

Account of Purley on Thames

Bradfield Union

R200168 1/7/2017

Poor Law Reform

The Poor Law Act of 1834 came about mainly as a protest against the high rates being charged by parish guardians to sustain the poor. This came about as a result of a report from the Committee which had been established in 1817 to look into the matter. By 1815 the average cost of administering the poor law system had risen to 13/3d per head of the population, but in fact this was falling on only a tiny fraction of the population.

This was the same group of people who were also paying most of the wages and most of the taxes, and incidentally the only people to have a say in the affairs of the country.

The corruption of the minor officials who actually administered the Poor Laws was widespread and most were also totally incompetent with no charitable thoughts at all in their minds. Thus there was a fairly general concensus that not only would it be possible to effect considerable savings of money, but it would also be possible to improve the help that could be provided to the needy. However the proposed Act which was widely accepted by all parties in Parliament was equally bitterly opposed by most newspapers and the public at large.

The new system was to be based on three National Commissioners with Edwin Chadwick as their secretary. As a matter of priority parishes were to be grouped into Unions and all Poor Law matters transferred to them. Once formed the Unions were enjoined to build workhouses where the indigent could be looked after and those without any money could be made to work for their living instead of loafing around on public charity as was the popular impression.

The Formation of the Bradfield Union

Purley, along with all the other parishes of the Theale Hundred and those of the Reading Hundred which were outside of the Borough were grouped into the Bradfield Union.

The Union was put under the control of a Board of Guardians who were made up of an appointed Guardian and ex-officio representatives of the clergy (usually the rector) for each parish. In Purley's case these were the Reverend Charles Manesty and Edward Sherwood, but the Reverend Henry Wilder of Sulham also was recorded as representing Purley.

The first meeting was held on 12th March 1835.

The Bradfield Workhouse

The new workhouse was designed for 214 paupers by the architect Sampson Kempthorne. It was built at Southend Bradfield and later became the Waylands Hospital. The site is now used for housing.

Effect on Rates

Insofar as Purley was concerned the drop in the amount of money paid by the ratepayers was considerable. In the ten years leading up to the change the average precept on the parish was £193

with a rate ranging from 3/- to a peak of 6/- in 1830-31. A parish rate was not levied again until 1840 when 6d in the pound was levied and the contribution made by the parish towards the Bradfield Union was only around £60 per annum.

Registration of Births and Deaths

In 1836 the Unions were required to register all births and deaths in their area.

Public Vaccination

Vaccination had begun with the discovery by Edward Jenner that it was possible to build up a resistance to a serious disease by having a minor infection, and that this minor infection could be induced by injection of dead germs. For many years local doctors had offered the service, but primarily to the wealthy, although Dr Monckton of Pangbourne, who lived in Purley, offered to do this gratis for the poor within three miles of Pangbourne in 1776. In 1840 this was made a public service and put into the hands of the Union.

Diets

The diet provided for the poor in the workhouse was very closely controlled by the Guardians. Great efforts were made to ensure that there was a well defined difference between what the worst paid labourer who was not reliant on charity could afford for his family and what an able bodied pauper was provided with. But when as in this area the labourers' wages were so tiny this meant that the paupers were virtually starved. In 1850 the Commissioners refused to sanction a dietary regime proposed by the Bradfield Guardians on the grounds that 'it was decidedly less nutritious than those of other Unions' In response the Bradfield Guardians argued that this diet was in fact more than most independent labourers in the district could afford for themselves and their families. (ref 91-13 p453)

Bradfield Union 1835

An article by Jean Debney published in the Purley Parish News of June 1981 From My History Notebook 12

An Act of Parliament was passed in 1835 which removed the responsibility of relieving the poor by individual parishes and Purley became one of 27 parishes in the Union of Bradfield. The Board of Guardians met weekly to "control things" and Rev. Charles Manesty (Rector and Mr. Edward Sherwood (farmer) represented Purley.

In the ten years prior to this Act, the poor Rates in Purley had varied from 3/- to 6/- in the £; after the Act they fell at first to 6d in the £. (In the first year £129 of surplus Poor Rates was spent by Purley on no doubt essential repairs to the Church.) This reduction was achieved by reducing or stopping relief wherever the Guardians thought that the poor could or should be able to support themselves, and thereby many anomalies and abuses of the old system. Before 1835 there were thirteen names regularly on the relief list but the Guardians soon reduced this to three,

Three Widows had been receiving small pensions weekly from Purley and suddenly found themselves destitute They all lived outside the parish and it is possible they had left the parish to find a home when the death of their husbands no longer entitled them to their accommodation. Widow Ford lived in Reading and was thought to be "capable of exerting herself", but further investigation found that she was "ill with a dropsy and unable to do any work and her weekly 2/- was restored. Widow Simonds, aged 65, lived in Eton and returned briefly to Purley to collect her 2/- as she had no other means of support, but was allowed no more when she returned to Eton. A letter from Rev. King of Henley was written on behalf of Widow Ford begging "she be allowed 2/6 a week at Henley" as "she is very poor and unable to support herself"

By this time Richard New was nearly 70 years old but still had several children at home, the youngest only 5 years old. He had 'been receiving an extra 1/3 "for his family" but this was stopped as he was "in constant employ". He could earn 9/- a week as a labourer but was frequently ill; and then the Guardians allowed him only 2/- plus three gallon loaves (see below) and 2 lbs bacon - and this was meant to satisfy six hungry mouths! Of course he may have been able to grow a few vegetables but I do not know for certain.

Later one of his children, Michael New when aged 18 years was admitted to the Bradfield Workhouse as he had his leg taken off and a wooden leg ordered for him by the Guardians. Surprisingly he survived this ordeal without anaesthetic or modern drugs, and was still living in the house 5 years later, but one wonders what sort of life he was able to lead.

The improvement in the Poor Rates was only achieved by a reduction in the services given, but as can be seen, in terms of human suffering it was only gained at the expense of those perhaps least able to cope.

Footnote: A gallon loaf weighed about 9 lbs. "Seconds" were supplied by a baker in Pangbourne. My modern large loaf weighs just less than 2 lbs,- so the News had about 4½ large loaves a week, plus about ¼ lb bacon each day.

Bibliography

91-13 Oxford History of England 'The Age of Reform'

121 Minutes of Bradfield Union Board of Guardians.