

THE RELIEF OF SUTTON'S POOR, PART II:

Sutton and the Aston Board of Guardians of the Poor

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In a previous article, published in the Research Group's Proceedings, Vol 4: Spring 1997, the present author described the relief of Sutton's poor under the Old Poor Law, 1601–1836. The account is continued in this article which describes the relief of Sutton's poor during the early years of the New Poor Law, enacted in 1836.

Widespread Distrust

The 1601 Poor Law Act (43 Elizabeth I), commonly known as the Old Poor Law, relied on the parish as a unit of government and upon unpaid non-professional administrators. This resulted in the creation of a vast but rather inefficient system of social welfare, roughly adapted to the requirements of the society of the day, and based on close relationships within the village and hamlet (1).

Overall, there was an absence of any consistent model of practice. This resulted in considerable geographical variation in the interpretation and implementation of the legislation. In Warwickshire, disputes within and between parishes were frequently sorted out by the Justices of the Peace at Quarter Sessions.

A Commission of Enquiry established by the government carried out its work during 1832 and 1833. Having studied local systems in operation, its main proposals and recommendations were:

- That there should be national uniformity in the treatment of each class of paupers, so that every applicant of any class might receive identical treatment wherever he or she might reside.
- Outdoor relief to the able-bodied and their families should be abolished.

- Each local authority should have a workhouse in which able-bodied applicants for relief should be received and set to work under strict discipline.
- The condition of the able-bodied pauper should be 'less eligible than that of the lowest class of independent labourer'. An appeal to the parish should be a person's last resort (2).

The Report of this Enquiry formed the basis of the Act for the Amendment and Better Administration of the Laws relating to the Poor in England and Wales 1834 (4 and 5 William IV, c. 76), commonly known as the New Poor Law. This legislation was primarily intended to reduce the excessively heavy Poor Rate which, at that time, amounted to £7 million per annum nationally, and as much as 14 shillings and 5 pence per head in some of the larger parishes in the south east of England.

A Board of three Commissioners was appointed to enforce regulations for the government of workhouses and to be responsible the nature and amount of relief given. These regulations were made uniform throughout the country.

The New Poor Law catered for two main activities:

- setting the able-bodied to work, including children whose parents could not support them, youths who could not be trained by means of an apprenticeship or adults who were to be supplied with materials on which they could work;
- making arrangements for all those old, sick and disabled who could not support themselves (3)

Even with the changes in the law, the responsibility for assessing and supervising poor relief remained that of Overseers of the Poor and Churchwardens in each parish.

Parishes were grouped together to form unions. The Aston Union was comprised of the parishes of Aston, Sutton Coldfield, Curdworth [which included Minworth], and Wishaw. Each parish elected Guardians of the Poor to represent its interests at meetings of the Union.

The Aston Board of Guardians

The Board itself was a voluntary body. Its 25 members were elected from within the Union, there being 18 Guardians from the Parish of Aston (which included Aston, Erdington, Nechells, Duddeston, Deritend, Bordesley, Castle Bromwich and Water Orton), four from Sutton Coldfield, and one each from Curdworth, Minworth and Wishaw. The Board held its first meeting at 11.00 am on Tuesday November 1836 in the Board Room at the Aston Parish Workhouse in Erdington (lunch was taken at the Swan Inn opposite).

The well-known industrialist and public figure, Joseph Webster of Penns Hall, was elected to serve as its first Chairman. Various honorary officers, paid officers and employees were appointed, including Enoch Pearson. He was engaged as full-time clerk to the Board at a salary of £150 per annum (the minutes and accounts are recorded in his neat handwriting). A Relieving Officer, James Martin, was appointed to be in charge of 'outdoor' relief [to paupers not in the workhouse].

It is not always realised that the geographical areas covered by the Unions became convenient for setting up other aspects of local government such as Registrar Districts [for registering births, marriages and deaths]. In March 1837, the Union was divided into seven Medical Districts, the minutes noting that 'the leeches be paid for by the Union'.

In order to finance the work of the Union, it was resolved that 'orders' of ten per cent in the pound, based on the average population, were to be paid by each parish to the Treasurer before 18th December of that year.

The Aston Union Workhouse

At its first meeting in November 1836, the Aston Board of Guardians agreed that the use of Sutton Workhouse (then 100 years old) should be discontinued at the next quarter day and that its remaining inmates should then be transferred to the Union's Workhouse at Erdington. This had been built in 1735 as

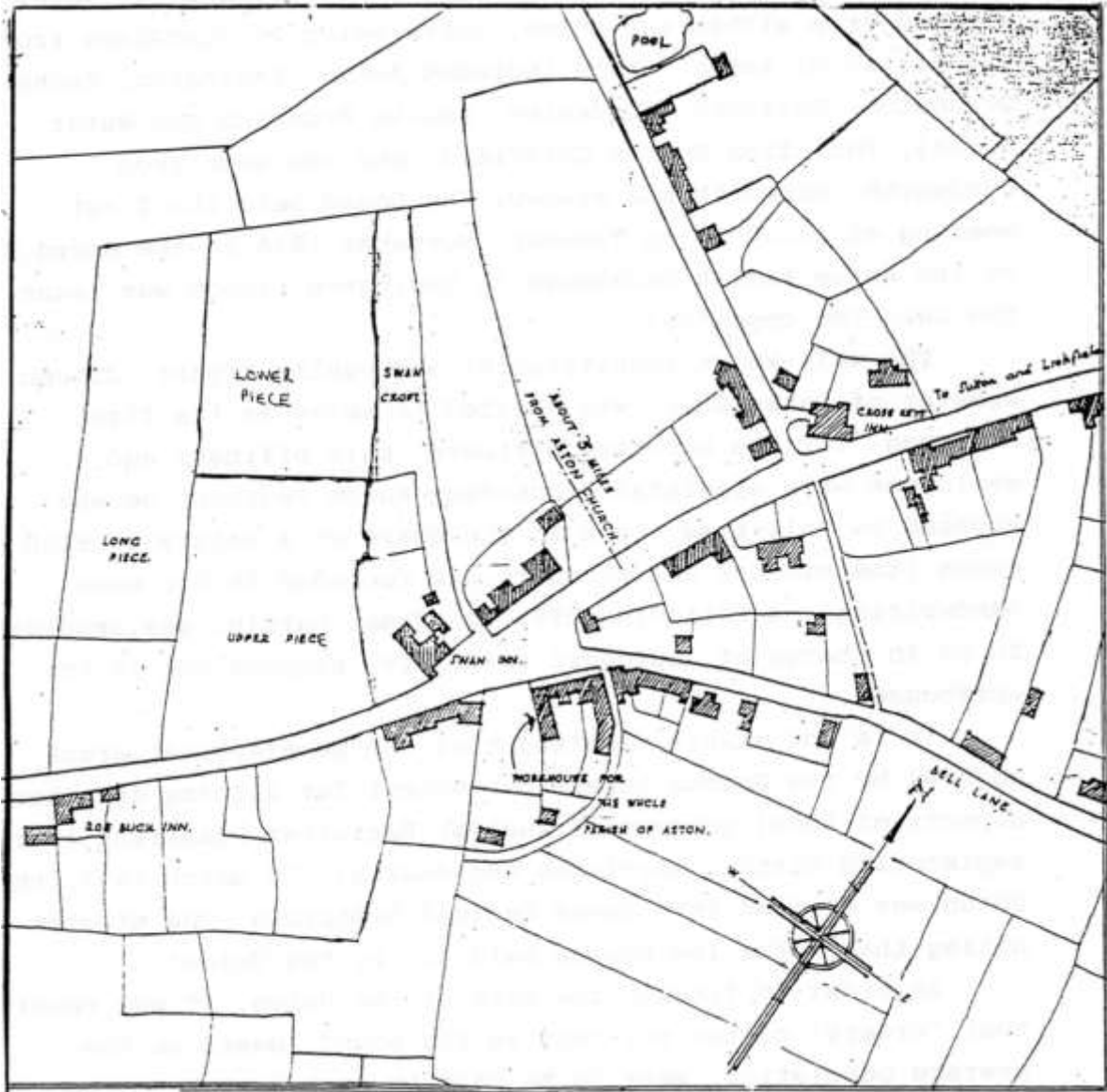


Figure 1 - Village of Erdington c. 1820

the workhouse for the parish of Aston and stood on the site now occupied by the Erdington Lending Library (see Figure 1). By all accounts, it was a rambling old building in urgent need of repair. No pictures have survived, however, it may well have been similar in design to other workhouses of the period (see Figure 2). Following a valuation of the premises, it was agreed that the Poor Law Commissioners would pay the Parish of Aston £140 per annum for its use.

The New Poor Law, required that men, women and children should be housed separately. One of the great fears of families entering the Workhouse was that they would be parted because of their segregation into seven classes:

- aged and infirm men;
- able-bodied men and youths over 13 years old;
- youths and boys, 7-13;
- aged and infirm women;
- able-bodied women and girls over 16;
- girls aged 7-16;
- all children under seven years of age.

Extensive alterations and extensions had to be made in order to make the building in Erdington 'more commodious' (6). Until it was finally abandoned in 1870, the workhouse was frequently in need of repair.

Collecting the Rates

The Aston Union was divided into districts for the purposes of collecting the rates, the Sutton district consisting of Sutton Coldfield, Minworth and Curdworth, and Wishaw.

In March 1838, the Sutton Overseers requested the Board that they should be empowered to levy a rate of five pence in the pound in order to meet the demands upon them. The Board sent a request to the Poor Law Commissioners for an order for a new valuation of Sutton Parish as they found themselves unable to obtain a fair estimate of rateable property without one (7). A percentage of the amount of rates collected was paid to collectors as remuneration. A note in the minutes of the

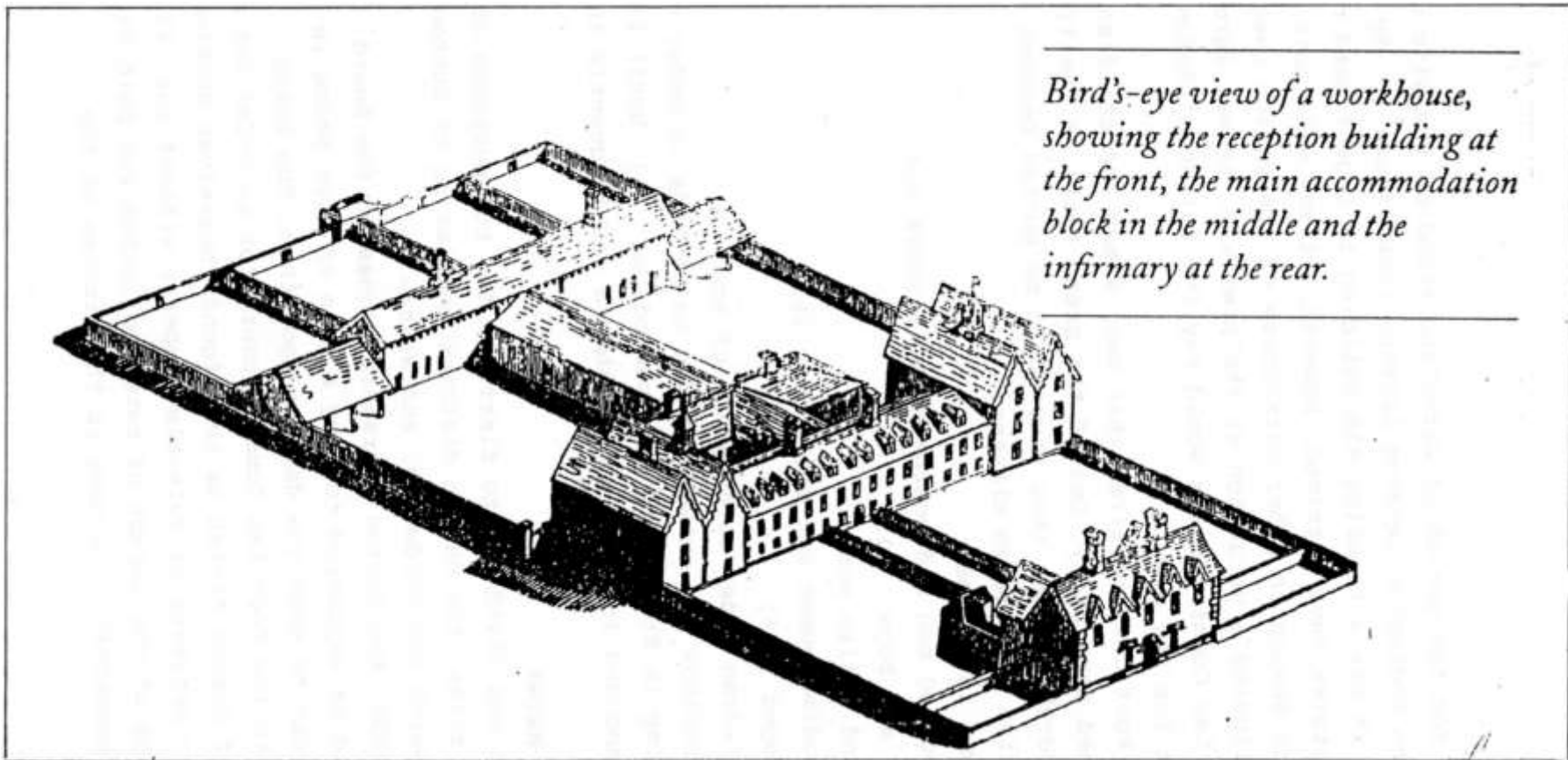


Figure 2

meeting held on 26th February 1839, records that Mr John Soden Holbeche, Sutton's first collector was paid 2½ per cent plus £5. He had been required to produce two persons to provide a joint bond of £300 as surety for the performance his office.

Evidence suggests that, despite the fact that Curdworth and Wishaw had their own collectors, the post of Rates Collector for the Sutton district was certainly no sinecure. It involved considerable time in travelling to the more remote hamlets and homesteads. Some rate payers experienced genuine financial hardship and others, as nowadays, were very reluctant to part with their cash.

As part of his duties, the Collector had to keep the rates book and other records up-to-date. The total amount of rates collected by each collector was entered in the minutes of the Aston Board of Guardians at its weekly meetings. For example, the following entry was made for 11th June 1839:

'Sutton Collector

Mr Whitworth, the Sutton Collector having £100 in hand, Resolved that the Clerk inform him that by the Commissioners' Orders every Collector must pay to the Treasurer weekly and whenever the sum in their hands shall amount to fifty pounds, all monies received on account of the respective parishes' (8).

Collectors were expected to keep meticulous accounts (9). Each ratepayer received a legal receipt which bore the corporate seal of the Aston Union. The receipts would have previously completed by the Overseer in the Rate Receipt Check Book which was then carried by the Rates Collector. He would detach a receipt from the book but, by law, could not part with it until the Rate was paid. If the check was missing, then the Collector became responsible for the sum involved.

Despite the procedures adopted to secure a steady cash flow, the various districts were frequently behind with their payments and, on several occasions, Sutton Coldfield was no exception, the minutes for 1st August 1847 noting:

'The Parish of Sutton Coldfield only having sent £20 towards the maintenance of its poor, which still leaves £155-15-0 unpaid of the precept issued on the 6th day of July last, notwithstanding, there appears by the collector's weekly return to be an arrear of £523-9-7 uncollected out of the Rate of £867-9-7' (10).

The Guardians were prepared to proceed against Sutton's Overseers to recover the amount, however, it appears that the sum in question was eventually paid in the autumn of that year.

Life in the Workhouse

The paupers' lot did not appear to improve as a result of the New Poor Law. Many who, through no fault of their own, were drawn into the 'Victorian poverty trap', suffered the indignities of poor relief because life without it was likely to be even worse.

To end up in the workhouse was a terrifying prospect for most poor people. During the 19th century, the term 'workhouse' became a misnomer. These institutions became 'poor houses' - long-term homes for the aged, the sick and orphaned children - with little prospect of productive employment. In this respect, the Aston Union workhouse was no exception.

The day-to-day running of the workhouse was under the control of a Master and Matron, Thomas and Ann Village, who were appointed by the Board in October 1838.

Work - ten hours of work was expected from all workhouse inmates, other than those with a physical disability, or those below seven years of age. The toil was unpaid and usually monotonous. The majority, especially the aged and infirm, women, children and 'defectives', were employed on ordinary household duties within the workhouse. This included nursing the sick in the workhouse hospital as there was unlikely to be any paid nursing staff.

In 1837, the Board purchased and installed a hand-cranked mill for grinding corn, capable of being operated by twelve inmates at any one time. Shortly after, a blind pauper named

William Bickley from Sutton was allegedly set to work on this very corn mill. Taking advantage of a typographical error in the printed list of paupers, in which Mr Bickley's age was recorded as being 69 (instead of 59), the Reverend W. K. Riland Bedford, Rector of Sutton (also a newspaper proprietor) seized the opportunity to make serious allegations concerning the running of the Aston Union Workhouse to the Poor Law Commissioners. On 26th June 1838, after much unpleasantness, the Aston Board of Guardians subsequently petitioned the House of Lords and was eventually fully exonerated.

Picking oakum was another of the monotonous tasks used to occupy inmates. Oakum was made by unpicking old rope, the loose fibres thus created then being used to caulk the planks of wooden ships and boats. An entry in the minutes records:

'Mr Booth having offered to purchase the whole stock of Oakum on hand at 18/- per cwt. [hundredweight = 112 lbs] and asked for an allowance of 3/- per cwt on the last he had. Resolved that Mr Booth be informed if he choose to take the whole of the stock, he may have it at 20/- per cwt. including the last lot ... ,'(11).

Apprenticeship – the minute books contain frequent entries regarding the apprenticeship of young people by the parish authorities. An apprenticeship thus recorded was recognised as being legally binding. Girls usually entered domestic service: boys were often apprenticed to learn a skilled trade.

On 7th May 1844, for example, Mr Isiah Whitehouse, a keymaker of Willenhall, applied to the Board for an apprentice and was allowed to take Thomas Evans, a parishioner of Sutton Coldfield, on a month's trial. In September of that year, Mr Joseph Barnes of the Coldfield, Sutton Coldfield applied for a servant and was allowed to take Anne Sigley on trial. Finally, on 10th December, it was noted that James Brown, aged 13, having completed three months trial, appeared before the Board with his master, Mr William Slater of Hospital Street, Birmingham. Both parties 'appearing quite satisfied with each

other', the boy was bound for eight years as an apprentice cobbler and an indenture was executed accordingly.

Outdoor Relief

The Guardians were ever vigilant that relief went only to those paupers who needed. For example, in January 1841, the Guardians were informed that James Bird had been offered 21/- per week wages by Mr Jones of Birmingham. However, Bird had refused to accept the offer, thereby causing his family to be chargeable to the parish of Sutton Coldfield. They resolved to take him before the magistrates to be dealt with under the Vagrancy Act, '...it being clear that he is able by labour to provide for his family'.

At a national level, the Poor Law Commissioners found it increasingly difficult to deal effectively with a growing number of aged, sick, infirm and orphaned children, the numbers of which had been grossly underestimated in the Report of 1834. Far from abolishing outdoor relief, this had actually increased and the Commissioners had practically abandoned hope of its prohibition.

In 1847, the Poor Law Commissioners were abolished by Act of Parliament and their duties transferred to the Poor Law Board under a Minister responsible to Parliament.

A New Workhouse: A New Union

In 1870, the Aston Union opened a new workhouse in Gravelly Hill (Highcroft). The old workhouse was closed and subsequently sold in 1876.

Later, as a result of the extension of Birmingham's city boundaries, the Aston Union was disbanded in 1912. On 1st April, the parish of Aston (and its workhouse) became part of the Birmingham Union. The parishes of Castle Bromwich, Water Orton, Minworth, Curdworth and Wishaw were all incorporated into the Meriden Union and Sutton Coldfield was welcomed as a member of the Tamworth Union (12).

References and Notes

1. Marshal, J D (1968) The Old Poor Law 1795-1834, Macmillan.
2. Webb, S and B (1910) English Poor Law Policy, Longman (reprinted 1963).
3. Oxley, G W (1974) Poor Relief in England and Wales, 1601-1834, David and Charles, Chapter 1.
4. The Select Vestry was a special committee elected to administer poor relief, set up under the Sturges Bourne Act of 1819.
5. Borough of Sutton Coldfield, Vestry Minutes, 1836. [Deposited in the Local History Dept., Sutton Coldfield Library].
6. A notice of the sale of building materials from the Old Workhouse, Erdington at the Swan Inn, Friday 6th October 1876, gives details of a range of three storey buildings 'having a frontage of 30 yards to the village', also describing accommodation for paupers, sick wards and a school building.
7. Minutes of the Aston Board of Guardians of the Poor, Vol 1, 1836- 1839, 27th March 1838. [Deposited in the DRO, Floor 7, Birmingham Central Lending Library.]
8. op cit., 11th June 1839.
9. The 19th century Rate Books can be consulted in the Local Studies section of Sutton Reference Library.
10. Aston Board of Guardians Minutes, Vol 3 [1846-47], 11th August 1847.
11. Aston Board of Guardians Minutes, Vol 2 [1842-1846], 4th July 1843.
12. Sutton Coldfield News, 9th March 1912.