

New Poor Law of 1834

The following account gives an idea of how the New Poor Law of 1834 was officially meant to work, and of public reaction to it in Stafford. The speaker makes a clear distinction between the “virtuous” poor and “paupers” whom he classes as criminals and “the refuse of society”. Among other things, the presentation is an interesting early example of spin!

On 3rd September 1836 the *Staffordshire Advertiser* reported on the visit to Stafford of Richard Earle, an Assistant Poor Law Commissioner, to address a meeting at the Shire Hall explaining the new Poor Law Amendment Act.

There was a lot of hostility in Stafford both to the Act and to the uniting of Stafford with other parishes, the latter because the existing Assistant Overseer, Mr R J Jones, was very popular. Apart from the gentry, there were at the meeting a large number of “Stafford burgesses”, “ratepayers and the neighbourhood of every class”, and Mr Earle was often heckled.

Mr Earle started off by saying he was glad to see so many present and he would now explain the Act. [“Here several Stafford burgesses loudly denounced the whole measure.”] He said he wasn’t there to defend it but to explain it – “From merely reading the act, even the most learned could not understand it.”

“Now, what were the main provisions of this act? The Commissioners were invested with the power of uniting parishes for managing the affairs connected with the poor, and for the purpose of having one or more common workhouses, and that one parish might use the workhouse belonging to one or parishes of the union.”

He went on to explain that the united parishes would be managed by a Board of Guardians voted in by rate-payers; those who paid higher rates would have more votes. “He conceived nothing more fair than for persons paying a large rate, or owning extensive property, to have more control over the expenditure of such money.” To be elected a Guardian, a man must be rated at the annual value of £20 or £25.

The paid officers would be the Clerk, the Treasurer, the Auditor, and the Relieving Officer (a full-time job) who would deal with outdoor relief. The latter would visit every parish at least once a week to pay the paupers, check up on them, hear their complaints and put their cases before the Guardians. In emergency he could call on the churchwardens and overseers for help.

Mr Earle stressed that it was untrue that all the aged and infirm were going to be forced into workhouses – they could receive relief out of the house.

Larger parishes could appoint a Collector of Rates if they wished. A workhouse would have a Master and a Matron, and if there were children in the workhouse, there would be a Schoolmaster and Schoolmistress.

The “vicious system” of charging medical assistance for poor non-paupers to

parish funds was going to be stopped. He hoped the poor would join medical clubs.

Mr Earle went on to explain some general orders to do with outdoor relief.

- they were going to abolish the practice of working men getting weekly help from the parish once they had four or five children. If the Guardians wanted to help such men, it must be in kind, not money.
- men and women employed by the parish would be paid half in kind and half in money;
- the Guardians would no longer pay rents, except for “females or aged and infirm persons”;
- anyone between 16 and 60 living at a distance from their parishes would no longer get outdoor relief except in cases of accident or sickness, or women already receiving relief.

Mr Earle said there was nothing in these orders “in the least bit oppressive even to paupers”. He stressed there was confusion between “poor” and “paupers”. A large number of “poor” people had become “paupers” and “lived on the industry of their neighbours. The new law was aimed at *paupers* not the *poor*. It would be a sad imputation on the creditable poor to suppose this act would affect them.”

The aged and infirm would be better off, and so would children “taken from the filthy receptacles in which too many of them were now found, and placed in wholesome workhouses where they would be taught some useful employment [picking oakum?] and soon be able to support themselves in independence.” “Harmless idiots” would be better off, taken care of in comfort. The few aged and infirm forced into workhouses would usually find they “had cause for gratulation”.

“As regarded the able-bodied, he for one never expected to see any of them in workhouses.” “It was very rare ... for any such persons to be in the house who were not brought there by their own misconduct. He did not say that poverty was a crime ... but he would affirm that *pauperism* was often a crime” – if a man of 30 or 40, because of “drunkenness or other bad habits”, couldn’t support himself, “he certainly was criminal”. The Act would not on the other hand be oppressive to “the virtuous poor”, “it would be an advantage to them”.

Mr Earle went on to say there was no need to build new workhouses if existing buildings could be adapted. He read out a list of parishes to be included in Stafford Union, including “Gnosall (doubtful)”.

The newspaper report says: “During the delivery of his speech, Mr Earle was frequently interrupted by loud expressions of disapprobation from the humbler class of his hearers.” When he read out the list of parishes, “deafening cries of ‘No Union,’ ‘Put it to the vote!’, ‘It’s a Whig job!’ etc. etc. were kept up for some time. [The Whigs were the forerunners of the Liberals, but surprisingly they were responsible for the Poor Law Amendment Act. They had adopted Bentham’s ideas about making utility the over-riding principle.]

Mr Earle said there was not to be a vote; the Act was going to happen anyway – he was just explaining it. “Much angry feeling ... and great uproar.” He said he would answer any questions asked “in a decorous manner”.

A shoemaker called William Hall asked, to applause, if it wasn't true that “man and wife, who happened to be poor” were separated “and cast into the workhouse”.

Earle replied that they would certainly be separated if they were able-bodied; he expected they would not be in the workhouse for long. Tradesmen had sometimes to be separated from their families: “Persons under such circumstances must put up with inconveniences.” Hall argued that that was different, it was by mutual consent.

Earle continued that it would be impossible to build workhouses to accommodate married couples. “A Voice: ‘How do soldiers do in barracks, then?’” Mr Earle would object to that too (even though it was currently allowed in some cases).

Someone else asked about provisions in the workhouse. Mr Earle said “The condition of the pauper ought certainly not to be superior to that of a person who supported himself by his own labour.” They would have “everything that was requisite”.

Shoemaker William Hall launched back in – what if he was unlucky enough to break his leg, and was forced into the workhouse with his family, would he be separated from them?

“Yes, certainly. If persons were indebted to the public for support, they must put up with some inconvenience.”

J. O. Oldham, Esq., a retired Indian judge, from Bellamoor Hall at Colton, backed him up by saying that married couples weren't allowed to be together in Infirmarys.

Hall wasn't defeated: “... the Commissioners assumed a power which God did not give. God said, ‘What God hath joined together, let no man put asunder.’ (Applause.) ‘No man had a right to undo that.’”

He carried on – were the inmates at liberty to attend any place of religious worship?

Mr Earle said: “If that were to be allowed, it was known ... that improper advantage would be taken of the permission. They would go anywhere but to church. ... they were generally the refuse of society.”

Hall was weakening – “Then, no difference is made between the good and the bad?” Earle conceded that in large workhouses, chaplains, vicars and ministers might visit. Hall asked if he would have to go into the workhouse if he was left

with half-a-dozen children, and Earle said he hoped he would be able to support himself.

Conservative Alderman Stevenson asked how the Act was working out in practice in the big cities – Manchester, Leeds, and Birmingham. Were they allowed to accept or reject it? Earle replied that it would apply to them as well. It was already in force “in Lambeth, Christchurch, Wolverhampton, Dudley and other populous places.”

Stevenson said that “he knew something of Manchester and the people there would have nothing to do with the work-house system of the new Act.” He was “perfectly astonished” at the Commissioner’s admission that the Act couldn’t be understood by reading it. “Applause.” Earle said that was often that case.

During a lull, “the workmen present” were heard exclaiming at the “indifference of the ‘gentlemen’ to the cause of the poor man” – “What! Will nobody else say a word for us?”

Charles Flint, the Town Clerk and a solicitor, then interrogated Mr Earle on why the new Act was necessary for Stafford which had managed its poor so well in the past, and the extent of the Commissioners’ and Guardians’ powers. He asked what would happen if the Guardians refused to act, and was told that Guardians would be sent in from other parishes.

Mr Passman, another solicitor, asked about two recent cases of bastardy involving “great hardship” under the new law. Mr Earle at first dodged the question, and then had a private conversation with him.

And that was more or less the end of the meeting. The newspaper commented that Mr Earle had “acted with great courtesy and good humour”.

It seems clear that the Stafford objectors were not yet aware that in addition to couples being separated, children would be taken from their mothers, which happened on many occasions locally. The new law met a furious response nationwide, including Charles Dickens’s “Oliver Twist” and Fanny Trollope’s novel “Jessie Phillips”.

The original newspaper article can be read online at the British Newspaper Archive; there is a fee.