

THE  
NATIONAL  
ARCHIVES

## A 'right' to relief?

In what ways did paupers hold the Poor Law to account?



Key Stage 4 - 5 | Victorians 1800 - 1900

Lesson pack

# Paupers and the Poor Law

It has previously been assumed that paupers themselves had little knowledge nor understanding of the legislation governed their position, yet letters sent to the poor law commission from across England and Wales challenge this notion. In fact there is evidence that paupers were frequently writing to contest the way that they were being treated, complain about actions of their Guardians and in some instances even quoted specific parts of legislation in an attempt to change their lives.

The legal terminology contained in the letters written by the poor, and the inferences that historians can make from this is a fascinating challenge to students of both History and Law related subjects. This resource aims to demonstrate, through a selection of letters and accompanying tasks, how paupers were active in exercising what they believe to be their 'right to relief' and were in fact agents who held the Poor Law to account.

## Suitable for:

KS 4 - 5

## Time period:

Victorian / Industrial  
1800 - 1900

## Connections to the Curriculum:

Rule of Law; purpose and nature of law making in Britain

Britain as the first industrial nation

Poor Law development from the Elizabethan period

## Learning Objectives:

To read extracts from the 1834 Poor Law and 1847 General Order in order to investigate the ambiguity of its wording.

To read letters written by the Victorian poor in order to analyse how paupers held their superiors to account using an understanding of poor law legislation.

To study specific examples of law specific vocabulary to challenge traditional assumptions that paupers had little knowledge of their position in society and their 'rights'.

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## Background

After the passing of the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act, the Poor Law Commissioners in London were tasked with implementing changes how poor relief was administered across England and Wales. However, discrepancies between poor law unions grew more apparent over time, meaning the experiences of paupers and the operation of the New Poor Law might have varied hugely depending upon the area one resided in.

Attempts were made to regulate the implementation of the New Poor Law via orders and circular letters that were sent to individual unions, collections of unions and indeed all unions, from the Centre. Some of were sent as directions – “what local unions should do” – and some were sent as permissions – “what local union could do” – should they wish. Knowledge of such regulations (of both types) quickly began to specify the day-to-day operations of out-relief as well as the conditions that should be set down for the workhouse inmate. Thus many paupers built up a picture of their “rights” under the law. In their letters to the Centre paupers and the wider poor complained about their treatment, and how it did not match what they believed was their entitlement, often referencing the Poor Law despite its often ambiguous phrasing. From this we learn that paupers were not oblivious to their position and became more vocal in challenging what they believed were social injustices.

## Teacher's Notes

This resource is designed to enable students to explore the concepts of rights, accountability, and agency in relation to paupers and the wider poor and their dealings with poor law officials and agencies in nineteenth century England and Wales under the New Poor Law.

Students will investigate extracts of the Poor Law Amendment Act to understand that paupers had few "rights" in law. The letters from paupers themselves encourage students to explore the way in which paupers used the law (and legal terminology) to hold local union officials to account for what they believed were injustices in their treatment or condition.

The accompanying questions are purposely explorative and open ended. Students will hopefully come to realise the extent to which paupers were aware of their position, and how they "should" be treated. The surprising use of legal terminology by those who are often assumed to be illiterate or "unintelligent of law" will challenge such assumptions. These letters, which illustrate how paupers were active in challenging the actions of poor law officialdom, demonstrates an agency that is often not revealed in other sources.

How teachers should use the resources in the classroom is not prescriptive. For upper key stage 4 students, teachers may wish to have students work in larger groups to investigate the sources. Alternatively older students would likely benefit from exploring the law in pairs or small groups before using this to interpret the letters.

## Glossary

**Ambiguous:**

open to more than one interpretation and not having one obvious meaning.

**Arbitrary:**

random, not based on any reason or system (letter 3)

OR

limitless use of authority (letter 6)

**Circumtext:**

the writing associated with pauper letters- usually notes written by officials within the Centre when suggesting responses. Note that the contents of the circumtext would never have been viewed by the letter sender – although some wording used as suggested responses can be seen in the office copy of such a response.

**“Hold to account”:**

requiring explanation of, or acceptance of, responsibility for actions.

**Liberty:**

being free from restrictions by authority on how a person lives.

**Rights:**

a moral or legal entitlement to have or do something. In the case of these letters moral rights as used to extend the definition within legal rights.

**Satire:**

using humour, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and/or criticize.

Extracts from the Poor Law Amendment Act 1834

## Notes

### Explanatory notes:

These selected extracts are designed to show the phraseology and scope of the Poor Law Amendment Act 1834 as it was published, (it is not the Act in full). Some extracts have been edited to provide accessibility but where possible the language and structure have been maintained. Teachers/students could use these extracts in many ways however the prompts below are some areas to consider. The extracts could work alongside or prior to students engaging with the pauper letters.

### Archival note:

Where letters/words were indecipherable we have used ----- as the convention to show that such words are present in the original text.

## Poor Law Amendment Act - Activities

The following pages are sections from The Poor Law Amendment Act 1834. They can be printed and provided to students as worksheets.

1. Identify the following phrases in section 15:

- "as they shall see occasion"
- "interfere in any individual case"

These words are examples of ambiguity in the Poor Law Amendment Act; what does the Act mean by "occasion"? And what constitutes "interfering"?

- a. In the other sections, identify more examples of ambiguous language and/or guidance.
- b. Guardians were tasked with implementing the new Poor Law in their local union. What problems can you envisage (predict) from the lack of specific direction about how to implement the New Poor Law?

2. What "rights" do paupers have in these extracts? Make a list of all the "rights" you identify.
3. Using these extracts, suggest the extent to which you think paupers had a legal "right" to relief?

## MH12 Letters - Activities

The following pages are pauper letters from our MH12 collection. They can be printed and provided to students as worksheets. Explore the letters and consider the following questions:

1. Did paupers have any "right" to relief? If yes, how so?
2. How did paupers hold their guardians to account? Can you find examples of paupers that complain about their treatment in comparison to expectations according to the Poor Law Amendment Act?
3. How far do you agree that paupers held the poor law to account? Did you expect this to be the case when you began this enquiry?
4. Study today's benefits system. Can you find specific legislation that governs entitlement and provision of support for those on low incomes in today's society? (for instance the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016)

## The Poor Law Amendment Act - Section 15

And be it further enacted, That from and after the passing of this Act the Administration of Relief to the Poor throughout England and Wales, ... shall be subject to the Direction and Control of the said Commissioners; and for executing the Powers given to them by this Act the said Commissioners shall and are hereby authorized and required, from Time to Time as they shall see Occasion, to make and issue all such Rules, Orders, and Regulations for the Management of the Poor, ...and for carrying this Act into execution in all other respects as they shall think proper; and the said Commissioners may, at their Discretion, from Time to Time suspend, alter, or rescind such Rules, Orders, and Regulations, or any of them; Provided always, that nothing in this Act contained shall be construed as enabling the said Commissioners or any of them to interfere in any individual Case for the Purpose of ordering Relief.

Summary:  
Commissioners make and control the regulations regarding administration of poor relief.

## The Poor Law Amendment Act - Section 19

And be it further enacted, That no Rules, Orders, or Regulations of the said Commissioners, nor any Bye Laws at present in force or to be hereafter made, shall oblige any Inmate of any Workhouse to attend any Religious Service which may be celebrated in a Mode contrary to the Religious Principles of such Inmate, nor shall authorize the Education of any Child in such Workhouse in any Religious Creed other than that professed by the Parents or surviving Parent of such Child, and to which such Parents or Parent shall object, or, in the Case of an Orphan, to which the Godfather or Godmother of such Orphan shall so object: Provided also, that it shall and may be lawful for any licensed Minister of the Religious Persuasion of any Inmate of such Workhouse, at all Times in the Day, on the Request of such Inmate, to visit such Workhouse for the Purpose of affording Religious Assistance to such Inmate, and also for the Purpose of instructing his Child or Children in the Principles of their Religion.

Summary:  
No person in a workhouse can be forced to attend a religious service that contradicts (goes against) their own religious beliefs.

## The Poor Law Amendment Act - Section 27

Summary: Justices (judges) have the power to order the provision of outdoor relief to those unable to work due to infirmity or old age.

And be it further enacted, That in any Union which may be formed under this Act it shall be lawful for any Two of His Majesty's Justices of the Peace usually acting for the District wherein such Union may be situated, at their just and proper Discretion, to direct by Order under their Hands and Seals, that Relief shall be given to any adult Person who shall from Old Age or Infirmity of Body be wholly unable to work, without requiring that such Person shall reside in any Workhouse: Provided always, that One of such Justices shall certify in such Order of his own Knowledge, that such Person is wholly unable to work, as aforesaid; and provided further, that such Person shall be lawfully entitled to Relief in such Union, and shall desire to receive the same out of a Workhouse.

## The Poor Law Amendment Act - Section 45

Summary: insane persons, lunatics and dangerous Idiots cannot remain in the workhouse for longer than 14 days.

And be it further enacted, That nothing in this Act contained shall authorize the Detention in any Workhouse of any dangerous Lunatic, insane Person, or Idiot, for any longer Period than Fourteen Days; and every Person wilfully detaining in any Workhouse any such Lunatic, insane Person, or Idiot, for more than Fourteen Days, shall be deemed guilty of a Misdemeanor: Provided always, that nothing herein contained shall extend to any Place duly licensed for the Reception of Lunatics and other insane Persons, or to any Workhouse being also a County Lunatic Asylum

## The Poor Law Amendment Act - Section 52

'And whereas a Practice has obtained of giving Relief to Persons or their Families who, at the Time of applying for or receiving such Relief, were wholly or partially in the Employment of Individuals, and the Relief of the able-bodied and their Families is in many Places administered in Modes productive of Evil in other respects: And whereas Difficulty may arise in case any immediate and universal Remedy is attempted to be applied in the Matters aforesaid;' be it further enacted, That from and after the passing of this Act it shall be lawful for the said Commissioners, by such Rules, Orders, or Regulations as they may think fit, to declare to what Extent and for what Period the Relief to be given to able-bodied Persons or to their Families in any particular Parish or Union may be administered out of the Workhouse of such Parish or Union, by Payments in Money, or with Food or Clothing in Kind, or partly in Kind and partly in Money, and in what Proportions, to what Persons or Class of Persons, at what Times and Places, on what Conditions, and in what Manner such Out-door Relief may be afforded:

...upon Consideration of the special Circumstances of such Parish or Union, or of any Person or Class of Persons therein, be of Opinion that the Application and enforcing of such Orders or Regulations, or of any Part thereof, at the Time or in the Manner prescribed by the said Commissioners, would be inexpedient, it shall be lawful for such Overseers or Guardians to delay the Operation of such Orders or Regulations, or of any Part thereof, for any Period not exceeding the Space of Thirty Days, to be reckoned from the Day of the Receipt of such Orders or Regulations; and such Overseers or Guardians shall, Twenty Days at the least before the Expiration of such Thirty Days, make a Statement and Report of such special Circumstances to the said Commissioners; and all Relief which shall be given by such Overseers or Guardians.

Summary:

The extent of outdoor relief to be given to able-bodied paupers and their families is dictated by commissioners. Any relief that does not fall within these guidelines is not to be given unless overseers deem special circumstances, in which case a report must be submitted to the commissioners.

## The Poor Law Amendment Act - Section 92

Summary:  
Any person bringing spiritous or fermented liquor (alcohol) into the workhouse is subject to punishment.

And be it further enacted, That if any Person shall carry, bring, or introduce, or attempt or endeavour to carry, bring, or introduce, into any Workhouse now or hereafter to be established, any spirituous or fermented Liquor without the Order in Writing of the Master of such Workhouse, it shall be lawful for the Master of such Workhouse, or any Officer of the same acting under his Direction, to apprehend or cause to be apprehended such Offender, and to carry him or her before a Justice of the Peace, who is hereby empowered to hear and determine such Offence in a summary Way; and upon Conviction thereof the Party so offending shall forfeit and pay any Sum of Money not exceeding Ten Pounds for every such Offence, as such Justice may direct; and in default of Payment of the Penalty hereby imposed such Justice may and is hereby required to commit such Offender to the Common Gaol or House of Correction for the District in which such Workhouse shall be situate for any Space of Time not exceeding Two Calendar Months, unless such Penalty shall be sooner paid.

## The Poor Law Amendment Act - Section 93

Summary:  
There is a penalty for masters allowing liquor in the workhouse, except for their own consumption. There is also a penalty for masters who mistreat inmates.

And be it further enacted, That if any Master of a Workhouse shall order any spirituous or fermented Liquor to be carried, brought, or introduced into any Workhouse, except for the domestic Use of himself or of any Officer of the said Workhouse, or their respective Families, or except by and under the written Authority of the Surgeon of such Workhouse, or of any Justice visiting the same, or of the Guardians of such Workhouse, or in conformity with any Rules, Orders, or Regulations of the said Commissioners;

... or shall punish with any corporal Punishment any adult Person in such Workhouse, or confine any such Person for any Offence or Misbehaviour for any longer Space of Time than Twenty-four Hours, or such further Space of Time as may be necessary in order to have such Person carried before a Justice of the Peace; or shall in any way abuse or ill-treat, or be guilty of any other Misbehaviour, or otherwise misconduct himself towards or with respect to any poor Person in such Workhouse; every such Master or Officer of a Workhouse so offending shall ... forfeit and pay such Sum of Money, not being more than Twenty Pounds, as such Justices may direct; and in default of Payment of the Penalty ...are hereby required to commit such Offender to the Common Gaol or House of Correction for the District in which such Workhouse shall be situate for any Space of Time not exceeding Six Calendar Months, unless such Penalty shall be sooner paid.

## Letter one - Thomas Henshaw

Catalogue Ref: MH 12/9232/46

Whiston February 5 - 1847  
 1356 B.  
 3311 P.  
 141  
 RECEIVED  
 P.L.C.  
 FEB. 7  
 1847

Gentlemen, I beg leave most humbly to submit  
 my case to you for your consideration and pray that  
 you will regard me ~~that~~ <sup>as</sup> ~~in~~ <sup>my</sup> most  
 distressing case - I am a poor Man by trade a Frame  
 work-miller and have been for a length of time nearly out  
 employment and now entirely so - I have a wife and 3  
 children and we have been completely destitute of food since  
 February the 1<sup>st</sup> to the present time - I applied on the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the  
 relieving officer, <sup>Mr. Storer</sup> for relief as an order to the union workhouse  
 and he refused to do either - I then applied Mr. W. Bennett  
 assistant overseer and he refused likewise. I then applied to Mr. Radford  
 a Magistrate at Smalley who sent a positive order to Mr  
 Bennett <sup>to</sup> ~~see~~ <sup>to</sup> my case as I was destitute, according to the  
 5<sup>th</sup> clause in the poor law amendment Bill, but still he  
 refuses to allow me any thing so that we may lie and  
 die in a land of plenty - Tho I saw a circular sometime  
 ago from Mr. Chadwick clerk to the poor law commissioners  
 stating you would hold officers responsible for any usual con-  
 =equence arising out of such neglect - Gentlemen I submit my  
 case to you and hope you will regard me that assistance as speedily  
 as possible my case needs need will oblige your Humble servant  
 Thomas Henshaw

# Letter one - Thomas Henshaw

Catalogue Ref: MH 12/9232/46

**Date of letter:** 5 February 1842. **Poor Law Union:** Basford Poor Law Union

Ilkeston February 5 1842

Gentleman,

I beg leave most humbly to submit my case to you for your consideration and pray that you will afford me that redress in my most distressing case - I am a poor Man by trade A Frame worknitter and have been for A length of time nearly out of employment and now entirely so, - I have A wife and 3 children and we have been completely destitute of food since February the 1st to the present time - I applied on the 3rd to the relieving officer, ^Mr Stotten^ for relief or an order to the union workhouse and he refused to do either - I then aplied to Mr Bennett assistant overseer and he refused likewise. I then applied to Mr Radford[?] A Magistrate at Smalley who sent A positive order to Mr Bennett ^to^ see to my case as I was destitute, according to the 54 clause in the poor law amendment Bill, but still he refuses to allow me anything so that we may live and die in A land of plenty - tho I saw A circular sometime ago from Mr Chadwick clark to the poor law commissioners stating you would hold officers responsible for any bad[?] consequence arising out of such neglect - Gentlemen I submit my case to you and hope you will aford me that asistance as Speedy as possible my case needs wich will oblige your Humble Servant.

Thomas Henshaw.

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## Contracted section 54 of Poor Law Amendment Act referred to by Henshaw

54. And be it further enacted, That from and after the passing of the Act, the ordering, giving, and directing of all Relief to the Poor of any Parish which, according to the Provisions of the said recited Acts... shall appertain and belong exclusively to such Guardians of the Poor or of any Select Vestry, according to the respective Provisions of the Acts under which such Guardians or Select Vestry may have been or shall be appointed; and it shall not be lawful for any Overseer of the Poor to give any further or other Relief or Allowance from the Poor Rate than such as shall be ordered by such Guardians or Select Vestry, except in Cases of sudden and urgent Necessity, but not in Money, and he is hereby required to give such temporary Relief as each case shall require, in Article of absolute Necessity, but not in Money, and whether the Applicant for Relief be settled in the Pareish where he shall apply for Relief or not.

1. Read the extract from Section 54 of the Poor Law Amendment Act and the letter whereby Thomas Henshaw quotes this particular section. How has Henshaw used the law to hold those in authority to account? Is his a valid claim?

2. Can you find where Henshaw refers to his "case"? Consider this use of quasi (semi) legal terminology. What impact do you think it might have had?

# Letter two - William Jackson

Catalogue Ref: MH 12/6846

Received of the  
 Bishop of Exeter  
 259  
 Workhouse, Exeter  
 Feb 11 1854  
 5820  
 52  
 1854  
 I hope you will be  
 kind enough to pardon me  
 in copying my case before you  
 I am a Pensioner of the 19<sup>th</sup>  
 Regt at S. J. Dinm.  
 I have been an inmate of  
 this Establishment since  
 May 16<sup>th</sup> 1853. and on the  
 3<sup>rd</sup> of this month their was  
 10 months Pension due to me  
 6 months have been paid  
 at Regents Park Barracks  
 the Remainder at Tower  
 Hill, the whole of which  
 has been kept by the  
 Master of the House

for my keep. I beg most  
 humbly to say gentlemen  
 I have seen many Pensioners  
 paid, who have been accom-  
 panied by the Relievers,  
 overboard and they have  
 handed to them 10/- or 15/-  
 for their months keep, as to the  
 number of days in the month  
 I have always been told  
 by the Military Authorities  
 6/- per diem was all that  
 wold be kept for a Pensioner  
 food. I beg most respectfully  
 to say I want to get into  
 Chelsea College and I have  
 not the means of living for  
 a few weeks nor am I able  
 to walk from S. J. Dinm.

I should be allowed to take  
 air & Exercise with Catches  
 and be allowed 9 or 10 weeks  
 for my little necessities I  
 might want. Gentlemen  
 I have most humbly to beg  
 you will be kind enough  
 to see that I have the  
 Balance that is due to me.  
 I beg that I should be in-  
 formed to go into Chelsea  
 Gentlemen its hard after  
 having crossed my country  
 in the Unhealthy Climate  
 of the West Indies to be  
 kept from my rights  
 I am Gentlemen  
 the Right Hon. your most Obedient  
 Poor Law  
 Commissioner  
 William Jackson  
 No. 17 West

## Letter two - William Jackson

Catalogue Ref: MH 12/6846

**Date of letter:** 11 February 1854. **Poor Law Union:** Bethnal Green Poor Law Union

Bethnal Green

Workhouse Infirmary

Feby 11 1854

Gentlemen

I hope you will be Kind enough to pardon me in laying my case before you I am a Pensioner of the 19th Regt. at 8d. Pr Diem.

I have been an inmate of this Establishment since May 16th 1853 – and on the 3rd of this month their was 18 months Pension due to me 6 months have been Paid at Regents Park Barracks the Remainder at Tower Hill, The Whole of wich has been Kept by the master of the House for my Keep, I beg most humbly to say Gentlemen I have seen many Pensions paid, who have been accompanied by the Relieveing Overseers and they have handed to them 15/- or 15/6 fr their months Keep, as to the numbear of days in the month I have allways been told by The millitary authorities 6d Pr Diem was all that could be Kept for Pensioners food. I beg most Respectfully to say I want to get into Chelsea Colledge and I have not the means of liveing for a few weeks nor am I able to work from bad legs. I should be allowed to take air & Exercise with Crutches and be allowed 9d P week for any little necessaries I might want. Gentlemen I have most humbly to beg you will be Kind enough to see that I have the Ballance thats due to me Paid as I then should be in a Position to go into Chelsea Gentlemen its hard after having served my Country in the Unhealthy Climate of the West Indies to be Kept from my rights

I am Gentlemen

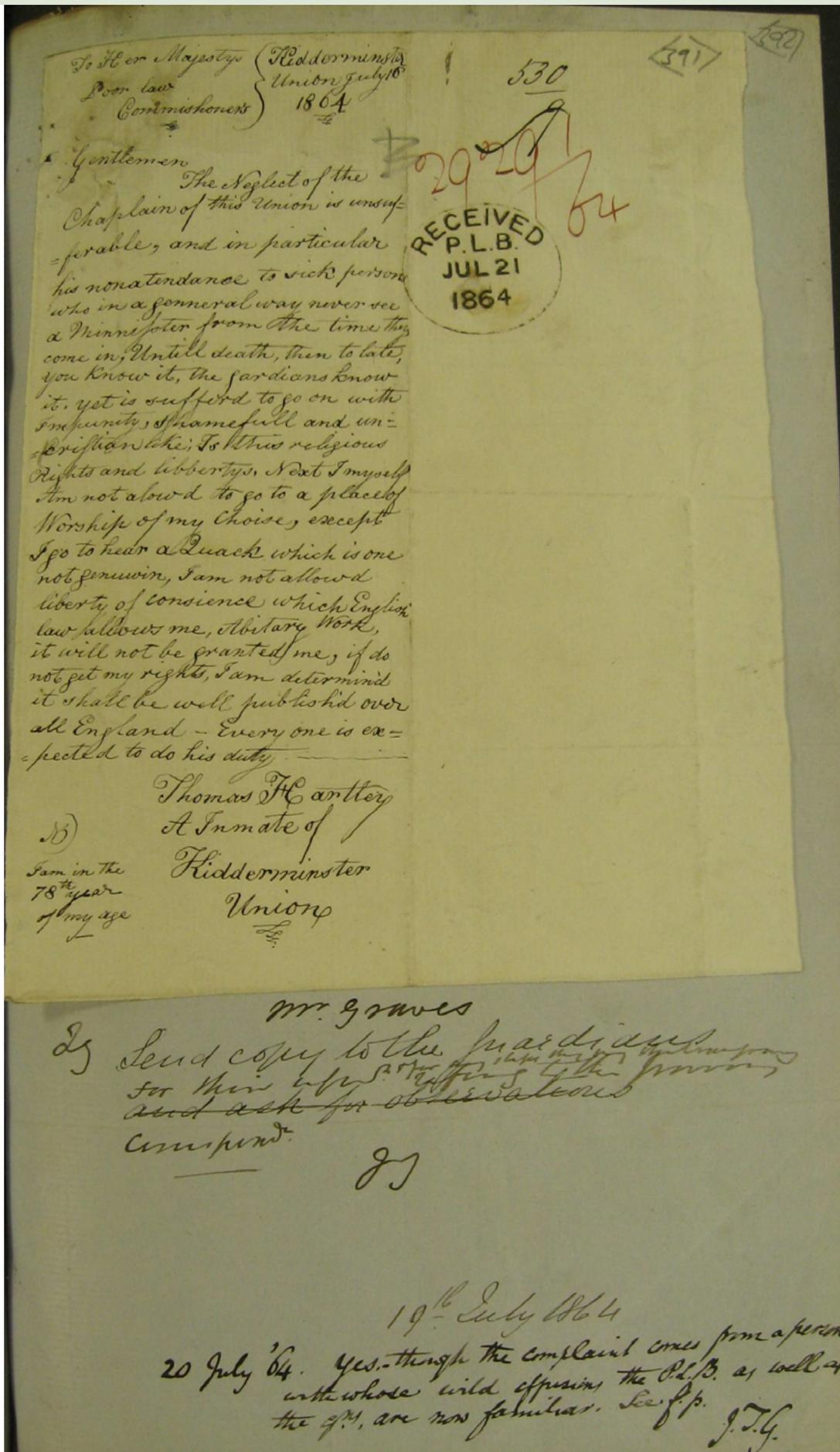
your Most Obedient Humble Servant

William Jackson

1. What do you think William Jackson means when he refers to “having served my country in the Unhealthy Climate of the West Indies”? Why do you think he writes about this?

2. What does Jackson believe to be his “rights”? What is he requesting from the commissioners?

Letter three - Thomas Hartley  
Catalogue Ref: MH 12/14023/277



# Letter three - Thomas Hartley

Catalogue Ref: MH 12/14023/277

**Date of letter:** 16 July 1864. **Poor Law Union:** Kidderminster Poor Law Union

CIRCUMTEXT:

Mr Graves Send copy to the Guardians for their views ----- any ----- they say ---- ----- to the ----- and ask for observations [correspond] JG 19th July 1864

20 July '64. Yes. – though the complaint comes from a person with whose wild [opinions] the P.L.B. as well as the gdns. are now familiar. See.[J].p. JTG

TEXT:

To Her Majestys Poor Law Commissioners {Kidderminster Union July 16 1864}

Gentlemen

The Neglect of the Chaplain of this Union is unsufferable, and in particular his nonattendance to sick persons who in a general way never see a Minister from the time they come in, Untill death, then to late, you know it, the guardians know it. yet is suffered to go on with impunity, shamefull and unchristian like; Is this religious Rights and libbertys, Next I myself Am not allowed to go to a place of Worship of my Choise, except I go to hear a Quack which is one not genuwin, I am not allowed liberty of consience which English law allows me, Arbitary Work, it will not be granted me, if do not get my rights, I am determined it shall be well published over all England – Everyone is expected to do his duty

Thomas Hartley

A Inmate of Kidderminster Union

NB) I am in the 78th year of my age

1. Highlight where Hartley uses this legal terminology:

- rights
- liberty
- English law
- arbitrary
- duty.

Discuss the impact of this choice of language.

2. Towards the end of his letter Hartley uses satire to make a point about those in authority. Identify where he uses satire and consider what impact this might have had on the reader.

3. Would you have expected this level of satire from paupers? Why/why not? (consider the risks of writing such statements).



# Letter four - Brutus Lloyd

Catalogue Ref: MH 12/16556

**Date of letter:** April 1876. **Poor Law Union:** Llanfyllin Poor Law Union

CIRCUMTEXT:

Mr Murray Brown AB 13 Apl /76

I have retained the pp until I visited the Workh. which I did to-day. Brutus Lloyd is not, & was not at the date of the letter an inmate of the Workhouse: nor as I am informed is he in receipt of out-relief. It is clear from the previous pp that no reliance can be placed on anything he says.

TEXT:

gentleman I am obliged to trouble you xxxx again. I can get no fair play I have no friend & no money nor helth if you will not [fit] me... I had medicine from a dauctor in llanfair and said I was not fit to work doctor Jones from llanfyllin says I must be cuired before I can work and sent a note to the board to tell them so I am begging of you to save my life by gending<sup>1</sup> a doc[ter] to examin me and then you will no the truthe I am an o[ut] door patient to thee infirm[ary] but I cant attend I ask the gardians to alow me food and medicine to give me some ch[ance] to get well to work for my own living but the bear all to the house doctor our master no gentleman ne[ver] came near the place the as got such a low name he can turn the gardians any way but I think it would be very wise of them to take the trouble to find him out and not punish us poor people as I am suffering from bad dises is it the law for me to have no hope but to die a lingering death when others doctors say with a little food and medicine I could me curied me starving and this master living of on the best of the land and making money from the parish and being a secretary to a club if not two I dont think it is fair to alow him bet me beg of you to do something for me

I am from one place to the other trying to get a bit of breathe to keep me alive but I am trusting you will attent to my case and I will go the next board at the Llanfylling union to meet the [board]

Brutus Lloyd

---

<sup>1</sup> Error for "sending"?

1. Lloyd refers to his situation as a "case". He considers this a legal proceeding when he asks "is it the law for me to have no hope but to die a lingering death". What impression of paupers do you get from this letter?

2. Are you sympathetic to Lloyd? Why/Why not?

3. Read the Circumtext carefully. To what extent do the Guardians/commissioners show sympathy?



## Letter five - Charles Leonard

Catalogue Ref: MH 12/6078

**Date of letter:** 13 November 1886. **Poor Law Union:** Manchester Poor Law Union

6 Paradise Hill, Nov 13th 1886. Manchester Board of Guardians

Sir

Your letter of the 15th Oct. 1886 notwithstanding the somewhat lengthy letters sent you on this subject your reply is very unsatisfactory. Before I proceed further allow me to cite as follows

The Poor Law, by T.W. Fowle MA

Rector of Islip

London 1881. Macmillan Publisher

(no of Book in the Manchester Reference Library is 519.C11)

The [errors] and ----- displayed by certain members of this Board including their clerk I fear has influenced your consideration of my case However there is ample scope for an impartial investigation into the merits of the matter and hope it is not too late for this to be done. Since I wrote you last I have been out, and am still – of employment – As a matter of necessity I must again apply for relief at the hands of the Board. Of course, I should wish to be legally dealt with – Your Board is the only protection paupers have, and when a pauper appeals it is a pity in fact a Wrong that by any concerted action of the Guardians “trimmed” by the Clerk that any act of injustice or illegality should be “shelved” or left void of a legal remedy.

It is to your province that this lies.

I shall be glad to hear from you again of course the routine of your Board is of a protracted character. However your reply as early as your system permits will oblige

Sir

Yours truly

Chas Leonard

1. This letter reveals a great deal about how the poor were able to access the law in detail and use it to hold their guardians to account. Which book does Charles Leonard reference? Where did he get hold of this book?

2. It was more common than might be expected for paupers to become aware of detailed aspects of the Poor Law. Discuss other ways paupers might have been able to source such information.



## Letter six - John Joseph Macdonald

Catalogue Ref: MH 12/6010

**Date of letter:** 30 September 1893. **Poor Law Union:** Liverpool Poor Law Vestry

CIRCUMTEXT: [contains numerous references to previous correspondence between Guardians and Poor Law Commissioners in regards to inmates and postage stamps/letters to try to establish any past precedent in similar incidents]

TEXT:

O. I. Division Liverpool Workhouse. Brownlow Hill. The President of the Local Government Board

Sir

I beg leave deferentially to submit for your grave consideration and presidential decision, a grievance fraught me with feelings of pain and indignation, the irrepressible outcome of right invaded by dominant wrong, which I in common with the pauper population of this Workhouse, suffer under. My plaint is that the official personnel of this institution are, in my opinion acting ultra vires<sup>1</sup> and contravening not only the Orders and Regulations but the generous mild and beneficial spirit of the Poor Law as embodied and represented by the Local Government Board, in arrogating to themselves the power to demand and enforce obedience to the behest that I – and the inmates generally...-must, immediately on delivery, open my letter or letters for official inspection when any stamp which they may contain are abstracted and are either confiscated or withheld from the owner while an inmate of the Workhouse. Now Sir, against a mode of procedure so high-handed as his is; invasive and deprivative as it is of the right – unless it can be, conclusively demonstrated that Workhouse paupers have no just claims of privileges whatever – which I deem sacred, i.e. to have and to hold free from official control and interference, the means in the shape of a little money or postage stamps, for epistolary communication with my friends and kindred in the outside world, I take leave to record my strong and emphatic protest and appeal to your high sense of Justice to redress the wrong and abuse of official authority to which when reasonable and not arbitrary I have ever yielded a ready and willing obedience. Regretting my trespass upon your valuable time.

I am, Sir your obedient servant

John Joseph Macdonald. Pauper inmate of the Liverpool Workhouse

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<sup>1</sup> Beyond the scope of given power

1. How many references does Macdonald make to his "rights" in this letter? What particular "right" is he most concerned the guardians in his Union are not upholding?

2. How far do you agree that MacDonald has a valid complaint? Notice how the commissioners have attempted to use precedent (past decisions) to make a decision about MacDonald. Judges today use precedent all the time when deciding the outcomes of cases; how far does this demonstrate a law-based approach to poor relief?