵

In most eastern and southern English counties the 'collapse in cereal prices' was 'the quintessence' of the agricultural crisis.¹⁶ On average wheat producers experienced the largest percentage decrease in their profit margins because prices fell by around 63 per cent between 1860 and 1895.¹⁷ Farmers in the Brixworth Union, however, were also affected by barley and oats prices, which fell sharply by around a third by the mid-1890s.¹⁸ In an attempt to improve rental incomes, which fell on average 26 per cent nationally between 1879 and 1895, most landowners converted arable land to grassland.¹⁹ Consequently, the total acreage of wheat under cultivation in England contracted by some two million acres between the early 1870s and the mid-1890s.²⁰ However, as Richard Perren comments, changes in arable land use, and

¹³ G.E. Mingay, *Rural Life in Victorian England*, (1990), pp. 62-5.

¹⁴ Perry, *British Agriculture*, p. xxvi.

¹⁵ N[orthampton] R[ecord] O[ffice], *Spencer MS*, Sox 562, 566, 567, land agents' records. Perry, *British Agriculture*, p. xix, points out that all sectors of the economy, not just farming slowed down because of the scarcity of gold on the world markets and that contributed to the agricultural crisis; Perren, *Agriculture*, p. 6, also notes that these problems were exacerbated by the declining importance of agriculture in the national economy, at a time when Britain's wealth creation was concentrated on manufacturing and service industries.

¹⁶ Perry, *British Agriculture*, p. xiv.

¹⁷ R. Floud, *The People and the British Economy, 1830-1914*, (1997), pp. 102-6.

¹⁸ Perren, *Agriculture*, pp. 8-9, Tables 1, 2 and 3.

¹⁹ M. Overton, 'Agriculture', in J. Langton and R.J. Morris (eds.), *Atlas of Industrialising Britain, 1780-1914*, (1986), chapter 4, pp. 34-54, estimates that 45 per cent of farming land was under cultivation in 1866, but that figure had fallen to 32 per cent by 1905.

²⁰ Thompson, 'Agriculture', p. 220; Perren, *Agriculture*, Table 1, p. 8, calculates that home production of wheat contracted from 50.7 million cwt. in 1872 to 32.2 million cwt. by 1902. In the same period wheat imports increased from 48.3 per cent to 80.8 per cent.

the severity of reductions in both rental incomes and profit margins largely 'depended on both the type of soil and the type of farming' found regionally.²¹

In a midlands county like Northamptonshire, where classic High-farming methods were practised, meat suppliers usually adopted either 'beef-barley or lamb-barley systems', as well as producing wheat.²² There were a number of dairy farmers/wheat growers in the county who marketed butter, cheese and liquid milk, as well as raising pigs, poultry or selling eggs. Therefore, in mixed-farming districts it is very difficult to measure profitability trends because investment returns were based on a wide range of produce and it is necessary to take into account a number of variable costs, such as the price of purchased feed.²³ In addition wool prices, which were important in the Brixworth Union, during the 1880s were affected by the over-production of Australian wool which flooded British markets at a time when sheep farmers lost a lot of stock after a virulent outbreak of liver rot.²⁴ Consequently, although meat prices were generally more buoyant in the 1880s because there was a higher demand for better quality home produce, they need to be set in the context of a range of less favourable market factors.²⁵ In mixed-farming regions farmers commonly tried to diversify by moving into large-scale fruit and vegetable production, though estimates vary on the size and spread of these ventures.²⁶

There is no doubt that the size of the agricultural labour force declined during the agricultural crisis, falling by some 21 per cent nationally between 1871 and 1911.²⁷ In the

²¹ Perren, *Agriculture*, p. 18.

²² *Ibid*, p. 221.

²³ Perren, *Agriculture*, Table 3, p. 9, 12-13, gives details of mutton, beef and pork prices. Mutton prices fell sharply between 1879 and 1888. They did not recover their 1870s levels until 1896. Beef prices fell in the 1870s but were generally stable throughout the crisis. Pork prices fell sharply between 1880 and 1896. They did not recover to 1880 levels until 1913. He also estimates that purchased feed was 30 per cent cheaper in 1894-5 compared to 1867-7.

²⁴ Floud, *British Economy*, p. 105.

²⁵ Perren, *Agriculture*, p. 11.

²⁶ Overton, 'Agriculture', p. 48 estimates that the number of orchards increased by 60 per cent 1873 to 1904; Floud, *British Economy*, p. 105, calculates that the number of market gardening ventures grew by 145 per cent and the number of woodland management schemes by 27 per cent between 1873 and 1911.

²⁷ Thompson, 'Agriculture', p. 218.

Brixworth Union, as chapter two explained, population levels fell by 22 per cent between 1861 and 1901. Thompson emphasises that the psychological impact of this flight from the land and 'the contraction in the opportunities for employment in farming' was profound, even though the rural exodus resolved the problems of underemployment in many regions.²⁸

Although average wages between 1860 and 1890 rose from some 12 to 17 shillings these rates of pay were low compared to other occupations, even though cheap wheat prices (which cut bread prices) lowered the cost of living. Also in a period when farming profits plummeted, a smaller labour force (often comprised of older men) was asked to increase productivity rates to replace lost revenue. Charles Feinstein estimates that the output of an average agricultural worker increased by around 26 per cent between 1871 and 1911, when a greater volume of crops was grown to make up for the fall in prices.²⁹ However, since agricultural conditions differed very considerably regionally it is very difficult to assess with any degree of accuracy how the rural labour force as a whole was affected by the agricultural crisis. Factors such as piece-rates, bread prices, poor housing, declining numbers of labourers, and the instability of the labour market during seasons when employment rates fluctuated because of poor weather conditions need to be taken into account. It has often been said that most labourers were not forced off the land but left voluntarily, but in many regions the local employment situation during the crusade decades was complex. 'It could be argued', Thompson observes, 'that the relative...inferiority of agricultural labourers was the necessary pre-condition for the magnetic attraction of towns and emigration' during the agricultural crisis.³⁰ A series of grievances including the crusade campaign probably convinced many to leave. It is possible that farmers with falling rental incomes resented labourers claiming outrelief at a time when the cost of

²⁸ Ibid., p. 217.

²⁹ C.H. Feinstein, *Statistical Tables of National Income, Expenditure and Output of the U.K., 1855-1965*, (1965), Appendix, Table 54.

³⁰ Thompson, 'Agriculture', p.218.

living fell but rateable expenditure increased. Central government records indicate that in many rural areas outrelief regulations were relaxed around 1879, but that does not explain why significantly higher numbers of elderly working people accepted compulsory admittance into the workhouse by the 1880s.³¹ This trend seems to suggest that farmers were not the only social grouping that suffered increased hardship as a result of the crisis in agriculture.

There has been some disagreement, notably between Perry and Thompson, about the impact of the agricultural crisis in Northamptonshire. Perry used 'bankruptcy rates as an indicator of depression for farmers'.³² He concluded that Northamptonshire farmers in the 1880s were able to absorb some of their losses because mixed-farming practices gave them an opportunity to spread their investment risk and that they therefore did not experience a recession until the 1890s. Thompson disputes these findings because he found that Inland Revenue returns, which measure rent movements, refute Perry's work.³³ Thompson believes that rent levels give a 'reasonable indicator of the general state of farming', provided they are balanced with county figures on gross farm output.³⁴ He found that Northamptonshire rents decreased by 24 per cent between 1872 and 1893; this meant that it ranked eighth out of forty English counties in a league table of the steepest rental reductions. Gross farm output in the county fell by around 15 per cent between 1873 and 1894, with its labour force (excluding farmers) declining by some 39 per cent in the period between 1871 and 1911.³⁵ Overall Thompson ranks the county in a grouping of the ten most affected counties in England where landowners and farmers, but probably not labourers, experienced the worst aspects of the agricultural crisis. However, Thompson's valuable work fails to take into account the context

³¹ Mackinnon, 'Poor Law' & 'Crusade Against Outrelief', equates this trend with the high social cost of withdrawing outrelief.

³² Perren, *Agriculture*, p.19; Perry, *British Farming*, pp. 26-34; Thompson, 'Agriculture', pp. 210-40. Recently this debate has been revived in M.E.Turner, J.V.Beckett and B. Afton, *Agricultural Rents in England, 1690-1914*, (1997).

³³ Thompson, 'Agriculture', 233-240.

³⁴ Thompson defines gross output as, 'crops plus stock minus quantities consumed in the farming operation'.

³⁵ Thompson, 'Agriculture', Tables, 11.1-11.8, pp. 226, 232-234, 237-8.

of the crusade campaign. As we shall see this had a significant impact on individual working family's incomes.

It has been said that 'farmers were not so much interested in what was happening to total farm output' in the district where they lived, instead their priority was 'what was happening to their share of the division in the proceeds between themselves, the landowners and farmworkers'.³⁶ The recently catalogued Spencer Papers at Northamptonshire Record Office show that tenant farmers on Spencer's Althorp estate started to complain about poor profit margins around 1879.³⁷ For example, a farm bailiff informed Spencer that during 1879 his wholesale wheat prices at market fell by 11s. per quarter.³⁸ The farm bailiff later reported that wheat prices fell by a further 30s. per quarter between 1879 and 1884, which meant that his profits were 50 per cent less than 1860s levels. The bailiff tried to diversify his farming practices to spread his investment risk and reduce labour costs, setting aside thirty-three acres of arable land to implement a market gardening experiment, where he grew mainly root vegetables (carrots and turnips) interspersed with beans and peas. Initially the scheme was profitable but it lost money when larger farmers followed suit and undercut his prices at market. He then tried to improve his cereal profits by using steam machinery to drain, plough and harvest wheat, which cut labour costs, but his prices still plummeted. In 1883 he nearly went bankrupt because his cattle had to be destroyed after a severe local outbreak of foot and mouth disease, closely followed by an attack of pleural pneumonia. At the same time most of his sheep died from liver rot. The bailiff complained to Spencer that if he were forced to leave the Althorp estate because of his accumulated debts he would not receive adequate compensation for the capital he invested in farm improvements in the 1860s. Unless he ran the

³⁶ Thompson, 'Agriculture', p.235.

³⁷ NRO, Spencer MS, Sox 562, 566, 567, land agents' records document numerous cases.

³⁸ B[ritish] L[ibrary] M[anuscript] D[eartment], Althorp MS, K349, Eady to Spencer, 7.1.1880, 2.9.1880, 10.2.1882, 22.2.1882, 22.10.1883, 10.2.1884.

farm down before giving up his tenancy, both Spencer and the next tenant farmer would be the beneficiaries of his venture capital and hard work. This compensation issue is one of the chief complaints recorded in the Spencer archive.³⁹ Most tenant farmers believed that they were effectively bankrupt by 1887.⁴⁰

Throughout the 1880s Althorp estate tenant farmers reported that the agricultural crisis was not ephemeral because it could not be blamed on successive seasons of poor weather conditions. They predicted that the problems of mixed-farming would be of a much longer duration because of the growth in overseas competition, which allowed too much cheap produce to flood British markets. In fact prices fell so steeply that some tenant farmers in the district refused to grow grain crops. For example, in Harlestone parish one tenant explained that he stopped growing oats because it was so unprofitable.⁴¹ It took 170 tons of manure to cultivate an average plot of twenty-one acres, but the yield was so poor in the 1880s that it was not cost effective to purchase and plant seed. Most farmers ploughed their oat crops back into the soil because after successive wet seasons it was of such poor quality it could not even be used for pig fodder. Another tenant farmer explained that converting arable land to grass was no more cost-effective.⁴² In 1887 he had to plough both his hay and straw back into the soil because it lay so long on the wet ground that it rotted away. The tenant farmer usually sold surplus poorer quality straw for thatching ricks, but nobody would buy his rotten stained produce. Spencer's land agents⁴³ reported that on the three estates they managed (Althorp, Holdenby and Overstone, comprising some 49,000 acres) tenant farmers began to break their

³⁹ BLMD, *Althorp MS*, K599, Beasley (junior) to Spencer, 19.6.1882, discusses farmers' plight.

⁴⁰ BLMD, *Althorp MS*, K569, Sir Hereward Wake to Spencer, 4.5.1881 & 7.5.1881 warned Spencer about the farmers' plight and the affects of compensation controversies.

⁴¹ NRO, *Spencer MS*, Sox 566, Alley to Morley, 5.9.1887.

⁴² NRO, *Spencer MS*, Sox 562, Morley to Spencer, 12.11.1887 discusses plight of John Wykes a valued tenant farmer who was in rather dire circumstances and broke his lease agreements.

⁴³ There were two land agents on the Althorp estate in the 1880s. Joseph Noble Beasley served as land agent from 1874-1885, leaving under a cloud when it was discovered that not only did he neglect his duties, but also had a drink problem. John Morley, who served on the estate until the 5th Earl's death in 1910, succeeded him.

leasing agreements to recover costs, which they had generally not done before. Tenants began to sell hay, straw and clover crops, which should have been stored, because they were their only remaining sources of revenue. Although these examples do not fully explore the depths of recession across the Brixworth Union, they do give us a flavour of the sorts of difficulties many tenant farmers faced in the 1880s. Initial research seems to indicate that Perry's work on bankruptcy rates in Northamptonshire, which show the county was 'marginally an island of prosperity' because of its 'concentration on grazing and fattening,' underestimates the degree of distress in the farming community.⁴⁴ Contemporary accounts suggest that Thompson's assessment of the sharp decrease in rental returns and decline in gross farm output reflects the reality of dire farming conditions in the 1880s.⁴⁵ At the very least tenant farmers in the Brixworth Union experienced a severe rural recession, confirming that their evidence to successive Royal commissions was not unduly alarmist or exaggerated.

In the 1880s Spencer's land agent reported that the agricultural crisis was making it very difficult to retain good tenant farmers.⁴⁶ Many whose families had been employed for generations on the Althorp estate left the district, even though the agent offered rent reductions of up to 30 per cent per annum. John Morley, who became land agent in 1885, found that few tenants would agree to sign lease renewals with traditional long-term fixed rental agreements, until they could predict farming's longer-term prospects. The land agent decided to renew tenancies on an annual basis rather than evict loyal tenants with whom the estate had developed good working relationships. Although farming speculators were more common in this period, Spencer's agent was wary of entering into long lease agreements with this new breed of agriculturist. Experience had taught him that such agreements usually resulted in evictions. There are some well documented cases in the Spencer archive of the

⁴⁴ Perry, "Great Agricultural Depression", p. 36.

⁴⁵ Thompson, 'Agriculture', pp. 223-240.

⁴⁶ NRO, Spencer MS, Sox 562, Morley to Spencer, 26.1.1888.

land agent having a great deal of difficulty trying to enforce lease agreements when farming speculators defaulted on their rental arrangements by the early 1890s.⁴⁷ Spencer's land agent seems to have found his job increasingly difficult because he had to maximise business opportunities to try to offset falling rental incomes, but this meant that he had to take unpopular decisions. He reported that Spencer's rental income fell by an unprecedented £4000 per quarter and by 1887 he had to begin to evict a number of long-standing tenants.⁴⁸ The agent's letters reveal that this was a depressing task.⁴⁹

Spencer adopted a much more business-like attitude after the onset of the agricultural crisis. He told his land agent that 'the principle of a berth that is supposed to be hereditary' in farming was 'bad and unsound' because it usually led to 'unpleasantness in the end'.⁵⁰ Spencer was forced to take a much more pragmatic viewpoint, even though many of his tenants had invested their capital and labour resources for generations, because he had over extended himself in the 1870s, just before the crisis in agriculture got underway. The office of Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, which he held twice between 1868 and 1874, and 1882 to 1885, came with a £20,000 allowance from the public purse, but like previous holders Spencer over spent almost double that amount on lavish entertainment during each tenure. On his first return from Ireland in 1874 he took up foxhunting, a life-long but expensive passion. By April 1879, rather than liquidate assets that he inherited, he had to take out a loan of £15,000 'on account of the excess of expenditure for the Hounds 1874/8'.⁵¹ His financial records show that he was very worried about the rate of the decrease in his farming revenues.

⁴⁷ NRO, Spencer MS, Sox 562, Morley to Spencer, 12.1.1887, discusses problems of lease agreements with speculators from the North.

⁴⁸ BLMD, Althorp MS, Misc. Box, Spencer to Hartington (copy), 23.12.1881, discusses fall in Spencer's rental income in some detail and his concerns about the future of farming.

⁴⁹ NRO, Spencer MS, Sox 562, Morley's letters to Spencer 1887-79.

⁵⁰ NRO, Spencer MS, Sox 562, Morley to Spencer, 12.11.1887 and reply 13.11.1887.

⁵¹ BLMD, Althorp MS, Misc. Box, Spencer memorandum on his finances, 26.4.1879; J.P.D. Gordon (ed.), The Red Earl: The Papers of the 5th Earl Spencer, 1835-1901, Volume 1, 1835-1885, (1981), pp.1-34, gives an overview of Spencer's financial situation.

In 1886 he decided to close Althorp House for the foreseeable future, releasing all but a few female servants to reduce household bills.⁵² By the 1890s Spencer's land agent was also very concerned about the future of English agriculture. He warned that,

There will be a sort of agricultural collapse to face – the poor old ship agriculture has been up against bad winds for many years – Her machinery has broken down and she has put to her sails, and the question is whether her provision (capital) will last out until she reaches the haven of better times and remunerative prices - ...Oh that a smarter hand would arise to place on the old ship the Plimsoll mark of a fair rent and a fair burden of taxation.⁵³

During the 1880s everyone in the Brixworth Union was affected by the agricultural crisis. It is evident that if the largest landowner in the area, Spencer, was forced to cut costs dramatically then labourers unable to claim outrelief must have been suffering too. Some guardians of the poor who were experiencing lower profits and falling rental incomes were determined not to reintroduce outrelief to keep the rates as low as possible. Consequently, they decided to offer outrelief claimants a number of privately funded welfare to work schemes.

4.2: Welfare to Work Schemes.

Lynn Hollen Lees in her recent appraisal of the English Poor Laws comments that 'welfare transactions offer a window into the functioning of societies at the local level, one which brings into view the destitute alongside the affluent'.⁵⁴ Therefore, the poor law decision-making process during a period of agricultural crisis should be of prime interest to welfare historians because economic tensions would have reshaped welfare priorities. It is evident that during a period of agricultural crisis working people needed more generous outrelief provision, but rural boards of guardians dominated by farmers whose incomes were falling wanted to make major cost-savings to cut rateable expenditure. The outrelief bargaining

⁵² BLMD, *Althorp MS*, K398, Dasent to Spencer, 10.9.1886.

⁵³ NRO, *Spencer MS*, Sox 563, Morley to Spencer, 21.2.1893.

⁵⁴ L. H. Lees, *The Solidarities of Strangers. The English Poor Laws and the People, 1700-1948*, (1998), p. 12.

process that developed in response to these contradictory priorities strained social relations considerably.

In the Brixworth Union two factors above all others influenced how guardians acted during the 1880s. First, the private charitable fund set up to prevent deserving claimants being awarded outrelief, dubbed the *Secret Service Fund* (refer chapter 3), lacked funds because it was inundated with applications once the agricultural crisis got underway. Pell's party organised a fund-raising drive, but at the same time they began to rethink how to counteract pressure for the reintroduction of outrelief. Second, around 1885 central government became alarmed at the example of growing social unrest in London and major English towns as a result of recessions in trade and agriculture.⁵⁵ As unemployment levels in urban areas rose, creating exceptional distress amongst the working classes, attitudes to pauperism slowly began to change. It was evident that individual outrelief claimants could not be held responsible for the vagaries of poor weather or the prevailing trade recession in an industrial economy. Therefore, a new outrelief recommendation was issued in March 1886, the Chamberlain Circular, which authorised guardians in depressed areas to create welfare to work schemes funded from the rates to alleviate unemployment.⁵⁶

The Chamberlain Circular stated that guardians should implement employment projects that did 'not involve the stigma of pauperism'.⁵⁷ Outrelief claimants were to be given the option of labouring on a variety of community schemes such as laying paths, cleaning streets or doing 'spade husbandry on sewage farms'. They were to be paid at a rate lower than the wage level in their area, but above a minimum subsistence threshold so that they would be able to avoid the workhouse. Central government refused to fund the employment schemes,

⁵⁵ D. Englander, *Poverty and Poor Law Reform in 19th Century Britain, 1834-1914. From Chadwick to Booth*, (1998), summarises background to the Chamberlain Circular (1886), pp. 27-9.

⁵⁶ The Chamberlain Circular (1886) is discussed in J. Harris, *Unemployment and Politics*, (1972), pp. 76-7; Lees, *Solidarities*, pp. 287-293; A. Kidd, *State Society and the Poor in Nineteenth Century England*, (1999), pp. 58-63.

⁵⁷ Englander, *Poverty*, pp. 109-111.

but as an alternative to rate increases guardians had the option of borrowing money to defray costs until conditions improved. Predictably, this new set of recommendations alarmed guardians in the Brixworth Union who were unwilling to increase their borrowing costs. They complained that the scheme would increase local rates and undermine their retrenchment experiment, which they had worked so hard to implement.⁵⁸ Pell summarised their views in a speech to the North Midland Poor Law conference:

Aid from a public fund...only makes matters worse in the end unless applied to assist in the accomplishment of changes arising from economical causes, which are as irresistible as they are natural...The victim to this and similar schemes is the Forgotten Man – the ratepayer – the man who had watched his own investments, made his own machinery safe, attended to his own plumbing, and educated his children; who, just wants to enjoy the fruit of his own care, is told that it is his duty to go and take care of some of his negligent neighbours...He is passed by for the noisy, pushing, importunate and incompetent...Misery enough we shall always find in this world, the result of improvidence, intemperance and idleness...but whether there be more or less of this sort of habitual misery, it should never be taken into the account of exceptional distress, or met or relieved in the same way. This sort of distress is more a matter for public police than public bounty.⁵⁹

However, Pell realised that the Chamberlain Circular was not a problem, but an opportunity. He proposed that guardians should adapt the new guidelines to suit their interests, by setting up a number of welfare to work schemes funded by private enterprise. These were portrayed as benevolent gestures to alleviate unemployment; in reality they were an ill-disguised attempt to force the labouring poor in the area to migrate to local towns. This meant that the Brixworth Union guardians exported their outdoor relief problems to their poor law union neighbours. Three of the major welfare to work schemes were set up on the Spencer's Althorp estate, and they reveal the true motivations of members of Pell's party.

In 1884 Spencer authorised his land agent to set aside 'a hundred to two hundred acre' site to create a large-scale allotment farm on the outskirts of Harlestone parish as close to

⁵⁸ NRO, PL 2/ 17, Brixworth Union guardians' minute books.

⁵⁹ C[ambridge] U[niversity] L[ibrary] C[ollection], Q. 232.6, A. Pell, 'Exceptional Distress', Annual Poor Law Conference for the East Midland District Poor Law Conference Reports, (1888), pp. 412-14. Quoted as in original.

Northampton as possible.⁶⁰ The land was divided into plots of 'one, two or three acres'. In theory the allotment farm was created to provide work for labourers in low paid rural employment or the non able-bodied unemployed (elderly, disabled, widowed and children). Spencer's land agent gave the impression to local newspaper reporters that any resident of the Brixworth Union could apply to grow produce on the allotment farm to feed their families and this would allow them to remain outside the workhouse.⁶¹ In reality, the allotment scheme was discriminating because although it was portrayed as a charitable initiative it was set up as a profit-making business enterprise. Spencer told the Chairman of the board of guardians, Bury, that he got his land agent to draw up a contract specifying that only the able-bodied who were already employed in town and who were members of an existing allotment society could join the scheme.⁶² Spencer took this decision because he was concerned about the high level of cottage arrears on his estate and his aim was to encourage men employed in regular urban work to stay in the area. He hoped this would force the unemployable to migrate and not become a burden on the local economy.⁶³ Despite the scheme's welfare to work rhetoric it was a speculative business venture with a social engineering objective that discriminated against the most vulnerable members of the labouring community.

Janet Howarth has argued that in the Brixworth Union 'there was no record of an unsatisfied demand for land before 1885' because it had been 'Spencer's policy...to give allotments when asked'.⁶⁴ However, that assertion is mistaken because the majority of the labouring poor could not join the welfare to work allotment-farming scheme. Most were

⁶⁰ NRO, Misc. ZA 2246, 5th Earl Spencer and his allotment farming scheme.

⁶¹ Both the Northampton Mercury and Northampton Herald interviewed Spencer and his agent about the initiatives in March, 1884.

⁶² NRO, Spencer MS, Sox 566, land agent records reveal that Spencer got his solicitor to draw up a number of regulatory contracts in 1884-7 to cover the welfare to work schemes. The contracts have not survived but the agent expressed concern about their harshness to a number of his close confidantes.

⁶³ NRO, Spencer MS, Sox 565, Spencer to Bury & reply 8.1.1887 & 9.1.1887 reveals Spencer's views on the need to disperse underemployed labour in the district to towns.

⁶⁴ J. Howarth, 'The Liberal Revival in Northamptonshire, 1880-1895: A study in late-nineteenth century elections', Historical Journal, 12, (1969), 1, pp. 110-11.

denied access to the scheme because it was designed to persuade the unemployed to migrate to nearby towns. Even those who succeeded in joining the scheme found that Spencer's agent threatened to evict them if they did not pay their rent on time. This became a problem during the frequent bouts of inclement weather in the 1880s. The allotment holders harvested poor quality produce, which was difficult to sell and many who could not pay their full rent had their plot sizes reduced proportionally or withdrawn. After 1885 Spencer decided to change the allotment scheme by limiting all plot sizes. He cited financial reasons for this decision, stating that in a three year period, 1884 to 1886, a plot of one acre lost on average £7 2s. 7d..⁶⁵ Although labour charges in the first year were high, the scheme never subsequently broke even and Spencer calculated that it was not worth investing in such an unprofitable venture. Instead, he decided to invest in a second welfare to work scheme, a co-operative farm, hoping that it would be more profitable.⁶⁶

In October 1885 a fact-finding delegation, comprising guardians who supported Pell's party, inspected a co-operative farm at Radbourne in Warwickshire. They were impressed by its achievements and thought a similar scheme might provide employment opportunities in the Brixworth Union. This would mean they would not have to reintroduce outrelief provision in the area. In 1886 they persuaded Spencer to take the lead by establishing the Harlestone Co-operative Farm Ltd.⁶⁷ He lent the venture £3000 charged at 3 per cent interest (2 per cent below average loan charges) because he was determined to ensure that the enterprise was profitable. If the farm went into profit he would review the interest rate charge, with a view to increasing loan repayments. Two leading supporters of retrenchment, Pell and Bury, subscribed £25 each. A farm of twenty-one fields, comprising 160 acres of arable land and

⁶⁵ *BPP, Royal Commission on Labour*, (1894), Appendix F, q. 87 and Appendix C.XIV, q. 107, gives details of the financial arrangements on the allotment and co-operative farms respectively.

⁶⁶ BLMD, *Althorp MS*, K324, Calverley to Spencer, 5.5.1885.

⁶⁷ NRO, Misc. ZA 2246, 5th Earl Spencer's co-operative farming scheme.

140 acres of pasture, was set aside on the glebe farm at Harlestone. Again Spencer got his solicitor to draw up a contract. It stated that eight able-bodied labourers would be elected by a committee from amongst the respectable labouring poor at Harlestone to work the farm. The stock, farm equipment and any improvements were valued at cost. Spencer agreed to charge a fair and equitable rent, set at £410 16s. 8d. in 1886. It was agreed that each co-operator would be paid average wages for the district, around 13s. per week. Profits would be distributed as follows. Three-quarters would be put into a reserve account, to fund further work on the farm and the remaining quarter would be divided equally amongst the co-operators and the manager. If the farm made a loss the bonus would not be paid until any deficit had been made good.

Once again Pell's party portrayed the co-operative scheme as a benevolent welfare to work gesture, but it too was discriminatory because its contract undermined the spirit of co-operation that it was supposed to be promoting. Even though the labourers were normally paid wages of 13s. per week, they were not recompensed for the high levels of unpaid overtime that they worked over the first six months. The scheme would not have got off the ground if they had not worked the extra hours because the previous tenant had left the farm in such 'bad order'. It is also worth emphasising that this wage level was below that achieved by the National Agricultural Labourers' Union (NALU) in the district in the 1870s, namely 15s. per week. Morale amongst the labourers was low because the farm made a year-on-year loss. Over an eight year period, 1886 to 1893, it lost £1818 7s. 4d. and it was evident that the bonus would never be paid.⁶⁸ The labourers complained that the venture was not a true co-operative.

Spencer's land agent asked a valued tenant farmer to assess whether the labourers had a legitimate complaint. The tenant farmer replied - 'it isn't co-operation at all in the strictest

⁶⁸ The co-operative lost on average £259 16s 9d annually, a deficit of 176s 6d per acre which equates to an average loss of $8\frac{3}{5}\%$ on the £3000 capital that Spencer invested.

sense of the term...the benefit to be received by any co-operator under this scheme is microscopic and remote'.⁶⁹ He noted that labourers should have had the same rights as shareholders in a company. However, as the contract conferred 'absolute and autocratic power upon Lord Spencer', the labourers had no rights. Spencer could dismiss labourers at a week's notice. He could wind up the concern without notice. He could over-ride any decision of the management committee or the manager. He could buy or sell stock without consulting anyone. The tenant farmer confirmed that although labourers received a weekly wage they were considerably out of pocket. Unlike their fellow day labourers in the district they were not paid piece-wages but a fixed wage agreement. This seemed to be an advantage, guaranteeing them employment, but in reality they were being exploited, working much longer hours.⁷⁰ The farmer calculated that a farm of three hundred acres with capital bearing interest could not make a substantial profit. Even if it did eight labourers and a manager had to share a 25 per cent bonus. Each would get a maximum of 2.7 per cent from negligible profits. He believed that the co-operative ethos was a sham and as so few were employed on the farm it was a hollow gesture, rather than an effective welfare to work initiative.

Numerous protests by angry labourers were reported in local newspapers opposing the privately funded charitable and welfare to work schemes.⁷¹ For example, in 1881 the Chairman of the board informed Spencer that his parishioners in Harlestone reacted angrily to the *Secret Service Fund* by refusing to attend church, even before the welfare to work schemes got underway. He admitted that his sermons on charity, self-help and the evils of outrelief were not popular amongst the labouring poor:

the poor people of Harlestone will naturally look upon me with suspicion and it may be some time before they understand that I am not so bad as I have been painted. I quite anticipate empty benches at Church but luckily I have long ceased to regard the

⁶⁹ NRO, Spencer MS, Sox 566, Rice to Morley, 27.10.1887.

⁷⁰ NRO, Spencer MS, Sox 562, Morley to Spencer, 25.6.1890 – noted this was an ongoing wage grievance.

⁷¹ E.g. Northampton Mercury, throughout 1884-7 the letter page was filled with complaints.

size of a congregation as a measure of good work.⁷²

We cannot determine from the records why every labourer decided not to attend church. It seems likely most judged that it was a visible means of registering their protest, since the poor law boardroom had become a closed forum to working people. The Spencer papers reveal that political activity amongst labourers was extensive at this time because few accepted the abolition of outrelief. A wry poem was circulated in the district mocking the inability of Anglican clergy guardians in the 1880s to increase their congregations without resorting to new deterrent tactics:

I can't get the parish to come to my church,
 They all go elsewhere and leave me in the lurch.
 So I'll tackle them now in a different way
 And at the same time I shall make them all pay.
 I've hit on a scheme to set up a club
 And incidentally compete with the pub...
 I shall be boss and take all the dough.
 I shall also decide where the money's to go.
 I shall not allow them to have a committee,
 They might not want me and that would be a pity...
 The pick of my rules is the last number ten,
 I shall get all their money and on Sunday's when
 I rise in my pulpit to give a discourse,
 You'll see that I preach to a much larger force.
 As you can't join my club if you don't go to church
 I think this will stop my being left in the lurch.⁷³

Guardians reported numerous protest meetings to the Althorp estate land agent. For example, Harlestone labourers held a number of meetings to oppose the conversion of their village store and public house to similar co-operative contracts. They applied to several clergy guardians to support their cause, with little success.⁷⁴ One clergyman explained to Spencer that labourers felt very aggrieved that supporters of retrenchment were forcing them to migrate by

⁷² BLMD, Althorp MS, K382, Bury to Spencer, 31.10.1881.

⁷³ M.D. Wilford, Clipston Heritage, (1991 edn.), p. 5 – Clipston village lay on the edge of the Brixworth Union and local people were angry that Pell's party influenced nearby poor law unions, such as Market Harborough, where outrelief was also difficult to obtain. The records of Market Harborough poor law union are located at Leicestershire county record office and show low levels of outrelief in the 1880s.

⁷⁴ BLMD, Althorp MS, K381, Stewart to Spencer, 3.3.1885.

introducing discriminating contracts and ineffective welfare to work schemes.⁷⁵ These excluded many agricultural workers who needed regular employment to replace much-needed outrelief funding.

In the mid-1880s many labourers from the Brixworth Union migrated to find regular work in shoe-manufacturing towns, such as Kettering, Northampton and Wellingborough. Few unemployed able-bodied agricultural workers could afford to stay in a district where there was no outrelief provision and most refused to enter the workhouse. As a result, the population of the Brixworth Union fell by 15.2 per cent between 1871 and 1901.⁷⁶ Spencer's land agent was concerned that this meant a large underemployed pool of older labourers would roam the district in search of work. Poorer families and the aged usually lived in tied estate cottages and could not afford to give up their homes to seek work in town. In any case there was little work available in town because manufacturing was also experiencing a trade recession.⁷⁷ The land agent noted that the non able-bodied were experiencing great difficulties outside the workhouse. One clergy guardian explained in a private letter to Spencer that elderly labourers living in Chapel Brampton on the Althorp estate walked fourteen miles per day to seek work in the spring of 1888.⁷⁸ Older labourers earned just 2s. 6d. per day for twelve hours labour in the fields. On wet days their work was cancelled and as the work was only available in March, one of the wettest months, this happened frequently. They could not earn a living wage. Most worked a three-day week earning just 7s. 6d. and they needed some form of outrelief to avoid workhouse admittance. Despite evidence of this type of impoverishment

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ NRO, census returns, Brixworth Union, 1871-1901 – refer Graph 2.1, chapter 2.

⁷⁷ NRO, Spencer MS, Sox 246, Bobby Spencer's political speeches, 'Depression in trade', outline local economic problems (rural and urban) in the county, 1885-6; R. Greenall, Northamptonshire, chapter 20, pp. 103-106, explains that the influx of agricultural labour into the shoe industry caused a number of problems in the 1880s. It lowered wages and created a 'sweat industry'. This benefited manufacturers who were experiencing a trade recession, as a result of increased competition in the industry. However, once mechanisation was phased in, which remedied competition problems, unemployment levels increased.

⁷⁸ NRO, Spencer MS, Sox 567, Calverley to Morley, 7.5.1888 and replies.

guardians were determined to avoid reintroducing outrelief.

Local newspapers reported that those labourers that succeeded in joining the private welfare to work schemes realised that guardians were exploiting their labour for profit.⁷⁹ Labourers suspected that the work measures had been introduced to persuade potential poor relief applicants to leave the area. Spencer's land agent became very concerned about the impact of the welfare to work schemes and the retrenchment policy. Althorp estate employees believed the policy was draconian and he worried that this was irreparably damaging traditional social relations. For example, he described a rent audit in the parish of Chapel Brampton in 1888 as tense. Labourers turned up in a drunken state and were unwilling to pay even a portion of their rent. They were generally very abusive and felt that because they were being treated harshly by farmer guardians they could ignore rental demands. He observed that on the whole labouring demands were legitimate and the anti-outrelief campaign would have far-reaching repercussions;

Unfortunately there is no one resident...who can now fuse the different interests and schools of thought and any meeting now...reminds one of so many barrels of the different sorts of explosives now in use. Each dangerous in itself and frightfully jealous of its neighbour.⁸⁰

The reason that the land agent was so concerned was that Spencer instructed him to make a third welfare to work administrative change on the Althorp estate in the late-1880s, which caused even more hardship and therefore increased resentment. It showed that as the recession deepened Spencer was determined to save money, whatever the social cost.

In the late-1880s Spencer told his land agent to set up a wood faggoting welfare to work scheme for elderly labourers of pensionable age on the Althorp estate.⁸¹ This was the brainchild of Bury who argued that labourers over seventy years of age still had '10 or 15

⁷⁹ Northampton Guardian, 14.3.1885, reported working people's complaints in an article entitled, 'Harlestone -Lecture on Agricultural Depression'

⁸⁰ NRO, Spencer MS, Sox 562, Morley to Spencer, 6.3.1888.

⁸¹ NRO, Spencer MS, Sox 565-66, Spencer to Bury 24.10.1886 & Bury to Spencer 10.1.1887.

years of good work in them'. Older worn-out labourers worked in woodsheds, earning on average 11s. per week. One local clergyman complained to Spencer's agent that it was upsetting to watch the daily struggle of infirm labourers to work, even in the depths of winter, trying to earn enough to keep them out of the workhouse.⁸² What saddened him most was that many were respectable labourers who had worked loyally on the Althorp estate throughout their lives. Their life savings were usually spent during their first serious illness and thereafter most went into a steady and cruelly prolonged decline. They had the option of workhouse admittance but most feared the stigma and monotonous daily ritual. Also they were separated from their loved ones and made to wear a pauper uniform. The land agent admitted privately to the clergy guardian that he opposed the scheme but intervening with Spencer was pointless.⁸³ The real intent of the welfare to work schemes was to encourage labourers to work to avoid the workhouse, to migrate, or accept indoor relief at the end of their working lives. The agent noted that the schemes prolonged the older labourer's hardship and that most died after entering the workhouse, which pleased some farmer guardians since it kept rates low. Spencer had admitted previously in a private letter to Bury that putting older labourers to work was an excellent way of managing pensionable estate workers. It demonstrated to elderly paupers that they had to work to avoid the workhouse or accept indoor relief quickly when they broke down on the job. He admitted that it was 'demoralising' for younger workers when their fellow labourers died on the job but he would not compromise his poor law convictions.⁸⁴ It soon became apparent throughout the Brixworth Union that some guardians with their eyes fixed on central government targets chose to overlook the depths of local poverty, which their initiatives exacerbated.

Three further cost-saving measures were implemented on the Althorp estate in this

⁸² NRO, Spencer MS, Sox 562, Calverley to Morley, 29.11.1887 & reply.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ NRO, Spencer MS, Sox 565, Spencer to Bury, 24.10.1886.

period. First, in July 1888 all rent reductions on the Althorp estate were cancelled.⁸⁵ This caused hardship amongst both tenant farmers and labourers. Spencer calculated that he could no longer afford to supplement the incomes of his fellow farmer guardians. He knew that this policy would not interfere with the retrenchment experiment because it would make farmer guardians more determined not to reintroduce outrelief as it would increase their rates.

Second, tenants who lived in estate cottages and who were in high rental arrears were given two options. Either they accepted assisted emigration, locally or overseas, or they would be evicted.⁸⁶ Spencer asked local clergymen to interview potential migrants and stress that their homes would shortly be repossessed. The clergymen reported that most 'refuse[d] point blank' to emigrate. Middle-aged labourers stated that they were 'too old' to 'make a fair start overseas'.⁸⁷ Third, Spencer told his land agent to review his charitable expenditure, instructing him to cancel all contributions, including Xmas gifts of bread and meat, to the poor.⁸⁸ One clergy guardian, who supported the retrenchment cause, felt Spencer had gone too far.⁸⁹ He asked him to reconsider his decision because Xmas charity was such a 'vital and needy distribution'. In the makeshift economies of the poor these gifts were important to their annual subsistence calculations. He stressed that to withdraw them 'without any previous notice!', would have deeply impoverishing repercussions (quoted with original punctuation). When Spencer refused to reconsider his decision, the clergyman felt that it was his Christian duty to take over the subscriptions personally. He could not in good conscience ignore poverty. He was also very concerned when Spencer withdrew his annual subscriptions to local burial, sickness, coal and clothing clubs, even though he was patron of many local friendly societies. In the 1870s Spencer had set up many of these schemes personally and assured the labouring

⁸⁵ NRO, Spencer MS, Sox 567, Spencer to Morley, 2.7.1888.

⁸⁶ NRO, Spencer MS, Sox 567, Calverley to Morley, 7.3.1888.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ NRO, Spencer MS, Sox 566, Spencer to Morley memo on charity cancellations, dated March 1887.

⁸⁹ NRO, Spencer MS, Sox 567, Calverley to Morley/Spencer, 30.12.1888.

poor that if they subscribed to these self-help initiatives they would replace outrelief.⁹⁰ Most labourers had been sceptical because friendly societies often went bankrupt before subscribers could claim any benefits. Spencer promised that this would not happen because he would underwrite the schemes. In the late-1880s he reneged on this promise, citing financial pressure.

It is worth investigating this financial justification. In reality, Spencer's charitable expenditure was minute compared to his net income. Spencer's land agent sent him regular income and expenditure statements of his financial position. By 1895, during the second phase of recession when he was under even greater financial pressure, he still had a total income of just over £94,000 in his private bank account, out of which he spent a meagre £387, or 0.04 per cent on sundry charitable payments.⁹¹ One case illustrates just how small his charitable subscriptions were by the late-1880s. In 1887 Spencer reduced his charitable payments in the parishes of Chapel and Church Brampton to £3 annually, even though local piecework wages averaged just 2s. 6d. per day. A clergy guardian had to divide this subscription between ten impoverished families, comprising fifteen adults and nineteen children.⁹² This was an average annual payment of just 1s. 8½ d. per head, and the clergyman stepped in once more supplementing poorer residents out of his own pocket.

The social cost of these welfare to work schemes and of Spencer's actions was profound. As one of the largest employers in the district his actions penalised those in parlous circumstances. The working life cycle of the labouring poor was precarious normally but during the rural recession it was perilous. For instance, one clergy guardian complained to the Althorp estate land agent, that the children of the labouring poor were 'half-starved'.⁹³ Older

⁹⁰ E.g. N[orthampton] L[ibrary] L[ocal] S[tudies] R[oom], Misc. Collection of Friendly Society Records, Chapel Brampton Friendly Society, Annual Report for the Year, (1873), established by 5th Earl Spencer, who paid an annual donation of £4.

⁹¹ NRO, Spencer MS, Sox 551, Morley to Spencer, 26.10.1895.

⁹² BLMD, Althorp MS, K324, Calverley to Spencer, 26.12.1887 & 5.1.1888.

⁹³ NRO, Spencer MS, Sox 562, Morley to Spencer, 3.3.1888, discussed the clergyman's complaint.

labourers in the parishes of Brington and Whilton petitioned a clergyman to help them rent an allotment site of '8 to 10 acres of arable land', which was 'urgently required' to feed them because they were living a hand to mouth existence.⁹⁴ They explained in the petition that they tried to rent land from a local farmer but he turned 'nasty' and they were afraid to beg for help again because a second request might later 'recoil on their heads'. The labourers worried that farmers would stop employing them in the district. The Spencer archive reveals that even when they were employed they experienced poor working conditions and received meagre piecework wages of around 2s. per day. The same clergy guardian complained to Spencer' that 'big farmers are without exception exceedingly hard on their men...they are bullies and village tyrants'.⁹⁵ He 'wish[ed] their farms were cut in half' because 'it would be better for the land, as well as for [local] people'. He witnessed numerous evictions, where poor people were treated harshly. Many should have been given a month's notice before being repossessed but most were 'ejected at a week's notice'. Labourers had the option of moving to town but in reality they had little hope of securing work there either.

The records of the Northampton Poor Law Union for this period have only recently been found.⁹⁶ Initial research indicates that the town had a large pool of underemployed labourers from the Brixworth Union. The Northampton workhouse did not have the capacity to house these poor relief claimants and guardians had to reintroduce outrelief. They complained to central government that the Brixworth Union was resolving its social problems by exporting them to its neighbours.⁹⁷ Senior civil servants replied that rural depopulation

⁹⁴ NRO, Spencer MS, Sox 562, Calverley to Morley, 22.3.1888.

⁹⁵ BLMD, Althorp MS, K324, Calverley to Spencer, 26.12.1887 & 5.1.1888.

⁹⁶ NRO, Misc Volumes, Northampton guardians' minute books, 1870-1900 [note: ref. unallocated as yet].

⁹⁷ The problem of the influx of working people was a key feature of life in the Northampton Union. Guardians tried to resolve their outrelief crisis by sending large numbers of vagrant and lunatic paupers to the County Asylum at Macclesfield to free up space in the workhouse, which was filled to capacity in the 1880s. Also John Bates who was a guardian of the poor for St. Andrews parish acted as an emigration agent at 28 the Drapery Northampton for guardians, and tried to persuade claimants to go overseas. The growing outrelief crisis was discussed at successive meetings in the mid-1880s and was a key election issue, as posters that have survived in Northampton Library Local Studies Room attest.

was the natural consequence of the recession and had not been manufactured by guardians in the Brixworth Union. However, in reality this evaluation of local policy was mistaken. The privately funded welfare to work schemes were introduced to cut rates and prevent the reintroduction of outrelief, by convincing many in the district to migrate. Brixworth Union workhouse records (Table 4.1) reveal that larger numbers of elderly persons who remained behind had to accept indoor relief in the 1880s.

Although the data in Table 4.1 does not take account of demographic variants, such as fertility and death rates, or of seasonal work patterns, these figures show significant changes in age differentials. If the changing age structure of the population increased substantially in the period 1861 to 1891, it would explain why the numbers of elderly persons in the workhouse increased substantially. Yet, David Thomson estimates that between 1861 and 1891 the number of persons aged 65 or over as a percentage of the total population in England and Wales only increased by around 1.6 per cent.⁹⁸ Therefore, there was a connection between the withdrawal of outrelief and the agricultural crisis because the percentage rise in the proportion of elderly people in the workhouse far exceeds the national ageing demography. It is evident that by 1881 increasing numbers of older labourers, both male and female, were accepting indoor relief in the Brixworth Union. The proportion of male labourers aged over sixty in the workhouse rose by 30 per cent in the decade 1881 to 1891. This was probably because they could not find menial work in the district, whereas women could undertake child-care, nursing, washing and mending work to contribute to meagre family economies. Regional studies have shown that almshouse provision for women was more widely

⁹⁸ Thomson, 'Residential', p. 46, estimates that in 1861 3.75 per cent of the population was aged over 65, compared to 5.4 per cent in 1891. He points out that the figures over 60 are more difficult to correlate and although the increase of 1.6 per cent excludes those aged between 60 and 65, the numerical increase still does not account for the significantly higher pauper numbers of older persons in the workhouse post-1870.

Table 4.1: Changing Age Structure of the Brixworth Union Workhouse, 1861-1891.

Age:		0-9	10-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60+	Total %
Date:									
1861	Women	32.0	17.0	9.0	21.0	2.0	6.0	13.0	100%
	Men	20.0	4.0	4.0	20.0	12.0	16.0	24.0	100%
1871	Women	14.0	40.0	17.0	6.0	14.0	3.0	6.0	100%
	Men	18.0	15.0	5.0	13.0	3.0	8.0	38.0	100%
1881	Women	26.0	22.0	3.0	10.0	8.0	8.0	23.0	100%
	Men	20.0	8.0	5.0	5.0	12.0	10.0	40.0	100%
1891	Women	23.0	10.0	3.0	6.0	6.0	10.0	42.0	100%
	Men	11.0	4.0	2.0	0.0	4.0	9.0	70.0	100%

Source: NRO, census returns the Brixworth Union, 1871-91, and compiled from N. Van der Velde, 'The Brixworth Union Workhouse: Its Regime, Officers and Inmates', (Unpublished BA dissertation, University College Northampton, 1998-9), p. 33.

available, compared to men in rural unions.⁹⁹ Families often refused to let women enter the workhouse because they had greater affection for female relatives. Nevertheless, the proportion of women in the workhouse aged over sixty still rose by 19 per cent in the period 1881 to 1891 in the Brixworth Union. These figures explain why the lack of outrelief pensions led to deep class divisions by the 1890s. The stigma of workhouse admittance was inevitable for the majority of elderly agricultural workers and this motivated the majority of working people to oppose Pell's party (refer chapter 6). Most chose to act now to avoid indignity later.

Michael Rose suggests that by the 1880s most workhouses were transferring their duties to other care-institutions by boarding out paupers.¹⁰⁰ This was not the case in the Brixworth Union because the rural workhouse contained a large number of young children

⁹⁹ M.E. Rose, 'The crisis of poor relief in England, 1860-1914', in W.J. Mommsen and W. Mock (eds.), *The Emergence of the Welfare State in Britain, 1850-1950*, (1981), pp. 50-70, argues women were less harshly treated on the whole and benefited from the move to boarding out paupers after 1870 as indoor care expanded.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

and elderly patients, who were the most vulnerable members of the community. The Webbs' model of social welfare progressivism, which stresses the development of more specialised indoor care, was not in operation in the Brixworth Union during the 1880s.¹⁰¹ Instead fewer paupers were boarded out to discourage others from entering the workhouse and to save money, a policy that seems to have penalised the most impoverished. Further comparative work needs to be done to ascertain whether the same trends occurred elsewhere. However, even though Brixworth was a strict 'model' union and therefore its workhouse statistics might be expected to be atypical, Thomson's Bedfordshire studies reveal similar increases in the number of elderly paupers post-1880. He explains that workhouses became institutional care homes for the elderly in rural society during the agricultural crisis, with one out of every three workhouse inmates classified as elderly (over 65) by 1891.¹⁰² This suggests that even in areas where outrelief regulations were relaxed many guardians tried to save outdoor costs. The social cost of the crusade may have been more profound than many current welfare historians appreciate.

The Spencer archive reveals that many dispossessed older labourers sold their meagre possessions to buy food, but the majority had to accept indoor relief.¹⁰³ Today it is easy to overlook the shame and stigma of workhouse admittance. In the late-nineteenth century it was visible proof of social failure. Mackinnon stresses that the psychological impact must have been considerable because before entering paupers had to surrender their belongings.¹⁰⁴ If the inmate was elderly these were often sold to recoup indoor relief costs. When the Brixworth Union workhouse was refurbished as an old people's home in the early 1970s, workmen found bundles of meagre possessions within the perimeter wall and hedging which had been

¹⁰¹ S. & B. Webb, *English Poor Law History, Volumes I-III*, (1927-9).

¹⁰² Thomson, 'The decline', pp. 299-336.

¹⁰³ NRO, *Spencer MS*, Sox 562, Calverley to Morley, 29.11.1887, discusses social problems.

¹⁰⁴ Mackinnon, 'Poor Law'; Mackinnon, 'English Poor Law'.

deposited by paupers in the late-nineteenth century.¹⁰⁵ Purses containing a few pennies, letters from loved ones and precious wedding rings were stashed for safekeeping. They represent an inventory of pauper dignity, the social cost of an impoverishing retrenchment experiment. Presumably paupers hoped to collect their prized bundles at a later date. We know so very little of those who never returned. Their lost property has become an historical analogy for the lost account of their parlous lives. Undoubtedly, in the 1880s Spencer and his fellow guardians who supported the retrenchment experiment accentuated their pauperism. As one local clergyman complained, 'the moral qualities' of guardians 'in the matter of Christian kindness [were] very low indeed' during the late-Victorian agricultural crisis.¹⁰⁶ They achieved their aim of making claimants reluctant to seek official relief and this 'became firmly rooted in popular culture'.¹⁰⁷ However, the social cost was extreme because it created a 'world without welfare' outside the workhouse for the most needy in the community.¹⁰⁸ However, guardians went a step further to ensure that outrelief was eradicated.

4.3: Begging for a Burial – Pauper Funeral Controversies.

Under the terms of the Anatomy Act of 1832, no person who died in the care of parish authorities in England and Wales was guaranteed a pauper funeral paid from local rates.¹⁰⁹ After 1834 guardians of the poor had the right to reclaim any poor relief costs associated with parish care, both indoor and outrelief funding, by selling parts of any pauper cadaver to teaching hospitals. Legislation stipulated that any deceased person's body that had not been

¹⁰⁵ NLLSR, Anon. Centenary of Brixworth Rural District Council, 1894-1994, (1994) (copy also held at Brixworth parish library).

¹⁰⁶ NRO, Spencer MS, Sox 567, Calverley to Spencer, 20.12.1888.

¹⁰⁷ D. Fraser, The Evolution of the British Welfare State, (1984 edn.), p. 55.

¹⁰⁸ Thomson, World Without, p. 1.

¹⁰⁹ The significance of the Anatomy Acts is discussed in - R. Richardson, 'A Dissection of the Anatomy Acts', Studies in Labour History, (1976), I, pp. 8-11; T. Laqueur, 'Bodies, death and pauper funerals', Representations, (1983), I, pp. 109-31; R. Richardson, Death Dissection and the Destitute, (1987); P. Jalland, Death and the Victorian Family, (1996).

'claimed' for burial six weeks after death could be used to provide anatomical tuition. The Act outlawed the commercial use of whole corpses but crucially allowed parish authorities to use their discretion to permit pauper cadavers to be used for dissection or dismemberment. Ruth Richardson has described the Anatomy Act as an 'advance clause' to the New Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 that together 'forged a wedge, which sundered the two nations of rich and poor' in England and Wales.¹¹⁰ She stresses that this was why pauper burials were so feared amongst the impoverished since guardians could use legislation as a 'class reprisal' to dispose of the poor's loved ones' remains arbitrarily.¹¹¹ In an age when the dismemberment of a cadaver was visible proof of both social and religious failure, the poor used every resource within their limited means to avoid such a fate.¹¹²

What little research has been done on the subject of poor law pauper funeral rites in the mid-Victorian period suggests that it was not common for pauper cadavers to be sold to recover parish relief costs.¹¹³ Instead, many guardians agreed to pay for a series of customary local funeral arrangements using medical outrelief orders. However, when the Poor Law board merged with the newly created Local Government Board in 1871 medical provision came under a renewed attack. Even then the issue of pauper funeral rites did not become a contentious issue in the Brixworth Union until central government passed the third Reform Act (1884) followed by the Medical Relief (Disqualifications Removal) Act (1885).¹¹⁴ The latter stated that those in receipt of medical outrelief were no longer disenfranchised in parliamentary elections.¹¹⁵ Consequently, guardians who believed in the principle of 'no representation without rates' were determined to eradicate medical outrelief provision,

¹¹⁰ Richardson, *Death*, pp. 266-7.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² Laqueur, 'Bodies', p. 109.

¹¹³ Although there is a substantial literature on the subject of the New Poor Law, little has been written on the topic of pauper funeral provision on medical orders. E.g. - A. Digby, *The Poor Law in Nineteenth-Century England and Wales*, (1982), pp. 19-26 details misuse of medical orders by boards of guardians.

¹¹⁴ D. Englander, *Poverty*, p. 25.

¹¹⁵ Williams, *Pauperism*, p. 102.

including pauper funeral customs. At a time when the retrenchment experiment was at its most severe the issue of pauper funeral provision became a rallying cry for overt political activism of a type that had been little seen since the demise of the NALU in the area. Local people sent petitions, letters of protest and evidence about pauper funeral controversies to central government. Although those who wrote in to the Local Government Board could have been motivated for a variety of personal reasons to take this action and their evidence may contain a number of strategies, notably due to the anti-outrelief context, on balance the sources that have survived are compelling. This material gives us a rare glimpse of the working classes' funeral mores and experiences at the hands of parsimonious parish authorities. The harshness of the crusade experiment appears to have given voice to a subject that was normally taboo in rural society.

In the late-1880s the Chairman of the Brixworth Union board of guardians introduced a motion proposing that the union's four doctors, who were employed as poor law medical officers (hereafter referred to as medical officers), should be dismissed and replaced by a single doctor on a lower salary.¹¹⁶ He argued that as there were fewer medical outrelief cases the services of four highly paid medical officers was an unjustifiable expense.¹¹⁷ Although the board of guardians passed the motion, dismissing the medical officers was not straightforward. Guardians discovered that the medical contracts of only three out of four of the doctors could be terminated. One medical officer had been employed prior to 1870 and his contract stated that his job was 'for life'. Unsurprisingly, the doctors resented the fact that they had co-operated in implementing the medical retrenchment strategy against their better judgement, which had resulted in their eventual dismissal. They told central government that

¹¹⁶ P[ublic] R[ecord] O[ffice], MH 12/8705, Brixworth Union correspondence volumes for the period 1885-1890 have provided most of the primary research material on the medical outrelief controversy and the four pauper burial case discussed below.

¹¹⁷ PRO, MH 12/8705, 2.10.1890, LGB internal review of the impact of dismissals over a five-year period claimed the medical officers were earning £78 per annum each, with little work to do.

they were furious at being dismissed on economic grounds because their salaries had been reallocated to the one relieving officer in the area who was a staunch supporter of the retrenchment experiment.¹¹⁸ As a result the relieving officer was one of the highest salaried poor law officials in England and Wales, earning £150 per annum.

The Chairman's high-handed actions turned the remaining medical officer into a formidable enemy. He became a spokesperson for those colleagues who had been dismissed and felt very aggrieved about the lack of consultation over these medical changes. The doctor began to organise a campaign to discredit the achievements of the Brixworth Union board of guardians.¹¹⁹ He challenged the conventional view that they were one of the top ten performing 'model' unions in England and Wales. He also refused to assist Pell's party in reviewing medical outrelief procedures. Instead he sent a number of reports to central government outlining why medical statistics that were returned to the Local Government Board by the Chairman were false.

The medical officer explained that guardians kept two sets of records on medical cases.¹²⁰ These were sent regularly to senior civil servants who used them to compile annual figures on national medical trends. The first return listed the number of funded outrelief cases and the second recorded the number of consultations. However, only the first list was used to compile performance indicators, whereas the second set of figures was filed centrally. Yet, the latter reflected the true reality of local medical practice. The doctor pointed out that a simple comparison of the two returns for the Brixworth Union showed that medical officers were attending patients regularly and their salaries were justified. Often they worked free of charge and the remaining medical officer pointed out that he now had an unacceptable workload. He

¹¹⁸ PRO, MH 12/8705, letters 1885-1890 discuss doctor's grievances and recall the changes that had taken place and their fury.

¹¹⁹ PRO, MH 12/8705, 19.9.1890, gives a long account of poor law medical officers' complaints in this period.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

warned that recent changes in outrelief medical regulations would cause hardship and were resented amongst the poor. The doctor decided to focus on the issues of poor quality medical treatment and the sudden withdrawal of pauper funeral rites in his reports to central government. He took this decision because these subjects would arouse considerable controversy locally and that would bring attention to the good work that the doctors had done over the years on behalf of the poor. Following the doctor's example a series of complaints about these issues began to flood into central government from traditional outrelief claimants too. This dossier contains rare details of the funeral customs of the poor and their fears about pauper funerals. Four of the best-documented cases are discussed here.¹²¹

The first case was that of an elderly pauper aged eighty-five from Spratton village, Sarah Ward.¹²² The Brixworth Union letter book and central government records reveal that she applied for medical outrelief funding in late June 1887 after she broke her leg. Her relatives sent a messenger to the union doctor asking him to attend Sarah as soon as possible. They feared that her injury was more serious than it appeared because she was in considerable pain. The medical officer had to refuse to visit Sarah at home because although his terms of employment could not be changed, his conditions of service had been altered. He was no longer authorised to make home visits without the presence of the relieving officer and the authority of a full board meeting of the Brixworth Union guardians. His contract also stipulated that he was not allowed to attend paupers in cases of 'sudden accident'. He told Sarah's family that their only option was to transport her to Northampton Infirmary, some seven miles away, where she would receive the necessary medical treatment. However, Sarah's family could not afford to pay her transportation costs because they were so

¹²¹ Note these cases are not detailed in date order but in the sequence that they were discussed in official records at the LGB or elsewhere.

¹²² Case analysed from PRO, MH 12/7805, 19. 7.1887; NRO, LG 21/07, Brixworth Union letter book (1886-1889), entry 19.7.1887.

impoverished. She was left overnight to suffer in considerable pain. The doctor attended her the following day free of charge and arranged for transportation at a reduced cost. Despite this action Sarah died one month after entering the infirmary (on 24.7.1887) from a thrombosis related condition. Although there was no evidence linking her demise to medical neglect, the doctor believed the Brixworth Union guardians had undermined his professionalism.

The letter book and central government files reveal that Sarah's family was now confronted with two dilemmas.¹²³ First, they suspected, but could not prove, that had she received immediate medical attention she might not have died. If they requested an official Inquiry into the case it was likely that it would focus on the action of the medical officer and they had no desire to criticise him because he had acted in Sarah's best interests under the circumstances, providing free medical care. Second, Sarah's cadaver was now located in the Northampton Infirmary. Unless her family pooled their meagre resources to pay for a private burial, the parish authorities would bury her. This meant that her body could be dissected or dismembered¹²⁴ at the local anatomical teaching hospital located next to the Northampton Infirmary.¹²⁵ They were anxious to avoid this at all costs. The correspondence between guardians and Sarah's family indicates that the bereaved relatives knew that it was pointless applying for a medical outrelief order to bury Sarah, as this would be refused. After consulting the local medical officer a decision was taken to report the case to the Local Government Board. The family hoped central government would intervene if they created a controversy, forcing the board of guardians to act more leniently by funding a customary pauper funeral.

An official Inquiry was instigated but the guardians' minute books reveal that the

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ It is worth noting that dissection of the body for anatomical teaching did not necessarily involve dismemberment, that is the severing of the limbs or body parts. However, poorer families could not be sure how much the body had been interfered with and this was why they resented the policy.

¹²⁵ *The Lancet*, 7.9.1889, noted that there was a teaching hospital in anatomy and materia medica and practical pharmacy located next to the Northampton Infirmary. Its pupillage charges were £25 p.a. with a perpetual fee of £50. The anatomical school appears to have been conveniently located nearby so medical students could study cadavers from the infirmary.

medical officer, not the board of guardians, came under attack from central government.¹²⁶ Guardians were very careful to distance themselves from a charge of medical culpability and they were determined not to act leniently in this case because they judged that would be setting an unwarranted precedent for the future. The medical officer defended his actions at a board meeting on the grounds that medical regulations in the Brixworth Union were unworkable and undermined his professionalism. After a lengthy investigation the Inquiry concluded that Sarah's death was the result of natural causes and was the responsibility of neither the medical officer nor the guardians. However, that verdict did not resolve the problem of Sarah's burial and her family had to accept the ignominy of a pauper funeral. No details have survived concerning the fate of Sarah's cadaver. It is difficult to assess whether the doctor portrayed this case in a bad light to further his interests, but it is evident that a lack of medical outrelief provision had forced a pauper to leave her home to get essential medical care. Sarah was placed in a vulnerable position that heightened the threat of her body being dismembered or dissected if she died.¹²⁷

The second case occurred in the autumn of 1885 when an elderly widower, Samuel Brains, died from natural causes. Central government records and the evidence of a labourer, Sidney Ward, at the Royal Commission on the Aged Poor (1894) reveal the circumstances of this case.¹²⁸ Samuel Brains had been a resident in the Brixworth Union but his body was in the Northampton Infirmary at the time of death. He had recently been transferred there because the local medical officer was not authorised by the local board of guardians to attend terminally ill paupers at home, unless it was to arrange to transfer them to the workhouse or a

¹²⁶ NRO, PL2/17-18, Brixworth Union guardians' minute books.

¹²⁷ The case and subsequent Inquiry was reported in local newspapers throughout July 1889, refer Northampton Mercury and Northampton Herald. There was no discernible bias in their coverage but a sense of outrage amongst the community at the turn of events was apparent.

¹²⁸ This burial controversy has been analysed from - PRO, MH12/8705, 19.9.1890, Wilson [MOH] to LGB and replies 2.10.1890 & 27.09.1891; *BPP*, The Royal Commission on the Aged Poor (1983/4), Sidney Ward q.15696, q. 15696, q. 15698, q. 15702; NRO, LG 21/07, 23.6.1887 & 16.5.1888.

local hospital. Samuel's body lay in the Northampton Infirmary for a week after death. This delay was a tactic by his wife, friends and neighbours to give them more time to organise a funeral fund to bury him without recourse to a pauper burial. Central government files reveal that they knew that leaving his body in the Northampton Infirmary was a risky strategy because if they failed to collect enough funds to bury him the Brixworth Union board of guardians could sell his body for dissection or dismemberment.¹²⁹ Even though guardians were not authorised officially to sell the corpse for dissection until six weeks after death, the cadaver might be dismembered in the morgue at any time without consultation. After seven days it became apparent that his wife, friends and neighbours could not raise enough money to bury Samuel privately. The makeshift economies of the labouring poor in the area were already over-stretched because of the impact of the agricultural crisis. Consequently, Samuel's wife asked their daughter to travel to the area from a nearby county and arrange to claim her father's body for burial on behalf of his close relatives. However, as she was also impoverished the daughter had to apply to the Brixworth Union board of guardians for a medical outrelief order to bury her father, as had been the custom in the area before 1870.

Samuel's daughter made a burial application to the Brixworth Union relieving officer. Sidney Ward informed the Royal Commission on the Aged Poor that three times she applied and three times her request was refused.¹³⁰ The relieving officer informed her that guardians would only lend her money to bury her father, otherwise she had to accept a scaled down pauper funeral arranged by the parish authorities. Samuel's daughter refused to take out a loan because she would have to sign a contractual weekly agreement to repay the debt in instalments, which she could not afford to do. The Brixworth Union letter book suggests that paupers feared that if they defaulted on their funeral loan repayment guardians would

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ward, Aged Poor, q. 15696.

prosecute them at the petty sessions in Northampton for the recovery of the outstanding debt.¹³¹ Ward explained that Samuel's daughter pleaded with the relieving officer to assist her to bury her father's body 'decently'. She wanted a small parish allowance to pay for a customary burial. Local Government Board records suggest that funeral allowances were modest and would provide for a local woman to wash her father's body and to dress him in a new woollen funeral shroud, to ensure that the body could be laid out for inspection by her father's neighbours and friends. Such arrangements appear to have been important signifiers of the family's respectability indicating that the deceased had the right to be buried in consecrated ground because his death was natural, and not the result of a violent suicide.¹³²

In his evidence Ward explained that Samuel's daughter was determined to ensure that her father's body was buried in a wooden coffin with a basic Christian service (there is no indication from the records whether the family was established church or nonconformist). Records of local burial boards indicate that it was conventional for poorer people to be buried in a communal grave marked with a numbered cross and probably located to the north of the churchyard (wealthy residents were buried in the eastern section of churchyards).¹³³ It was also customary to arrange to bury loved ones in a nailed coffin otherwise there was no guarantee that the body would reach the grave before being sold. This explains why Samuel's daughter was determined to bury her father in a coffin, otherwise it might be exhumed and sold privately for anatomical purposes.

Pat Jalland in her recent re-appraisal of Victorian mores about death explains how

¹³¹ NRO, LG21/07, Brixworth Union letter book reveals that although guardians did not prosecute they still used the threat of prosecution regularly.

¹³² E. Howlett, 'Burial Customs', *Westminster Review*, (August, 1893), pp. 166-174, discusses history of pauper funeral rites. The basic conventions were very similar to cases in the Brixworth Union. They included a woollen shroud (p. 168), laying out a body to prove death was natural (p.171) [although this was often done for inheritance reasons in a wealthier family], tolling a bell to bid mourners to a funeral (p. 174) and a wake (p.166).

¹³³ NLLSR, Misc. Pamphlet Collection, 'Rule of the East Haddon Burial Board, adopted January 12th 1892, (1892). The pamphlet reiterates basic conventions that had been in use since the 1860s and sets new regulations on the cost of burial sites, etc.

important funeral rituals were in the late-nineteenth century.¹³⁴ She states that although many people did not attend church, after a bereavement most mourners ensured that their loved ones' body was buried intact, otherwise they could not be raised from the dead on the Day of Judgement and ascend into heaven with the other members of the community. In an age when 'appearance' was of the utmost importance, each family was responsible for giving their loved one a 'good' send off by paying for the most elaborate funeral they could afford. Consequently the worst type of funeral was a pauper burial and customary funeral rites, even amongst the poorest families, were important.¹³⁵

Ward said in his statement to the Royal Commission on the Aged Poor that the relieving officer of the Brixworth Union board of guardians refused to make an exception in the case of Samuel Brains. He informed Samuel's daughter that if she could not afford a coffin and a funeral service she would have to do without one.¹³⁶ He instructed her to claim her father's body from the Northampton Infirmary and arrange with the hospital authorities to prepare the body for burial herself. She was told to wash her father's cadaver, wrap it in a cotton sheet and sew the body in personally.¹³⁷ She could then accompany it on a return journey back to her father's parish of birth, having paid a local carter to transport her and the cadaver. The body could then be buried in a communal grave. This would give her an opportunity to ensure that her father's body was placed securely in the ground. Samuel's daughter was outraged. It was unlikely that a carrier would agree to transport a body that had been putrefying for several weeks wrapped in a thin sheet. Ward said that he 'could hardly believe' the relieving officer's instructions, as reported by Samuel's daughter.¹³⁸ He 'wrote to the guardian of the parish' to ascertain the full facts of the case and the guardian wrote back

¹³⁴ Jalland, Death, p. 3.

¹³⁵ Kidd State, (1999), p. 138 discusses general fear of pauper burials; Lees, Solidarities, pp. 294-298, does too.

¹³⁶ Ward, The Aged, q. 15696.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ward, The Aged, q. 15695, 15697-15704.

‘confirming the statement’. Clearly, the furtive funeral arrangements that the relieving officer suggested undermined poorer families’ sense of respectability in the local community, offending both their cultural and religious sensibilities. After considerable local controversy about the fate of Samuel’s cadaver a sympathetic guardian intervened in the case. He could not get the medical outrelief decision overturned on the Brixworth Union board but he gave Samuel’s daughter a charitable contribution towards the cost of a coffin. He also wrote a begging letter for her, authorising her to collect house-to-house around the union from wealthier ratepayers in the community until she had enough donations to bury her father decently.¹³⁹ Begging for a burial was replacing customary funeral payments in this location and these revised medical outrelief policies were deeply resented amongst the poor in the area.

The third case was that of a pauper, Elizabeth Simons,¹⁴⁰ aged seventy-eight from Moulton village. In May 1888 she applied for medical outrelief because she was infirm and could no longer work.¹⁴¹ Her husband Daniel, aged seventy-four, was also unemployed. Her outrelief application was refused but because her case was deserving she was funded temporarily for one month from the *Secret Service Fund* run by the Chairman of the board of guardians. Three weeks later she died and her destitute husband applied for a medical outrelief order to bury his wife. He thought that this would be a straightforward matter. However, the poor law union records and Ward’s evidence before the Royal Commission on the Aged Poor reveals that Daniel Simons could not get guardians to agree to pay his wife’s funeral costs even though he was destitute. Since his wife had been in receipt of charity prior to death and was therefore not technically destitute, guardians would not pay for a coffin or any associated conventional funeral expenses on medical outrelief orders. Instead, Elizabeth’s body was left

¹³⁹ Ibid., q. 15696-97.

¹⁴⁰ There is some disparity in the evidence as to the correct spelling of this name, sometimes referred to as Simons or Symons. It is taken here as the former, as this was recorded in the guardians’ minute books. Her age was also disputed as 73 or 78 at the time of death. It is cited twice as 78 so this has been accepted here.

¹⁴¹ PRO, MH 12/7805, 16.5.1888; NRO, LG21/07, 16.5.1888; Ward, The Aged, q. 15701.

at home to putrefy whilst her husband appealed to local overseers and the sanitary inspector to help him bury his wife's body privately from public funds. When that failed he solicited the help of a sympathetic guardian who brought the case before local magistrates on his behalf. This was a risky business because the inspector of nuisances could remove the body on health grounds or arrange with the relieving officer to sell it to recover parish costs without consulting the widower. Although there is no evidence that this was common practice in the Brixworth Union it was a possibility under the terms of the Anatomy Act. The fear of this possibility shaped the actions of poorer people.

At a petty sessions hearing in Northampton magistrates decided that they could not interfere with due process in the Brixworth Union but they did indicate that in their opinion the cadaver was the responsibility of the sanitary inspector because a putrefying corpse was a health hazard.¹⁴² However several magistrates who served as *ex-officio* guardians in the Brixworth Union felt very uneasy about this decision and there was heated debate during successive board meetings about the case. Guardians agreed to refer the matter to the local sanitary inspector but he refused to take responsibility for the case. He informed guardians that as the body was lying-in at home it was a private, not a public nuisance. He argued that he was a poorly paid official whose low wages did not recompense him for taking unpopular decisions. He recommended that the case should be referred back to the relieving officer who was a more highly paid official on a salary of £150 per annum, as opposed to his £5 per annum. The relieving officer adjudicated that as the widower had 'been to work, was able to work, and had the prospect of work' he should be offered a loan to cover the costs of the coffin to be repaid in weekly instalments.¹⁴³ If he remained unemployed he could ask his relatives to repay the funeral debt. The medical officer, who was very critical of the funeral

¹⁴² NRO, PL2/17-18, Brixworth Union guardians' minute books.

¹⁴³ NRO, LG21/07, entry 16.5.1888.

policy, refuted that assessment. At a time when young men found it difficult to get employment in the district, an aged, worn out labourer was all but unemployable. His family could not support him as they were already struggling to make ends meet.

The doctor approached the magistrate who had been uneasy about the case during the original hearing in Northampton and asked him to support a move to overturn the burial policy of the board of guardians. The sympathetic guardian proposed a motion that censured the conduct of the relieving officer. Although twenty-six guardians attended the meeting only twenty voted (6 abstained), but the vote was carried by 11 votes for to 9 against.¹⁴⁴ The Chairman was outraged at this turn of events and to deflect attention from the funeral controversy he focused on the need to rally support for the relieving officer who had been criticised. He moved a new motion to 'approve the action' of the relieving officer, reiterating that he was the instrument, not the instigator of the policy. At the request of the Chairman the Local Government Board inspector, Mr W. Peel, intervened in the case. The relieving officer was not censured but it was noted that a minority of guardians strongly disapproved of the unpopular burial policy. In the end Elizabeth Simons was given a customary funeral but only because two sympathetic guardians paid the costs of the burial out of their own pockets.

These burial controversies caused a public outcry in the district. Consequently, the Chairman of the Brixworth Union, Bury, decided to make a statement to local newspapers, in which he defended his actions:

in a parish where they have learnt to help themselves and where the Guardian has the reputation of being hard-hearted...an old woman dies. There can be no question about destitution. She was a widow, and had been an inmate of the Workhouse until quite recently and possessed literally nothing but her clothes. What happens here? The difficulties which staggered Moulton and convulsed the Board of Guardians...with a threat of popular *emeute* [unrest]...is very simply settled. The neighbours who had taken it in turn to sit up with her during her illness perform all the necessary offices after her death. The carpenter makes the coffin at cost price; first one gives help, then another...and the poor woman is quietly and decently buried...I only ask lovers of poor relief...to ...look at this picture...and say which exhibits the better side of human

¹⁴⁴ NRO, PL2/18, Brixworth Union guardians' minute books, May-June 1888; NRO, LG 21/07, 16.5.1888.

nature? [sic]¹⁴⁵

The Chairman's letter reveals three important factors. First, he was concerned enough about the threat of a popular reaction to defend his action in a letter to a local newspaper. Evidently it must have been general public knowledge that residents in the Brixworth Union were bitterly divided over the pauper burial issue. Secondly, the action of residents reveals that they used their friendship and kinship networks to overcome parsimonious poor relief policies.¹⁴⁶ Thirdly, even the Chairman admitted that a burial was not 'decent' unless a pauper was buried in a coffin 'quietly', in a private manner. His stance over the pauper burial issue attacked working class culture and was deeply offensive.

The final case was that of a labouring man from Spratton, John Wykes, aged twenty-seven with a wife and two young children.¹⁴⁷ Letters from the remaining poor law medical officer and a sympathetic local guardian reveal the circumstances of this fourth medical case. After the harvest of 1889 Wykes contracted 'quinsy', an inflammation of the throat. He never fully recovered from the illness and by Christmas his condition had worsened after a severe dose of influenza. The doctor explained that he made no application for medical outrelief and 'during this time he was destitute and dependent on private Charity'.¹⁴⁸ In April 1890 Wykes tried to return to work at the Iron pits at Brixworth but he contracted pleurisy and a severe inflammation of the lungs. He now had to apply to the local medical officer for outrelief. Local Government Board records indicate that the doctor certified that the patient was too ill to be moved but guardians refused his outrelief application, offering only indoor relief care. Meanwhile the pauper's condition deteriorated further. The doctor explained that Wykes developed a 'pulmonary inflammation which resulted in an ulceration of the lung with a

¹⁴⁵ Northampton Guardian, 18.5.1888.

¹⁴⁶ For a general text on the use of charity and kinship as neighbourhood resources refer - P. Mandler (ed.). The Uses of Charity: the Poor on Relief in the Nineteenth Century, (1990).

¹⁴⁷ PRO, MH12/8705, Rev JL Roberts to LGB, case of John Wykes, 9.7.1890.

¹⁴⁸ PRO, MH 12/8705, 9.7.1890, Roberts and Harpur to LGB.

constant discharge of a most malignant and offensive character'.¹⁴⁹ The smell of infection was so bad that neither the doctor, nor a local clergyman, or a farmer guardian from the parish could enter the sickroom for more than a few minutes where he lay dying. His wife and mother nursed him because the stench of his condition was so bad that no paid nurse would attend. The clergyman tried to get Wykes to enter the workhouse but he refused because he wanted to die at home and avoid the stigma of a pauper burial after death.

The medical officer in the Brixworth Union supported Wyke's case for special treatment to central government. He stated that any sudden movement would be fatal. His family also complained separately to the Local Government Board that once Wykes was placed in the workhouse he would be placed in a male ward where his female relatives could not enter to nurse him. There was no trained nurse in the workhouse, no officer who cared for patients during the night, and he would be left in the care of 'aged male paupers who would desert him in his need'.¹⁵⁰ The medical officer pleaded with the Local Government Board stating the extenuating circumstances but they adjudicated that the pauper had to enter the house. The Chairman of the Brixworth Union offered to relax workhouse regulations by allowing the pauper's wife to nurse him in an upper sick ward. If she did not accept this adjudication parish funded medical treatment would stop unless the doctor offered to attend Wykes free of charge. His wife accepted reluctantly that she had no choice but to arrange to transport her terminally ill husband, on a cart, one chilly autumn morning three miles to the Brixworth Union workhouse where, unsurprisingly, he died shortly afterwards. The family could not afford to pay for his funeral expenses and he had to accept the ignominy of a pauper burial. Regrettably no details have survived concerning the fate of his cadaver but this case caused a furore in the district.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ PRO, MH 12/8705, case files July 1890.

There is no doubt that the facts of these four cases need to be set in the context of the doctors' grievances and the poor's resentment of the anti-outrelief policy since its inception. However, it is apparent that paupers were being refused customary funeral payments on medical orders on a more regular basis. Local newspaper reports about these cases suggest that residents in the Brixworth Union believed that guardians had withdrawn the medical outrelief funding of customary funerals for both economic and political reasons because of the change in medical outrelief suffrage regulations.¹⁵¹ The four cases detailed in this chapter show just how impoverishing the revised medical regulations were in practice. They confirm Williams' findings that this policy was a form of 'brutal dispauperisation'.¹⁵² Although we have no evidence that guardians authorised the regular dismemberment or dissection of corpses in this location, the labouring poor had learnt to fear the action of guardians in the Brixworth Union. This fear further undermined traditional social relations in the area and deepened the climate of mistrust. This must have accentuated the stress that poorer families experienced during mourning. Sidney Ward told the Royal Commission on the Aged Poor that too many claimants were refused a coffin in the Brixworth Union. When a young mother died even 'the children had to collect round the village to bury her'.¹⁵³ He claimed that 'people would rather die of want than go into the house' because of the burial policy. Ward's statements are compelling because even though he raised the cases for political purposes, as we shall see in chapter 6, it seems unlikely that he would have given such damning evidence in front of Pell and Spencer who sat on the Royal Commission on the Aged Poor. If the cases had been untrue Ward knew that they would be challenged immediately. In fact, although both Spencer and Bury questioned Ward at length about other aspects of his evidence they did not pursue the matter of the lack of outrelief burial payments, an omission that reveals how

¹⁵¹ E.g. letter pages of the Northampton Guardian, May 1888.

¹⁵² Williams, Pauperism, p. 107.

¹⁵³ Ward, The Aged, q. 15702.

controversial the burial policy was.¹⁵⁴ It is evident that in the Brixworth Union poorer families could not afford the luxury of private grief; instead they had to put aside their intimate feelings to wheedle for basic customary funeral rites.

It is worth noting that we do have evidence that 'model' metropolitan unions did authorise dismemberment and dissection practices regularly. For example, the Whitechapel Union in London sold corpses, which their workhouse officials should have buried, to major London teaching hospitals.¹⁵⁵ Similarly, the Lancet reported in November 1889 that clause 4 of the Poor Law Act of 1889 had been altered to allow hospitals of the Metropolitan Asylums Board to be used for medical instruction because of the availability of pauper cadavers.¹⁵⁶ In addition, the Paddington Union passed a resolution 'permitting the friendless or unknown dying in the Paddington Workhouse Infirmary to be used for purposes of dissection'. An editorial in the Lancet welcomed this trend amongst 'model' poor law unions because it noted that 'the number of subjects at present in the dissecting rooms is less than the supply for many past years and we are glad to see another source of supply has become available.'¹⁵⁷ Williams argues that the crusade against outrelief encouraged guardians to act in a devious manner to make greater cost-savings.¹⁵⁸ These pauper funeral controversies appear to support that assertion. It is evident that medical funding changes had a detrimental impact on some of the most vulnerable members of late-Victorian society, who suffered the stigma and shame of pauper funeral practices as a result. In the Brixworth Union the poor renamed the board of guardians the '*Bury-al Board*' in this period.¹⁵⁹ This was a pun on the Chairman's name, the

¹⁵⁴ It is worth noting that the Chairman was given an opportunity to defend his poor relief management in the appendix to the *BPP, Royal Commission on the Aged Poor* (1894). Although he gave details of a number of general outrelief cases, no medical cases were discussed, nor was the subject of pauper funeral provision defended.

¹⁵⁵ Richardson, *Death*, p. 243.

¹⁵⁶ The Lancet, 9.11.1889, p. 971.

¹⁵⁷ The Lancet, 30.11.1889, p. 1129.

¹⁵⁸ Williams, *Pauperism*, p. 102.

¹⁵⁹ W.R.O. Adkins (ed.), *Our County*, (1893), pp. 89-92, noted the reputation and nickname of the '*Bury-al board*'.

Rev. William Bury, and a wry comment on the nature of poor relief care in the vicinity. The Brixworth Union was the poor law board that would rather bury you than care for you outside the workhouse, and then might not bury you in the conventional manner. The poor feared death less than dissection or dismemberment, a far more demeaning fate.

Tom Laqueur explains that working class funerals were usually much simpler affairs than their middle class counterparts.¹⁶⁰ However, the poor had one priority - to avoid a pauper funeral at all costs. Consequently, many paid into burial societies to ensure a decent burial. In the Brixworth Union Sidney Ward became an insurance agent for a friendly society that provided this service. He collected weekly subscriptions around the district to ensure that the poor had a customary funeral. In some areas mourners organised a funeral raffle or an evening's entertainment at the local public house to pay for funeral expenses. Richardson points out that it was often women who took responsibility for funeral funds. She found evidence of women taking round 'the basin to collect for the burial of a pauper'.¹⁶¹ The pauper funeral controversies in the Brixworth Union support those findings. Begging for a burial became a more common sight in the district during the agricultural crisis and it was women and children who pleaded for charitable donations. It is also evident, as in the second case of Samuel Brains discussed above, that certain funeral components 'were a powerful articulation of social aspiration and attainment'.¹⁶² A woollen shroud, displaying the body, a wooden coffin and a Christian service demonstrated 'distance from the workhouse'.¹⁶³ Unlike the upper or middle classes the poor could not afford a lead coffin secured by 'stout rows of coffin nails'. This was a status symbol beyond their means. However, they could claim a body, accompany it until it was laid out, arrange a wake and finally ensure that it was buried

¹⁶⁰ Laqueur, 'Bodies', pp. 125-6.

¹⁶¹ Richardson, *Death*, p. 277.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, p.273.

¹⁶³ Richardson, *Death*, p. 273.

whole. This was the register of their respectability, the scale of their cultural expectations and conventions. They were not dissimilar to middle-class mores, but were equally important in their own right. They ensured that a loved one did not become an anonymous cadaver taken from a shallow pauper grave or degraded during an anatomical teaching seminar.¹⁶⁴ The dignity of private burial was society's final judgement of the deceased. For this reason the relatives of deceased paupers begged to bury their dead in the Brixworth Union.

Conclusion.

This chapter has explored the impact of the onset of the late-Victorian agricultural crisis on the Brixworth Union. The Spencer Papers confirm Thompson's view that landowners and farmers in the Brixworth Union experienced a serious recession during the 1880s.¹⁶⁵ However, working people and the poor suffered too. Further comparative analysis on land agents' records would deepen our understanding of the degree of economic change across the district, but they would be unlikely to alter the view that the recession was a second catalyst (trade unionism being the first) that reshaped the poor law decision-making process. Pell's most loyal supporters feared that the agricultural crisis would force them to reintroduce outrelief, which they had worked so hard to eradicate. They were primarily motivated by the desire to protect their reputation as one of the top ten poor law unions for reasons of prestige and ideology. Most landowners and tenant farmers seem to have taken a much more pragmatic line. They were determined to prevent the reintroduction of outrelief, not for ideological but for economic reasons. The fall in Spencer's rental income was a shock to him and his land agent was very worried by the pace of economic change. However, Spencer's ruthless actions are startling and indicate that any trace of paternalism on his part disappeared

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 279, explains that pauper graves were usually shallow because up to 12 bodies were placed in one hole and this meant that it was easier to rob bodies to sell for dissection.

¹⁶⁵ Thompson, 'Agriculture,' p. 240.

during the agricultural crisis. Although individual farmers may have acted leniently, Spencer set the farming tone for the district and the impact of his conduct was far-reaching. It is difficult to explain Spencer's motivations except in financial terms. However some of his actions such as the cancellation of paltry charitable payments, were not only short-sighted, damaging social relations, they also made little financial sense, since he needed to make major, not minor, cost-savings.¹⁶⁶ The present Earl Spencer believes that once agriculture failed to provide the income the Spencer family took for granted, his relatives still acted in a beneficent manner because they were reluctant to adapt to changing circumstances as they found finance an embarrassing subject.¹⁶⁷ However, the Spencer Papers show that the 5th Earl was an astute businessman who was determined to avoid selling assets. His main priority was to resolve the problem of his falling rental income, by evicting tenants if necessary. It is clear that the Local Government Board gave guardians, like Pell and Spencer, a high degree of autonomy and this allowed deep poverty to remain hidden, disguised by rather crude pauperism returns. Superficially the welfare to work schemes appeared to be benevolent gestures that followed the Chamberlain Circular guidelines, but in reality so many were denied access that the unemployed were forced to migrate or accept indoor relief. The flight from the land in the Brixworth Union was voluntary, but it was also precipitated by the deeply impoverishing anti-outrelief policy and the privately funded welfare to work schemes.¹⁶⁸

These unemployment schemes further our understanding of the types of unofficial strategies that a strict 'model' poor law union implemented to ensure that it continued to achieve its performance indicators. Guardians adapted the Chamberlain Circular to further their interests. In the 1880s the crusade against outrelief in the Brixworth Union only

¹⁶⁶ Spencer sold the famous Spencer library in 1895 to Mrs. John Rylands, who founded the John Rylands' Library in Manchester to offset his rental losses during the agricultural crisis.

¹⁶⁷ C. Spencer, *The Spencer Family*, (1999), pp. 274-5.

¹⁶⁸ Thompson, 'Agriculture', p. 218.

succeeded because guardians exported many of their social problems to their poor law union neighbours. Further work needs to be carried out on the impact of the Brixworth Union retrenchment policy in Northampton town. Initial research indicates that the labouring poor had a great deal of difficulty getting employment in urban manufacturing districts and consequently the Northampton Poor Law Union was inundated with outrelief applications. Since it did not have the workhouse capacity to give unlimited indoor relief, it had to reintroduce outrelief provision. Thus the Brixworth Union was successful because others inherited its social problems. Until more research is carried out on the other strict rural 'model' unions it is not possible to determine whether others resolved their poor relief dilemmas in a similar manner. The higher levels of indoor claims appear to suggest that larger numbers of the poorest inhabitants in rural society during the 1880s were forced into the workhouse compared to the 1870s. This indicates, as Mackinnon, Thomson and Williams observe, that the social cost of the crusade controversy was profound.¹⁶⁹

Spencer's land agent records are filled with accounts of parsimonious decisions taken during the agricultural crisis. It is reasonable to conclude that these accentuated the impoverishment of the poverty-stricken. Cancelling rent reductions, evicting tenants, putting pressure on working people in rent arrears to migrate and withdrawing meagre charitable provision were a few of the major sanctions against the poor Spencer approved. He also authorised that worn out elderly men were to be put to work in woodsheds, knowing that they would do anything to avoid the workhouse. This type of action reveals in what ways guardians radicalised the Longley objectives to suit their interests, even though the demarcation between endemic poverty and destitution was indistinct in the 1880s.¹⁷⁰ Little wonder that working people, forced to beg for a customary burial for their deceased relatives,

¹⁶⁹ Refer footnote 2.

¹⁷⁰ Williams, *Pauperism*, p. 107.

began to ignore the dominant forces of traditional authority in the countryside. Church attendance figures dropped and labourers resented the fact that public houses, the centre of political activity, were also to be converted to co-operative contracts, drawn up by Spencer's solicitor. The Brixworth Union guardians tried to create a 'world without welfare' outside the workhouse, but that strategy was risky because local attitudes to poverty were already changing, just as they were in the towns.

Some magistrates were uneasy about the cancellation of pauper funeral rites, leading to further widespread criticism of Pell's party in the local community and that did not auger well for the future. It also strengthened opposition amongst working people who reverted to their rich counter-culture of kinship and friendship ties in the 1880s to survive the worst aspects of the anti-outrelief policy. It seems likely that further impoverishment must have built up a store of grievances that shaped their political will. However, it is difficult to ascertain from local records how it felt like to battle daily against the exigencies of life, nor can we fully appreciate the desperation of those who failed. Despite the richness of the primary material in this chapter it is difficult to penetrate those 'secret' impoverished lives that are, 'never quite made up to us' by the poor themselves.¹⁷¹ During the agricultural crisis in the Brixworth Union 'a complete tradition of surviving in rural conditions – not only a whole manner of life, but an unconscious philosophy of it – also disappeared'. The poor's ways of 'working and behaving, of seeing and being', are seldom glimpsed in welfare text books for these reasons.¹⁷²

In this location during the agricultural crisis the poor never came to terms with the medical outrelief changes that violated their fundamental cultural mores. The Chairman's letter to local newspapers made an inadvertent reference to the legitimacy of their complaints.

¹⁷¹ J. Fowles, *Wormholes*, (1998), pp. 218-227.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 223.

However, his party feared economic change at a time of democratisation and, as the next chapter explains, those perceptions shaped their actions. 'Mingling with the crowd' in the Brixworth Union has shown that working people suffered as a result of the agriculture crisis, but not simply as a result of poor profit margins. Landowners and farmers, with smaller rental returns and a decline in gross output, accentuated 'the relative inferiority' of their workforce. By withholding outrelief they created the necessary preconditions for far-reaching political change once local government democratisation started to erode guardian's power.

Chapter Five.

Caucus Politics and the County Council Challenge, 1885-9.

Introduction.

The impact on rural society of the Franchise and Extension Acts (1884-5), commonly known as the third Reform Act (1884), and the County Council Act (1888) have been the subject of considerable debate amongst political historians since the 1960s.¹ Although the 'parliamentary strength of English counties was increased by a third under the 1885 distribution', when the borough and county suffrage qualifications were equalised, complicated registration procedures limited the extent of the new voting provisions. In fact, Neal Blewett estimates that less than thirty per cent of the total male adult population in England and Wales successfully registered their right to vote post-1885.² However, the significance of the third Reform Act was that it coincided with a period of rapid economic change in rural society when land ownership started to 'lose its perquisite of power'.³ Even though many land owning magistrates were elected to county councils in 1889 there was a

¹ There is a vast literature on the meaning of suffrage extension under the third Reform Act (1884), a selection of major texts is quoted here. Note, that some older references are still set texts in their field – V.D.Lipman, *Local Government Areas, 1834-1945*, (1949); B. Keith-Lucas, *The English Local Government Franchise: A Short History*, (1952); J. Redlich and F.W. Hirst, *The History of Local Government in England*, (1958 edn.), J. M. Lee, *Social Leaders and Public Persons: A Study of County Government in Cheshire since 1888*, (1963); F. M. L. Thompson, *English landed society in the nineteenth century*, (1963); J.P.D. Dunbabin, 'The politics of the establishment of the county councils', *Historical Journal*, 4, (1963), I, pp. 238-50; J.P.D. Dunbabin, 'Expectations of the New County Councils and their Realisation', *Historical Journal*, 8, (1965), pp. 354-73; K. O. Morgan, 'the Liberal Unionists in Wales', *National Library of Wales Journal*, 16, (1969), pp. 165-7; J.P.D. Dunbabin, 'British local government reform: the nineteenth century and after', *English Historical Review*, 92, (1977), pp. 777-805; N. Blewett, 'The Franchise in the United Kingdom, 1885-1918', *Past and Present*, 32, (Dec. 1965), pp. 27-56; F.W.S.Craig, *British parliamentary election results, 1885-1918*, (1974); K.O.Morgan, *Rebirth of a Nation State: Wales, 1880-1980*, (1981); K.T.Hoppen, 'The Franchise and Electoral Politics in England and Ireland, 1832-1885', *History*, 70, (1985), pp. 202-217; I.G.C. Hutchinson, *A Political History of Scotland, 1832-1914: Parties, Elections and Issues*, (1986); P. Hollis, *Ladies Elect: Women in English Local Government, 1865-1914*, (1987); P.F.Clarke and K. Langford, 'Hodge's Politics: The Agricultural Labourers and the Third Reform Act in Suffolk', in N.Harte and R. Quinault (eds.), *Land and Society in Britain, 1700-1914: Essays in Honour of F. M. L. Thompson*, (1996), pp. 119-37.

² Blewett, 'Franchise', p. 27.

³ E. J. Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire*, (1969), p. 203.

gradual change in the personnel and nature of local government.⁴ The reform of county government raised many controversial questions about the future structure of rural politics, most notably should lower local authorities, specifically poor law unions, be democratised. Consequently, this chapter's four sections explore the impact of the widened parliamentary franchise and debates about the democratisation of local government in relation to the Brixworth Union's crusade campaign.

Section one (5.1) examines the impact of national franchise changes and how the Chairman of the Brixworth Union, Rev. William Bury, reacted to the threat of democratisation. Section two (5.2) analyses the composition of the board of guardians in the period 1885 to 1889. It explores whether the agricultural crisis undermined the dominance of farmers in poor law politics by tracing the changing class profile of guardians. The third section (5.3) discusses the advent of caucus politics and the political activities of working people. Finally, section four (5.4) considers a scheme of local government that Pell proposed, which aimed to ensure that county council legislation did not undermine the crusade campaign.⁵ Although his proposals were unsuccessful they reveal just how alarmed anti-outrelief supporters felt about the pace of economic and political change, and how that fear shaped their actions.

5.1: The Shadow of National Suffrage.

Northamptonshire politics in the late-Victorian period were complex. The revival of

⁴ D. Cannadine, *Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy*, (1996 edn.), Chapter 4, pp.139-181.

⁵ Few welfare historians discuss the impact of county council proposals on the anti-outrelief supporters. E.g., A.J.Kidd, *State, Society and the Poor in Nineteenth Century England*, (1999), pp. 48-52, makes no reference to the threat of county council reform to the crusade against outrelief; Keith-Lucas, *English Local Government*, Chapter 4, pp. 82-115, still gives the most comprehensive summary of the implications of local government change for poor law unions post-1850; C.Bellamy, *Administering Central-Local Relations, 1871-1919: the Local Government Board in its Fiscal and Cultural Context*, (1988), pp. 148-9, & 233-71, discusses those who lobbied central government to protect their poor law interests in the light of local government change.

Liberalism, as Janet Howarth explains, was one of the most striking features of political life in the county post-1880.⁶ In 1885 the Boundary Commission divided Northamptonshire into four parliamentary constituencies and the Brixworth Union was reallocated to the newly created mid-Northamptonshire seat, which was held until 1895 by Spencer's half-brother, Hon. C. R. Spencer (known as Bobby Spencer, later 6th Earl).⁷ The other Liberal stronghold in the county was the East Northamptonshire seat, located around the town of Wellingborough, which was held by F.A. Channing. Howarth explains that the success of Liberalism in the county was dependent on two factors, namely the influence of the Spencer family and the appeal of Gladstonian democracy. However, as the image of Liberalism in the area was 'not simple or uniform', both factors had limited success during the 1880s, despite the general election victories of 1885, 1886 and 1892.⁸ Liberalism was a success in the East-Northamptonshire constituency because it was an 'advanced' Liberal stronghold, with puritan and Chartist roots allied to nonconformity, which appealed to the growing industrial electorate. In, on the other hand, mid-Northamptonshire Liberalism was less successful because Spencer and Bobby Spencer represented Whig constitutionalism and Gladstonianism respectively, neither of which appealed to villagers concerned about the reintroduction of outrelief and social welfare issues, particularly old age pensions. Although the Home Rule issue was debated extensively in the area in the 1880s, local issues that affected voters' everyday lives had the most direct appeal. In a less democratic era the Spencer family's refusal to support popular poor law reforms would probably not have affected their long term

⁶ J. A. Howarth, 'The Liberal Revival in Northamptonshire, 1880-1895; A case-study of late-nineteenth century elections', *Historical Journal*, 12, (1969), I, pp. 78-118.

⁷ These were East Northamptonshire (Wellingborough, 'advanced' Liberal, 1885, 1886, 1892, 1895), Mid Northamptonshire (Brixworth, Whig and Gladstonian Liberalism, Spencer family seat, 1885, 1886, 1892, lost to Conservatives 1895), South Northamptonshire (Towcester, Conservative, 1852-92, Gladstonian Liberal, 1892-95, Conservative post-1895); North Northamptonshire (Oundle, safe Conservative seat, post-1870) – Howarth, 'Liberal', pp. 83-4, footnote 14.

⁸ There were elections in 1885 and 1886 because of the Home Rule crisis.

political future, but that situation altered considerably following the third Reform Act (1884).

Howarth estimates that the parliamentary electorate in Northamptonshire trebled under the third Reform Act, when county and borough qualifications were equalised, even though many were still disenfranchised by complicated registration procedures. Gradually, the character of local political life changed because the rural exodus of the 1880s ensured that the new electorate was 'outside the reach of the landed influence' in the area.⁹ Although it might be expected that migration would have increased the influence of the rural elite over those who stayed behind in the Brixworth Union, the anti-outrelief policy ensured that this was not the case. During the first stage of the agricultural crisis in the 1880s, as the previous chapter explained, discriminatory welfare to work schemes and a controversial burial policy polarised local opinion against Pell's party. This changing political atmosphere alarmed the Chairman of the Brixworth Union, Rev. W. Bury, for two reasons. First, he feared that democratisation was raising the political expectations of new voters. In the future those new voters might have a greater say in poor law matters, which would threaten the success of the anti-outrelief policy.¹⁰ Poor law democratisation would give the lower classes an opportunity to get elected as guardians. Second, many farmer guardians on the board of guardians had become rather complacent about holding power because they had neither the time or the inclination to devote to poor law politics. Bury was concerned that the farmers were more concerned about their falling rental incomes and poor profits than daily poor law administration. He was convinced that the recent political changes increased the need for his party to put on a united front to retain the anti-outrelief cause. Consequently, he decided to publish an article in a leading national journal outlining his concerns. He emphasised that the

⁹ Howarth, 'Liberal', pp. 90-91.

¹⁰ B[ritish] L[ibrary] M[anuscript] D[epartment], Althorp MS, K382, Bury to Spencer, 6.3.1883, 24.7.1885, discuss his concerns.

crusade against outrelief should be preserved as a means of securing the landed interest's political future in county politics at a time when their traditional role as the leaders of rural society was starting to erode.

Bury's article entitled '*Squires, Spires and Mires*' appeared in the March 1885 issue of the Fortnightly Review.¹¹ The article's theme was controversial because it criticised the conduct of landed patricians in local government administration. Its timing was unfortunate because it was published several months before Joseph Chamberlain's Unauthorised Programme appeared in the same Liberal journal, anticipating many 'advanced' Liberal criticisms of the Whig and Gladstonian party members. Bury did not intend to create so much adverse publicity, but it caused a furore in Liberal party circles because readers realised its author was criticising landed families in Northamptonshire, including the 5th Earl Spencer, who was a close ally of Gladstone. Since Spencer valued his privacy and carefully protected his political reputation, he was angered at being identified so easily and by the forthright nature of the criticisms. When it then came to light that the author was a clergyman and that Spencer was the patron of his living, his critics seized the opportunity to make political capital out of a potentially embarrassing article. In a lengthy discussion Bury outlined why the conduct of country gentlemen in rural society ought to be censured. He stated that landowners used the countryside as a 'playground', exploiting its sporting potential, but taking little interest in local affairs and often refusing to invest in the community by implementing basic sanitation improvements. Squires also refused to build good housing and they seldom administered poor relief regulations efficiently:

My complaint is limited to this, that he neglects the plain duties which lie at his very door, and which require nothing from him beyond a little self-denial; that on matters of local administration properly belonging to him, and which are of really vital importance to the community, and especially to the labourer, the country gentleman is

¹¹ Rev. W. Bury, '*Squires, Spires, and Mires*,' Fortnightly Review, (March 1885), pp.352-70.

conspicuous by his absence; and that when he is brought face to face with local abuses of the gravest kind he is apparently unconcerned and that in attempts at reform he lends no hand.¹²

Bury went on to state that too many squires were apathetic about poor law matters and most did not appreciate that by neglecting their local duties they were undermining their power in rural society.

The article also criticised Bury's fellow Anglican clergymen, which again delighted 'advanced' Liberals who were mainly nonconformists.¹³ Bury argued that clergymen never questioned conventional definitions of poverty, instead they categorised most poor relief claimants as 'deserving' because they did not want to offend their congregations. Many gave alms to paupers even though they knew it discouraged an ethos of self-help and industry. He argued that withholding outrelief and charity 'makes the poor more self reliant not less'. The article stated that guardians should reformulate their out-dated notions of charity in favour of scientific theory and political economy because only those approaches would remedy the social evil of poverty over time. Clergy should recognise that charitable donations ought to be 'temporary expedients,...stepping stones' to independence, otherwise their generosity would produce 'an utterly thriftless class'. Bury observed that rural society was on the brink of a number of important political changes and he felt that Anglican clergymen did not appreciate their implications fully. He believed that it was every cleric's duty to guide their parishioners, by taking a proactive poor law role. In this way the Anglican clergy would minister to their parishioners in a practical manner by re-educating them to be industrious and teaching them

¹² Ibid.

¹³ BLMD, Althorp MS, K382, Bury to Spencer, 14.4.1885, discusses criticisms that the article raised and its political controversy. Bury told Spencer to refer all critics to him and he would explain that in poor law matters 'everyone knows how much the reform [i.e. crusade against outrelief] owes to the line you took...to the invaluable support you have given to the "reformers"'.

how best to vote.¹⁴ This would also be of long term benefit to the landed influence, who should work together to ensure that their power was not eroded further in the farming community.

Bury's motivation for publishing this article was self-evident to its readership in the Brixworth Union.¹⁵ The article was a political cry to arms, an appeal to those who had supported the crusade against outrelief to remain united. Bury believed that the political strength of the rural elite had always been based on a principle of unity in diversity and so long as they concentrated on principle agreements, not minor differences, they would remain in power. However, if they allowed internal divisions, complacency or apathy to determine their actions their political oligarchy would be destroyed. In particular, the reintroduction of outrelief would undermine the basis of their power, since the poor law system with its lack of uniformity, plural voting scales and chaotic rating procedures had underpinned their status in rural life throughout the Victorian era. Bury's greatest fear was that democratisation threatened to broaden the local government political pyramid and once reform cascaded to other local authorities this would force his party to change the basis of welfare service provision. They would then have to respond to the pressure of a wider political spectrum by reintroducing outrelief, which would undermine their authority. Bury thought that by forewarning his poor law colleagues he could reunite his party, but he soon learned that his article stirred lengthy debates that divided, rather than united guardians. There were two main replies to his article.

The first reply was written by Lord Stanley of Alderley, who was a Spencer family

¹⁴ BLMD, Althorp MS, K382, Bury to Spencer, 25.2.1885, informed Spencer that Bury thought it was his duty to teach the new rural voters how they ought to participate in politics by organising a series of meetings that he would chair. He ended, 'it is high time the new voters should learn something about politics'.

¹⁵ BLMD, Althorp MS, K382, Bury to Spencer, 6.3.1883, Bury had earlier set out his views of the importance of poor relief management and how it protected the interests of the landed influence in a very lengthy letter to Spencer.

friend and co-editor of the Fortnightly Review. He had not seen Bury's article before publication and informed Spencer that he would not have published it if he had known it was so embarrassing politically. Since Spencer was living at Dublin Castle at the time of publication, serving his second term of office as Lord Lieutenant of Ireland (1882-5), Stanley decided that it was his duty to defend him publicly. In July 1885 in the same journal he published a rejoinder entitled, '*Two Days in the Brixworth Union*'. It informed readers that Stanley had visited the district in May 1885 to ascertain whether Bury's claims were true and in particular if his criticisms of Spencer were warranted.¹⁶ Bury told Spencer that the visit had been a difficult one:

He came to Harlestone &...wandered about the neighbouring parishes to see whether or not I had overstated my case in my Article -...He refused my hospitality for fear lest he should become too friendly with me and be disarmed...but this didn't prevent him talking to me "sixteen to the dozen" – quite ignoring my replies – I gather however he quite accepts facts but quarrels with conclusions.¹⁷

Stanley reported in his article that he interviewed a cross-section of guardians of the poor and learned that many were very critical of the Chairman's anti-outrelief policies. Although critics did not vote against Bury on the poor law board many abstained because they disliked his impoverishing policies and administrative methods. Clergy guardians were very angry about Bury's criticisms of their charitable work. They noted that Bury used private charitable schemes, such as the *Secret Service Fund*, when it suited him and that even he could not ignore 'deserving' outrelief applicants. Stanley believed that the Chairman's charity was nothing more than political expediency couched in Charity Organisation Society (C.O.S.) rhetoric. He concluded that, 'Mr Bury surveys the world from the serene altitudes of the political economist' failing to recognise that 'the new gospel...of legislative change, scientific

¹⁶ Lord Stanley of Alderley, 'Two Days in the Brixworth Union', Fortnightly Review, (July 1885), pp. 42-55; Sir S. Lee (ed.), Dictionary of National Biography 1901-1911, (1911), p. 383, summarises Stanley's career.

¹⁷ BLMD, Althorp MS, K382, Bury to Spencer, 16.5.1885.

and economic improvements' often ignored the 'considerable number of human beings silently suffering below' it. In his opinion Bury was a penny-pinching bureaucrat who ignored his own economic principles to further his local government work and that made him nothing more than a 'pestilent meddler, *an unmitigated evil* and an intolerable nuisance' (emphasis in original).

The second reply was published in a local newspaper. A leading Liberal *ex-officio* guardian, who was a Northamptonshire squire and a close friend of Spencer, wrote a rejoinder entitled, '*Country Gentlemen and Agricultural Labourers*'. The squire described the Chairman's criticism as a '*stinking fish*' (emphasis in original).¹⁸ He denied any *ex-officio* dereliction of duty, revealing that if landowners had not supported the Brixworth Union's private charity scheme, the *Secret Service Fund*, the Chairman's anti-outrelief campaign would have failed in the late-1870s. He was angered that Bury criticised clergymen for giving charity to the poor when the Chairman acted in the same manner every time he funded an outrelief claimant through the *Secret Service Fund*. In his opinion the ideological basis of the crusade against outrelief did not work in practice because it accentuated rather than resolved the problem of endemic poverty. Bury's claims about the success of his anti-outrelief ideology were unfounded because if guardians had not introduced a number of rather ruthless deterrent stratagems the workhouse in the Brixworth Union would have been filled to capacity. Instead nearby poor law unions inherited their social problems. The squire, like Stanley, noted that the crusade against outrelief had been promoted for economic reasons and yet guardians calculated that it was cheaper to pay outrelief than indoor relief. He concluded that Bury was a politically ambitious clergyman who used poor law ideology to further his interests, ignoring the fact that his parsimonious policies radicalised working people. The

¹⁸ Sir H. Wake, 'Country Gentlemen and Agricultural Labourers', *Northampton Mercury*, 11.4.1885.

squire noted that Bury's short-sighted action, not guardians' justifiable criticisms of the anti-outrelief policy, would undermine the long term success and power of the rural elite in the Brixworth Union. He warned Bury that 'labourers are as independent as their incomes allow; they bitterly resent the accusation that they would sell their freedom for a dole' and it was unwise to ignore such popular sentiments.

A number of local clergymen also wrote lengthy criticisms to local newspapers. One described the Chairman as a man of 'candour and caustic vigour'. He noted that Matthew Arnold 'held that the State Church' should provide 'for each parish an educated man as a diffuser of *sweetness and light*' (emphasis in original).¹⁹ The clergyman pitied Bury's parishioners because the Anglican Church had appointed someone who used his position to impoverish them and residents in neighbouring parishes. The labouring classes also took a keen interest in these articles because this was a public debate, which revealed that guardians were more divided over the anti-outrelief issue than they appeared. Although working people were aware that some guardians opposed the anti-outrelief crusade, they had little information about how deeply divided Pell's party had become on the Brixworth Union board by 1885, until this series of controversial articles appeared. The ongoing debates also revealed that Bury's article had backfired and was accentuating his party's internal divisions. One correspondent aptly summarised the labouring poor's position:

By the kindness of a friend I continue to receive the *Guardian* from your office...and I want to say that I am glad that you keep pegging away...two million of our fellow creatures are about to give their votes for the first time. To *whom* shall they be given?...Let me say as a worker what kind of men we need to make laws for us. Is it quite necessary that they must be rich men and of high social position, men born, as we say, "with a silver spoon in their mouths", men quite removed from the experience of the struggling multitude...I say no, a thousand times no...Now the kind of man I want to represent me is a plain straight upright large-hearted broad minded a "be just and fear not" man - a man who knows by actual experience what the tussle of life is...If we workers are properly represented ...we shall have *better times*...we want *fair*

¹⁹ Northampton Guardian, 30.5.1885

*play, just laws and a chance to live. [sic]*²⁰

This letter, one of several written to local newspapers, revealed there was a growing awareness amongst the labouring classes of the implications of the Chairman's controversial action. Parliamentary democratisation and future local government extension would give them an opportunity to challenge the Chairman's policies through the ballot box, where it most mattered. Correspondents commented that Bury's article in the Fortnightly Review revealed the need to challenge the anti-outrelief policy because the crusade ideology was being used 'to protect the interests of the few, at the expense of the many'.²¹ The scene was set for working people to forge alliances with sympathetic farmer and tradesmen guardians, as they had done during the advent of agricultural trade unionism and the vestry contests in the mid-1870s. In this way they would gain a foothold on the Brixworth Union board at a time when its profile was starting to change significantly.

5.2: New Personnel.

In the period between 1885 and 1889 the profile of the Brixworth Union board of guardians began to change in several fundamental ways. Guardians' minute books reveal that the advent of a phase of more intense coalition politics created a tense atmosphere during fortnightly board meetings. Regrettably guardians' voting patterns were not recorded in this period on a regular basis and this makes it very difficult to ascertain the divisions on the poor law board. However, the clerk of the Brixworth Union did keep a record of votes during key controversial motions and sampling these gives an insight into party allegiances. To test the

²⁰ Letter entitled, 'What We Workers Want and Should Have', Northampton Guardian 14.3.1885 -Quoted with original spelling and emphasis.

²¹ *Ibid.*

accuracy of this analysis the same cross-section of votes has been checked against voting patterns in the 1890s, when accurate records had to be kept by law. They reveal that those guardians who attended board meetings on a regular basis usually voted in a consistent manner; they therefore give us an insight into party loyalties. However, it is difficult to assess the voting patterns of farmer guardians in the period 1885 to 1889 for several reasons, which the introduction raised.

First, apart from those farmers who have been identified as key Pell's supporters, there was also a large cohort of farmers who held about one third of the seats on the Brixworth Union board and whose loyalties are difficult to distinguish. They seem to represent a block of floating voters who either abstained or crossed party lines on each issue as they saw fit. Second, this floating block vote tended to have poorer attendance levels, usually turning up to about one third of the fortnightly board meetings. In addition the turnover of this type of guardian was very high in this period, since around 80 per cent are listed as only serving for one term of office, usually a three-year period. The most likely explanation for this trend is that the context of the agricultural crisis was affecting guardian voting patterns and attendance levels. Farmers who had over-borrowed in the High-farming period probably had less time and were thus not inclined to take an active interest in poor law matters. Instead they concentrated their efforts on resolving their immediate farming difficulties and the need to achieve a higher gross output to offset lower profit margins at market. In common with many southern English counties, Northamptonshire had poor weather conditions for farming in 1885 and 1887 when two summer droughts resulted in a shortage of roots to feed stock. Although other seasons were moderate in this period and purchased feed was cheaper, farmers had fewer reserves to buy in produce from outside

sources and they were anxious about their precarious profit margins.²² This seems to have had a knock-on effect on poor law politics in the Brixworth Union.

Despite the deficiencies in the records during this period and the context of the agricultural crisis, it is important to analyse the class composition of the Brixworth Union board, since it shaped poor law decisions. Table 5.1 outlines the basic class division amongst guardians, but rather than simply group the farmers as one class, they have been divided into three sub-groupings. Group 1 consists of tenant farmers from the three largest landed estates in the area – Althorp, Holdenby and Overstone – which were managed by Spencer's land agents. Their sample of voting patterns has been checked against the more reliable data post-1890, when they voted consistently for Pell. Although these tenant farmers may have abstained during key votes, in the 1890s they seldom voted against Pell and probably represent his core support base amongst farmers. Group 2 comprises a small cohort of larger more independent farmers. Regrettably, since neither rateable assessments nor their farm records have survived post-1870, it is not possible to categorise them using a reliable database. However, they can be identified as larger farmers because they gave evidence to the Royal Commission on Labour in 1894 detailing their farm sizes, employment levels and so on.²³ This material has been checked against recent local studies on the Brixworth Union found in Northamptonshire Record Office. Group 3 contains the floating block vote of farmers about whom little is known.

If we then further divide these figures along party lines, as in Table 5.2 and Graph 5.1, and take out the floating block vote of farmers in group 3 from the equation, they reveal that

²² G.E. Mingay, Rural Life In Victorian England, (1991 edn.), pp. 62-3, discusses weather patterns.

²³ Compiled from *BPP*, Royal Commission on Labour, (1894), 'Brixworth Union', Appendix I, pp. 895-995; NRO, ROP 2765, P. Kirton, Census of Brixworth: an analysis and transcription, on behalf of Brixworth History Society, (1994).

Pell's majority was not as secure as it appeared. His average share of the available seats was

Table 5.1: Class Composition of the Brixworth Union board of guardians, 1885-9.

Date(s):	1885	1886	1887	1888	1889
Non-elected:					
<i>Ex-officio</i>	14	14	14	14	16
Elected:					
Landowner/ Householder	2	1	2	2	2
Land Agent	2	4	4	4	4
Clergy	5	4	6	5	5
<u>Farmers:</u>					
Group 1	8	7	6	5	4
Group 2	7	3	5	3	2
Group 3	13	14	18	19	19
Tradesmen	3	3	2	2	2
Artisans	0	0	0	0	0
Labourers	0	0	0	0	0
Other:					
Double Nominations/ Vacant seats	4	8	1	4	6
Sub-total					
Elected:	44	44	44	44	44
Total Votes:	58	58	58	58	60

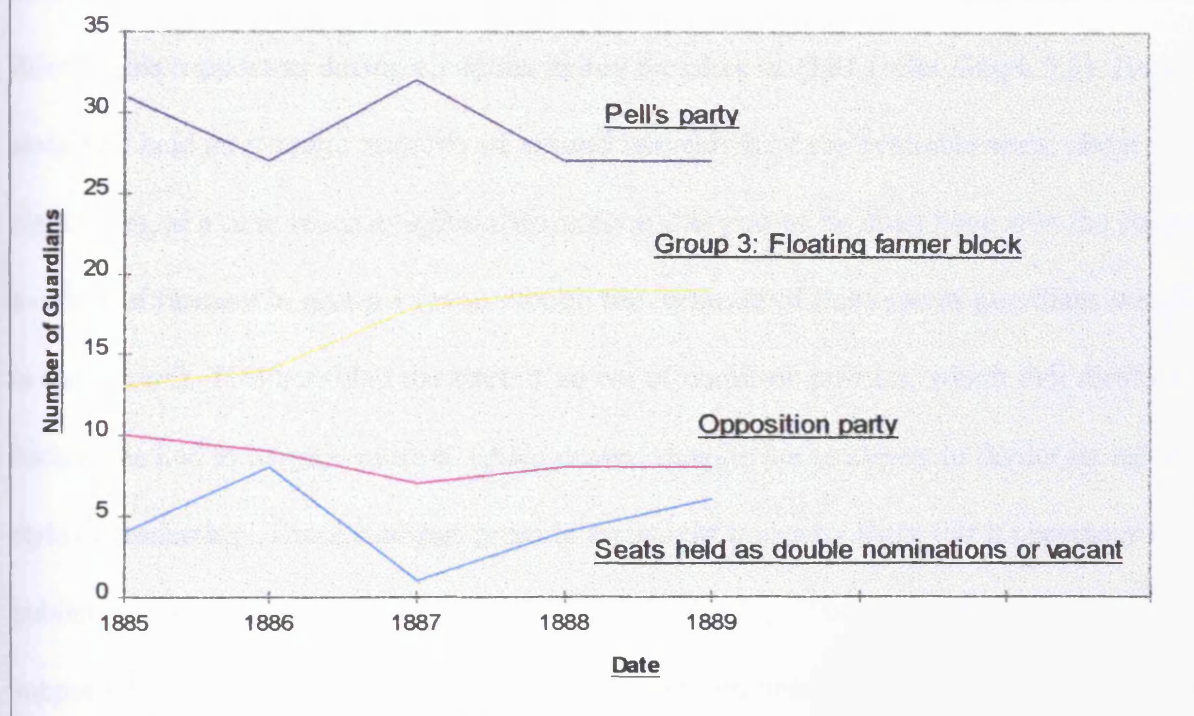
Source: N[orthampton] R[ecord] O[ffice], PL2/17-18, Brixworth Union guardians' minute books.

Table 5.2 Class composition of the Brixworth Union board of guardians with political allegiances identified where possible, 1885-9.

Dates(s)	1885	1886	1887	1888	1889
<u>Pell's party:</u>					
Non-Elected:					
Ex-officio	11	11	11	12	14
Elected:					
Landowner/ Householder	2	1	1	1	1
Land Agent	2	4	4	4	4
Clergy	4	3	5	4	4
<u>Farmers</u>					
Group 1	8	7	6	5	4
Group 2	4	1	4	1	0
Group 3	—	—	—	—	—
Tradesmen	0	0	0	0	0
Artisans	0	0	0	0	0
Labourers	0	0	0	0	0
Sub-Total:	31	27	32	27	27
<u>Opposition Party:</u>					
Non-Elected:					
Ex-officio	3	3	3	2	2
Elected:					
Landowner/ Householder	0	0	1	1	1
Land Agent	0	0	0	0	0
Clergy	1	0	1	1	1
<u>Farmers</u>					
Group 1	0	0	0	0	0
Group 2	3	2	1	2	2
Group 3	—	—	—	—	—
Traders	3	2	1	2	2
Artisans	0	0	0	0	0
Labourers	0	0	0	0	0
Sub-total:	10	9	7	8	8
<u>Floating Voters:</u>					
<u>Farmers</u>					
Group 3	13	14	18	19	19
<u>Double/Vacant</u>					
Seats:	4	8	1	4	6
TOTALS:	58	58	58	58	60

Source: NRO, PL2/ 17-18, Brixworth Union guardians' minute books.

Graph 5.1: Party divisions on the Brixworth Union board of guardians, 1885-9.



Source: NRO, PL2/17-18, Brixworth Union guardians' minute books.

twenty-nine out of a total of fifty-eight votes. However, taking just the figures for the elective part of the Brixworth Union board, that figure was reduced to an average share of just seventeen seats, against eight on the opposition party. Since the *ex-officio* guardians attended less often, this meant that Pell and Bury had to work harder to convince them to turn up to meetings during key votes, to ensure that they retained a comfortable majority. They also had to negotiate on a more regular basis with the farmers in group 3 because if they migrated to the opposition party Pell would have lost power in years when *ex-officio* attendance was low. In fact had no *ex-officio* guardians attended in 1888-9 and if the block farming vote in group 3 had changed allegiance to the opposition party, then despite full attendance amongst the rest

of Pell's supporters the board would have been tied at twenty-seven votes apiece. One of the key findings from these records is that the Althorp estate tenant farmers declined in numbers in the 1880s, which suggests many were suffering as a result of the agricultural crisis. This obviously worried Pell's party since he tried to ensure that the eight vacant seats in 1886 were filled by his supporters during elections in key parishes in 1887 (refer Graph 5.1). However, since Pell held an average majority of around two-thirds of the available seats, about thirty-eight votes, at a time when *ex-officio* attendance was poorer he must have won the support of a cohort of farmers in group 3 (even though the turnover of this type of guardians was higher in this period). This heralded the start of an era of coalition politics, which Pell disliked because he had to bargain more to retain power, despite his tendency to favour an autocratic style of leadership. These findings provide an insight into why Bury felt it necessary to publish his controversial article in the Fortnightly Review. Those *ex-officio* guardians who supported the anti-outrelief cause were complacent and needed to regroup by taking a greater interest in poor law matters, otherwise they might lose power in the future.

These findings also reveal that an opposition party, which had started to gather momentum during the vestry contests in the years 1876 to 1877 (chapter 3), had now become more established. Although small in number, these guardian opponents were regular attenders (including the *ex-officio* opponents, who incidentally were responsible for rejecting the prosecution stratagem by 1877). The larger farmers from group 2 seem to have had the financial independence to devote time to poor law politics. Also their political leanings were not compromised by being dependent on a large landowner for rental reductions. For instance, a larger independent farmer, Francis Chevalier Jeyes, who had been elected to serve for Brixworth in 1876 during the controversial vestry contest that year, owned one of the largest farms in the area and employed on average seven men and several boys. This was

around one tenth of the labour force left in Brixworth by 1890. However, he did not rely on farming for his sole source of income, as his family were wealthy pharmaceutical manufacturers from Northampton and he had a share of the family business.²⁴

In this period several influential tradesmen who owned public-houses in the district became long-serving members of the board and were all elected in parishes where no single landowner predominated. To stand as a guardian of the poor a candidate had to pay rates of between £15-£40 per annum (rates varied in different locations).²⁵ The three tradesmen on the Brixworth Union board were self-made men who rented or owned land on which they paid minimum rates of £15 per annum. Although many tradesmen's profits must have been affected by the migration of the local population to towns in the area because of the impact of the anti-outrelief policy and the agricultural crisis, these men seem to have accumulated enough capital to ride out the recession. Most of the publicans also farmed smallholdings, where they grew wheat and barley for beer production.²⁶ They appear to have joined the opposition party on the Brixworth Union board of guardians for two reasons. First, it was probably in their business interests to uphold the rights of those who gravitated to the public house. In the Brixworth Union the publicans were placed at the epicentre of opposition to the anti-outrelief cause, as the next chapter will explain more fully. Some of the first agricultural trade union meetings were held in the backroom of the pub and often friendly societies met at

²⁴ Francis Chevalier Jeyes' family fortune was derived from Jeyes fluid, which his father manufactured in Northampton. The family fortune was established during the Crimean War when Jeyes fluid was used to combat the spread of typhoid amongst British soldiers. The family also developed the recipe for Worcester sauce, which they manufactured in Worcester. One of Jeyes' brothers was a renowned Northampton chemist Philadelphius Jeyes from Boughton, who was also a guardian of the poor in the Brixworth Union. I am indebted to Miss Doreen Jeyes of Earls Barton who was kind enough to give me access to the Jeyes' family archive, which is still held in private hands at Moulton.

²⁵ Keith-Lucas, *English Local Government*, Chapter 4, pp. 82-115, outlines voting scales.

²⁶ Research compiled from NRO, *Kelly's Directories*, 1885-9; PL 2/17-18, Brixworth Union guardians' minute books and annual electoral returns to Local Government Board.

these convenient venues.²⁷ This kept tradesmen abreast of public opinion, both in the district and from anyone travelling through the area. Tradesmen often imported more radical ideas from local towns and usually aligned themselves very carefully for business reasons, which is why their political allegiances are of such interest in this study. As they never wavered in their opposition for Pell's party until the anti-outrelief policy was overthrown, this seems to indicate the strength of their resolve and the depths of opposition amongst their client base. Second, the guardians' minute books reveal that some tradesmen were nonconformists and seem to have held strong views about the impoverishment of working people.²⁸ It is difficult to assess to what degree this motivated their actions, because keynote speeches were not recorded in sufficient detail, but it cannot be discounted as a factor in their opposition to the anti-outrelief policy. Regrettably little alternative evidence in private family papers has survived about the motivations of these tradesmen in this period. It is possible that they had friendship or kinship ties with those who had been refused outrelief and this may have influenced their actions.

For these reasons Pell relied on a cohort of guardians to uphold his policy and was forced to negotiate with a growing block vote of farmers whose allegiance was not fixed. One key reason why Pell remained in power was that the high turnover of farmers meant that new guardians took some time to grasp poor law procedures, which the Chairman was so skilful at manipulating. By the time Pell's opponents had learned how to oppose controversial motions, they were out of office. By contrast, Pell's party was comprised of a number of socially conservative representatives, predominantly land agents and clergy, who closely

²⁷ W.L. Feingold, *The Revolt of the Tenantry: The Transformation of Local Government in Ireland, 1872-1886*, (1984), many of my conceptual ideas about the significance of tradesmen in poor law politics are taken from Feingold's broader observations about class; A. Howkins, *Poor Labouring Men. Rural Radicalism in Norfolk, 1870-1923*, (1985), pp. 33-34, discusses the importance of the pub as a political venue and place of entertainment in rural life.

²⁸ NRO, PL2/17, Brixworth Union guardians' minutes books, details some key speeches 1878-1887.

identified with the interests of landed families and were long-serving members of the Brixworth Union board. In addition, poor law regulations stipulated that when a board of guardians was tied the Chairman had the power to cast a second discretionary vote to resolve matters and predictably this was always cast in favour of Pell's party. However, although Pell had *de facto* power in the period between 1885 and 1889, his party felt threatened by the advent of caucus politics. Recent political change seemed to radically threaten the tenor of class relations in the district. Although the turnover of farmers benefited Pell's party on numerous occasions, it made it difficult for Pell to develop close political ties with farmer guardians that were becoming involved in caucus affairs.²⁹ For these reasons fear shaped his party's actions and we need to explore briefly what impact caucus politics had on the local political scene, at a time when county council legislation was being proposed.

5.3: Liberal Caucus Politics.

Although, as the introduction to this chapter indicated, there has been considerable debate amongst political historians about whether democratisation under the third Reform Act (1884) constituted a watershed in English politics because of registration problems, it did start to change the tenor of rural life.³⁰ Post-1885 national parties could no longer afford to ignore the new rural electorate.³¹ Consequently, in 1885 a number of Liberal associations affiliated to the National Liberal Federation were formed in the Brixworth Union. They tried to harness the political ambitions of the labouring classes. Although a number of former NALU leaders

²⁹ Howarth, 'Liberal', pp. 92-6, explains that often a leading farmer in rural districts of Northamptonshire organised local caucus branches.

³⁰ Blewett 'Franchise', p. 43; J. Davis and G. Tanner, 'The Borough Franchise after 1867' *Historical Research*, (1996), 69, (170), pp. 306-327.

³¹ Charles Parker M.P. for Perth, *Hansard IV*, 25.5.1892, s.1814., noted the registration problems but also observed that working people's aspirations could not be ignored; Blewett 'Franchise', Table 4, p. 49, explains that as late as 1911 11 per cent of the electorate in the mid-Northants division covering the Brixworth Union were exploiting complicated registration procedures to obtain votes in multiple divisions.

set up Liberal associations in their villages, many were disenchanted with caucus politics for two reasons.³² First, associations were allied to larger, predominately middle-class, caucus initiatives in local manufacturing towns, such as Kettering and Wellingborough. These urban delegates predominantly promoted the interests of middle-class voters. The Spencer family election agent commented that many urban caucuses discriminated against new rural associations. He noted that agricultural labourers were not encouraged to stand in caucus elections or local government contests. The election agent warned Spencer that the political mood in the area was changing because 'the main body of electors prefer a more advanced man', to represent them.³³ A number of Spencer's correspondents reported that labourers experienced some form of electoral discrimination on a regular basis.³⁴ Second, the Spencer family was the leading Liberal family in the area but they opposed the reintroduction of outrelief. This began to undermine the Liberal party's fortunes in the Mid-Northamptonshire division, where Bobby Spencer (Spencer's half-brother) was the sitting member. At a time when it was crucial for the Spencer family to take the lead in the district by supporting labourers' causes, they acted conservatively.³⁵ In parishes where Spencer owned substantial property he refused to let labourers, even Liberal caucus members, use schoolrooms for political meetings. Spencer told labourers that national schools could only be used for matters of a disinterested nature, which ruled out political gatherings. In private he admitted that he knew schoolrooms would be used as a platform to criticise the anti-outrelief party's policies.

³² Howarth 'Liberal', pp.92-93.

³³ BLMD, *Althorp MS*, K277, Becke to Spencer, 10.1.1885.

³⁴ F. A. Channing M.P. for East Northants discussed with Spencer how the new Liberal Associations were formed in the mid-1880s at Kettering and Wellingborough. He noted that the population of Kettering increased dramatically from 11,000 to 14,000 in 1888, and the strongly middle-class emphasis of the N.L.F. caucus – BLMD, *Althorp MS*, K252, Channing to Spencer, 10.4.1888, 11.8.1888.

³⁵ J.P.D. Gordon (ed.), *The Red Earl: The Papers of the 5th Earl Spencer 1835-1910, Volume I*, (1981), Introduction, pp.1-34 discusses Spencer and Bobby Spencer's political outlook in the 1880s.

He refused to allow that type of free speech to develop on his estate.³⁶ The Spencer Papers reveal that support for a Liberal caucus in the district was patchy. In public Spencer always maintained that support for the anti-outrelief cause was widespread amongst independent abouring Liberal voters. However, in reality Liberalism, as Janet Howarth argues, failed to 'nurture support' in the Brixworth Union, where the party was too closely associated with the crusade campaign.³⁷ Working people appear to have been unconvinced by the Spencer's political rhetoric at a time when substantial social welfare provision would have improved their lives materially.

The Spencer Papers reveal that this disenchantment convinced many new rural voters post-1885 to reject caucus politics because the established rural order did not welcome their new political voice. Bury told Spencer he felt very uneasy about further democratisation, declaring, 'what a deplorable condition the political world is in! Liberals and Tories trying to outbid each other for the popular vote regardless of principle', which was something he refused to do.³⁸ He had recently turned down a request from 'a labourer called Brambley who hailed originally from Brixton and asked to be able to use the school room' for a political discussion.³⁹ In April 1886 another clergyman wrote to Spencer that Brambley had mounted a very successful campaign opposing the anti-outrelief cause. Brambley accused the Liberal party in the county of failing local voters in poor law matters. The clergyman noted that Brambley was a former agricultural trade union leader and 'owing to his present position as supposed leader in a working men's question his remarks were always received with cheers', wherever he spoke.⁴⁰ Brambley seems to have ignored his local Liberal association and

³⁶ BLMD, Althorp MS, K382, Bury to Spencer, 25.2.1885 & 24.7.1885.

³⁷ Howarth, 'Liberal', p.97.

³⁸ BLMD, Althorp MS, K382, Bury to Spencer, 24.7.1885.

³⁹ BLMD, Althorp MS, K382, Bury to Spencer, 25.2.1885.

⁴⁰ BLMD, Althorp MS, K381, Stewart to Spencer, 5.4.1886 – regrettably there is little evidence in the Spencer Papers about remaining agricultural trade union support by 1885.

travelled about the district campaigning for the rights of the poor, which local newspapers reported earned him a considerable amount of support.⁴¹ Spencer told his land agent to refuse any request from Brambley to hold meetings in his estate villages, but ironically this seems to have advanced the pro-outrelief cause.⁴² Instead, Brambley spoke at numerous venues - in public houses, in nonconformist chapels and by the side of fields at the end of the working day. At a typical meeting he spoke in favour of outrelief provision and local newspapers reported that Brambley was fighting on behalf of the labouring poor for a series of grievances. These included employment with fair wages, basic food, better cottages, fair rent, and outrelief allowances in times of illness and old age.⁴³ Spencer's correspondents complained that labourers became adept at holding meetings in venues where they had been refused permission to congregate. One local clergyman gave permission for a school hall to be used to discuss general agricultural questions. However, after the discussion finished a second meeting took place at the rear of the venue, where local people debated the anti-outrelief controversy. Despite the clergymen's intervention he failed to disperse the large crowd that had congregated.⁴⁴ These are only a few examples of the drift away from Liberalism and are not representative of every shade of labouring opinion. However, the Spencer Papers do reveal that these meetings were becoming more popular and that the political climate was changing because the third Reform Act had raised expectations amongst agricultural workers. This seems to have made them more determined to oppose the anti-outrelief policy by campaigning alongside, rather than within the Liberal rank and file. The

⁴¹ Northampton Guardian, 14.3.1885.

⁴² After the Liberal party election defeat in 1895 Brambley agreed to become the leader of the Harlestone Liberal Association, but only because Bobby Spencer had been ousted from office and the crusade against outrelief had been over-turned on the Brixworth board. I will return to this theme of Liberal party support amongst the working classes in the conclusion - Northampton Mercury, 21.6.1895.

⁴³ BLMD, Althorp MS, K345, Bury to Spencer, 21.5.1894, discusses Brambley family history.

⁴⁴ BLMD, Althorp MS, K381, Stewart to Spencer, 5.4.1886.

Spencers' stance over the anti-outrelief issue and their close association with Liberalism in the county had some bearing on this trend.

Working people had embarked on a political journey, in response to their opposition to the anti-outrelief policy. That political transition unfolded in stages, starting with the advent of agricultural trade unionism, before going on to parallel caucus politics. The refusal of prominent Liberals like the Spencers in this part of Northamptonshire appears to have marked the tentative demise of Liberalism. How widespread this was elsewhere is unclear, but as Howarth point out 'the growth of class consciousness among the rural and urban poor' in Northamptonshire was underway post-1885.⁴⁵ It is ironic that this was promoted by Liberalism's 'democratic local government reforms', which were the 'source of weakness to the Liberal party, and contributed to its collapse in 1895' in both national and local elections. Howarth suggests that voters in the Brixworth Union were divided by the anti-outrelief dispute and 'it was the Liberals who lost most by it', in the years 1885 to 1895.⁴⁶

The evidence in the Spencer Papers corroborates Howarth's viewpoint, indicating that political historians who debate the drift away from Liberalism in the late Victorian/Edwardian era may need to take into account the political ramifications of poor law controversies when they assess the success or failure of municipal socialism.⁴⁷ For example, Brian Harrison has

⁴⁵ Howarth, 'Liberal', p.117.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁴⁷ There is a vast literature on the subject of the timing of the demise of Liberalism. A selection of major texts is quoted here – G. Dangerfield, The Strange Death of Liberal England, (1935); T. Wilson, The Downfall of the Liberal Party, (1966); P. Thompson, Socialists, Liberals and Labour: the Struggle for London, 1885-1914, (1967); P. F. Clarke, Lancashire and New Liberalism, (1971); J. Vincent, The Governing Passion, (1974); M. Bentley, The Liberal Mind, (1977); P.F. Clarke, Liberals, and Social Democrats, (1978); M. Freedman, The New Liberalism: An Ideology of Social Reform, (1978); P. Weiler, The New Liberalism: Liberal Theory in Great Britain, 1889-1914, (1982); M. Bentley and J. Stevenson (eds.), High and Low Politics in Modern Britain, (1983); M. Bentley, Politics Without Democracy, Great Britain, 1815-1914, (1984); K. Laybourn and J. Reynolds, Liberalism and the Rise of Labour, 1880-1918, (1984); J. Parry, Democracy and Religion: Gladstone and the Liberal Party, 1867-1875, (1986); G. L. Bernstein, Liberalism and Liberal Politics in the Edwardian England, (1986); M. Bentley, The Climax of Liberal Politics: British Liberalism in Theory and Practice, 1868-1914, (1987); K. Laybourn, The Rise of Labour: The British Labour Party, 1890-1979, (1988); R. Bellamy (ed.), Victorian Liberalism: Nineteenth Century Political Thought and Practice, (1990); J. Turner,

recently stated, 'nor is there strong evidence of working-class pressure for public welfare, which was a prominent election issue between 1885 and 1914...Interventionist ideas were not prevalent in working class organisations' or politics.⁴⁸ Yet, in trying to identify antecedents of rural poor law change, events in this chapter indicate that a process of political transformation had begun to unfold, which would later feed into the establishment of a local independent labour movement (refer Chapter 6). This suggests that until further work is compiled on all the poor law unions that adopted the crusade against outrelief for over twenty years, both political and welfare historians may have undervalued working people's active interest in public welfare issues, which impacted in such a direct manner on their lives. After all, the crusade campaign was about the need for intervention in a welfare dispute that needed to be resolved because it was impoverishing the most vulnerable members of the rural community. These outrelief debates at the caucus level also started to inform wider political debates about county council reform. Guardians of the poor, like Pell, who feared local issues were now determining the character of political life in the county, felt that it was imperative to persuade central government to revise proposals to reform the basis of English local government. They were concerned that the creation of county councils would lead to a concomitant review and possible democratisation of poor law procedures too. Thus, Pell took decisive action by forming a powerful cross-party lobby at Westminster to try to persuade central government to rework county council reform to protect the interests of the landed influence in county society.

British Politics and the Great War, (1992); E.F. Bagini, Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform, (1992); G.R.Searle, The Liberal Party: Triumph and Disintegration, 1886-1929, (1992); E.F.Biagini (ed.), Citizenship and Community: Liberals, Radicals and Collective Identities in the British Isles, 1865-1931, (1996); A. Sykes, The Rise and Fall of British Liberalism, 1776-1988, (1997).

⁴⁸ B. Harrison, The Transformation of British Politics, 1860-1995, (1996), p 71.

5.4: Pell's county council scheme.

In the 1870s when the Local Government Board was trying to persuade poor law unions to implement a crusade against outrelief it established a number of regional poor law conferences throughout England and Wales to promote its policies.⁴⁹ Guardians were encouraged to send representatives to debate poor relief issues because senior civil servants believed that sharing experiences and best practice would encourage guardians to become more proficient administrators. Each regional conference usually nominated two guardians to attend an annual poor law conference held in London. Senior civil servants and a number of prominent C.O.S. members, such as Charles Loch, attended the national conference, during which they gave papers on contemporary poor law subjects. The Local Government Board used these regional and national forums to test reactions to forthcoming government legislation. Naturally, the Chairman of the central committee of poor law conferences had a considerable amount of influence in central government circles. Pell chaired this central committee from its inception in 1868 until his retirement in 1896 and his position gave him a unique opportunity to promote a C.O.S. ethos.⁵⁰ These conference proceedings are a valuable historical resource because they reveal the issues that were being debated and how anti-outrelief supporters tried to influence government policy.⁵¹

In 1885 Pell decided to use this forum to outline an alternative model of county government, which envisaged poor law unions occupying the central role. He hoped this would enhance the role of poor law unions, protect the political interests of the traditional

⁴⁹ P[ublic] R[ecord] O[ffice], MH 19/93, 21.7.1883, internal memos amongst inspectors discuss the value of poor law conferences.

⁵⁰ A. Digby, 'The Rural Poor', in G.E.Mingay (ed.), The Victorian Countryside, Volume 2, (1981), p. 600, discusses the importance of the Poor Law conference lobby.

⁵¹ For example 'Local Government and its Responsibilities' Charity Organisation Review (March 1886) No.15, p 81& (March 1886) No.16, pp.145-150 – discussion arose from poor law conference proceedings.

leaders in county life and prevent the reintroduction of outrelief.⁵² Pell conceded there were too many overlapping agencies in local government with no clearly demarcated lines of responsibility. However, he felt that the Local Government Board did not fully appreciate the implications of county council reform. He believed county councils would be too democratic and would eventually take over poor law administration. This would undermine the anti-outrelief campaign and destroy the power of guardians in rural society. For these reasons Pell argued it was imperative that poor law unions were selected as the new unit of county government. He rejected the Liberal proposal that parishes should become the new unit of local administration because he felt that individual parishes were too small to work any effective system of county government.⁵³

Instead, Pell proposed that central government should set up the new local government authority by allocating four poor law unions in each county to oversee all local authority administration.⁵⁴ These would comprise a rural board with jurisdiction over all villages in a county, a borough board to oversee each county town, an urban board to oversee manufacturing districts in the county and a metropolitan board in cities. Each county would have a county council comprised of representatives from each of the four poor law unions within its geographic area. Members could not serve on the county body unless they had first served on a local poor law union board and proved their expertise in a particular area of local administration. The county council would thus be 'an intermediate between the primary local authorities and the Imperial government'. There would be one poor law rate levied for the whole county and each county council would distribute financial awards to those poor law

⁵² W. Rathbone, A. Pell and F.C. Montague, Local Administration, (1885).

⁵³ A. Sykes, The Rise, chapter 5, pp. 128-76, discusses Liberal party policy 1885-90.

⁵⁴ A Pell, 'Local Government in Counties a paper delivered to the 14th Annual Poor Law Conference', Poor Law Conferences, (1885), pp. 294-308.

unions that were prudently administered. Those who were the most proficient managers of outrelief would be awarded the largest county grants. To resolve the problem of too many competing agencies in local government, legislation would stipulate that there would be one rateable valuation, one method of voting and one county authority to oversee the four poor law boards in each area.⁵⁵

Pell knew that it was important to preserve the property qualification in guardian elections, otherwise the labouring classes might out vote the landed interest in the future. Therefore, he proposed that each county authority would be elected as follows. One third of its membership would be appointed by Justices of the Peace, two-thirds would be elected by ratepayers. Of that two-thirds, 33 per cent would be elected directly by ratepayers and the remaining 33 per cent would be co-opted by ratepaying guardians who sat on the four local poor law union boards. All members of the county authority and feeder poor law boards would serve a minimum three-year term of office. Ratepayers would accept the principle of direct taxation in return for greater representation on the county authority. Pell conceded that poor law union boundaries would have to be redrawn as many crossed county lines. He believed that the most effective way of overcoming this problem would be to amalgamate parishes along county boundaries into whichever poor law union was most convenient for administrative purposes. Essentially, Pell's scheme aimed to distribute local government duties amongst poor law unions, and thereby concentrate the power of the rural elite. He explained, 'these principles must surely be the guiding ones in local government where, at any rate, the conservative is the true reformer, for he desires to apply principles, which have answered since the birth of civilisation'.⁵⁶ He also hoped to compel the new county authorities

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Pell, 'Local Government', p. 304.

to adopt profitable business practices by tendering out their services and cutting costs where possible to save ratepayers money, which would have electoral appeal and guarantee the success of the new scheme.

Unquestionably Pell's local government scheme was proposed in response to the growth of caucus politics and the changing political character of the Brixworth Union which alarmed his party. It was an astute measure that tried to disguise his real political ambitions and fears about democratisation cascading down to lower local authorities. Its main aim was to preserve the power of guardians who supported the anti-outrelief cause. If we examine the voting arrangements they reveal how the new county infrastructure would have not only protected but enhanced his party's interests in county life. An average poor law union in the 1880s was comprised of *ex-officio* members and elected guardians who held approximately 20 per cent and 80 per cent of the available seats respectively. Under Pell's proposals the *ex-officio* block vote on each feeder poor law union was increased from 20 per cent to 33 per cent. The elected guardian block vote of 80 per cent correspondingly fell to 66 per cent. However Pell limited the number of directly elected guardians on the county authority to just 33 per cent of that 66 per cent. Elected guardians on each of the four poor law unions in a county appointed only 8.25 per cent of their members to sit on the county authority. Consequently, the new county authority was made up of a 33 per cent *ex-officio* block, 33 per cent (8.25 per cent x 4) directly elected members, and 33 per cent (8.25 per cent x 4) co-opted members appointed from amongst the elected guardians.⁵⁷ This rather complex system meant that once anti-outrelief supporters were elected to office they could dominate the county authority by forming a formidable coalition with the *ex-officio* representatives, allowing them to have effective control over all local administration.

⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 304.

Pell sponsored numerous private members bills at Westminster to get these measures onto the statute books but each time they failed because of a lack of parliamentary time.⁵⁸ The scheme was finally rejected in 1888 when a Boundary Commission reported that implementing the proposal would have meant redrawing constituency boundaries, including those in Ireland.⁵⁹ The Conservative government refused to introduce any changes that would have political ramifications for Irish Home Rule. Nevertheless, Pell's proposals did carry considerable weight with MPs from both sides of the House of Commons.⁶⁰ Spencer was one of a number of prominent Liberals interested in the scheme. He even convened a private meeting at Althorp in April 1888 to discuss the proposals with key anti-outrelief supporters from Northamptonshire to see how they could work together to persuade the government to adopt Pell's scheme. Pell told Spencer in advance of the meeting that if his county scheme was rejected then poor relief would be administered in a 'frothy and harmful' manner because further democratisation was inevitable. He feared that the new 'mischievous' form of 'political feeling' would determine local government in the Brixworth Union and the growth of caucus activity was a harbinger of that change.⁶¹ Regrettably Spencer's response has not survived, since it would have made interesting reading, giving an insight into the Whig view of democratisation changes and the progress of 'advanced' Liberalism. Bury admitted to a packed meeting of the Northampton Chamber of Agriculture on the eve of the new county council legislation that he was alarmed by the reconstruction of county politics that was taking place. He pointed out the dangers of widening political discussion and greater representation:

⁵⁸ Pell sponsored private members' bills on 16.2.1880, 21.5.1880, 19.1.1881, 13.2.1882, 2.4.1883.

⁵⁹ Keith-Lucas, *English Local Government*, pp. 96-98.

⁶⁰ Prominent supporters included Lord Edmond Fitzmaurice, Mr William Rathbone, Mr Clare Sewell Read, Mr James Yorke, Mr Albert Gray, Mr A Doyle (LGB Inspector for Wales), Mr G F Henley and Mr C T Ritchie (President of the LGB after 1886).

⁶¹ BLMD, *Althorp*, K372, Pell to Spencer, 1.4.1888 & 2.4.1888.

Debates and discussions must take place...Eloquence must be aired and, of course, reported; election pledges, however vast, must be kept and the “penny wise and pound foolish” policy may often triumph over the true economist. The work to be done calls for men of independence and public spirit, as well as ability and business-like capabilities. Plainly the Council is no place for drones or dunces or dummies, still less for political adventurers or charlatans...the Court of Quarter Sessions was not always infallible but was always above suspicion...popular government is not always wise, nor is it always pure, [for] it also has its peculiar dangers and temptations for[there] will always be prophets to prophesy falsely if the people will have it so...⁶²

Despite Pell's best efforts the County Council Act of 1888 made no mention of poor law reform and his scheme was abandoned in order to get the rest of the legislation through.⁶³ Each county council was comprised of elected members and co-opted aldermen. Outside of London 40 per cent of those elected to the new county authorities were magistrates and in most counties the Chairman of Quarter Sessions was elected Chairman of the County Council.⁶⁴ Spencer became Chairman of the Northamptonshire County Council and Pell was one of a number of Conservative magistrates elected.⁶⁵ To the anger of the local populace, Spencer and Pell co-opted Bury onto the council's technical education committee to serve as an alderman. Not until the more democratic 1890s did working people gain the opportunity to govern themselves for the first time.

Conclusion:

The four sections of this chapter have explored the process of political change in the Brixworth Union between 1885 and 1889. First, in 1885 the Chairman of the board's article

⁶² Northampton Guardian, 22.12.1888.

⁶³ BLMD, Althorp MS, K170, Henage to Spencer, 7.5.1886- E. Henage, former Chief Whip of the Liberal Party, advised Spencer to distance himself from Pell because he believed one of the reasons that the Liberal party lost the general election of 1886 (aside from the issue of Home Rule) was the party's support for 'Mr Pell's Taxation Resolution for county councils', which was 'unpopular'. There is no record of Spencer's reply.

⁶⁴ Dunbabin, 'British Local', p.793.

⁶⁵ J. Bradbury, Government and County: A History of Northamptonshire County Council 1889-1989, (1989), p.91.

revealed the depths of his concern about democratisation changes following the third Reform Act (1884). Howarth believes that this publication was a straightforward attack by a clergyman who felt the landed elite acted irresponsibly in rural society.⁶⁶ However, Bury's motives were more complex than this and must be viewed in the context of the crusade campaign. The article was an attack against *ex-officio* guardians who were acting in a complacent manner, but it was also a cry to arms to motivate them to regroup and unite to protect their class interests at a time when the political character of local life was changing fundamentally. Bury's purpose was to warn his party on the board of guardians that their apathy and complacency would eventually cause them to lose power. He believed they ought to take a proactive, not reactive, stance in poor law matters. Bury was convinced that the anti-outrelief ideology could be used to further the political interests of the older rural order. There is no doubt that further parliamentary democratisation alarmed Bury and since it coincided with an era of coalition politics he felt that his worst fears about losing power in the longer term were being substantiated. Unfortunately, his article backfired because it was too controversial and exposed deep divisions within his party, which ironically may have encouraged working people to openly criticise the anti-outrelief policy even more.

Second, poor law boardroom politics were very complex in this period because of the impact of the agricultural crisis. Guardians' minute books reveal that the farmer block vote was split into three groupings. Pell had to negotiate with a group of farmers who had no firm party allegiance and this floating cohort of voters forced his party to engage in coalition politics. This type of political management did not suit Pell's autocratic style. It was unfortunate from his party's viewpoint that the rural recession coincided with a more

⁶⁶ J. A. Howarth, 'Politics and Society in Late-Victorian Northamptonshire', Northamptonshire Past and Present, 4, (1970-1), 5, pp. 269-74.

democratic era in county politics, since once land was devalued the power inscribed in that land started to diminish too. This process was slow but it was also irreversible because the dispersal of territorial wealth also signalled the erosion of landed power. The establishment of an opposition party on the board of guardians in this period was a harbinger of how that process of economic change would lead to a political shift in Pell's party's fortunes.

Tradesmen were now a permanent fixture on the board of guardians and they had a very different political outlook. They had started to move out of their traditional client relationship with the farmers because they disagreed with the anti-outrelief policy. Also it was in their political and economic interests to do so. As democratisation unfolded in a period of rapid economic change, for the first time tradesmen had an opportunity to come to the fore in poor law politics to play a more independent role. This had not been possible before because of the way that landowners and their tenant farmers were able to dominate the board of guardians by virtue of their economic strength. The advent of the third Reform Act and caucus politics signalled that tradesmen in the countryside could begin to participate more fully in local political life.

John Garrard's studies of urban local authorities in this period show that tradesmen considered local government to be a more important political forum than Westminster.⁶⁷ Those with successful local government careers seldom tried to get elected to parliament, but not because they were unambitious. In local government they could bring about more radical policy changes and had greater influence and this was why they often rejected the tussle of parliamentary life. Since tradesmen tended to align themselves carefully for business reasons

⁶⁷ J. A. Garrard, 'The Middle Classes and Nineteenth Century National and Local Politics,' in J. Garrard, D. Jary, M. Goldsmith and A. Oldfield (eds.), *The Middle Class in Politics*, (1977), pp.35-67; J. A. Garrard, *Leaders and Politics in Nineteenth Century Salford: An Historical Analysis of Urban Political Power*, (1977); J. A. Garrard, 'Parties, members and voters after 1867', *Historical Journal*, 20, (1977), pp.145-163; J. A. Garrard, 'Social History, Political History and Political Science: The Study of Power,' *Journal of Social History*, 3, (1983), pp. 105-123.

in their local community, their staunch support for the opposition party on the board of guardians is revealing. At a time when they were losing custom because of the rural exodus it was even more important to support the interests of their client base. There appears to have been a groundswell of local opinion centred on the public houses and beer shops in the area opposed to the anti-outrelief policy. Tradesmen were probably closer to their voters than the more established guardians who represented the older rural order and at a time of further democratisation this may have given working people fresh hope that poor law reform was a real possibility in the future. The advent of caucus politics also gave tradesmen the opportunity to develop new political relationships outside the Brixworth Union in local towns, where other tradesmen were coming to the fore and radical ideas were being circulated. It is worth noting that this was the era of Bradlaughism in Northampton town politics and 'advanced' Liberal views began to inform politics across the county.⁶⁸ Although the evidence relating to tradesmen's aspirations and influences is fragmentary they were an important new social grouping because most were motivated differently. They appear to have followed the example of their urban counterparts and the local tradesmen elected in the mid-1870s by adopting a more proactive role in poor law matters.

Third, the advent of caucus politics in the area was important because it alarmed Pell's party and that fear shaped their actions. The Liberal caucus was not a success in mid-Northamptonshire, as Howarth explains, because party activists failed to 'nurture support' in villages, at a time when wider political participation questioned the basis of the older rural order.⁶⁹ Caucus activity challenged the poor law decision-making process, which was the

⁶⁸ For example, C. Bradlaugh, *Parliament and the Poor: What the legislature can do; What it ought to do*, (1889), pp. 1-14.

⁶⁹ Howarth, 'Liberal', p. 97.

foundation of that order in this location. Consequently, the development of caucus politics led to debates about the impact of democratisation that fed into the issue of county council reform and what that would mean for the long term future of Pell's party and the crusade against outrelief.

Fourth, Pell feared that the creation of county councils would ensure the democratisation of the poor law and that would erode the power of the landed influence in Northamptonshire. Thus, he tried to redraft county council legislation before it reached the statute book. Although those fears in the immediate aftermath of the County Council Act (1888) were unfounded that fear shaped his party's action. Significantly those debates and the crusade campaign further isolated working people who already felt excluded from political life. In some areas former agricultural trade union leaders came to the fore once more to fill the political vacuum that the Spencer family and Pell's crusade created. Further work is needed to trace the extent to which working people in Northamptonshire rejected Liberalism in this period. This would reveal the connections between the crusade campaign and the collapse of Liberalism in the county at the 1895 general election. Initial research appears to indicate that in the Brixworth Union an independent parallel labour movement was forming alongside Liberalism. Peter Clarke observes that 'for many illiterate labourers, the meetings of 1884-5, whether held under union auspices, or convened to demonstrate feeling over the franchise, or straightforwardly organised in support of Liberal candidates, were a breakthrough into socialisation of a novel kind' in local political life.⁷⁰ Events described in this chapter and the next support that viewpoint. Furthermore, the political impact of the crusade campaign refutes Harrison's view that working people were not interested in public

⁷⁰ Clarke, 'Hodge's Politics', p. 129.

welfare issues in the late-Victorian era.⁷¹

As Clarke suggests, the English counties experienced a political awakening post-1885. This influenced those who were determined to retain a crusade against outrelief and those who were equally determined to oppose such a harsh policy. Bury and Pell tried to awaken their party to the threat of democratisation, caucus politics and county council legislation. Pell and Spencer tried to use their positions at Westminster to rework the reform of local government in their favour. By contrast working people aligned with, but were not absorbed by, the democratising influence of caucus politics. By the 1890s, as the next chapter explains, the promise of further local government changes gave the labouring poor in the Brixworth Union the means, vision and hope to move on and they grasped that chance resolutely.

⁷¹ Harrison, British Politics, p. 71.

Chapter Six.

Democratisation and the Erosion of Landed Control, 1890-1900.

Introduction:

The ending of the crusade against outrelief, as Karel Williams explains, 'is conventionally fixed in 1893', the year that guardian election property qualifications were lowered from a rateable value of £25 to £5 per annum.¹ This was closely followed by the passing of the Local Government Act (1894) which introduced universal suffrage in both guardian and parish council elections (the latter were created under the new legislation).² The plural voting system was abolished and for the first time women could officially stand as guardians of the poor.³ In addition, the office of *ex-officio* guardian was disbanded and poor law union boards were renamed urban or rural district councils. Although there has been considerable debate in recent years amongst political historians about the meaning of parliamentary democratisation post-1885, the democratisation of the poor law is still understudied.⁴ Today the conventional view is that the nature of local government in the English provinces did not change significantly after the Local Government Act (1894) because there was more continuity than

¹ K. Williams, From Pauperism to Poverty, (1981), p. 103.

² For a basic outline of Local Government Act (1894) provisions refer – M. Pugh, The Making of Modern British Politics, 1867- 1939, (1982), pp. 69-112; M. Pearce and G. Stewart, British Political History, 1867-1995. Democracy and Decline, (1996 edn.), Chapter 6, pp. 185-231.

³ Prior to 1894 women were not excluded from standing for election as guardians provided they were independent ratepayers. It is not certain when women began to be elected to boards of guardians on a broad front because women in some rural areas did seek office before the 1870s. P. Hollis, Ladies Elect. Women in English Local Government, 165-1914, (1987), pp. 195, 267-302, estimates that around eight hundred women were elected for the first time in 1894.

⁴ For example, the Local Government Act 1894 changes are discussed in the following texts, but little mention is made of poor law democratisation – N. Blewett, 'The Franchise in the United Kingdom, 1885-1918', Past and Present, 32, (Dec.1965), pp. 27-56; K. T. Hoppen, 'The Franchise and Electoral Politics in England and Ireland, 1832-1885', History, 70, (1985), pp. 202-17; P. Hollis, Ladies Elect ; P. Clarke and K. Langford, 'Hodge's Politics', in N. Harte and R. Quinault (eds.), Land and Society in Britain, 1700-1914: Essays in Honour of F.M.L.Thompson, (1996), pp. 119-137.

discontinuity in the personnel structure of the new district and parish councils.⁵ However, as this chapter explains, whilst that may have been the case in most poor law unions, democratisation had a major impact in the Brixworth Union. For the first time working people had the opportunity to take control of the poor law system that had excluded and impoverished them, and they acted decisively.

This chapter is divided into four sections arranged around core themes that explore which events led to the denouement of the crusade campaign. Section one (6.1) examines a public health scandal which mobilised cross-community opposition against Pell's party and was the last stage in the political journey of working people in relation to the anti-outrelief campaign. The second section (6.2) explores the political reaction amongst working people when the property qualification in guardian elections was lowered in 1893. Section three (6.3) discusses how the political tide at both the national and local levels had turned against committed anti-outrelief supporters by 1894. Finally, section four (6.4) explores how in 1896 working people won the majority of seats on the board of guardians. Thus ending the protracted battle over the anti-outrelief issue in the Brixworth Union.

6.1: A Sanitation Scandal and Diphtheria Debates.

Until quite recently the history of late-Victorian sanitary provision, like the poor law, was written in Whiggish terms. It was conventionally seen, as Christopher Hamlin observes, as 'part of the triumph of rationality over superstition, recognition over denial, utopian vision over ideological apology, activism over complacency.'⁶ Medical historians and demographers,

⁵ A. Sykes, *The Rise and Fall of British Liberalism, 1776-1988*, (1997) is one of the latest political texts to adopt this view; A. Kidd, *State, Society and the Poor in Nineteenth Century England*, (1999), is the latest welfare textbook to take a similar stance.

⁶ C. Hamlin, 'Muddling in Bumbledom: On the Enormity of Large Sanitary Improvements in Four British Towns, 1855-1885', *Victorian Studies*, I, (Autumn, 1988), p. 55; C. Hamlin, *What Becomes of Pollution? Advisory Science and the Controversy on the Self-Putrifaction of Rivers in Britain, 1850-1900*, (1987).

notably Thomas McKeown, Simon Szreter and Sumit Guha, have revised the Whig theory of public health because of their renewed interest in debates surrounding the decline in mortality rates in the late-Victorian era.⁷ Although those debates have concentrated on public health issues (notably epidemiological statistics, medical developments and improving standards of living) to explain mortality decline, they have also refocused attention on the nature of local sanitation provision. In particular, Szreter points out in a groundbreaking article that historians still misunderstand the nature and politics of local sanitary provision in the late-nineteenth century. Often historians ignore the fact that, 'Victorian public health remained hamstrung at the local level by the twin problems of overlapping authorities and the non-compulsory, merely permissive nature of most of their statutory duties'.⁸ This was the case in the Brixworth poor law union during the crusade campaign.

Few welfare textbooks explore the relationship between sanitary and poor law authorities in rural society during the crusade decades.⁹ However the crusade against outrelief began to change the tenor of all local authority administration in a number of significant ways. First, the Longley strategy (1874), which recommended the abolition of outrelief, stated that guardians should ignore the advice of technical medical experts if it interfered with their cost-saving outrelief initiatives.¹⁰ However this also meant that in locations where the personnel on poor law unions and sanitary authorities overlapped the crusade's economic considerations changed guardians' attitudes to sanitary advisers too. Second, the crusade

⁷ T. McKeown, *The Modern Rise of Populations*, (1976); S. Szreter, 'The Importance of Social Intervention in Britain's Mortality Decline c. 1850-1914: a Re-interpretation of the Role of Public Health', *The Society for the Social History of Medicine*, 1, (April, 1988), I, pp. 1-37; S. Szreter, 'Mortality and Public Health, 1815-1914', in A. Digby, C. Feinstein and D. Jenkins (eds.), *New Directions in Economic and Social History*, (1992), pp. 136-48; S. Guha, 'The Importance of Social Intervention in England's Mortality Decline: the Evidence Reviewed', *The Society for the Social History of Medicine*, I, (Jan. 1994), 1, pp. 89-113; S. Szreter, *Fertility, Class and Gender in Britain, 1860-1914*, (1996).

⁸ Szreter, 'Importance', p. 25.

⁹ This of course follows on from the general neglect of this topic in the secondary literature, which has been highlighted throughout this thesis.

¹⁰ Williams, *Pauperism*, p. 100.

against outrelief was introduced to bring about cost savings on a broad front, which meant that guardians who wanted to continue with outrelief reductions had to implement some creative anti-outrelief measures. Thus, they took a much greater interest in all aspects of rateable expenditure, including sanitation provision. Anne Digby has shown in her *East Anglia* studies that guardians in the mid-Victorian period sometimes used the highway rates of the sanitary authority to fund road schemes to pay outrelief to the able-bodied during peak unemployment periods.¹¹ This allowed farmers to retain a surplus pool of labour nearby, ready for spring and harvest-time. Therefore, it is perhaps unsurprising that in a strict 'model' poor law union like Brixworth, sanitation provision became contentious because guardians started to use sanitation funds to improve their anti-outrelief performance indicators by the 1890s. This only came to light following a severe outbreak of diphtheria in 1889, which alerted the local community to how determined Pell was to retain his anti-outrelief policy.

The Brixworth Union highways and sanitary authority was established in 1850, following local concern about the spread of cholera in England in the years 1848 to 1849.¹² Local ratepayers in the Brixworth Union petitioned the General Board of Health in Westminster to set up a sanitary authority with the power to levy rates to be spent on improving sanitation and highway provision. This revenue could be used to fund road building schemes. It was also spent on the management of local sewers, refuse systems, slaughter houses and burial grounds. The sanitary authority had the powers to appoint inspectors of nuisances to deal with the problems of vagrancy and poor housing. If ratepayers wanted to make expensive sanitary or highway improvements they could apply to central

¹¹ A. Digby, *The Poor Law in Nineteenth Century England and Wales*, (1982).

¹² V. Berridge, 'Health and Medicine', in F.M.L. Thompson (ed.), *Cambridge Social History of Britain, 1750-1950, Volume III*, (1990), pp. 171-242, outlines sanitary movement developments; N[orthampton] R[ecord] O[ffice], LG 21/07, Brixworth Union sanitary authority records; Misc. Ledger 267, Brixworth Rural Sanitary Authority letter book, 23.8.1886-26.10.1898.

government for a low-interest public works loan to fund schemes of work. It is difficult to ascertain whether guardians of the poor used the highway rate in the mid-Victorian period to support the able-bodied during peak unemployment periods. Regrettably the local sanitation records are inadequate. However, they do reveal that in 1873 when the crusade against outrelief was underway a number of key members of Pell's party stood for election to the sanitary authority because they wanted to control all the local authorities in the district. Consequently, the Chairman of the Brixworth Union board of guardians, Rev. Bury, also chaired the highways and sanitary authority in the district throughout the late-Victorian era.¹³

Local Government Board reports and the Spencer Papers reveal that by the 1890s the issue of sanitary provision was controversial in the Brixworth Union for two reasons. First, the Public Health Act of 1872 'made it compulsory for every statutory sanitary authority to appoint a Medical Officer of Health (MOH)', but Pell's party argued against this on economic and professional grounds.¹⁴ The Brixworth Union board of guardians, as chapter 4 explained, cut the number of its poor law medical officers from four to one in the late-1880s. Guardians took this decision for three reasons. First, they wanted to prevent doctors funding the customary burial of paupers on medical orders in order to save money. Second, anti-outrelief supporters were determined to stop medical outrelief claimants voting in parliamentary elections because after the passing of the Medical Relief (Disqualifications Removal) Act (1885) they were no longer disenfranchised for being in receipt of medical relief outside the workhouse. Since Pell's party believed in the principle of 'no representation without rates', they withdrew medical outrelief funeral payments. Third, guardians had no desire to appoint

¹³ The rateable property suffrage qualification for guardian election was between £15-£40 until 1893, depending on the location. To be elected to a sanitary authority a ratepayer had to have property valued at not less than £500 and pay a minimum of £15 per annum in rates. This meant that guardians usually sat on the sanitary authority too.

¹⁴ Szreter, 'Mortality', p. 145.

an MOH to the sanitary authority since it had been very difficult to change the employment contract of the remaining poor law medical officer and to dismiss his colleagues. Also Pell did not value the medical expertise of MOHs in sanitary matters. He felt that under the Longley regulations he was better qualified to decide the merits of sanitation improvements. A clergyman from Guilsborough parish, who was an anti-outrelief supporter for over twenty years, revealed to Spencer in a private letter that guardians in Pell's party felt they were 'better qualified' than MOHs and he commented that 'the whole course' of sanitation 'is too expensive'. He also believed that, 'no one...really knows more of sanitation than Bury or Pell [because] sanitation is like medical jurisprudence a special subject, which they have...specifically studied'.¹⁵ Anthony Wohl explains that this attitude was common because MOHs did not have to be 'qualified doctors holding a diploma in sanitary science, state medicine or public health' until after the Local Government Act of 1888, which created county councils.¹⁶ One of Pell's opponents tried to get a close friend appointed MOH to the Brixworth Union in the late-1880s, but was unsuccessful.¹⁷

Second, the Brixworth Union sanitary authority ignored the provisions of the Public Health Act of 1872, which stated that it was a statutory duty to provide fresh water supplies in all areas, on the grounds that it would be too expensive. It also refused to implement the Public Health (Water) Act of 1878 Vict. c. 41, which stipulated that ratepayers must pay for proper waterworks, to ensure efficient clean water supplies and sewage disposal in properly regulated sewage farms.¹⁸ However, that did not prevent the sanitary authority from submitting elaborate schemes to central government to obtain a public works loan to implement these measures, even though they had no intention of spending all of the money on

¹⁵ B[ritish] L[ibrary] M[anuscript] D[epartment], *Althorp MS*, K324, Hichens to Spencer, 14.1.1890.

¹⁶ A. S. Wohl, *Endangered Lives, Public Health in Victorian Britain*, (1983), pp.157-9.

¹⁷ BLMD, *Althorp MS*, K383, Thursfield to Laudon, 29.1.1890, Laudon to Spencer, 4.10.1891.

¹⁸ Szreter, 'Importance', p. 24.

sanitary improvements.¹⁹ Instead, Pell and Bury decided to redirect the funds to poor law union coffers to improve their central government indicators, but as they had to be seen to spending the money appropriately they offered to fund half the sanitary measures.²⁰

In the late-1880s the Brixworth Union sanitary authority implemented a large-scale sanitation project throughout the district.²¹ However, since Pell wanted to keep costs as low as possible the plans did not follow public health regulations. Instead the sanitary authority only paid for the existing sewerage supply to be upgraded. Workmen were instructed to lay new sewerage pipes from each house in the district to village main sewers, but to save costs older main sewers, which predated the changes, were not renewed. Pell refused to pay for new sewerage treatment works in each parish, so the main sewers were terminated in the surrounding fields outside village limits, where effluent would not be a health-hazard. Pell argued that upgrading the main sewers would stop villagers dumping effluent in village wells and this would improve drinking water supplies. Therefore there was no need to lay drinking water pipes or to pay for costly water treatment works. He also pointed out that one of the benefits of depositing the 'night soil' from the main sewer nearby was that it would provide a regular supply of fertiliser for farmers. There was considerable local debate about the merits of these sanitation schemes and the controversy came to a head in 1889.

Reports were received at the Local Government Board that workmen had difficulties connecting the new pipes to the older main sewer in each village and effluent was leaking into

¹⁹ NRO, LG 21/07, Brixworth Union sanitary authority 1886-9, discusses controversy.

²⁰ P[ublic] R[ecord] O[ffice], MH 12/8705, internal memos amongst civil servants for example, 3.3.1890, 4.3.1890 discuss Pell's delay in applying for a public works' loan to fund statutory improvements and questions about whether once the funds were allocated they had been redirected to poor law union coffers. The suggestion was that sanitary matters were being undermined by the context of the anti-outrelief campaign. In memo 26.4.1890, no. 34353 K (1) senior civil servants decided to reserve their right to interfere, as that was 'contrary to the practice of the Board' and would be embarrassing since they had promoted the Brixworth Union's policies since the 1870s.

²¹ PRO, MH 12/8705, LGB memos on Brixworth Union drains provision, dated 1889.

the main streets of some parishes in the district, a clear health hazard.²² Villagers also reported that during wet spells untreated human waste was washed from the surrounding fields into the water table, contaminating local drinking water supplies in wells. Pell's opponents pointed out that his cost-saving schemes were putting the health of the whole community at risk. Their criticisms seemed to be vindicated when sixteen labourers' children and one adult died from a diphtheria outbreak in the parish of East Haddon in 1889.²³

Diphtheria, 'one of the common infectious diseases of childhood' in the nineteenth century, is caused by an 'acute, infectious, and very variable disease' due to the presence of the 'bacillus *Corynebacterium diphtheriae*'.²⁴ The symptoms of the disease are 'fever, headache malaise, and a sore throat', which often result in a very painful death from asphyxiation. Suffocation is usually caused by the development of a 'false membrane' in the infected patient's throat. Milder forms of diphtheria were often misdiagnosed as croup, influenza or scarlet fever in the nineteenth century. Until 1894 medical opinion was divided as to the causes of the disease. It was 'popularly assumed that diphtheria was caused by polluted drinking water supplies,' when in fact the disease was spread by 'droplet infection, close contact, infected dust and contaminated milk'.²⁵ Consequently, following a virulent outbreak of the disease around 1888 in rural areas many people blamed sanitary authorities for not improving drinking water.²⁶ Thus, residents in the Brixworth Union held Pell's party responsible for the East Haddon children's painful deaths.²⁷

²² Ibid.

²³ PRO, MH 12/8705, 6.7.1880, Wykes to LGB.

²⁴ A. Hardy, 'Tracheotomy versus intubation: surgical intervention in Diphtheria in Europe and the United States, 1825-1930', *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 66, (1992), 4, pp. 536-559; A. Hardy, *The Epidemic Streets. Infectious Disease and the Rise of Preventive Medicine, 1856-1900*, (1993), chapter 4, 'Diphtheria', pp. 80-109.

²⁵ Hardy, *Epidemic*, pp. 87, 102.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 87.

²⁷ PRO, MH 12/8705, petitions dated 20.9.1889, June 1890, received from ratepayers confirm this.

Pell had to inform the Local Government Board about the diphtheria outbreak under the Infectious Diseases (Notification) Act (1889) and an immediate investigation began.²⁸ Central government demanded a full report from the sanitary MOH, but as he did not exist they asked the remaining poor law medical officer to investigate the outbreak. He replied, 'I would suggest the water supply of East Haddon requires the immediate consideration of the Sanitary Authority'.²⁹ At the same time a petition was sent signed by the villagers complaining that 'a scheme for supplying the village with water was submitted by...one of our Guardians for this Parish, but it was rejected in favour of the Draining scheme'.³⁰ Pell informed the Local Government Board that the remaining poor law medical officer was acting out of spite and the villagers were not qualified to decide sanitation matters. Consequently, a decision was taken to send a Local Government Board sanitary inspector to arbitrate by preparing a second report. An editorial in The Lancet welcomed the decision reporting that, 'so fatal an outbreak in so circumscribed an area should...throw useful light upon the causation of such rural epidemics, [since] the increase and behaviour of the disease is becoming daily more important, owing to the general increase of diphtheria mortality in this country'.³¹ Once again the Brixworth Union was setting policy standards but not in the way that the Local Government Board desired. Pell's actions reveal how anti-outrelief supporters had taken over the crusade campaign by forcing central government to compromise policy guidelines on public health matters, which were of wider significance to the medical profession.

²⁸ Wohl, Endangered, p. 111.

²⁹ PRO, MH 12/8705, LGB ref. 83400/89, 19.9.1889 report request; 10.9.1889, Williams, poor law medical officer to LGB reply; LGB ref. 84079/89, 20.9.1889, Petition from 'vicar, churchwardens, overseers and ratepayers of East Haddon' to LGB.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ The Lancet, 21.9.1889, p. 613.

Dr. Bruce Low of the Local Government Board's sanitary division conducted an exhaustive enquiry, which concluded that

there is no system of sewerage, and that rude drainage tends to soakage into the subsoil with filth; that privy-pits of the most offensive and unwholesome sort prevail; that refuse and filth removal are of the most elementary sort...the water-supply, which sometimes "stinks" is from draw-wells, sunk in the soil...is constantly subject to the risk of filth pollution. That the piggeries and the overcrowded churchyard must almost necessarily constitute a danger to health; and that some of the cottage property is extremely defective... It is impossible to ignore the fact that the defective sanitary conditions and deficient sanitary organisation of the village must have had important bearings on some of the results of the epidemic.³²

The doctor stated that the source of the infection may have been due to 'infected rags' that had been collected around the district and deposited in a rag shop at East Haddon, but that did not excuse the lamentable sanitary arrangements of Pell's party. A follow-up editorial in The Lancet reminded its readership, 'that it must be remembered that Brixworth is a sanitary district which has persistently defeated the intentions of the Public Health Act' and noted that for political reasons the Local Government Board's 'instructive report had not been placed on sale', at a time when its finding should have been made available to advance medical knowledge.³³ There was no mention of the context of the crusade campaign, but that seems to have had some bearing on central government's decision to withhold a report that would have been politically embarrassing for a strict 'model' poor law union and the wider anti-outrelief cause.³⁴

Pell's party refused to accept the outcome of such a damning and embarrassing report. Thus, the Brixworth sanitary authority commissioned a third report from an MOH who worked for the Rugby poor law union, Dr. T. Osborne-Walker, whom Pell regarded as an expert on diphtheria treatment. The Northampton Daily Chronicle derided the third report

³² The Lancet, 4.1.1890, pp. 47-8; British Medical Journal, 7.9.1889, p. 575, also reported the case, though in a more matter-of-fact manner.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ See footnote 20 above.

stating that Dr. Osborne-Walker had only been commissioned because he was a ‘Pellite economist’ and ‘few agreed with his treatments’.³⁵ The third report stated that Pell’s party was not negligent because by upgrading sewerage supplies the quality of drinking water had been improved and in any case diphtheria was not a water-borne disease. However, few accepted these findings.³⁶

Spencer, who despised publicity and controversy, took the unprecedented step of making a statement to the Times about the diphtheria outbreak. He defended Pell’s actions stating incorrectly that the Brixworth sanitary authority’s policies ‘did conform to central government guidelines’.³⁷ However, the Local Government Board did not pursue the matter, instead they insisted that the low paid sanitary officials on £5 per annum should be replaced by a full-time MOH. In addition, the sanitary authority had to fund a new piped fresh drinking water supply system and water treatment works. They were also required to replace the old main sewer in the village and set up a sewerage treatment works.³⁸

Until the outbreak of diphtheria, Pell’s party’s administration of the sanitary authority was not subject to public accountability. As long as their outrelief returns met central government targets, senior civil servants ignored their unconventional cost-saving methods. However, they could not ignore a diphtheria outbreak. The Chairman knew that central government would now scrutinise his procedures at a time when it was difficult to stop the reintroduction of outrelief. Therefore, it was vital to deflect attention and yet reassure central government that Pell’s party was blameless. Pell asked the Local Government Board to allow the sanitary authority to delegate its powers under section 201 of the Public Health Act of

³⁵ Northampton Daily Chronicle, 10.9.1889.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Times, 6.12.1889.

³⁸ PRO, MH 12/8705, ‘Full Report on the East Haddon Drainage Scheme’, p.13, dated January 1890.

1878 to a 'committee consisting of a whole number of guardians' of the poor.³⁹ This was a ruse to convince central government that the anti-outrelief party would be more publicly accountable for its actions. However, senior civil servants knew the committee would be a sham. They authorised the new arrangement provided the committee consisted of at least one third of the poor law union's *ex-officio* guardians. They hoped the magistrates would oversee policy decisions and act impartially.⁴⁰ What they did not realise was that the changes strengthened the power of the Chairman of the board of guardians. Bury could vote up to six times on the new poor law-sanitary committee.⁴¹ This came to light when a number of vestries in the area complained to the Local Government Board that the Brixworth sanitary committee still refused to pay for drinking water improvements in the years 1890 to 1891. Spencer, Pell and Bury were using their enhanced voting powers to oppose central government's instructions.⁴² Ratepayers and labourers in the parishes of Ravensthorpe and Harlestone petitioned central government to compel the sanitary committee to sanitise their villages properly.⁴³ A farm bailiff from Harlestone led a delegation of labourers who visited the Local Government Board offices in London in August 1891 to complain about Pell's intransigence. However central government could not compel the Brixworth sanitary committee to pay for the sanitary improvements, they could only make recommendations.⁴⁴ The deaths of so many children of the labouring poor were very emotive and the stubborn refusal of Pell's party to change policies in the face of two comprehensive sanitary reports, compiled under the most

³⁹ PRO, MH 12/8705, memo 17.2.1890 and reply to Pell 3.3.1890; Northampton Herald, 29.3.1890.

⁴⁰ PRO, MH 12/8705, 17.2.1890, 3.3.1890 & 14.3.1890 discusses disagreements between senior civil servants and Pell.

⁴¹ He held two votes as Chairman of each authority, two votes as an elected representative of each authority and two discretionary casting votes if either authority was tied over a motion. This gave him a total of six votes on the new sanitary committee.

⁴² BLMD, Althorp MS, K 324, Hichens to Spencer, 14.1.1890 and replies.

⁴³ PRO, MH 12/8705, 14.4.1890, Ravensthorpe ratepayers to LGB and reply memo ref. 34353 k (1).

⁴⁴ NRO, Spencer MS, Sox 563, Morley to Spencer, 18.8.1891.

tragic of circumstances, created cross-community opposition.⁴⁵ Although Pell was technically correct about the diphtheria outbreak he acted in a very high-handed and offensive manner. This was the final catalyst in the political journey of working people in the district; they were now committed to overthrowing the anti-outrelief policy.

6.2: The Brixworth District Out-Door Relief Association.

In December 1892, at Gladstone's request, Spencer convened a meeting at Althorp (his Northamptonshire seat) to discuss parish council proposals with senior members of the Liberal Government. This had been a key manifesto commitment of the Newcastle Programme of 1891, which had helped the Liberal party to win the general election of July 1892.⁴⁶ Many Liberals feared that the party could not introduce a new local government act to create parish councils, without also democratising the poor law. The Chancellor of the Exchequer, Harcourt, told Spencer that the problem with the parish council scheme was that, 'we have moved too fast and too far towards the extreme left on every subject at once, and quite sensible folk don't like it'.⁴⁷ Spencer agreed that the future was 'very dark' for the party but he conceded that poor law democratisation was inevitable because of the manifesto commitment to create parish councils. A number of correspondents wrote to Spencer before the meeting at Althorp to ask him to oppose the parish council scheme because of the effect it would have on poor law administration, which was the last redoubt of the rural elite's power in local government. For example, a clergyman asked Spencer whether ratepayers would be given more votes on village councils than non-ratepayers. He could not believe that the Liberal party was going to repeal the principle of 'no representation without rates'. Spencer

⁴⁵ NRO, Spencer MS, Sox 568, Morley to Selby, 12.2.1891 - discusses political tensions in the area.

⁴⁶ Sykes, Rise, p. 145, discusses background to 1892 election victory.

⁴⁷ B[odelian] L[ibrary] M[odern] M[anuscripts] R[oom], Harcourt MS, ref. 711, fol. 10, Harcourt to Spencer, 17.7.1892; ref. 711, fol. 16, Spencer to Harcourt, 18.7.1893.

told his land agent that the clergyman's enquiry 'was a difficult one' because the Liberal party was 'supposed to be the champion of householders'.⁴⁸ Predictably, Pell's party felt threatened by the parish council proposals. Bury wrote to Spencer:

I am quite in accord with the provisions of the Bill, but I would argue that it must have a serious effect, at any rate for a time, on administration and that it will excite speculative hopes in the minds of potential recipients, which, whether realised or not must have a mischievous tendency. All considerations of expense or modification sink into insignificance compared to the enormous power which poor law administration has to improve or demoralise every class of the community...- will you let the importance of this subject be my apology, for earnestly praying you to use your great influence in the direction of enquiry before legislation. [sic]⁴⁹

After the meeting at Althorp the Liberal government introduced local government legislation, which created parish councils in villages with populations of over three hundred inhabitants. Under the terms of the Local Government Act of 1894 poor law unions in rural areas were to be democratised too and as an interim step the Liberal government reduced the rateable property suffrage qualification in guardians elections to £5 per annum in 1893. Bury wrote a very angry letter to Spencer, who replied:

I cannot agree with your view that those who prepared the bill were unconscious of the effect it would have on the Poor Law. We considered it and discussed it. We knew that by doing away with the plural vote we were giving more direct control of P.[oor] Law to the poorer classes of the Electors who might desire to give more out-relief than is given in some Unions like Brixworth. We cd.[could] not however defend the present voting or ex-officio JP guardians. The battle wh. [which] you have fought at Brixworth will no doubt have to be fought if...the Bill is carried but I believe that in the end the principle of relief wh.[which] you have been champion will be carried. Pray remember that this method, this sound method is really exceptionally practised. I thought that maybe a majority of the Bd. [Board] as at present carry not a lax policy of relief ? [sic]⁵⁰

⁴⁸ BLMD, Althorp MS, K329, Abbay to Spencer, 14.12.1891; Spencer to Abbay 14.12.1891.

⁴⁹ BLMD, Althorp MS, K329, Bury to Spencer, annotated by Spencer 10.11.91, quoted with original phrasing and emphasis.

⁵⁰ BLMD, Althorp MS, K344, Spencer to Bury, dated 'Nov. 1891'. There is some confusion over the dating of this letter as 7th Earl Spencer, who catalogued his family papers in the 1950s, wrote that it was written in 1893. This was a cataloguing error as it was written in response to Bury's letter of 10.1.1891. Quoted with original phrasing, spelling and emphasis.

Spencer seemed to have done a *volte face*, because, unlike Pell and Bury, he was a pragmatist and a political realist. He was not in favour of the democratisation of the poor law, but he sensed that the political scene was changing and he appears to have judged that it was better for the Liberal party to adapt, than stagnate and lose office. His election agent also warned Spencer after the election victory in 1892 that, ‘unless something is done for the agricultural labourer pari passu with Home Rule or even before it we cannot keep our hold on the Counties or this part of the County’ [sic].⁵¹ He recommended that Spencer support the reintroduction of outrelief for elderly paupers, which ‘would do more for us in villages than Parish Councils, one man one vote or a Good Allotment Act all found together’. The Chairman of the Brackley Union, a leading Liberal in south-Northamptonshire, told Spencer that Liberalism should ‘pronounce in favour of old age pensions of 5/- [shillings] per week to every man or woman arriving at the age of 65 [so that] the workhouse with its preceding nightmare would be abolished’.⁵² These local proposals anticipated the Liberal welfare reforms of 1906, but in the Brixworth Union working people wanted to reform the poor law first. Thus, Spencer felt ambivalent about social welfare reform and so he responded when asked about the anti-outrelief campaign in a typically Whig fashion, citing his apolitical stance. For example, he sat on the Royal Commission for the Aged Poor (1894), but would not support state pensions. He spoke in favour of local government changes, but would not endorse the reintroduction of outrelief. Pell thought Spencer’s appraisal of further local government proposals, in particular the democratisation of the poor law, was naive and he wrote a letter to the Times protesting that;

under the Bill...however, this control reduced....passes into the hands of a class which comprises the recipient numerically strong and whose influence becomes

⁵¹ BLMD, Althorp MS, K333, Ryland Adkins to Spencer, 17.7.1892. *Pari passu* is a legal term in English land law meaning ‘alongside’, where charges on a property are not ranked in order of debt but have equal weighting in the event of bankruptcy. Quoted with original spelling and emphasis.

⁵² BLMD, Althorp MS, K330, Judge to Spencer, 6.12.1891.

dominant. Should this Bill pass in its present form the prospect is a sad one for the country [sic].⁵³

These local government debates convinced working people, ratepayers and guardians who opposed the anti-outrelief policy in the Brixworth district that the time was right to launch their own campaign to re-introduce outrelief provision.

In late January 1893 the following advertisement appeared in the Northampton Mercury;

To the Electors of the Brixworth Board of Guardians
A meeting of Delegates will be held in the Brixworth School-Room
on February 2nd 1893,
in respect of the recent reduction of qualification for guardians.
Chair to be taken at seven p.m.
All villages in the district are requested to send delegates.⁵⁴

Approximately two hundred people met at the Red Lion public house in Brixworth village, where they formed the Brixworth District Out-Door Relief Association (BDODRA). This political pressure group was the brainchild of a working man, Mr. Sidney Ward (who explained why working people feared the workhouse in chapter 2 and spoke out against the burial policy in chapter 4). There were similar associations that may have influenced Ward. For example, in 1888 working people in Oxford formed an association to fight against the anti-outrelief policy of the Oxford Union board of guardians.⁵⁵ The Oxford Union was dominated by leading members of the Charity Organisation Society (C.O.S.), such as Arnold Toynbee and Rev. L. R. Phelps. The pro-outrelief political association at Oxford failed to get elected to the board of guardians because Oxford University colleges held a disproportionate number of seats on the poor law board, in return for paying higher rates. It is not clear

⁵³ Times, 25.11.1893. Quoted with original emphasis and phrasing.

⁵⁴ Northampton Mercury, 27.1.1893.

⁵⁵ Oriel College, Oxford, Phelps MS, Misc. Volumes 1888; Jackson's Oxford Journal, 24.3.1888, p.8; L.R.Phelps, 'Oxford Poor Relief' in Victoria County History of Oxfordshire, (1952), p. 349; Oxford Chronicle, 24.3.1888; Berkshire and Buckinghamshire Gazette, 24.3.1888, p.2.

whether the Oxford association provided the blueprint for BDODRA, but its activities were well known in poor law circles.

Sidney Ward was born in Brixworth parish in 1864. He was illegitimate and was the only child of a woman who had been rather harshly treated by the Brixworth Union guardians.⁵⁶ During her labour guardians refused to pay for the cost of a midwife on medical outrelief orders and she had to give birth in the Workhouse. However, she refused to hand her child over to the parish authorities, raising him at home with the help of her family and friends. Little is known of Ward's early life, except that he acquired a rudimentary education at the Church of England school in Brixworth parish and had a nonconformist background. He attended Sunday school at the local Methodist church. In 1893, when BDODRA was founded, he was a single man aged twenty-nine, standing over six feet tall and sporting a large beard. He had three part-time jobs during the second phase of the agricultural crisis. He worked as a jobbing gardener, a lamplighter and an insurance representative for the Royal Liverpool & Victoria Friendly Society. As an insurance collector Ward travelled weekly throughout the district collecting sickness and burial club subscriptions from local people who needed some form of insurance to replace outrelief payments. He often visited subscribers during family crises when he called to assess their insurance claims. Contemporary accounts suggest that Ward was a popular member of the community, both admired and respected by his peers. In adulthood he became an active member of the Salvation Army in Brixworth parish often preaching at church services. Since the Salvation Army had no church hall in Brixworth village they usually hired either the school hall, village hall or held open-air services, often accompanied by a band. Ward's Salvation Army work taught him how to

⁵⁶ Ward's illegitimacy was recorded on the 1881 census return for Brixworth parish. Recent family members seem to have been unaware of it – J. Gould, 'In Search of Sidney Ward,' Northamptonshire Past and Present, 8, (1993/4), 5, pp. 393-406.

make an effective public speech and organise rallies. Although he learned to read and write at school his Bible studies appear to have given him a thirst for wider political knowledge. Like many nonconformists he favoured radical texts, such as Tom Paine's The Rights of Man and he often quoted the speeches of Kier Hardie (one of the first members of the Independent Labour Party to be elected to parliament in 1892/3), which he read in the Daily News.⁵⁷ This 'advanced' Liberal newspaper was widely circulated in the Brixworth Union and seems to have influenced Ward. In the years 1890 to 1891 the Daily News published a series of rural reports about the effects of the agricultural crisis and the anti-outrelief crusade on the lives of the labouring poor in rural England. A typical editorial in the series concluded that, 'in the abstract principle the [poor] law is right; the practical application of it...is often a cruel wrong'.⁵⁸ Ward's illegitimacy and nonconformist upbringing gave him the motivation, contacts and skills to organise the local community into a political pressure group to exploit poor law democratisation changes, in order to overthrow Pell's party on the Brixworth Union board of guardians.

In the years 1891 to 1892 Ward recruited leading opponents of the anti-outrelief policy whom he met at nonconformist meetings or on his travels throughout the district. For example, in Walgrave he enlisted the help of Stephen Norton Walker, a Baptist lay-preacher and former agricultural labourer. Walker was a self-made man that manufactured army boots in a small factory in his village, where he employed a large number of local people.⁵⁹ At Pitsford he recruited Josiah Turner, also a member of the Baptist Church, a carpenter and

⁵⁷ *BPP, Royal Commission on the Aged Poor*, (1894), Ward, 27.2.1894, q. 15955.

⁵⁸ *The Daily News*, 3.8.1891, quoted in E. Bellamy, E. Razzell and J. Ward (eds.), Life in the Victorian Village The Daily News Survey of 1891; Volume 1, (1999), p.112.

⁵⁹ PRO, MH 12/8706, LGB ref. 31225/93, Walker to LGB, dated March 1893; I am indebted to Miss. Doreen Norton, niece of Stephen Norton Walker for sharing her private family archive with me at Walgrave and her memories of her uncle.

builder with strong 'advanced' Liberal views.⁶⁰ They were joined by George Page, a baker, grocer and beer retailer from Holcot parish. Ward also enlisted a number of outspoken agricultural labourers who had originally been members of the National Agricultural Labourers' Union (NALU), such as Sam Brambley. Brambley led one of the first union meetings in the spring of 1872 and petitioned Spencer in March 1873 for higher wages (Chapter 2). He had also campaigned alongside the Liberal caucus in 1884-5 against the anti-outrelief policy of the Brixworth Union (Chapter 5). A series of grievances in this rural community, but most notably the outrelief issue, fed into the establishment of this independent labour movement in 1893, which was led by a combination of moderate farmers, traders, artisans and men who described themselves as common agricultural labourers.

At the inaugural meeting of BDODRA members voted in a president (a sympathetic farmer guardian) and eight executive committee members (a farmer guardian, four artisans and two labourers) to oversee their political activities.⁶¹ Four of these men were nonconformist lay-preachers from local Baptist, Methodist and Salvation Army churches and all nine members were 'advanced' Liberal party supporters. Interestingly, two members (Ward and Walker) were illegitimate children, but in fact all seem to have had friends or relatives who had been harshly treated by the Brixworth Union board of guardians.

BDODRA's executive committee invited 'any competent working man' who paid rates of £5 per annum in 1892/3 to apply to be selected to stand as a guardian of the poor on their behalf. The imminent guardian election date in April 1893 meant BDODRA had a very short election campaign. Meetings were convened in most of the larger parishes in the district, where no

⁶⁰ I am indebted to the present 'Turner family' of Pitsford village for sharing with Peter King and myself family memories and a photograph of Josiah Turner.

⁶¹ Northampton Mercury, 3.3.1893.

major landowner predominated.⁶² A local BDODRA member usually hired a school or church hall in their parish and canvassed ratepayers to attend. In the course of each meeting a committee of five men was elected in each parish to oversee BDODRA's campaign in that village. Each BDODRA member subscribed 6d. per annum to a union fund, so that newly elected working guardians could claim an allowance of 2s. 6d. per day in compensation for lost earnings every time they attended a fortnightly poor law union board meeting.

Ward did three things to create publicity for BDODRA. First, he wrote a letter to sitting guardians in which he asked them to answer a series of questions about the anti-outrelief controversy, which he planned to publish in local newspapers:

whether, if you are returned at the next election as a guardian of the poor, if you would vote for out-door relief to be given to the deserving poor, such cases that are recommended by the committee and guardians of their own parish [sic].⁶³

His letter to Spencer stated that, 'in some parishes the men are *afraid* to vote *against* the Guardians who are opposed to out-relief because by doing so they would come under your Lordship's displeasure' (emphasis in original). Spencer replied that this was nonsense but he later admitted that the guardian election in 1893 had been partisan.⁶⁴ Second, Ward invited local newspaper reporters to attend a meeting in the Chairman's parish at Harlestone on 21st March 1893, six days before polling. It was one of the last chances BDODRA had to campaign and Ward hoped to belittle the Chairman publicly. Third, he invited a number of Northampton town councillors, who were members of the Northampton Liberal Radical Association, to attend the meeting at Harlestone. He hoped they would persuade ratepayers who were wavering to vote for BDODRA.

⁶² Northampton Mercury & Northampton Herald gave weekly accounts of BDODRA's activities in March 1893 and funding arrangements.

⁶³ BLMD, Althorp MS, K344, Ward to Spencer, 17.3.1893, quoted with original spelling, phrasing and punctuation.

⁶⁴ BLMD, Althorp MS, K344, Spencer to Ward, 18.3.1893.

The Harlestone meeting was reported in all of the local newspapers. The Northampton Mercury stated 'that Harlestone...was the scene of a meeting the like of which has rarely taken place'.⁶⁵ BDODRA's president chaired the meeting and Ward spoke first, attacking the private charity fund in the district, the *Secret Service Fund*, which was being used to fund deserving paupers, instead of giving outrelief. He stated that, 'if there were cases in the Brixworth district that were deserving enough to get a charity fund relief, they were deserving enough to get relief from the parish'. The town councillors from Northampton seconded this motion. Their spokesman, Frederick Covington J.P., felt that 'if a man was entitled to private benevolence, he was certainly entitled to the public benevolence'. Proceedings were so rowdy that the henchmen, hired by the Chairman of the board of guardians in anticipation that political feeling would be running high, had to intervene when scuffles broke out. Order was restored but then it broke down again as soon as Bury rose to make his speech. He challenged BDODRA to produce 'ten really hard cases' that had suffered because of the anti-outrelief policy. Bury offered to refer them to the Royal Commission on the Aged Poor, which had just convened in London in 1893. He promised that for every poor relief decision that was judged too harsh he would pay £5 to the Harlestone Benefit Society. The editor of the Northampton Mercury commented, 'that from communications which have reached me at different times, I should say it would not be difficult to accept that challenge!'⁶⁶

Pell's party defended Bury in a series of letters to local newspapers before polling day. One correspondent, styled 'Fairplay', stated 'the rector of Harlestone has been badly treated, and if the Out-Door Relief Association thinks to make or retain friends they are on the wrong track'.⁶⁷ Unfortunately a number of long-serving members of Pell's party ignored popular

⁶⁵ Northampton Mercury, 24.3.1893.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Northampton Mercury, 31.3.1893.

opinion, acting in a very offensive manner during the election campaign. For example, at East Haddon, scene of the diphtheria outbreak, the guardian incumbent (vice-Chairman of the Brixworth Union) was deselected by his local vestry. He offended the local community by telling working people that, 'he was too busy' to answer their criticisms and that 'in his experience...men of the lower class...had a tendency to bully'.⁶⁸ A lengthy editorial in the Northampton Mercury explained that Pell's party was losing support:

The Board is responsible to the law, as well as to the ratepayers, and to the poor; it cannot justly deliver over its duty to any private arrangements [*Secret Service Fund*]. There is never smoke without fire; and it is inconceivable that there can have been the strong and bitter feeling over this question...if there were not the pressure of a hardship, difficult perhaps to reduce to a particular shape but yet very present in the minds of the aged poor, living ever on the brink of starvation but still clinging to life outside the Bastille...The hardship is often difficult to prove, but it is hard to define the terror which seizes with undefinable grip the multitudes of the poor and because you cannot measure in a pint pot the pangs of hunger and misery of the cold which freezes aged blood. I feel that the balance of humanity and justice, as well as of policy, is in favour of discriminating "out-relief" and should, therefore, advise the casting of the vote in support of those candidates who carry it out.⁶⁹

Although this extract is lengthy it is worth quoting in full for a number of reasons. First, local newspapers had always reported poor law matters objectively in Northamptonshire. This change of editorial policy, even by a Liberal newspaper, tells us that the political climate in the area had changed radically. Second, the report confirms that years of poverty engendered a reaction against Pell's party. Two factors, the *Secret Service Fund* and the treatment of elderly paupers, coalesced working-class opinion. Third, if BDODRA had won such a resounding endorsement from a local newspaper it must have conducted a very successful election campaign. The next issue of the paper reported that BDODRA won nine out of the ten contested seats in the April 1893 elections.

⁶⁸ Northampton Mercury, 24.3.1893. Quoted as in original.

⁶⁹ Northampton Mercury, 31.3.1893.

In the 1890s poor law procedures were changed in two significant ways. First, the clerk to the Brixworth Union board of guardians had for legal reasons to keep a record of the votes cast during fortnightly meetings in the guardians' minute books. Second, reporters were admitted to guardian meetings for the first time and were allowed to report all proceedings in full. This means that accurate guardian voting patterns and party allegiances can be compiled. It is also possible to correlate figures on the basis of those who attended meetings regularly, rather than sampling key motions when more guardians probably turned up to vote. In 1890 there were a total of fifty-five guardians sitting on the Brixworth Union board. Thirty-nine guardians were elected to office (five smaller seats had been amalgamated in the late-1880s, e.g. Moulton Park merged with Moulton parish), and there were sixteen *ex-officio* representatives. On average forty-two guardians attended meetings regularly between 1890 and 1896, and voting patterns reveal that the opposition party held seven seats or a 16 per cent share of the available votes on the board between 1890 and 1892.⁷⁰ (Table 6.1 and Graph 6.1). This compared favourably with the average share of the votes in the 1885 to 1889 period. However, that situation changed following the April 1893 guardian election.

For the first time there were larger class divisions on the board over the anti-outrelief issue. In 1893 59 per cent of farmers supported Pell's party, which was a significant proportion of the board, but this was a reduction of 22 per cent in the 1890 to 1892 figures, which showed that 81 per cent of farmers supported Pell (Tables 6.2, 6.3 and 6.4). Those farmers with no fixed allegiance that supported Pell in the 1885 to 1890 period were starting to migrate to the opposition party on a permanent basis. The figures reveal that around three times as many artisans and traders were elected to office and they held a 16 per cent share of the available votes. One guardian who described himself as an agricultural labourer was

⁷⁰ Since each seat gave every guardian one vote, it meant that the share of the votes and the number of seats were equal. Thus, I will refer to the percentage share of votes held throughout this chapter.

ected to office for the first time. Pell's party held a 61.5 per cent block vote on the board and their opponents won a 38.5 per cent share. Overall the anti-outrelief supporters lost a 19.5 per cent share of votes on the board and it was clear that the loss of the farmer's vote was significant because they held the largest block of votes. Therefore, any change in their allegiance alarmed Pell. It also indicated that democratisation had given residents who paid rates of £5 per annum the opportunity for the first time to make their feelings felt at the poor law ballot box where it mattered most. All of the artisan, labourers and trader guardians were BDODRA candidates who joined the opposition party on the poor law board. Pell's party still held the largest block of votes, but it was dependent on higher attendance levels.

The first meeting of the newly elected guardians took place at the Brixworth Union workhouse on 23rd April 1893.⁷¹ Bury took the chair and welcomed the new members stating 'that as they were new to the work he might state one or two elementary principles to them'. He announced that as 'they were a public body, with a public duty and public funds to administer' they must follow central government guidelines closely. Pell also hoped, 'new members would divest themselves of the view that they were there to sit as opposing bodies', instead guardians should try to work together to administer the board's policies efficiently.⁷² However, BDODRA guardians refused to co-operate, since they had been elected to create as much agitation as possible until outrelief was reintroduced. By August 1893 political tensions between the two sides had reached an unprecedented level and most meetings were being headlined in local newspapers as 'disorderly'.⁷³

⁷¹ NRO, PL2/19-20, Brixworth Union guardians' minute book.

⁷² Northampton Herald, 22.4.1893.

⁷³ Northampton Herald, 12.8.1893.

Table 6.1: Pell's party support levels, 1890-96.

Date	1890	1891	1892	1893	1895	1896
No. Of Seats:						
A -						
Pell's party	37	36	30	27	23	20
B-						
Opposition party	6	7	7	17	19	25
C-						
(Opponents who were members of BDODRA)	(2)	(2)	(1)	(9)	(10)	(11)
D-	0	1	0	0	0	0
Guardians who abstained regularly						
Totals:						
A+B+D [Attending Guardians]	43	44	37	44	42	45

Table 6.2: Occupational Structure of the Brixworth Union board of guardians by %, 1890-6.

		1890	1891	1892	1893	1895	1896
Occupation:							
Attending <i>ex-officio</i>	%	9	7	8	4.5	0	0
Elected:							
Landowners/householders	%	7	12	13.5	9	16.5	11
Clergy	%	12	9	11	9	9.5	9
Land Agents	%	14	19	19	20.5	14	11
Farmers	%	53.5	46	43	39	29	29
Artisans and traders	%	4.5	7	5.5	16	21.5	29
Labourers	%	0	0	0	2	7.5	9
Female guardians ⁷⁴	%	0	0	0	0	2	2
Totals:	%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: Tables 6.1-6.2 compiled from NRO, PL2 /19-20, Brixworth Union guardians' minute books.

⁷⁴ Female guardians could only be elected post-1894.

Table 6.3: Pell's party on the Brixworth Union board of guardians, 1890-96.

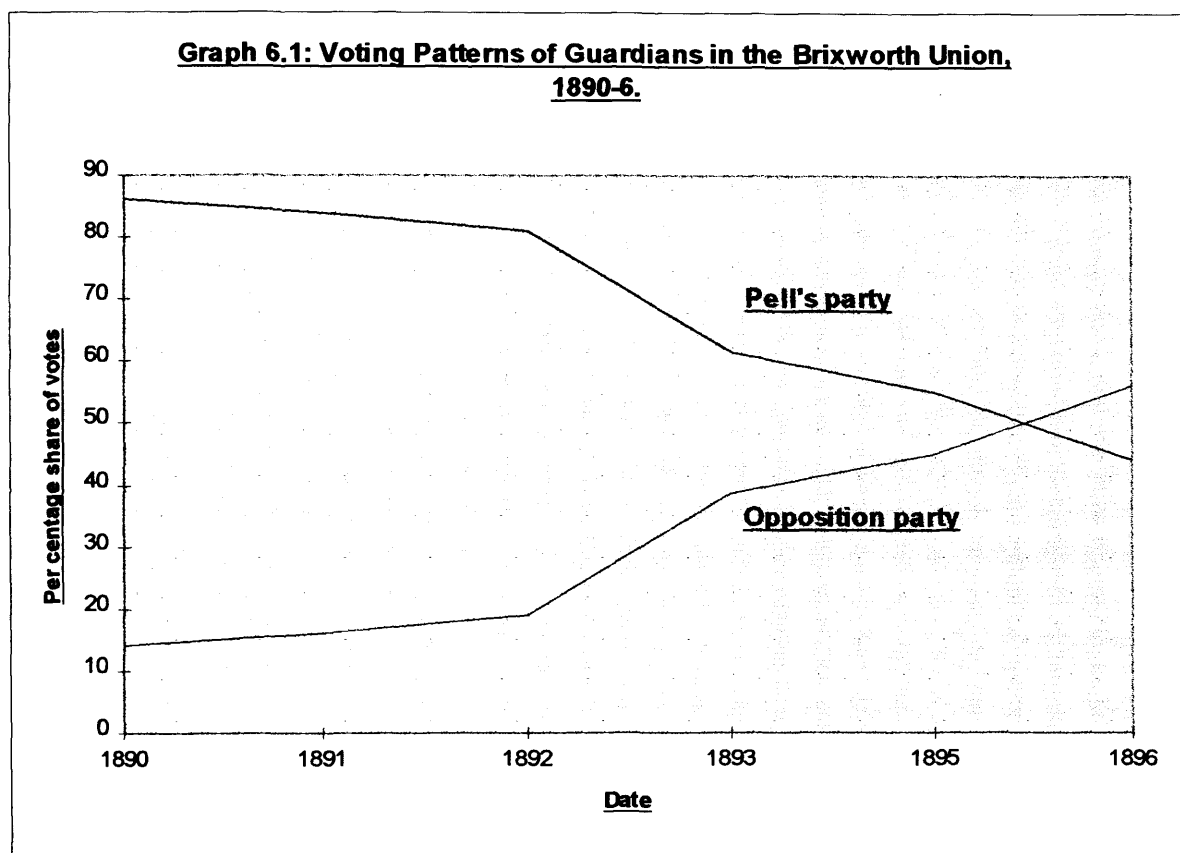
Occupation:		1890	1891	1892	1893	1895	1896
<i>Ex-officio</i> guardians	%	9	7	8	4.5	0	0
<u>Elected:</u>							
Landowner/householder	%	7	12	8	4.5	12	8
Clergy	%	12	9	11	9	7	7
Land Agents	%	14	19	19	20.5	14	11
Farmers	%	44	37	35	23	20	16
Artisans & Traders	%	0	0	0	0	0	0
Labourers	%	0	0	0	0	0	0
Female guardians	%	0	0	0	0	2	2
<u>Sub-Total A:</u>	%	86	84	81	61.5	55	44

Table 6.4: Opposition party on the Brixworth Union board of guardians, 1890-96.

Occupation:		1890	1891	1892	1893	1895	1896
<i>Ex-officio</i> guardians	%	0	0	0	0	0	0
<u>Elected:</u>							
Landowner/householder	%	0	0	5.5	4.5	4.5	3
Clergy	%	0	0	0	0	2.5	2
Land Agent	%	0	0	0	0	0	0
Farmers	%	9.5	9	8	16	9	13
Artisans & Traders	%	4.5	7	5.5	16	21.5	29
Labourers	%	0	0	0	2	7.5	9
Female guardians	%	0	0	0	0	0	0
<u>Sub-Total B:</u>	%	14	16	19	38.5	45	56
<u>Total: A+B</u>	%	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Tables 6.3-6.4 compiled from NRO, PL2/19-20, Brixworth Union guardians' minute books.

Graph 6.1: Voting Patterns of Guardians in the Brixworth Union, 1890-6.



Source: NRO, PL2/19-20, Brixworth Union guardians' minute books.

The BDODRA guardians wanted to challenge all outrelief refusals but they discovered that cases seldom came before a full board meeting. Outrelief applications were either redirected to the union's charity, the *Secret Service Fund*, or were refused by the assessment committee which decided outrelief cases and was dominated by Pell's party. Consequently, BDODRA guardians decided to concentrate their energies by attacking the legality of the *Secret Service Fund* because the private charity was despised by the labouring poor in the district. During proceedings of the Royal Commission on the Aged Poor (1894) Bury tried to minimise the role of the charity fund but Ward, BDODRA's founder, gave some damning

evidence to the same commission about the charity.⁷⁵ He explained that the Chairman used the charity to redirect deserving outrelief cases, which should have been funded from the rates, and that he was able to do this because he was in cahoots with the relieving officer. Together they made sure no deserving outrelief cases came before the board. If one slipped through the Chairman made sure the applicant was relieved with charity before the case was heard so that their application could be thrown out on the basis that the pauper was no longer destitute. Ward's integrity impressed the Prince of Wales, later Edward VII, who sat in on the commission's proceedings. Since both Spencer and Pell were members of the commission they allowed Bury to add an appendix to the commission's final report, defending his policy decisions. Ward complained to the Local Government Board that not only was this not only an act of nepotism, but under poor law regulations it was illegal since relieving officer's were not allowed to disclose outrelief applications for publication.

Sir could you let me know how it was Rev. W. Bury was allowed to reply to my evidence on the aged poor commission and why I was not allowed to see his reply before it was printed as his reply is very misleading and False Statements about the aged poor and other who have suffer enough already and who are able to give Evidence in the district also Guardian of the villages and people who have known them for years are willing to tell Truth about the poor people I refer to [sic].⁷⁶

Internal memoranda between senior civil servants reveal that they did not know how to reply to Ward as he was correct - Bury's reply and the relieving officer's disclosure were illegal. They decided to ignore his letter and it was filed without reply. This type of action both by central government and Pell's party angered BDODRA members, making them more determined to fight for the reintroduction of outrelief. However it was difficult to oppose a party led by such prominent individuals with so many influential allies. Yet, in January 1894

⁷⁵ *BPP, Aged Poor* (1894), Appendix, Rev. W. Bury's report on outrelief cases in the Brixworth Union; A Pell, 27.2.1894, q.15818; S. Ward, 27.2.1894, q. 15581-16019.

⁷⁶ PRO, MH 12/8706, LGB ref. 53860/95, Ward to LGB, 20.4.1895. Quoted as in original.

a new personality arrived in the district to support BDODRA's cause, Rev. Dr. John Charles Cox.

John Charles Cox was born in Parwich in Derbyshire in 1844, the second son of Rev. Edward Cox the rector of Lincombe in Somerset. Little is known of his early childhood except that he was educated at Repton and Somerset College in Bath, before being matriculated at Queens College, Oxford aged eighteen.⁷⁷ He decided not to take his final degree examinations leaving at the end of his third year to become a partner in the Wingerworth Colliery Company in Derbyshire. The business was a financial success and having married in 1868 he bought a home at Belper in Derbyshire, where in the 1870s he became a Justice of the Peace, a guardian of the poor and Chairman of the Belper school board. He was a committed 'advanced' Liberal and a strong supporter of working men's rights. The Ripley Advertiser in 1872 described Cox as a 'remarkable man', noting 'how rare it is to find a man without class prejudice'.⁷⁸ The success of his colliery business gave Cox the financial freedom to support numerous radical Liberal causes, such as trade union reform, a shorter working day and suffrage extension. He was the leader of a number of radical pressure groups in the late-Victorian era such as the Land Tenure Reform Association. His closest political ally was Sir Charles Dilke who remained a life-long friend. When Dilke's national political career got underway he delegated his radical responsibilities to Cox. Thus, Cox took over from Dilke as a member of the executive committee of Joseph Arch's National Agricultural Labourers' Union (NALU) in 1874. Cox stood for parliament twice as an 'advanced' Liberal candidate at Joseph Chamberlain's behest, at Bath and Dewsbury, but was defeated on both occasions by a small majority and this seems to have dispirited him so he

⁷⁷ Despite Cox's scholarly reputation and radical Liberal career no biography of his life has been written. R. F. Wearmouth, Some Working Class Movements of the Nineteenth Century, (1948), pp.293-296 gives a brief overview of Cox's career; Midland Free Press 26.4.1873 lists Cox's radical interests.

⁷⁸ Ripley Advertiser, 31.8.1872.

decided to follow in his father's footsteps and become a clergyman.⁷⁹ Cox was ordained at Lichfield Theological college in 1880 and he held a number of clerical posts in Midlands' parishes in the 1880s (Enville, Staffordshire 1883/6 and Barton-le-Street, Yorkshire 1886/1894). However, as Dilke explained in his diary, 'being a man of active mind' Cox 'found the care of small parishes of ritualistic tendencies insufficient to occupy his whole time'.⁸⁰ He took up antiquarian research, became a renowned local historian and gained the degree of doctor of divinity.⁸¹ Gladstone admired Cox's historical work and when the Crown living of Holdenby in Northamptonshire became available in 1893 he asked Cox to accept the appointment.⁸²

The Holdenby living, with its historical connections to Cromwell, the battle of Naseby and the imprisonment of Charles I, was an ideal choice for a radical historian. It was also a small parish with a generous stipend of £500 per annum, which was welcome given that Cox had ten children to support.⁸³ The small ministry would also give him the time to pursue his historical research and local politics. At first, Cox was unsure whether to accept the appointment because it involved a major move for his large family, but he changed his mind after the Bishop of Peterborough, Mandell Creighton, intervened. It was rumoured that this

⁷⁹ Cox's role in the Education controversy of 1873/4 has been reconstructed from the following sources - Bath Journal, 21.6.1873; Bristol Daily Times and Mirror, 23.6.1873; B[irmingham] U[niversity] L[ibrary] M[anuscript] C[ollection], Chamberlain MS, JC, 5/54.3, 5/54/7, Chamberlain to Morley, 19.7.1873, 10.8.1873 (copies); A. F. Taylor, 'Birmingham and the movement for national education', (unpublished Ph.D., University of Leicester, 1960), pp. 214-6; R. Jay, Joseph Chamberlain. A Political Study, (1981), p.18; P. C. Griffiths, 'Pressure Groups and Parties in late-Victorian England: The National Education League', 3, Midland History, 3, (1975), pp.19-26; P. Auspos, 'Radicalism, pressure groups and party politics; from the National Education League to the National Liberal Federation' Journal of British Studies, 20, (Fall, 1980), pp. 181-204.

⁸⁰ BLMD, Dilke MS, Sir Charles W. Dilke Diaries (1873), 43932, Vol. LIX.

⁸¹ N[orthampton] T[own] L[ibrary] L[ocal] S[tudies] C[ollection], The Third Council for Northamptonshire 1895 No.862 A Record of the Elections Reprinted from the Northampton Mercury; a resume of the career of Rev.Dr. J C Cox, (1895).

⁸² BLMD, Add. Gladstone MS, Cox to Gladstone 25.4.1892, fol. 204, 44514, CCCXXIX; Cox to Gladstone 28.12.1889, ff. 262, 44508, CCXXIII discuss mutual historical interest and Gladstone's scholarly patronage of Cox's work; H.C.G. Matthew (ed.), The Gladstone Diaries: 1872-1880, 1887-1900 Volumes, (1986, 1995 edns.), entries 7.01.1876 and 20.9.1889 make reference to visits Cox made to Hawarden Castle to discuss antiquarian research.

⁸³ PRO, C. 247/3, ref.147, January 1894, crown appointment at Holdenby to J.C. Cox, Lord Chancellors Office; NRO, Ref. 172/9, 24.1.1894, J. C. Cox, Presentation papers for the crown living at Holdenby.

had been done at Gladstone's behest because he deplored the action of Pell's party on the Brixworth Union board of guardians. The Northampton Independent recalled in Cox's obituary in 1919 that, 'it was currently understood that the offer was made' by Gladstone 'in order to introduce vigorous contention within the Brixworth district, where Liberals thought the agricultural labourers could not secure justice'.⁸⁴ Regrettably no primary evidence to substantiate this has come to light, but the Webbs did corroborate these rumours in their history of the English poor law policy.⁸⁵ Also Cox moved very quickly into the district to ensure that he could register in time to stand for election to the Brixworth Union board of guardians in December 1894.⁸⁶

Cox became a leading spokesman for BDODRA as soon as he took up his appointment and declared that he intended to stand for election as soon as possible. His radical creed brought both national and local attention to the pro-outrelief cause. He had always held the sort of views that BDODRA was promoting:

I do not hold what are generally understood as Socialist views...but I do believe very strongly that the present distribution of wealth, as it is in England, is gross and iniquitous...all of history teaches us that a disproportion so enormous, accompanied, as it is of necessity is, with so much crime, of pauperism, of absolute misery, cannot go on forever, and will one day right itself; - and remember, the jolt will be severe if it comes on us all at once.⁸⁷

Pell's party was very concerned about the amount of adverse publicity Cox began to generate against their anti-outrelief policy both locally and nationally. Bury decided to take

⁸⁴ Northampton Independent, 1.3.1919.

⁸⁵ S. and B. Webb, English Poor Law History Volume I: Part II The Last One Hundred Years, (1929 edn.), p. 466, footnote 2.

⁸⁶ Guardian elections in April 1894 were postponed until December 1894 because of the Local Government Act (1894) changes. Guardians then served from January 1895-April 1896, elections then continued in April thereafter.

⁸⁷ B[ritish] L[ibrary] of P[olitical] and E[conomic] S[cience], Pamphlet Collection, P. 25129, J.C.Cox, The Advantages of Trade Unions! A Lecture Delivered at Ripley by J.C. Cox JP FRHS of Hazelwood Belper on Thursday Evening August 29th 1872 published at the request of the Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire Miners' Association, (1872), pp. 1-27.

decisive action and bowed to public pressure by revealing how the private charity, the *Secret Service Fund*, was administered.⁸⁸ He set up a four man committee of anti-outrelief supporters to oversee the charity's finance in an official capacity and published a leaflet outlining the new procedures, which he distributed to every ratepayer in the district. For the first time he sent each subscriber an annual report of the charity's income and expenditure. Spencer's copy shows that the Chairman spent 'about £25 per annum per parish'.⁸⁹ If we multiply that figure by the thirty six parishes in the area, its average income was around £900. Spencer thought the Chairman sent the charity statement to ask for a larger subscription as the fund was overdrawn by £26 12s. Bury replied that he paid the deficit because he wanted to maintain the charity scheme. He knew it had 'been instrumental as much or more than anything else in enabling us to break the need of Outdoor relief'.⁹⁰ He revealed that BDODRA tried 'to break the bank' by inundating the charity committee with applications for funding in 1893/4, which had been Cox's doing because he was determined to bankrupt the fund to get rid of it. Cox could not hope to change the anti-outrelief policies in the area until he was elected a guardian of the poor, but he could use his contacts at Westminster to make political capital out of the crusade campaign. Yet, to the advantage of BDODRA's cause, the Brixworth Union had already become the focus of a national debate about the implications of poor law democratisation and the social cost of the anti-outrelief campaign.

6.3: 'Plain Words on Out-Relief'.

By 1894 the Brixworth Union had a formidable reputation in poor law circles because of its anti-outrelief policy. David Thomson explains that leading guardians, like Pell, made a

⁸⁸ BLMD, *Althorp MS*, K334, Bury to Spencer 11.1.1892; K345, Charity Fund Circular, dated January 1894.

⁸⁹ BLMD, *Althorp MS*, K334, Bury to Spencer, 11.1.1892.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

significant contribution to Imperial welfare debates as far afield as New Zealand, even though many colonial welfare ideas were imported into Britain too.⁹¹ Therefore, on the eve of the Local Government Act (1894), when central government was debating the implications of poor law democratisation, the policies of the Brixworth Union briefly became the focus of national attention in periodicals and newspapers. Considerable editorial attention was focused on what would happen in the Brixworth Union once working people got the vote in poor law elections and whether the social cost of the anti-outrelief policy was too high. For example, the Conservative Quarterly Review noted that in strict 'model' poor law unions, like Brixworth:

The problem of the Poor Law is being dragged into the vortex of practical politics. It is all too evident that the rate devoted to the relief of the poor can be made an admirable electioneering fund. The *debacle* has already begun...By a barefaced disregard of every principle of constitutional government, the public purse has been put at the disposal of a local electorate, the majority of which is in many cases financially irresponsible...The *debacle* is proceeding at an accelerated pace. The temptation to make political capital by advocacy of an outdoor policy is growing irresistible [sic].⁹²

A Fabian Society tract entitled '*The Humanizing of the Poor Law*' (1894) took the opposite view. It welcomed the new poor law electoral changes declaring that in poor law unions, like Brixworth, the labouring poor now had a much-needed voice in poor law administration. The pamphlet claimed that 'the average guardian is prejudiced against the poor', but now the working classes had an opportunity to 'control elections' and administer outrelief humanely.⁹³ It asserted that, 'the expense of relieving the poor is part of the ransom that Property has to pay to Labor [sic]; and it is a ransom which is not begged as a charity but demanded as an instalment of justice'. C. S. Loch, secretary of the C.O.S., defended the

⁹¹ D. Thomson, World Without Welfare: New Zealand's Colonial Experiment, (1998), Chapter 1, pp. 9-33.

⁹² Quarterly Review, Vol. 179, (July-October, 1894), p.467. Quoted as in original.

⁹³ J. F. Oakeshott, 'The Humanizing of the Poor Law,' Fabian Tract No.54, (1894), pp. 1-23.

policies of poor law unions, like Brixworth, in an article entitled '*Manufacturing a New Pauperism*' in the Conservative journal the Nineteenth Century. He worried that 'the trend of opinion in some quarters favours the abandonment of the principle which we would defend...even the bar of the disenfranchisement of the voter on receipt of poor relief is to be removed'. Reformers were manufacturing pauperism statistics to create more support for local government electoral reform and few understood that outrelief funding was 'a strong electioneering weapon' which could be exploited by unscrupulous local politicians.⁹⁴ Thomas MacKay, C.O.S. historian, supported Loch's view in '*Politics and the Poor Law*' published in the Liberal Fortnightly Review. He monitored the changing poor law political climate and he focused on events in the Brixworth Union, describing elections in the district as 'an auction wherein election is sold to those who offer the largest donation' of outrelief. He deplored BDODRA claiming it was, 'supported mainly by agitators and ...malcontents...who will bless the policy they have been sent to curse'.⁹⁵

The Brixworth Union was also the focus of a number of articles in Anglican journals. For example, The Church of Today published an article condemning the policies of Pell's party. It noted wryly, that 'Mr Loch and other reformers of his severe type are never weary of holding up this tract of Dark England as an example *to be seen and read of all men* - especially those of democratic, humanitarian or socialistic tendencies'[sic].⁹⁶ The journal rejoiced that 'there has been a long-smouldering opposition, which at last has burst into fierce flames' with the formation of BDODRA. The editorial concluded that it was 'evident that the autocratic...Abolitionist' was losing the poor law fight in the Brixworth Union because the 'ever-growing democracy' was stronger and 'will quickly take from him his *armour* of policy

⁹⁴ C. S. Loch, 'Manufacturing a New Pauperism,' Nineteenth Century, (April, 1895), pp. 697-708.

⁹⁵ T. MacKay, 'Politics and the Poor Law,' Fortnightly Review, (1895), pp.408-422.

⁹⁶ J. Frome Wilkinson, 'Poor Law Administration and the Brixworth Union,' The Church of Today, (Feb/March, 1895), 15.2.1895, p. 76. Quoted with original emphasis.

wherein he trusted [sic]. As Bury, who chaired the board of guardians, was a clergyman this article in an Anglican periodical must have been both personally and politically embarrassing. The journal labelled the Brixworth Union the rural equivalent of William Booth's findings in In Darkest England (1890). However, of all the articles that were written about the Brixworth Union, an anonymous pamphlet published in 1894 brought Pell's party the greatest amount of unwelcome publicity.

This tract entitled Plain Words On Out-Relief first appeared in 1894. It was rumoured to have been written by two senior civil servants at the Local Government Board who oversaw poor relief in Scotland.⁹⁷ The pamphlet reviewed the statistical claims of the outrelief abolitionists by testing 'whether total abstinence or moderation' in outrelief management was more economical. It asked why if the retrenchment policy worked were 'the ears' of so many guardians 'closed to the voices of Mr. Albert Pell?'. It examined two case-studies where outrelief was refused for over twenty years - Whitechapel Union in London and the Brixworth Union in Northamptonshire. It gave a brief account of the history of the Brixworth Union, explaining how guardians had reduced the number of outrelief paupers in their area from 1,118 in 1871 to just 55 by 1892, cutting outrelief expenditure from £5635 in 1871 to only £231 by 1892. The article stated that these results were impressive because the ratio of outdoor to indoor paupers in the area had fallen from 1:12 in 1870 to 1:127 by 1890. This meant that the Brixworth Union was one of the top ten performing unions in England and Wales. However, the authors pointed out that these crude pauperism indicators did not reflect either the true financial position or the high social cost of the crusade against outrelief at Brixworth. The civil servants decided to rank poor law unions in a new league table based on the '*cost of poor relief*' [sic.] per head of population in each district. They found that the Brixworth

⁹⁷ C[ambridge] U[niversity] L[ibrary] C[ollection], Pamphlet 94/7/277, Anon., Plain Words On Out-Relief, (1894), pp. 1-65.

Union slipped to 149th place out of a total of 648 unions in central government league tables because it still spent 4s. 7d. per head of population on poor relief, which was considerably more than poor law unions that had reintroduced outrelief in the 1880s. The reason that the expenditure in the Brixworth Union was so high was that its poor law officials, specifically the relieving officer, were the most highly paid in the country and indoor care was more expensive than outdoor relief. Despite Pell's best efforts workhouse numbers had risen because of the agricultural crisis, which forced elderly paupers to accept indoor provision. The article concluded that, 'although Mr Pell and his energetic fellow athletes' on the Brixworth Union board had been 'straining every nerve...in the arduous and well-nigh impossible task of...stamping out out-relief, a very large number of Poor Law administrators, working on different lines' had left them 'hopelessly behind'.⁹⁸

6.4: Democratisation – The Denouement.

The expenditure issue highlighted in Plain Words was used as a key electioneering theme by BDODRA during their guardian election campaign in December 1894. Thus a tailor, and prospective BDODRA guardian Cheyney Halford, from Naseby parish wrote a letter to Spencer, which he copied to local newspapers, protesting that ratepayers believed Pell's policies were too expensive and that residents were 'paying...[poor law] officers greatly in excess of what their duties call for'.⁹⁹ Sidney Ward (BDODRA's secretary) informed the committee of the Royal Commission of the Aged Poor in 1894 that ratepayers felt it was inhumane and uneconomic not to give outrelief to elderly poor law claimants. He explained about the awkward position ratepayers were often placed in;

Thomas and Elizabeth Campion of Holcot...-they were over 70 both of them...They struggled for a long time [to avoid the workhouse]...People gave to them for a time,

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ NRO, Spencer MS, Sox 372, Halford to Spencer, 19.7.1894.

but for people who have to pay rates...it is very hard for them to keep people as well: they say "We pay rates for the purpose and you ought to make an application". Very well they did make an application. They walked over to Brixworth, and when they got there they had the offer of the house, and they pleaded very hard to have a little out[relief]...they were refused and I believe they went back home...The woman went to the guardians again, she said: "I will rather die in the street than go back to the union"... [a] farmer...coaxed her to go back, drove her over in his trap on a Sunday morning, and I think it was hardly so long as a fortnight before they took her back as a corpse to her own village.¹⁰⁰

It was cases like these that were rallying cross-community support for BDODRA.

Pell's supporters went on the offensive to defend him in the national press and journals. For example, an editorial leader in the Conservative Quarterly Review stated that Plain Words was an underhand attack on both the Brixworth Union and central government policy. The editorial stated that if the author of the tract believed his cause was just then he ought to identify himself. The journal refuted Plain Words' view of Local Government Board returns and they commissioned C. S. Loch of the C.O.S. to review the claims.¹⁰¹ Loch said that poor law experts took three factors into account when making a poor relief decision - 'expenditure,... administrative experience... and a careful analysis of human motive'. The editorial concluded in poor relief matters 'we cannot devise any substitute for experience, common sense and detailed analysis' which was being practised at Brixworth. The C.O.S. also replied to Plain Words in a paper entitled, '*Why is it Wrong to Supplement Outdoor Relief?*'. It stated that 'the Poor Law is a legal institution based on a compulsory rate which must be kept as low as possible in order to prevent the poorest class of ratepayers from themselves becoming applicants for relief'.¹⁰² These national debates appear to have increased BDODRA's publicity considerably and strengthened their election campaign in December 1894.

¹⁰⁰ *BPP*, Aged Poor, Ward, q. 15680, p. 845.

¹⁰¹ Editorial Review, 'The Abuse of Statistics', Quarterly Review, 179, (July-Oct, 1894), pp. 467-85.

¹⁰² BLPES, Pamphlet Collection, P.205392, Anon., 'Why is it Wrong to Supplement Outdoor Relief?' C.O.S. Occasional Paper No.31, (1893/4), pp. 1-3.

The political climate in the Brixworth Union by 1894 had become so rancorous that a leading Liberal squire, a life-long friend of Spencer, decided to publish an election pamphlet. He stated that he hoped working people would not be suspicious or distrustful of the motives of the landed influence in the Brixworth Union. He regretted that political ill-will over the outrelief issue might result in a 'parting of the ways' now that the poor law was democratised and he hoped new voters would choose a third way, a broader road of co-operation.¹⁰³ Hon. C. R. Spencer MP for the Brixworth division was campaigning to be re-elected to parliament in the years 1894 to 1895. He kept Spencer informed of the mood of public opinion in the Brixworth Union. He warned Spencer that many anti-outrelief supporters would not be re-elected as guardians, since most were 'very low at the lapse of our old supporters' and he found that 'some tenants appear to be extremely active against us'.¹⁰⁴ A clergy guardian summarised what happened during the election contest:

It is all about the "Out-relief" question that the fighting arises - There is very strong feeling about it throughout the Union... One of the worst features of the business is that the latest clerical imposition Dr Cox of Holdenby is throwing himself headlong into the fray, as a resident's partisan of the "Outs" and is spreading broad cash statements, which are misleading and grossly inaccurate- he is full of talk, but not of well digested facts and aspires to be a leader on the subject, which he has not taken pains to make himself master of. I am afraid he is well in running for the Chairmanship, which would be a most deplorable appointment as he is evidently without either knowledge or tact...you have no doubt seen one of the "Out-Relief Association" circulars -...the men say they vote "not for the man, but for the principle!"¹⁰⁵

Once again BDODRA increased its representation on the poor law board by winning a 45 per cent share of the total number of votes. Pell's party had a very slim majority of only 10 per cent and the class divisions amongst guardians were growing (Tables 6.2, 6.3 and 6.4).

¹⁰³ NRO, CAM/901, Sir H. Wake, 'The Parting of the Ways; Or, What Local Government can and cannot do for Labouring Men by a Squire - For Lawyers by Lawyers,' (1894).

¹⁰⁴ BLMD, Althorp MS, K347, Bobby Spencer to Spencer, 2.9.1894.

¹⁰⁵ BLMD, Althorp MS, K345, Calverley to Spencer 19.12.1894. Quoted with original spelling, phrasing and punctuation.

Universal suffrage meant that no *ex-officio* guardians held seats. A female guardian was elected to office for the first time, Mary Calverley, but as she was a member of the C.O.S. and an outspoken critic of generous outrelief, she became one of Pell's staunchest supporters.¹⁰⁶ Farmers still held the largest share of the vote around one third (29 per cent), but just over two-thirds (20 per cent) voted for Pell's party and just under one third (9 per cent) for BDODRA. Although Pell's support appeared to be stabilising it was only a temporary respite. Even though farmers who voted for the pro-outrelief party decreased on the previous election, the number of artisans and traders had risen correspondingly to a 21.5 per cent share. After the farmers they held the next largest block of the votes, but their holding was not split, like the farmers, since they were all BDODRA supporters. Cox was the only clergy BDODRA guardian, but this did not prevent him challenging Bury for the Chairmanship, which he only lost by one vote. Bury was delighted that he won the contest because he automatically became a justice of the peace for his term of office as Chairman of the new Brixworth Union rural district council under the terms of the Local Government Act (1894).

At the first meeting of the new board of guardians on 21 February 1895 Cox declared that;

destitute deserving people had an absolute right to relief and the Brixworth Union had become an absolute hunting ground for selfish rate-payers and wrong intended economists of Mr. Bury's [the Chairman] school...the poor of the district thoroughly detested it.¹⁰⁷

Cox put four motions before the board. First, he proposed that the union's relieving officer should stop forewarning the Chairman of pending outrelief applications, which were referred to the *Secret Service Fund*. Second, he asked guardians to set up a committee to survey

¹⁰⁶ N[orthampton] C[entral] L[ibrary] L[ocal] S[tudies] R[oom], M. Calverley, "Looking Back": Records of the Brixworth Union: Lady-day 1895: Lady-day 1896, (1901), pp. 1-16.

¹⁰⁷ Northampton Herald, 23.2.1895. Quoted as in original.

unemployment in the district to ascertain whether the anti-outrelief policy was impoverishing the labouring poor.¹⁰⁸ Third, he wanted to lobby central government to redistribute guardian seats more fairly on the basis of population distribution in the area. Fourth, he asked guardians to develop a close relationship with the newly created parish councils in the district. Although Pell's party defeated all four motions, the voting was close and the Chairman had to cast his second discretionary vote on each occasion to prevent the proposals being passed when the board was deadlocked.

Cox ignored the ruling and decided to survey unemployment levels in the district anyway and to send his findings to the Local Government Board. The Northampton Mercury reported that it was a 'scandal to our social and industrial life that hundreds of able-bodied men in our county parishes should have to face every winter two months or more unemployment' [sic]. It felt that Pell's 'attitude of "we can't do this" and "we can't do that" [was] not creditable to our common humanity' [sic].¹⁰⁹ Cox found that there were 315 unemployed men in the Brixworth Union, 63 were skilled artisans (masons, bricklayers, builders' labourers and painters), and the rest were 'respectable' agricultural labourers. He noted that the population in the area had fallen by '1600 between 1875 and 1885' and that a further '1000-1200 left or migrated between 1885 and 1895'.¹¹⁰ Cox claimed that without outrelief provision the labouring poor had to migrate to the detriment of the area. Usually skilled labourers left the district first, never to return, which meant that key skills were lost forever and even if younger men wanted to stay in the Brixworth Union there was no-one left who could teach them a trade. Cox also complained that these less populous electoral districts

¹⁰⁸ PRO, MH12/8706, No.5448/95, 12.1.1895, Cox to LGB; NRO, PL2/19-20, Brixworth Union guardians' minute books.

¹⁰⁹ Northampton Mercury, 11.11.1895. Quoted as in original.

¹¹⁰ Northampton Mercury, 22.2.1895.

where working people had been encouraged to leave in the 1880s still elected more guardians of the poor than larger parishes.

Although BDODRA won a majority of 350 votes at the polls in 1895 it won fewer seats than Pell's party on the board of guardians. This was because small closed parishes, such as Hanging Houghton (20 inhabitants), were allocated the same number of seats as a large open parish, like Moulton (over 1500 residents). A key BDODRA objective was to get these seats redistributed equitably. It also tried to get working men elected to parish councils, so that it could take over all local administration. Regrettably, not all of the parish council returns have survived, but an editorial in the Eastern Weekly Leader gives us a flavour of the new political mood in the area:

For weeks past there have been crowded meetings in the village school, and heated discussions at the bar of the inn; knots of men have lingered on the threshold of the chapel, unwilling to let go of the subject they will resume the minute the service is over; strange nods and winks, with whispered hints and cautions have passed the labourers at their work and an unwonted eagerness has been shown in their examination of the weekly paper. At the markets farmers have forgotten their standing complaints about low prices to vent their wrath at the appearance of the new enemy. In the rectory, there has been keen questioning of the servants and anxious counting up of reliable dependants, while up at the Hall Bluebooks and Handbooks have taken the place of The Times and silenced the mirth of Punch. The finger of the labourer has stopped an inch short of his cap when the parson has passed...¹¹¹

In the Brixworth parish council elections four founding members of BDODRA out of a total of twenty-three candidates were elected to office.¹¹² Sampling the available parish council returns shows that BDODRA members won around 60 per cent of parish council seats in the district.¹¹³ Spencer told the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir William Harcourt, that he was in

¹¹¹ Eastern Weekly Leader, (1894), quoted in Hollis, Ladies Elect, p. 46.

¹¹² NRO, 50 p/109, Brixworth parish council minute book, (1894-1903), 4.12.1894.

¹¹³ NRO, 49/p/150/d, Brington; 50/p/109 Brixworth, 153/p/111 Harlestone parish council records; Misc. Volumes, Naseby and Scaldwell parish bundles, 1894.

the proud position of being Chairman of the Althorp parish meeting,' but he had to make an impassioned speech for fifty-five minutes to win the contest.¹¹⁴

Local newspaper post-bags swelled with letters about the outrelief controversy during 1895-6. One question predominated - would the 'autocrats or the democrats win the day?'¹¹⁵ The Chairman believed the press coverage was biased against Pell's party and he complained to the editor of the Northampton Mercury that - 'if the chair' of a poor law union 'of a popularly elected body [was] not a pulpit, neither [was] the chair of the Editor of a popularly conducted journal'.¹¹⁶ The editor explained that his paper was reflecting popular sentiment and he was not responsible for ill feeling in Northampton town and the surrounding district. The editorial said that the Chairman had created animosity by refusing outrelief in the first instance and then exporting the Brixworth Union's social problems to local towns, like Northampton, leaving urban ratepayers to pick up a larger pauperism bill.

This controversy came to a head when three new outrelief applications came before the Brixworth Union board in May 1895. Two cases were deserving, but the third application was a borderline case, the distant relative of a clergy guardian who supported Pell's party. The clergyman asked BDODRA to support the borderline outrelief application. They agreed to do this provided the clergyman defected to the opposition and supported a motion preventing the union's relieving officer forewarning the Chairman of pending outrelief cases so that they would not be redirected to the *Secret Service Fund*. BDODRA guardians wanted to compel the relieving officer to liaise with individual guardians where outrelief applications arose. The Chairman was furious at this turn of events and he resigned from the chair in a fit

¹¹⁴ BLMMR, Harcourt MS, ref. dep. 47 f. 86, Spencer to Harcourt, 6.12.1894; ref. 711, fol. 20, Harcourt to Spencer, 7.12.1894.

¹¹⁵ Northampton Mercury, 1.2.1895.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

of pique. He accused Cox of using underhand tactics, which made his position untenable. He asked Spencer to intervene by taking the chair.¹¹⁷

Spencer was worried about this turn of events and stressed to Bury that it was the Chairman's duty to 'hold the balance between the two sides' on a board of guardians.¹¹⁸ He told Bury that their anti-outrelief party should appoint an 'impartial' elected guardian to the chair until the controversy had died down. Bury felt Spencer had let him down and he threatened to end the *Secret Service Fund*, stating that it might be better to 'let each Guardian who is sound do the best he can with his own parish'[sic].¹¹⁹ Spencer regretted that having worked so hard 'to prevent old administration in the parishes where I have most influence' the retrenchment experiment would be given up without a fight. He thought the Chairman should take part in the chairmanship contest in August and hope to retake the chair in the autumn of 1895. In the interval Pell's party should regroup and consider converting the *Secret Service Fund* into a branch of the C.O.S. with 'different sorts of men...dissenters as well as Churchmen' appointed to oversee a finance committee.¹²⁰ They should not fear this change because the committee would have to work 'in harmony with the B.[oard] of guardians' and would still promote C.O.S. principles. Spencer told Bury that they must ensure that Cox did not use each outrelief case as a 'stalking horse' because that was 'dangerous and may lead to harm in the union'.¹²¹ Spencer also spoke to Cox, whom he met by chance on a train journey to London. He told Cox that he must not become Chairman until he moderated both his speeches and the action of his followers. Cox replied that he consulted his friend Sir Charles Dilke who advised him that it was his duty to accept the chair. He told Spencer, 'if I have to

¹¹⁷ Northampton Herald, 4.5.1895.

¹¹⁸ BLMD, Althorp MS, K348, Bury to Spencer, 6.5.1895; Spencer to Bury, 7.5.1895. Quoted as in original.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.* Quoted with original emphasis.

¹²⁰ BLMD, Althorp MS, K348, Spencer to Bury, 7.5.1895.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

take up the Brixworth reins, I shall do so...desirous to do right and check extremes'.¹²² Cox campaigned during August 1895 for the chairmanship. He attacked the *Secret Service Fund* and promised to relieve deserving outrelief cases, but Bury won the chairmanship again by one vote.

Although Spencer's immediate poor law concerns were resolved he was worried that the bad publicity over the Chairmanship fight was damaging Bobby Spencer's parliamentary re-election campaign for the mid-Northamptonshire division in 1895.¹²³ However, Bobby Spencer's local re-election campaign in 1895 was already going badly because his Conservative opponent, James Pender, was making political capital out of the anti-outrelief campaign. At a meeting in March 1895 Pender declared:

He was personally requested to assist and support the private fund...he refused to join it, considering then, as now, that out-door relief, ought to be provided out of the rates for the support of the poor...He hoped to see some old age pension scheme introduced and some reform in the working of the poor houses.¹²⁴

In 1895 the anti-outrelief controversy, as Janet Howarth explains, was the key parliamentary election issue in mid-Northamptonshire and Pender beat Bobby Spencer resoundingly because he favoured the reintroduction of outrelief. Turnouts at the election were very high at 84.4 per cent, reflecting local interest in welfare issues.¹²⁵ Spencer admitted to one of his old political allies, Harcourt, that he was 'dismayed at the elections as his family had 'suffered in a very tender part in my brother's defeat.... I was anxious but never lost faith in his winning'.¹²⁶ He subsequently learned from his election agent that 'the cry of opponents to out-door relief was used by Pender against' them. Spencer went abroad on a long winter holiday, but he still took

¹²² BLMD, Althorp MS, K348, Cox to Spencer, 30.4.1895; Cox to Spencer, 1.5.1895.

¹²³ Northampton Mercury, 1.3.1895.

¹²⁴ Northampton Mercury, 22.3.1895.

¹²⁵ J. Howarth, 'The Liberal Revival in Northamptonshire, 1880-1895: A Case-Study in Late-Nineteenth Century Elections', Historical Journal, 7, (1969), I, p. 84.

¹²⁶ BLMRR, Harcourt MS, dep. 37. fol. 87, Spencer to Morley, 20.7.1895.

a keen interest in poor law matters.¹²⁷ He received reports that BDODRA was making headway in the district and the Conservative government planned to redistribute guardian seats in agricultural districts more equitably. He suspected this would mean the end of the anti-outrelief policy.

In the April 1896 guardian election Pell's party won only a 44 per cent share of the seats on the Brixworth Union board. BDODRA members formed an opposition coalition with sympathetic ratepayers and farmers to secure a 56 per cent share of the seats which gave them a majority for the first time (Tables 6.3 and 6.4, Graph 6.1). This meant that the positions at the start of 1895 were reversed. The opposition coalition elected Cox Chairman of the board and the *Secret Service Fund* was stopped officially. Cox reviewed poor law officials' contracts of employment, increasing the medical officer salaries and reducing the relieving officer's stipend. He set up a committee to review indoor care and the new BDODRA guardians concluded that workhouse provision was sub-standard and needed to be upgraded. A new building project was implemented to equip medical wards properly and to provide shared bedrooms for married couples. Guardians also voted in favour of the reintroduction of medical outrelief, including funeral payments. Cox asked the Local Government Board to sanction the proper sanitation of villages. Pell and Bury tried to stop him but the Local Government Board intervened, authorising the appointment of a new MOH on a salary of £50 per annum to oversee comprehensive sanitary works.¹²⁸ Spencer's land agent reported that the villagers on the Althorp estate elected Ward as their guardian:

So we are saddled with the great Sidney Ward ("That splendid man" as Dr Cox calls him) for 3 years - I must say I do not like being represented by an outsider and I expect Sidney Ward may be trouble - I suppose he will bring up all the out-relief cases he can - I suppose it is the natural remedy of [the] cast-iron policy.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ BLMRR, *Harcourt MS*, ref. 711, f. 349, Spencer to Harcourt, 1.11.1895.

¹²⁸ PRO, MH 12/8709, 1.6.1897; NRO, LG /21/106-116, Brixworth RDC Minute books give details of ongoing sanitary controversies.

¹²⁹ NRO, *Spencer MS*, Sox 563, Morley to Spencer, 31.3.1896. Quoted as in original.

Although outrelief provision was reintroduced extensively in the area, the sanitation controversies persisted for some time. A local government board inspector noted in 1897 that the 'Pell-Bury' school was acting 'out of spite' and that everything in the district was still 'unhappily political'.¹³⁰ From time to time Pell's supporters published articles in the Charity Organisation Review justifying their experiment but their views were out-dated. When Cox retired from office in 1899, Ward became Chairman of the Brixworth Union board of guardians. It was the final realisation of BDODRA's aims - to let working men 'speak for themselves and govern themselves'. As F. A. Channing, 'advanced' Liberal MP for the East Northamptonshire division recalled:

In 1895 dreams and ideals were crystallising into positive proposals and thought-out schemes...Local self-government...would merge individualism into collective action. Guardians were not now nominees of large ratepayers but men with generous sympathies who knew the wants and miseries of the poor.¹³¹

BDODRA's 'new ideas, new hopes and new aims' had come to fruition. Democracy had triumphed.

Conclusion.

The denouement of the crusade against outrelief in the Brixworth Union began around 1893, as Williams states, because of poor law democratisation.¹³² Working people who had suffered under the harsh anti-outrelief policy, ratepayers who no longer believed in the classical economy of the Pell school and moderates who had fought against the crusade initiative from its inception, formed a coalition to reintroduce outrelief. The public health controversy following the outbreak of diphtheria in the district that resulted in the painful deaths of so

¹³⁰ PRO, MH 12/8709, 1.8.1897.

¹³¹ NRO, Misc. Collection, F. A. Channing MP, Memories of Midland Politics, 1885-1910, (1918).

¹³² Williams, Pauperism, p. 103.

many young children aroused deep-seated animosity and was the final catalyst in the political journey of working people in this location. By 1890 Pell was ignoring central government in all local authority matters, adopting whatever guidelines or legislation suited his political purposes. It is evident that the Longley strategy (1874) gave his party too much autonomy on the Brixworth Union board of guardians. Even though Pell was technically correct about the causes of the diphtheria epidemic he acted in an authoritarian manner, which seems to have offended ratepayers deeply. He paid the political price for his lack of consultation and sensitivity in the community once the poor law was democratised.

The establishment of BDODRA, which local newspapers reported had over 7500 members in twenty parishes by 1896 (around one third of the adult population), was a remarkable achievement that marked the beginning of the end of the anti-outrelief policy. It was a political pressure group led by a cross-section of the community, but instigated by a working man who felt that the social cost of the denial of outrelief was too high. There must have been a reservoir of political discontent in the Brixworth Union, which had been gathering force throughout each stage of the outrelief battle. Sidney Ward and Rev. Dr. Cox were facilitators who helped working people to target their grievances in a positive manner by exploiting poor law democratisation. BDODRA organised a formidable campaign and its members paid union fees at a time of higher unemployment just as the second phase of the agricultural crisis was starting around 1891. This suggests that the depth of their commitment probably mirrored the depths of impoverishment in the area and confirms Mary Mackinnon's view that the crusade against outrelief had a profound social cost.¹³³ Thus, the labouring community pooled its resources, both financial and organisational, to fight the anti-outrelief

¹³³ M. Mackinnon, 'Poor Law policy, unemployment and pauperism', *Explorations in Economic History*, 23, (1986), pp. 226-336; M. Mackinnon, 'English Poor Law policy and the crusade against outdoor relief', *Journal of Economic History*, 47, (1987), pp. 603-25.

policy. Local newspapers gave their cause widespread coverage because 'advanced' Liberals who sat on the Northampton Union board of guardians supported BDODRA. They objected to Pell's policies swelling their outrelief numbers in the 1880s when working people left the Brixworth Union in search of work and outrelief. Further work needs to be done on the recently discovered records of the Northampton Union, which were thought lost, to ascertain how many Brixworth Union natives claimed outrelief in local towns. However, that would not alter the fact that there were tensions between the rural and urban political scene because of the context of the crusade campaign.

The national outrelief debates, in which the Brixworth Union featured so prominently in the years 1894 to 1895, reveal that a growing body of opinion at Westminster and amongst civil servants at the Local Government Board no longer believed in the validity of the crusade's cost-saving claims. In particular, the anonymous pamphlet entitled Plain Words (1894) aroused considerable controversy. Here it has been possible only to give a flavour of the debates about outrelief cost-savings and democratisation. However, these debates indicate that it was evident to many, though not to Pell, that the political tide was changing because definitions of the causes of poverty were being revised, which signalled the ending of the anti-outrelief experiment. Both Spencer and Bury recognised this, but the former was more pragmatic than the latter because he had to consider his political career. Spencer accepted, albeit reluctantly, that the Liberal party would have to introduce more generous social welfare provision, otherwise candidates like Bobby Spencer, who had been defeated in the 1895 parliamentary election, would not get back into office. Therefore, he stressed the apolitical nature of his involvement in poor law matters, although in private he disliked the changes on the board of guardians.

The national debates that focused on the Brixworth Union in the years 1894 to 1895 were significant because they added further weight to BDODRA's campaign and persuaded ratepayers who were wavering that the anti-outrelief policy was too expensive. They also encouraged Spencer to distance himself from the controversy for political reasons. At the same time Pell discovered that the Local Government Board was not a strong ally because it had so few powers to support his cause when he needed help the most. In any event by 1895 he had fewer friends in central government because of his outspoken stance and maverick action during the public health controversy. He personified what Robert Humphreys terms, 'C.O.S. inflexibility,' the 'unbending socially marooned' who were 'obdurately indifferent to the changing tides of public opinion'.¹³⁴ Pell's philosophical outlook was 'built on a paradox...its primary purpose was to nurture self-sufficiency', but his 'methods demanded abject deference' from outrelief applicants. Once poor law democratisation unfolded Pell's administrative methods were an electoral liability.

Events described in this chapter and the data on guardian election contests suggest that from 1890 there was a great deal of interest in poor law elections in the Brixworth Union, with high turnouts during successive contests. There was also, as Howarth states, a similar level of interest in the 1895 parliamentary election in the mid-Northamptonshire division.¹³⁵ Therefore, testing this case-study against the views of political and welfare historians, such as Brian Harrison and Pat Thane, is problematic.¹³⁶ Instead of apathy amongst working people, this study has found evidence of political engagement surrounding welfare issues. The election manifesto of BDODRA, with its commitment to lobby central government for poor

¹³⁴ R. Humphreys, *Sin, Organized Charity and the Poor Law In Victorian England*, (1995), pp. 173-4.

¹³⁵ Howarth, 'Liberal', p. 84.

¹³⁶ P. Thane, 'The Working Class and State "Welfare" in Britain, 1880-1914', *Historical Journal*, 27, (1984), 4, pp. 877-900, recently reprinted without revision in D. Gladstone (ed.), *Before Beveridge. Welfare before the Welfare State*, (1999), pp. 86-113; B. Harrison, *The Transformation of British Politics, 1860-1995*, (1996), p. 71.

law pensions, anticipated early twentieth century welfare reforms. Such aspirations were a reaction against the deeply impoverishing anti-outrelief policy. They were not an expression of social welfare progressivism. In the 1890s working people did not look 'past the poor laws to another conception of welfare', as Lynn Hollen Lees claims, instead they organised to claim back lost outrelief benefits.¹³⁷ They wanted welfare reform within the poor law because only by taking control of the decision-making process, which had excluded them, could they ensure that their everyday lives were improved materially.

Further comparative work needs to be done on the other poor law unions where the crusade against outrelief was implemented rigorously, to ascertain if it produced such a strong political reaction elsewhere. Admittedly, the Brixworth Union crusade campaign and the manner of its overthrow could be an aberration, but the possibility that the area being studied is untypical should not prevent us from considering its wider implications and the conclusion will now consider the broader issues it raised.

¹³⁷ L. Hollen Lees, *The Solidarities of Strangers. The English Poor Laws and the People, 1700-1948*, (1998), p. 296.

Conclusion.

At the close of the nineteenth century the retrenchment experiment in the Brixworth Union failed. The right to receive public welfare assistance outside the workhouse was reinstated and the dominance of the landowning elite in poor law politics was on the wane. There are many reasons why the Brixworth Union might be unrepresentative of either 'strict' or moderate poor law unions, but before we consider the question of typicality we need to reflect on the wider lessons that can be drawn from this study by reviewing the six inter-related questions that were posed in the introduction.

Firstly, there is no doubt that the campaign against outrelief was a policy of 'brutal dispauperisation by every and any means' which accentuated the impoverishment of the poor in the Brixworth Union.¹ Pell's party almost eradicated outrelief spending on a scale that had never been tried before, with a profound social cost. The advantage of studying the crusade campaign from the local, rather than the national, perspective is that detailed research has revealed what the strategy of 'brutal dispauperisation' entailed. Had the local context been omitted it would not have been possible to evaluate the role of human agency during the crusade campaign and its overthrow. It is evident that we need to study this phase of poor law history from a local standpoint and in conjunction with wider changes in rural society, otherwise it would not be possible to understand the complexities of the decision-making process in the late-Victorian era. Moreover, concentrating on central government records exclusively is misleading because

¹ K. Williams, From Pauperism to Poverty, (1981), p. 102.

pauperism statistics are not a sufficient indication of the underlying sentiments of individual boards of guardians.² They do not tell us how outrelief reductions were achieved and for what reasons. Nor do they reveal what informal anti-outrelief strategies were implemented and with what consequences.

Pell's party introduced a number of creative anti-outrelief schemes. Some were authorised by senior civil servants at the Local Government Board, but the most radical were not. If this study had not used a wide range of research material those deterrent strategies that were the result of devious individual initiative would not have been traced, nor would the role of the poor law in rural society have been fully understood. The Longley strategy encouraged guardians who supported the anti-outrelief ethos to act in a 'crudely repressive' manner, but the diversity and harshness of their retrenchment experiment is startling in the case of the Brixworth Union.³ It is evident that no item of poor law expenditure was sacrosanct because Pell and his supporters used the crusade campaign to create a 'world without welfare' outside the workhouse.⁴ They were even prepared to redistribute public money that should have been spent on sanitation improvements to keep the poor rates as low as possible and to further improve their low expenditure returns to central government. There is no doubt that the Longley strategy was designed to attack the core of welfare commitment, but it was individual boards of guardians like the Brixworth Union who made this policy work by radicalising the

² I am indebted to S. King, 'A question of geography and taste: integrating the poor in 18th and 19th century rural England', (2000, unpublished conference paper), pp. 1-22 for giving me permission to draw on some of his conceptual ideas about the nature of poor law power.

³ Williams, *Pauperism*, p. 102.

⁴ D. Thomson, *World Without Welfare: New Zealand's Colonial Experiment*, (1999) – this is David Thomson's phrase.

crusade's guidelines. It is apparent that this phase of poor law administration is distinctive and deserves greater prominence in the broad chronology of nineteenth century welfare history. The Whig theory of welfare is not salient in relation to the crusade campaign, modern poor law textbooks need to move away from it once and for all. Moreover, the development of medical services and specialist care in the workhouse did not mitigate the worst aspects of the anti-outrelief strategy in the Brixworth Union. Indoor relief policies were shaped by the larger context of the anti-outrelief campaign, developing more by default than by design. Guardians that were determined to eradicate outrelief for cost-saving reasons were also loath to spend the rates on improving workhouse facilities. As a result, working people were motivated to organise in order to overturn the anti-outrelief policy because the retrenchment experiment was too extreme.

Secondly, the crusade campaign was more radical than the original New Poor Law ethos in the case of the Brixworth Union. It was not simply a backward looking policy that 'strengthened and remodelled' the existing administrative system along earlier principles.⁵ Instead, guardians who supported Pell broke faith with the past by insisting that all pauper claimants were no longer entitled to receive public funds in the form of outrelief. This response to the new anti-outrelief guidelines, which at first was common to the majority of poor law unions, differed from mid-Victorian attitudes to the New Poor Law. In the 1870s boards of guardians fostered the isolation of the poor by issuing anti-outrelief charters, whose severity deterred even genuine poor relief claimants. In Pell's autobiography the Charity Organisation Society (C.O.S.) historian Thomas

⁵ M. Rose, 'The Crisis of Poor Relief in England, 1860-1890', in W.J. Mommsen and W. Mock (eds.), The Emergence of the Welfare State in Britain and Germany, 1850-1950, (1981), p. 65.

MacKay conceded that Pell went 'rather beyond' the New Poor Law ethos because there was a correlation between the harsh rhetoric of his crusade charter and the reality of his deterrent policies.⁶ In this case there was a contrast between the sentiment of the New Poor Law and the crusade campaign. Thus, it appears that the crusade decades were a fundamental disjunction in nineteenth century poor law history. They were not an irrelevant administrative phase of reactionary darkness, to be dismissed or summarised in a short section, as is the case in many current welfare textbooks.⁷

This study has indicated that the radical nature of the crusade campaign contributed to early twentieth century welfare developments. For instance, the issue of pension provision was of paramount importance to working people in this study. Of course it would be foolish to suggest that events in the Brixworth Union shaped the Liberal welfare reform programme of 1906, but we equally should not overlook the fact that national expenditure on outrelief for the elderly was halved during the crusade campaign.⁸ The Brixworth Union contributed to that trend and therefore bears some responsibility for early twentieth century welfare measures that were a reaction against a deeply impoverishing policy, which had been tried and found wanting.⁹ There were of course other contributory factors that influenced social policy changes in the early twentieth century, but one of the most important was democratisation.

⁶ T. MacKay (ed.) and A. Pell, The Reminiscences of Albert Pell Sometime MP for South-Leicestershire, (1908), p. xiv.

⁷ A. Kidd, State Society and the Poor in Nineteenth Century England, (1999), is the latest text which overlooks the significance of the crusade controversy.

⁸ D. Thomson, 'Welfare and the Historians', in L. Bonfield, R. M. Smith and K. Wrightson (eds.), The World We Have Gained: Histories of Population and Social Structure, (1986), p. 374.

⁹ Thomson, World Without, p. 161.

Thirdly, one of the key findings of this study is the role that democratisation played in overthrowing the crusade campaign. There were two major poor law changes in the late-Victorian period - an attack against all outrelief provision orchestrated by Pell's party, followed by a counter-attack organised by those residents who were determined to reverse the retrenchment experiment. However, it was democratisation that began to transfer poor law power to the working classes, giving them an opportunity to influence the decision-making process for the first time. It is important not to overlook the fact that working people organised to fight the anti-outrelief policy from its inception, anticipating legislative changes. This study has traced their complex political journey from their involvement with the National Agricultural Labourers' Union (NALU) and vestry politics, to the activities of independent working class spokesmen during the caucus phase, and finally, to the establishment of the Brixworth District Out Door Relief Association (BDODRA). Although linear historical models are often problematical analytical tools, it is evident that some men who joined the NALU later led BDODRA. At each stage of the crusade campaign the working classes responded, rather than allowing apathy to result in further impoverishment. Working people fought to formalise a series of lost rights that made up their makeshift economies. Throughout the crusade decades turnouts in both parliamentary and guardian elections were high and political activity was intense over the outrelief issue. In this case local politics were more accessible and flexible than conventional modern scholarship appreciates.¹⁰

¹⁰ P. Thane, 'The Working Class and State "Welfare" in Britain, 1880-1914', *Historical Journal*, 27, (1984), 4, pp. 877-900, republished without revision in D. Gladstone (ed.), *Before Beveridge. Welfare Before the Welfare State*, (1999), pp. 86-113, set the tone; P. Hollis, *Ladies Elect. Women in English Local Government, 1865-1914*, (1987), p. 290, acknowledges the influence of working class candidates,

Democratisation in the Brixworth Union gave working people the chance to exercise power for their benefit and they seized that opportunity. They were not the 'helpless, hapless and hopeless sorts...the victims rather than the makers of history' because they could exercise their right to vote, which enabled them to make relevant welfare choices.¹¹ It would seem that working people wanted civil and political rights for a reason - to obtain a form of basic social security. Their aspirations, therefore, anticipated the modern concept of welfare citizenship, which is based on the premise that political rights without social welfare benefits are an 'empty constitutional promise'.¹² However, since there was a correlation between the strength of their commitment and the extreme nature of the anti-outrelief experiment at Brixworth, it is possible that BDODRA was an aberration. Evidently questions surrounding the nature of working class political activism and the social welfare aspirations of the labouring classes will not be resolved until further local studies have assessed the impact of democratisation on the poor law in the late-Victorian period. Only then can we assess the contribution that working people made to early twentieth century welfare legislation.

The aftermath of the crusade campaign in the Brixworth Union suggests that those who suffered under the anti-outrelief policy were determined to begin the process of widening the scope of public welfare assistance. For instance, in 1899 Sidney Ward

but tends to cite examples as the exception rather than the rule. It is difficult to sustain this view until more research is complete; B. Harrison, *The Transformation of British Politics, 1860-1995*, (1996), p. 71, makes a similar claim.

¹¹ D. Englander, *Poverty and Poor Law Reform in 19th Century Britain, 1834-1914 – From Chadwick to Booth*, (1998), p. 90.

¹² G. Finlayson, *Citizen, State and Social Welfare in Britain, 1830-1990*, (1994), pp. 12-13, explains the importance of the relationship between the right to vote and social welfare, which was a reaction against the mixed economy of welfare in the late-Victorian era.

petitioned central government on behalf of the board of guardians to repeal the ruling that all workhouse inmates should be disenfranchised.¹³ His supporters believed that elderly people in the workhouse should have the right to vote in favour of state-funded old age pensions.¹⁴ Therefore, the overthrow of the crusade does not appear to have been the climax of working people's political journey but the start of a new phase of political inclusion, which allowed them to exercise power. Admittedly the strong reaction of working people in the Brixworth Union might be unrepresentative of what took place elsewhere during the crusade campaign, but the strength of their opposition may have been characteristic of a more widespread desire for social welfare reform by the close of the nineteenth century. That change in popular attitudes altered the dynamic of central-local relations during the crusade decades too.

Fourthly, an advantage of studying the Brixworth Union is that it has been possible to explore the complex nature of central-local relations through the personalities of those individuals leading the crusade campaign. The Longley strategy was predicated on the understanding that boards of guardians would be prepared to follow anti-outrelief guidelines, rather than an official directive, thus improving compliance. At the same time central government tried to foster a competitive welfare climate, with the creation of league tables and poor law conferences. The main problem with this strategy was that its goals were contradictory. Compliance is seldom increased when policy initiatives are

¹³ Public Record Office, MH12/8710, RDC Brixworth correspondence, 1899-1900.

¹⁴ L. Hollen Lees, *The Solidarities of Strangers. The English Poor Laws and the People, 1700-1948*, (1998), p. 298, takes the view that the desire for pension provision indicates that workers 'looked past the poor laws'. This was not the case in this study. BDODRA wanted welfare reform (in particular pension provision) within the poor law first.

issued in the form of guidelines that increase the autonomy of those asked to follow them. Central government learned this lesson to its cost during the crusade decades because the Longley strategy set in motion a series of problems of its own creation.

At first, the relationship between central government and the Brixworth Union worked well because it was in both sides' interests to form a welfare partnership. Central government used the Brixworth Union to raise the profile of its anti-outrelief strategy and to publicise the cost-saving benefits of adopting the Longley guidelines. In return, Pell used the remit of the Longley strategy to pursue his ideological goals and to cut poor law expenditure radically. However, individuals like Pell, who dominated boards of guardians, started to exploit the close relationship they developed with central government. For instance Pell asked central government to authorise a number of unorthodox anti-outrelief schemes. This placed central government in an awkward position because some of the measures were in contravention of poor law codes of practice, such as Pell's request to reduce the number of relieving officers. However, since the crusade's success was dependent on retaining the support of the strict 'model' poor law unions like Brixworth, central government had little choice but to endorse the deterrent schemes, despite their reservations.

The welfare partnership between central and local government, therefore, created four problems. First, guardians like Pell began to ignore central government, acting in a devious manner because that was the only way they could sustain their anti-outrelief targets. Second, it encouraged crusade ideologues that achieved their targets to think of themselves as the welfare 'experts' of their day and they began to take control of the crusade campaign. For instance, Pell was convinced that he was an expert on all poor law

and public health matters. It proved difficult to check his outspoken criticisms of central government policy and his maverick actions. Third, the crusade campaign sent out a series of mixed messages about welfare provision that could be, and were, exploited, with problematic political repercussions. For instance Local Government Board policy was a 'complex mixture of the voluntary and the statutory', which historians often term the mixed economy of welfare. In theory the guidelines stated that poor relief and charitable provision should operate in tandem, but in reality guardians like Pell used charitable agencies to subjugate the poor. For example, the poor in the Brixworth Union despised the private charitable scheme, the *Secret Service Fund*, which replaced outrelief provision. The way that the charity was run motivated the labouring classes to fight to overturn the crusade campaign. Therefore, the mixed economy of welfare ethos contained the seeds of the crusade's downfall. Fourth, the Local Government Board's role was to implement the poor law policies of the government of the day. Consequently, it had to take into account welfare developments that were the result of election promises. Therefore, its poor law ideology was not fixed, in contrast to the ideology of the crusade's supporters who acted in an obdurate manner. By the 1890s more extensive political participation changed the dynamic of central-local relations. Senior civil servants had to negotiate with a new class of guardian in an era when popular attitudes about the causes of poverty altered significantly, which forced policy-makers to begin to make greater welfare concessions.

At the end of the crusade campaign a different type of local pressure was being brought to bear on central government. The dynamic relationship between central and local government was complex during the crusade decades and was complicated by the

mixed economy of welfare and the widened franchise. Characteristically, the Local Government Board adopted the line of least resistance because it had no effective enforcement mechanism, which meant that it supported Pell until the 1890s but then changed direction by 1896.

Fifthly, the death knell of paternalism has been a key feature of this study.

Although paternalism is a complex historical term there is no doubt that in the late-1860s there was a mixed economy of welfare in operation in the Brixworth Union, comprised of a combination of small outrelief doles and a range of charitable provision. These customary arrangements structured traditional social relations. Admittedly social duties and responsibilities were constantly under negotiation, usually changing according to economic conditions, but some key conventions, such as customary funeral payments, were enduring because they were deeply embedded in working class culture. What the crusade campaign at Brixworth demonstrates is how laissez-faire ideology taken to its extreme in the context of the poor law was utilised by the landowning elite and farmers to enhance their power, to the detriment of the poor. For instance guardians used the crusade as an instrument of class reprisal by penalising the poor for union combination. (Ironically agricultural workers combined into unions to fight for better wages to replace the same income supplements that guardians withdrew.) Therefore, there was a strong link between the disintegration of paternalism and the initial success of the crusade campaign. The crusade was also a political life raft for the landed interest in a period of rapid economic change that threatened to undermine their dominance of rural society. Those guardians like Spencer who needed to make major cost-savings, particularly after the onset of the agricultural crisis, abandoned paternalism in favour of the crusade

campaign. The social upheaval caused by the abolition of outrelief and the withdrawal of customary pensions by previously paternalistic landowners, had far-reaching political repercussions.

Tracing the demise of paternalism has given us fresh insights into how the crusade campaign felt from below, even though the evidence at certain junctures is fragmentary. Arguably it would be impossible to come away from this study without gaining a sense of how deeply impoverishing the crusade campaign was. The aim where possible has been to let the poor speak for themselves and their evidence is compelling. The poor's access to public welfare was not cut off during the crusade campaign, but those who dreaded the workhouse struggled to maintain their independence in parlous circumstances. Once the crusade ethos began to replace paternalism it was arguably the elderly who suffered most and this is why pension provision was a key grievance. Older people lost their pension benefits, their almshouse accommodation and the right to be buried in a dignified manner. Instead they were forced to use their kinship and friendship networks, pooling their meagre resources, and after death their relatives had to beg to bury them. The crusade against outrelief had a profound social cost, but working people did not accept their fate - quite the reverse. Pell believed the crusade taught the poor to adopt an ethos of self-help and industry, but in fact it taught them to fight. Most were not deferential but rather acted in an expedient manner until democratisation gave them the means to fight back and play a key role in the overthrow of the crusade campaign.

Sixthly, and finally, although key individuals and the various social groups who became involved in the crusade campaign were motivated differently, each made an important contribution to what took place. Three men championed the crusade campaign,

but Pell dominated poor law administration for over twenty years. His actions reveal the willingness of crusade ideologues to sacrifice the health and welfare of the poor in their ruthless pursuit of their ideological and cost-saving objectives. Pell never deviated in his commitment to the crusade campaign even after he lost power.¹⁵ He was a typical C.O.S. zealot who was left 'socially marooned, obdurately indifferent to the changing tides of public opinion' because he was so 'unbending'.¹⁶ Yet, although Pell's policies became an out-dated anachronism, we should not underestimate the degree of political power he held or his determination to stay in office. His party's conduct personifies the Longley strategy's culture of league tables, target setting and welfare charters. Pell sensed that the crusade campaign gave him the opportunity to further his political career, rather than languish on the backbenches at Westminster. He carved out a unique role for himself and forged a formidable reputation. Pell's contribution to the crusade campaign raises the question of the importance of the individual in history. Had he not dominated poor law proceedings the crusade would arguably not have endured for so long, which indicates that a dominant personality on boards of guardians was a necessary precondition for the successful implementation of the Longley strategy. Paradoxically, the radical nature of both the leading individual and their crusade ideology also led to the downfall of the anti-outrelief campaign.

Spencer's motives for supporting the crusade initiative were complex and at times have been difficult to pinpoint because he was such a private man. He usually revealed his convictions only to his peers, like Sir William Harcourt, in confidential

¹⁵ Pell, *Reminiscences*, p. xiv.

¹⁶ Humphreys, *Sin*, pp. 173-4.

correspondence. Yet, he did leave a local record of his poor law actions, notably in the letters to his land agents. Spencer held poor law power by virtue of his birth because of the extensive land and property that he inherited, which placed him at the apex of rural society. Initially he supported the crusade campaign for a mixture of ideological, economic and political reasons. However after the onset of the agricultural crisis he was determined to cut his rateable expenditure radically, withholding outrelief until the poor migrated. At the same time he introduced a range of economic sanctions on the Althorp estate mediated through his land agent. These included the repossession of cottages in arrears and cancelling all charitable subscriptions. Spencer may have been a Whig, but during the agricultural crisis he abandoned the paternalism of his Whig forefathers. He was determined to export the social problems of the Brixworth Union and for this reason he introduced welfare to work schemes rather than reintroduce outrelief. The schemes were too small-scale to alleviate unemployment and were run as business ventures. If they were not profitable, like the allotment farming scheme or the co-operative experiment, he withdrew his investment. Although Spencer was motivated primarily by economic rather than ideological considerations, he matched Pell's ruthlessness. His charitable subscriptions were a meagre portion of his personal expenditure, but the impact of those cutbacks was profound. However, Spencer did differ from Pell because he was a pragmatist. Spencer was reconciled to the fact that democratisation changed the basis of welfare provision and the nature of local government administration. If Spencer had not become involved in the crusade campaign it would still have got underway, but his support was invaluable, his reputation giving the anti-outrelief initiative authority. He died in 1910 on the eve of the introduction of the Parliament Bill to reform the powers of

the House of Lords. By tracing his career it has been possible to explore the demise of patrician authority in national and county politics, the dispersal of territorial wealth going hand in hand with the transition from landed dominance to democratisation.

Bury acted as Chairman of the Brixworth Union board for over twenty years, playing a pivotal role in the crusade campaign. Before 1870 he was a mild-mannered cleric who seldom attended poor law union board meetings. In his opinion it was in the farming community's interests to retain outrelief because it was part of the social fabric and therefore ensured stability. Bury believed that it was his clerical duty to mediate outrelief and charity to the poor on behalf of his patron. Thus, he organised the construction of a local school and better quality housing in his local parish. However, once Pell moved to the neighbourhood in the 1860s Bury changed his poor law outlook radically. Pell recognised that Bury would be a useful man to recruit to the crusade cause because he was a formidable bureaucrat. He persuaded Bury to take a more active interest in poor law matters and converted him into a zealous crusade supporter. Bury's unrivalled technical judgement of poor law procedures were among the chief reasons that Pell's party held power for so long. Bury delayed controversial motions on technicalities until he could round up enough supporters to outvote anything that challenged the crusade campaign. He acted as party whip and chairman, particularly during the agricultural crisis. Pell recognised in Bury the qualities of loyalty and resolute determination to follow fixed principles. They remained life-long friends and close allies. As a result, another major factor that helped to ensure the successful implementation of the Longley strategy seems to have been that whoever dominated a board of guardians needed a resolute lieutenant to round up supporters. Bury took on that role and never

wavered in his convictions after his conversion. It is difficult to gauge whether the crusade campaign would have failed without Bury because Pell would probably have co-opted a C.O.S. ally in his absence. However, there is no doubt that he, like the farmers, played a key role throughout.

Farmers in the Brixworth Union were a very complex social grouping who appear to have been motivated by a variety of local factors associated with their economic interests. It has not been possible to trace which types of farmer were elected to the board of guardians during the crusade campaign because a record of their rateable assessments has not survived. Consequently, it is difficult to ascertain why certain farmers became more involved than others. Some may have not been able to afford to take on an active poor law role; others might have been indifferent. However, at times, farmers did act as a more cohesive social grouping, particularly when they were experiencing poor profits or felt threatened by outside influences during the phase of trade union combination. In the 1870s the farmers' short-sighted action allowed Pell to consolidate his power. The farmers squandered their opportunity to check Pell's radicalism and by the time they realised their mistake it was too late. Their reputations were linked to the success of the crusade campaign and Pell exploited their vulnerability to retain power. After 1880 the farmers acted as a much less cohesive social grouping because they were under considerable economic pressure. The major priority of most farmers was to recover lost profits. As a result there was a higher turnover of tenant farmers on the board of guardians in the 1880s and this further undermined their authority in poor law matters. However, farmers' declining interest in the poor law changed the political tide against Pell. A new social grouping started to replace the

farmers, namely tradesmen, and they placed greater strains on Pell's party because their arrival heralded the start of coalition politics.

Tradesmen were an important social grouping in the Brixworth Union because they were at the centre of local life. Their business activities gave them an opportunity to develop vertical trading ties throughout the local community, giving them access to public opinion and keeping them in touch with political developments in nearby towns. In the 1880s farmers relied on tradesmen involved in the agricultural business, such as seed merchants, to extend credit until profits improved. Out of those closer economic ties some guardians began to develop stronger political alliances. In the 1880s the tradesmen who were elected guardians were predominantly publicans, who supported the interests of their customers, mainly working people. Once the rural exodus got underway it was commercially important to uphold the political interests of their shrinking customer base. Also, Pell's party tried to convert many public houses in the district to co-operative contracts, angering local publicans. During the crusade controversy public houses were key political venues where local people gravitated to meet and air their grievances. Publicans gained two advantages from this outcome. First, they were at the heart of subversive activity and since meetings were held frequently that was good for business and kept them in touch with public opinion. Second, as meetings were convened in their business premises they became associated with the popular cause to overthrow the anti-outrelief policy, which was advantageous at election time. Therefore, tradesmen represented a wider spectrum of political interests than Pell's party, and that factor eventually led to the overthrow of the crusade campaign.

Tradesmen derived their support from the largest generic social grouping in the Brixworth Union, namely artisans and agricultural workers. They did a wide variety of work that influenced their political outlook. Post-1870 the numbers of small craftsmen in the Brixworth Union began to decline because their traditional cottage industry work, such as shoemaking, was transferred to urban factories. For this reason it has been difficult to trace their political involvement. However, some poorer elements amongst the artisan class who worked in agriculture (blacksmiths, carpenters, iron stone workers, stone masons, sawyer, etc.) formed close ties with agricultural workers because both classes had similar poor economic prospects as a result of underemployment problems. Their key grievances were seasonal work, low paid piecework wages and a lack of outrelief provision. Pell's downfall, therefore, was of his own making because he impoverished these labouring classes, which were numerically the largest social grouping. They exacted their revenge when the poor law was democratised because they held the most votes. BDODRA was their pragmatic response to the widened franchise.

The activities of BDODRA raise the question of the relationship between the demise of Liberalism and the advent of labour based politics.¹⁷ Those members of the working classes who should have been affiliated to Liberalism via the NALU and chapel politics seem to have drifted away from the party fold in the 1880s because middle-class ratepayers dominated caucus politics and supported a controversial anti-outrelief policy. In areas, like Norfolk, as Alun Howkins' work reveals, there were 'particularly close links between the chapel and friendly societies, which in turn led to trades unions and

¹⁷ K. Laybourn and J. Reynolds, Liberalism and the Rise of Labour, 1890-1918, (1984); K. Laybourn, The Rise of Labour: The British Labour Party, 1890-1979, (1988).

Liberalism', but in the Brixworth Union that traditional political route was more complex because of the crusade campaign.¹⁸ The severity and duration of the anti-outrelief crusade persuaded many traditional Liberal voters to vote for pro-outrelief candidates in national and local elections, regardless of their broader political associations. Voters were, therefore, beginning to pursue welfare issues, such as pension provision, via BDODRA, which the Liberal party ignored to its detriment. There may well have been a socialist element in BDODRA, its leaders quoted Keir Hardie frequently in many of their political speeches, and it was evident that a political sea change was underway in the Brixworth Union. Although this was slow, it was irrevocable, indicating that labour and political historians who debate the drift away from Liberalism in the late-Victorian/ Edwardian era may need to take into account the local political repercussions of the crusade campaign in areas where the anti-outrelief regulations were adopted stringently.¹⁹

The question of typicality needs to be addressed here because for five key reasons the Brixworth Union looked 'different'. First, the pattern of land ownership and the peculiar way that three of the major landed estates were managed by the Spencer family's land agent placed poor law power in the hands of a select few. Second, this was an exceptional 'rural' union because of its unconventional boundaries drawn around the Althorp estate. Third, the poor law property franchise favoured landowners, large property owners and tenant farmers, exacerbating the problem of the dominance of the landed interest, which the peculiar boundaries created. Fourth, major landowners like Spencer controlled a number of safe-seats, which gave Pell's party the ability to control

¹⁸ A. Howkins, Poor Labouring Men. Rural Radicalism in Norfolk, 1870-1923, (1985), p. 51.

¹⁹ Laybourn and Reynolds, Liberalism; Laybourn, Labour.

elections when their positions of authority were threatened. Fifth, the Brixworth Union could justly claim to be a 'farmers' parliament. Only a few tradesmen participated in poor law politics, in contrast to boards of guardians located around county towns where tradesmen usually had more say. For these reasons Pell's party was able to dominate the board of guardians and democratisation was of vital importance to local people who opposed the crusade campaign. The crusade campaign in the Brixworth Union was radical and consequently the political reaction it engendered was extreme. Therefore, what happened here might be unique. Yet, claims of 'uniqueness' are a dangerous historical route to travel and fraught with difficulties, since radicalism was also a key feature of nineteenth century rural life. More work is needed on the crusade campaign in other locations before we can set the events at Brixworth in a wider historical context.

It is evident that this study has wider research implications, which cannot be explored here. For instance, it would be instructive to examine the experiences of the other six strict 'model' rural poor law unions that adopted the Longley strategy stringently, none of which have been the subject of thesis studies. Such an exercise would ascertain whether the Brixworth Union was representative or unrepresentative. Further work would establish whether the Brixworth Union was emblematic of the crusade controversy and whether it is possible to study the anti-outrelief initiative without first understanding what took place here. At present we can only speculate about the diversity and radical nature of poor law practices elsewhere, and whether others followed Brixworth's lead.

There are a number of issues that this thesis has been unable to explore. For example, women have played only a small role in this study. This was, however, not a

conscious omission, but a regrettable reflection of the lack of primary material left by women involved in the political contest. The only female guardian elected to office in 1894, Mary Calverley, was a devout supporter of the anti-outrelief policy. She went on to found the first branch of the C.O.S. in Northampton and was an outspoken critic of extensive welfare provision. Regrettably no evidence was found of women who were active NALU or BDODRA leaders or members. A few newspaper reports noted that some women made tea at large open air NALU rallies and attended BDODRA's inaugural meeting, but the evidence is too fragmentary to draw any firm conclusions about their involvement.

It is now over twenty years since Williams published his textbook on the poor law, with its extensive chapter on the crusade decades. He recommended that the crusade topic should be studied in greater detail and yet in that time few poor law historians have followed his lead. This is regrettable given the sorts of issues that this thesis has raised about the nature of political life in rural society and the history of labour relations. It aligns with newer rural studies modifying our understanding of the complexity of agricultural trade unionism and its links to wider changes in rural society. Further work needs to be undertaken on the issue of nonconformity and the influence of radical Liberal politics in Northampton town, as it was not possible to undertake such a study in this word limit. Similarly the complex issue of the demise of Liberalism in Northamptonshire has been raised in the course of this thesis. There appears to have been a drift away from Liberalism from the 1880s, but since the sitting Liberal member was re-elected again in 1905 we need to identify what happened between the ending of the crusade campaign and that election date to change public opinion. A key unanswered question is whether

these poor law events were antecedents of ‘labour’ politics that Liberalism tried and failed to contain before 1914. Further work would facilitate this type of analysis and support studies that political historians, such as Keith Laybourn, have done on northern English towns, like Bradford, where the drift away from Liberalism towards municipal socialism was evident in the late-Victorian period.²⁰

This study has raised more questions than it has answered, but it represents the start of a research process, rather than the summation. As more work is done in this neglected field it will be possible to develop a clearer understanding of the impact of the crusade campaign regionally and the influence of poor law democratisation on rural society. The history of the politically silent needs to be addressed because, as many Irish historians have shown, silence is a powerful political strategy too. Also it has only been possible to glimpse the depths of impoverishment that the crusade campaign created. In the Brixworth Union popular protest was not ‘revolutionary’, but it was radical and vocal. However, the outrelief battle was about human dignity more than any other single issue. For this reason the crusade campaign had to be challenged.

Finally, it seems appropriate to let ordinary working people in the Brixworth Union conclude this thesis because this study is their history. Sidney Ward at the inaugural meeting of BDODRA in 1893 declared to a packed public house that it was time to pursue ‘new ideas, new hopes and new aims’ in the Brixworth Union.²¹ At the Royal Commission on the Aged Poor in 1894 he told the then Prince of Wales, later Edward VII, why BDODRA was set up:

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Northampton Mercury, 3.3.1893.

Suppose say now, Sir, I have the privileges of liberty, a man who has lived in a cottage for years he has got a little home; it is a little castle to him, and they say when he has lived there over fifty years he and his wife have to break up their home and go into the house. He has to sell his furniture bit by bit before they go in, because if they have anything they will not give him a paper. He has to part with all, and then when he goes in he has to part with his clothing...He was a man who had his liberty, and used to go about the fields all his lifetime...being confined there after having his liberty is very hard...I believe there is a good many would have been living to-day if it had not been for the policy of the Board.²²

Ward explained that BDODRA was determined to oust guardians whose 'chief object had been to keep cutting rates...for they gloried in keeping figures right...it did not matter about the people left impoverished and suffering'. A fellow spokesman, Josiah Turner of Pitsford, reiterated the feelings among working people;

A man who had worked and paid rates all his life, for perhaps fifty or sixty years, was only asking for his own when he applied for outdoor relief. It was not charity that the working classes were asking for, but justice. Working men had never had the opportunity, which they had at present of sending men who could speak and vote...No law giving the working class such power as they had at present under the reduced qualifications had ever been brought forward. United they could send to the Board...men who would do justice to their fellow workers...they were the old people of the future...now they had an opportunity, which they should not allow to pass, of putting men there who knew their future needs.²³

Ordinary working men who founded BDODRA, like Sidney Ward and Josiah Turner, fought not just for political rights but for a series of welfare benefits denied to them, that later became pillars of the Welfare State. It seems David Thomson was correct when he said recently –

while history never repeats itself neatly, and circumstances are never the same again, there is much to be learned by considering carefully the last time 'new'

²² *BPP*, Royal Commission on the Aged Poor, (1894), evidence of S. Ward, (27.2.1894), q. 15761-64, 15676, this is a deliberate repetition of one of the opening quotes in chapter 2.

²³ Northampton Mercury, 3.3.1893.

welfare ideas...were dominant [since] ...the options facing us now are [often] very similar to those considered, tried and discarded by previous generations.²⁴

²⁴ Thomson, 'Welfare and the Historians', p. 357; Thomson, World Without, p. 165.

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