	Pauper Voices – Bonus Episode	THE
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Pauper Voices

It's often impossible to find direct accounts of poor people in the historical record, especially the further back you look. But an extraordinary collection containing thousands of letters written by people in poverty between 1834 and 1900 provides an insight into their lives.

In this episode, Chloe Lee speaks to specialist Paul Carter about letters held by The National Archives which were addressed to the Poor Law Board, the British central poor law authority.

Together they use these accounts to glimpse into the factories, the workhouses, and slums in which so many vulnerable people lived out their lives.

This podcast is based on the research In Their Own Write, a major AHRC-funded project, running from 2018 to 2021, which uses letters from paupers and other poor people, and associated manuscript material such as petitions, sworn statements and advocate letters (those written on behalf of paupers) to investigate the lives of the poor between 1834 and 1900. The Project was led by Professor Steve King (Nottingham Trent University) and Dr Paul Carter, (The National Archives).

Documents from The National Archives used in this episode: MH12/775, MH 12/9232/46, MH12/13673.

For more information about the records covered in this episode, look at our research guide to Poverty and the Poor Laws and Workhouse inmates and staff. For help navigating our catalogue, you can watch our top-level tips on using Discovery.

Listeners, we need your help to make this podcast better! We need to know a bit more about you and what themes you're interested in. You can share this information with us by visiting smartsurvey.co.uk/s/ontherecord/.

Transcript

Reader: "after trying it I had rheumatic pains and when I could not work, the summoner [workhouse official] sent [me] to prison for hard labour for twenty one days. .... [For] the pauper allowance [food allowance] I am letting your honour knows, I got always a pint of tea, pound and half potatoes for breakfast, for dinner three gills [measures] of skilly [thin porridge or soup] for supper six and a half ounces of bread."

Chloe Lee: You're listening to a letter written in 1858 by John Hankison, who was struggling with ill health, starvation — and being worked to the bone. His letter was a plea for help.

Reader: "For infirm [sick] men 7 ounces of sugar in the week and an ounce tea, 5 ounces of butter. This allowance we do not get, I can prove to it since Mr Lloyd died. Paupers are used with all cruelty".

Chloe: This is On the Record at The National Archives, uncovering the past through stories of everyday people.

I'm Chloe Lee, a Migration and Citizenship Researcher at The National Archives.
In this episode of On the Record, I'm being guided through an extraordinary collection of letters, by my colleague Paul Carter. Welcome, Paul!

Paul Carter:
Hello, and thanks for thanks for having me.

Chloe: Great to have you in the studio today. So Paul, honesty as the best policy: my knowledge of the Victorian poor is limited to pretty much Charles Dickens. And even that may be The Muppets Christmas Carol. So I'm really grateful to you for spending the time today to talk to me and share your insight. Yourself and your colleagues have been working through a unique stack of letters and testimonies that we hold here at The National Archives in Kew. And this project has taken years, the records are known as the poor law union correspondence, researchers have discovered that this collection offers a unique perspective on how those living in poverty felt about their circumstances, and what they did to try and change them.

Direct accounts from people experiencing poverty can be rare in the historical record, especially the further back you look, so to have this archive of 1000s of letters, written by some of the most vulnerable Victorians is really incredibly useful. These letters help us to understand their lives and reflect on where we are today.

Paul, before we share another one of those letters and delve into the history in a bit more detail. Can you clarify what the difference is between a person that's poor and what's called a 'pauper'?

Paul: Yeah, sure. I mean, at this particular time in history, we're looking at the 1830s, when the new Poor Law comes in, the expectation was the vast majority of our population is going to be poor. Poor was a normalised state of existence, for most people living in England and Wales. And that's what we're talking about England and Wales — Scotland is separate, Ireland is separate, their own legislation, and their own history.

So, if you are in receipt of relief, that's the big distinction. You're a pauper. So a pauper receives relief. And that had been the case under the old paw law, as well as moving into the new Poor Law of the 1830s. So a poor person is poor but in the eyes of the authorities, he's not destitute. And because they're not destitute, they don't receive relief. And that's the kind of distinction that we work with and that historically, administrators would have worked with.

Chloe: When you say 'destitute', what do you mean by that? Is that someone who doesn't have shelter? Is that someone who doesn't have access to food?

Paul: You don't have access to the requirements for life.

Chloe: Got it.

Paul: So, it's, but interestingly, though, and not an aside at all, the legislation doesn't define it. And that's why the Poor Law is an area of contestation. You can contest it and paupers contest in their letters, and undoubtedly in their conversations with local officials, because it's not set out.
This is a letter dated February 5th, 1842, the beginning of the hungry 40s. It comes from Ilkeston in Derbyshire and was written by a man named Thomas Henshaw.

Reader:

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 framework knitter, 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 … Mr Bennett … refuses to allow me anything so that we may live and die in a land of plenty… Gentlemen, I submit my case to you and hope you will afford me that assistance as Speedy as possible my case needs, which will oblige.

Your Humble Servant

Thomas Henshaw.

[Archive and reference: MH 12/9232/46. Folio 71]

Chloe: Okay, so here we have someone who seems to have tried to change his circumstances, but still struggling. Paul, can you tell me a bit more about the letter and this collection that it's part of?

Paul: Yeah, sure. So this is to some degree, this is kind of a classic letter. It's an individual who is attempting to show destitution. So at the moment that they're writing it, they're not in receipt of relief. So at that degree, they're wanting to be regarded as a pauper. Because if they can be regarded as a pauper, then relief will will kick in. Now, of course, in that letter, we've heard, we've heard in his own words, how he has done the right thing. So he's made these applications, they're destitute of food. So I've made this application locally. I've made it to a couple of people locally, and they've said, No, I've been to a magistrate. And a magistrate said, Yes, you should get this. But still, I'm getting a no from the local officials. But what we can see in that letter, which is really striking from that letter, is the references to the law, references to the regulations, references to rules. And this isn't by happenstance, this is a person who's thought about what are the words I

need to say, to engage the person that I'm writing that letter to, in London. This is written from Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire borders. So they set out the problems that the family are facing, set out that I've done the right thing. And what he's essentially saying that the Poor Law Commission in London is: your officers in the locality. They're the ones that aren't doing the right thing...

Chloe: I see. So he's always trying to appeal to the central kind of system.

Paul: Almost as a court of last resort. You know, we've made the appeals locally, and they're not following your rules. So you need to instruct them.

Chloe: So it's a real, real kind of well-written letter. Yes. And you mentioned as well, that he mentioned this, this new Poor Law, and his knowledge of that poor law is extensive, can you can you tell me a bit more about how important that change was from the Poor Law you mentioned before?

Paul: Well, there's a big difference between the old Poor Law and the new Poor Law or in terms of how the system is, is to work. There are people writing letters prior to the new Poor Law, but they would be usually around the issue that they're out of place. In other words, I'm living in this area, or actually it is the area over here that should be paying me. So they were those kind of letters, and they weren't particularly strident. But here we can see that this is a complaint. This is a complaining letter. And many of our letters are complaining letters. And what they're doing is they're complaining about the locality, to the centre. It's in that kind of nature. And the fact that there aren't just tens of these, or a couple of hundreds of these, there are many thousands of these.

Chloe: So this letter is really showing the agency of people in advocating for themselves and Britain at the moment. How wealthy is Britain at the moment?

Paul: Well at the moment, Britain is still the workshop of the world. It's the wealthiest nation on the planet. So in that regard, it's a wealthy nation, but to quote Pat Hudson, economic professor of history, this success of the Victorian economy was accompanied by high unemployment levels, urban squalor, and harsh working and living conditions. So there's two, Disraeli's two nations, there's a real polarity.

Chloe: Real polarity. And that Poor Law Amendment Act was trying to, well it wasn't trying to close that gap.

Paul: Oh, no, the understanding was that most of the people will remain poor. It wasn't about getting rid of people being poor. It was, how do we get on top of the welfare bill? How do we? How do we stop pauperism? Not, How do we stop —

Chloe: People being poor?

Paul: Exactly, exactly.

Chloe: So we've touched on how Henshaw's letter is so special, what does it mean for how we understand this period, this collection of letters and the people that live through it?

Paul: I think what it tells us is that the poor aren't this kind of amalgamated blob. I mean, if you look at a lot of social and economic history, and there's nothing wrong in this, people put into charts how many people are paupers, how many people are in receipt of relief at any given time. You can build graphs up, but it does depersonalise that. It's important work, knowing the scale is important. But what this does is it tells us, for those who are living in poverty, and in destitution, it tells us what did they think about the welfare on offer? And what did they want to happen as a result of it? And that comes to this idea of agency?

Chloe: I was just gonna say, interrupt you there, just a thought that I had, you know, these letters are so sophisticated. I guess maybe the assumption is that 'poor people' in quotation marks, wouldn't have the kind of ability to write such sophisticated letters. Can you tell us a bit more about how you got to that point?

Paul: I mean, there'll be a variety of levels of literacy and understanding. But one of the really... perhaps it shouldn't have surprised us, but maybe did is that level of sophistication. But when you reflect back on this, as a researcher, and as a historian, you start to think, well, surely, if anybody needs to know the detail of the law, and how it works, it is those who are looking to be in receipt of relief. The poor needed to understand, and we covered this in the book on the subject, which we will mention at the end. But we cover this in the chapter, how did they get to know what the

rules are, what the regulations are. When you look back at Henshaw's letter, you see that he's been to see a magistrate, and he talks about (later in the letter) but I've seen this circular. Indeed the Poor Law Commission, and later iterations of central authority, use these circular letters to instruct all of the Poor Law or unions across England and Wales on certain issues around the law. So he knows about this, he knows that's what they do. He knows Edwin Chadwick, who's the secretary of the Poor Law Commission, he's found these things out.

Chloe: And therefore he knows that the local authorities are not keeping up their end of the bargain.

Paul: He knows that he can lever this.

Chloe: Moving on now, I just want to share some music that this letter reminds me of Henshaw's letter was written in 1842. The same year as the Children's Employment Commission, which was this official investigation into the conditions of child labour in the mines. One of the child labourers who gave evidence to that commission was a 17 year old young woman from Halifax called Patience Kershaw. Now in her evidence, she details working for the past six years in hot, cramped conditions down the mine, pushing carts of coal with men who hit her if she's too slow. Her words were turned into a song in 1969 by Frank Higgins, a folk singer and here's a clip from a beautiful version of that song, The Testimony of Patience Kershaw by The Unthanks.

Song clip: The Testimony of Patience Kershaw by The Unthanks

It's good of you to ask me, Sir, to tell you how I
spend my days.
Down in a coal black tunnel, Sir, I hurry corves to
earn my pay.
The corves are full of coal, kind Sir, I push them
with my hands and head.

Paul: What a cracking song. I mean, that is that idea of looking to get the voices of ordinary people talking about what they consider their ordinary lives but when we listen to a sounds quite

extraordinary. I think poor people are always in danger of losing their voice so it's a continual kind of struggle to keep putting that in.

Chloe: Makes me think about how the thanks for that as a source of inspiration. Yeah, in 1969 what was going on then that made us reach back in time.

Paul: Absolutely. Cracking song.

Chloe: We'll make sure we get a link to that song in the Episode Notes. But let's move back towards the letters. Now we've got thousands here at The National Archives, can you share some more examples that give me different perspectives from different people?

Paul: Yes, so I'm going to introduce three letters to you. One of them is going to be talking about children, one about disability and the difficulties that brings with it in life, and another around an elderly couple. Now, it strikes me that all of these writers know something about the law. They don't have to be explicit in laying this out but you'll see that in there. And you can see that there's some degree of asking for help. But there's also some degree of asking for rights. And that is another feature of this collection. It's looking to persuade. Okay, so the first one is from Mary Jones, in Llannon in Wales, and she's writing in 1854. And she talks about, "I do hereby most Humbly Solisit the Commissioners attention to the following case"

Paul: "The following case" — and you use that kind of phraseology, almost like a legal case, so it's my case.

Chloe: Like she's standing in front of a jury almost.

Paul: Yeah. So it's the demand above and beyond please, can you please can you help. And she's talking about two children. And these are the children of her sister Catherine, who's deceased, and she's looking to support those children. She spells out the difficulties that the children have a legal settlement elsewhere to where she lives. This is getting in the way of her receiving relief. She talks about the money that would be needed, two and six a week, to keep the children and then she says "now unless the Commissioners will be pleased to cause the Newcastle Emblyn Board of

Guardians to do Justice in this case the truth is the children and myself must Starve/ they have refused to pay me anything this last 2 years."

And you can imagine the kind of poverty that that family has been living in, over the last couple of years around this. And they've got to the point now where this is, this is not something that can continue. What we find here, because this is a woman writing, so what we found in the collection, if we added up all of the letters, and we say well, how many women are writing, how many men are writing, it's about 20% of the letters are written by women. In the 19th century, that was not unusual if there is a couple there, the men wrote the letters. But there are times when that doesn't happen. And it's difficult to tell from individual letters, this one might simply be that it's her deceased sister, and therefore she's writing, maybe the husband cannot write. But this is one of those letters where you can see in there, it demonstrates the way that a woman might choose to write, bearing in mind she knows who the recipient is going to be. These very important people in London that she's that she's writing to. So very much rooted in the rhetoric of family and children and nurturing and caring.

Chloe: And shows the complexity of family structures that our time might have to take on the care of children.

Paul: Certainly, and this is not an uncommon feature in our letters. It's interesting that quite often when you see that it's the agency of the woman, it's almost like what they're saying is, we know what the characteristics that you, important wealthy men in London, expect a woman to be like. So what I'm going to say is, I'm trying to be that, but I can't without a little help. The local officials will not provide it. And therefore I'm asking you to step in. I'm trying to be the thing that you think I should be like, but I need you to step in. And so you can see the different rhetoric used by different writers.

Chloe: And what about the next letter?

Paul: So the next letter concerns an individual who has a disability because of an accident in the workplace. So let's hear from them.

Reader: 14 December 1852

To the Honourable Commissioners of the National Board of Guardians on account of Joseph Smith of Bradford Wiltshire, now aged 62 years and is disabled from work by an accident that he had about five years ago by which he got severely ruptured [disabled] and is altogether unable to work. His wife is 64 years old. He has applied to the Board for relief and they refuse to relieve him unless he consents to go into the union and he humbly seeks your advice and humbly hopes your lordships will not be offended with this, but inform him of what other means to make use of, so as...not to starve in my own Parish, you will please direct your answer to me,

Joseph Smith at Dryhill, Bradford, Wiltshire.

[MH12/13673]

Chloe: What can we learn from this letter, Paul?

Paul: OK, one of the things that we can learn is, it's about how dangerous work would be in the 19th century. Again, this is a relatively common kind of letter where somebody, because of something that's happened in the workplace, whether it's in a factory, whether it's in a mine, has been injured. And as a result of that injury, now cannot gain employment that will provide a wage to cover the family.

Chloe: And would that be an example of someone that would be poor, that then was almost threatened with becoming a pauper or fell into pauperism because of this accident?

Paul: And indeed, this is what this person is looking to become, because if I can be identified as a pauper, that's what gets me relief. What's interesting is that he's been offered relief, and he's turning it down. So if we look at this letter, he says that he's applied to the board for relief, and they refuse him unless he consents to go into the union. The union workhouse, that is the Victorian workhouse, when he talks about the union, that's what he's meaning. And he's saying, no, that's not what I want. I want relief at home. I have worked. I have worked. And there's an element of deservingness, therefore, and pride, and dignity, and all of those kinds of things. And he imbues that into his letter, I am not somebody that should go into the union. I've worked all my life, through no fault of my own, occupational hazard of work in the mid-19th century.

Chloe: I've contributed to society as well.

Paul: Yes, and again, those are the kinds of things, we see those grouping lots of letters. I've made my contribution, but now I can't work, it's time for me to take that out.

Chloe: So there is some kind of idea about how people felt about being a pauper or being destitute, and that wasn't a place, that wasn't as almost deserving of relief. That there was, there's some kind of distinctions there.

Paul: And different groups of people would find that easier to rhetoricise in their letters than others. The hardest, but still did it, is the able-bodied male, to say, well, I want dignity and I want respect. But here the letter is very much framed as -– I'm in my 60s, I've worked all my life, I've had this occupational accident, and therefore, I am worthy of the kind of respect that's offered by outdoor relief.

Chloe: I see and what about this other letter then? We've got a couple, a married couple?

Paul: Yes, so this is Daniel Rush. He's writing from Bethnal Green so we're in East London, would have been Middlesex at this particular time. I've got, I've got a quote from this, he's writing in August 1851. He sets his letter out again, in the context of, I've been a worker, 71 years old, and a silk weaver. He says, I'm past labour, I'm not able now to provide and he talks about, "When full employd Can Earn from 4s to 5s per Week but trade being bad We now earn abought 3s and I have aplyed to the Parish of St Mathews bethnal Green and they Will not Relive me With out my goin in to the Poor house" A bit like the last letter, "and We went on Tuesday the 19th and they insisted in Sepratin me from my Wife Wich I have had 49 years or turn us out, and soner then We Would be seperated We Will Perish for Want"

Paul: He's saying we've been married all this time, this is our life and what you're going to do, at the end of that life, we're in our 70s, no longer able to earn, you're going to separate us. One of the features of the union workhouses is that men and women were split, with children elsewhere. That's when the split of families that idea of in an institution of last resort. They're saying, no, this is this is not right. And again, it's that appeal to dignity, wanting to live in my own house.

Chloe: I guess it makes me think surely as one family, they would be able to. That's surprising that they'd want to split up that family unit that would have supported each other.

Paul: It's more than that. I mean, it's from the architects of the new Poor Law, a good workhouse is not one that's full, it's one that's almost empty. Because what you're looking to do is to build in these conditions and these regulations, to make welfare itself abhorrent. That's what you're witnessing in that letter.

Chloe: Yeah, hence why people didn't want to go to the poorhouse in the first place.

Paul: Exactly, that was the whole the whole nature of it. So a lot of the rules and regulations around this are to put you off it, because if you can put off a thousand, ten thousand, a hundred thousand applicants, what do you think happens to the welfare bill? It goes down. It's not even them refusing relief, it's offering relief of a certain nature...

Chloe: With certain caveats and certain conditions.

Chloe: And this is really a sad letter to read, isn't it? The idea of a couple that have been together for so long, and you know, 71 and 68, skilled labourers. Then having to make that choice and make that decision, and some, I imagine would have had to do that. They wouldn't have been able to write letters, they would have been separated.

Paul: Undoubtedly, and some will write from the workhouse complaining about that. That separation, we underplay that in the new Poor Law historiography, it must have been such a wrench. All of these familiar things around you, and the family around you that that's going to disappear when you walk in.

Chloe: So Paul, what do we know about the people that wrote these letters, what happened in the end?

Paul: We know the outcome of some of these letters, we don't know the outcome of all of these letters, because sometimes the archive doesn't survive that allows you. So a couple of points that I

would make here is that what I have seen in the archive is where somebody has looked to be put on the outdoor relief lists, and when I look at those, they're on the outdoor relief list. So we can, we can see that in terms of agency. There are successes in this. Sometimes though those successes, are maybe only part of what somebody has asked for.

I do recall a lady in York writing in, asking whether or not the local authorities can treat her the way that they're treating her. She talks about being thrown on the street, and the centre writes back, and they say tell me all the details about this. One of the things that does happen, that you may not think of at first, is that the central authority takes note of their letters. So they'll often write back.

Paul: So if Chloe, if you were this lady from York writing in, you would have got a letter back saying we can't interfere in individual cases. And that's what the law says, the 75th section of the Poor Law Amendment says that the centre can't interfere in individual cases. Then they have this little rider saying, we will write to the York Poor Law union asking them for further information, and in this instance, 1840s, that's exactly what they do. They find out why they wanted to kick her out, the laws changed slightly on settlement and the local authorities are asking her for information about legal settlement. The central authority writes back to the authorities in York and say you can't do that, that's not your jurisdiction. The poor won't want to answer questions to you about settlement and they do not need to. We've checked then in later censuses, and we find that she's again, on the outdoor relief lists, it's difficult to proportionise that because not everything that the poor got was what they wanted.

There's some fascinating cases where individuals have complained about the way they've been treated in the workhouse. An investigation has been set up and the pauper's case has been thrown out.

Chloe: So it didn't always rule in their favour.

Paul: So you think always, you think oh that's that's the end of that, then. But no, what you then find is that four weeks later, the master and matron have resigned. Now if you're the pauper that's instigated that, you're the one who wrote that initial letter about the treatment by those members of staff, towards the poor in that workhouse. You would mark that one up as a success.

Chloe: I see.

Paul: So there's all of those different ways as well as simply not getting anything that you wanted. So all of those are in the mix. They're all in the soup in regards to this archive.

Chloe: Paul, the new Poor Law comes in, can you remind me?

Paul: 1834

Chloe: So what's the period that these letters span?

Paul: The period for our projects was from 1834 going into the new Poor Law to around about 1900. The new Poor Law changes in nature at that sort of period, late 1890s, there's a big change. We thought we needed to mark that within the project.

Chloe: That really is a long time, are there any changes in how the letters are written? We've heard a lot from individuals.

Paul: I think so. One of the things we had meetings about when we set the project up, this was not something we were thinking of, or looking for. But one of the things that we see is this collectivisation around petitioning and letter writing. So from about the 1860s onwards, what you see is a new kind of petition. Sometimes advocate letters, where, instead of it being an individual, like maybe a local vicar, or perhaps a local philanthropic employer, writing on behalf of an individual, poor person, or pauper, you start to get letters being written about whole workforces who've been maybe thrown on the unemployment lists.

I've got a couple of examples here of collectives. This is from a group of Lancashire operatives and this is how they describe themselves. They appeal to the Poor Law board and they state, “we are specially deputed by a body of 1,600 men of the unemployed Lancashire operatives now attending the school in Jersey Street, Manchester, to respectfully lay before you that which they consider to be a grievance.” So again not an appeal to charity, this is a grievance that we have, and we think you are the right person to deal with this.

Chloe: And that language is important.

Paul: And that language is important and it's a step change. Also, because this isn't a trade union. They've been defeated at that time. We're in 1863. Importantly, over in America, we've got the Civil War, there's no raw cotton coming in. Mass unemployment now in the northwest. So that's the context of this title. That's the unemployment and that's interesting. They don't describe themselves as paupers. They are the unemployed Lancashire operatives. So they've started to say...a little bit different in terms of language, not very differential and they set out a whole host of grievances. What it strikes me as is a proto-trade union. It's not a continuously existing body. It's there because something's happened in 1863. It's that kind of thing that comes out for that with me and they talk about themselves. They describe themselves as "men whose whole lives have been one continued struggle for manly independence, who have never stooped to mortal man to ask for charity. Men who have banded together in societies to relieve their own distressed, to heal their own sick, to bury their own dead. And who have now in this crisis, which the history of the country has no parallel." And that's the cotton problem they're talking about. "We've already parted with our hard-earned savings that they jealously hoarded for old age or, or sickness, they've sold clothing, they've pulled down their household goods, to the last moment when our pride of independence must give way. And we must perforce ask for assistance or see our wives and children starve before our eyes."

Chloe: Those words are just so compelling and they also immediately strike me as gendered. They call it manly independence, wanting to take care of your families, not wanting to see them falling into ruin.

Paul: And again, that rhetoric of manly independence, as opposed to what the lady had written, in the letter we looked at. They're trying to say, so what would the recipient of this letter want me to be, what are they going to respond to? What are they going to identify?

Steve King from Nottingham Trent, who works on this and has done a lot on the old Poor Law as well, and he talked about the 'shared register'. What the people here are looking at was a shared register with the recipient. This is what you expect us to be like, we're trying to be like that. It's not working. You now have to intervene, you may have to intervene. One of the big grievances they're looking for is, well if we're being told we've got to be in the workhouse, we've got to be in this

institution. How do we find work? How do we find work in a situation like that? And they say, “we ask for gentleman simply a day in the week to seek employment. And that day not to be Saturday, is the request unreasonable.” You know, they're really forcing this. I want an answer. It's really interesting to see, and what they've not done here is lots and lots of individual letters about themselves in their own family.

Chloe: We're not getting 1,600 letters

Paul: No, we're getting one. You're getting one but from those 1,600 people. I mean, the next two letters, really show that shift towards collectivisation in terms of how poor people talk to the central authority about welfare. The first one is a letter from Hugh Thomas Leonard, who was a member of the able-bodied pauper in the Birmingham workhouse. He writes to complain about the death of a man called Henry Fisher, who everybody in the workhouse could see was a sick man, but it was actually treated as an able-bodied man and sent to work accordingly, in the body of the workhouse. He dies tragically and Hugh Thomas Leonard sends a letter in to the local government board complaining about the treatment.

Now the thing is, this individual case now gets picked up by several trade unions, National Trade Union bodies. We have a letter from the National Society of Amalgamated Brass Workers, saying that the Secretary was saying “I'm directed by the society to forward a copy of the following resolution passed unanimously, and that the local government board be respectfully requested to institute an independent inquiry into all of the charges made against the Birmingham workhouse in regard to his death.”

Chloe: So that letter is like the catalyst for this other letter that comes.

Paul: Yes, it starts with the agency of the individual pauper but it's like throwing a pebble in the pond, you've now got all of these ripples. Now you've got trade unions getting involved. We have letters from the Independent Labour Party in the early workers’ labour parties, so you can see how when we look forward to the 20th century, and then say, so how is it that trade unions have got involved in health, safety, welfare, all of those things? This has a massively long tail to it and we can see it at the end of the 19th century, and we see it in these letters. And it's absolutely amazing.

Chloe: It's so interesting. Unfortunately, that's just where we're gonna have to leave this episode. But before we finish, Paul, if listeners want to discover more of these texts, and find out all about them, and the people that wrote them, where can they go?

Paul: Okay, there's a couple of places that people could go, the first thing you can do is you can go to Mr. Google and if you put in there, The National Archives, and 'workhouse voices'. You can also put in The National Archives, and 'voices of the Victorian poor'. Both of those will take you to sites where you can get hold of full transcripts of these letters. The second one, there are thousands up, that we've we've put on there. You can of course, get the book, *In Their Own Write*: *Contesting the new Poor Law 1834-1900*. Cracking book. And of course, visit us here at Kew because one of the things that you should bear in mind: we sampled this, to get thousands and thousands of letters. There are thousands more, and nobody's looked at them.

Chloe: And you could be one of you could be one of those. I mean, they're an extraordinary insight into the lives of working class people and the Victorian age and can tell us so much about where we are now too. Thanks for finding them and all your work with the project, and sharing them with us and with the world.

Paul: You're welcome.

Chloe: Thanks for listening to On The Record from The National Archives. To find out more about The National Archives, follow the link from the episode description in your podcast listening app. Visit nationalarchives.gov.uk. to subscribe to On the Record at The National Archives so you don't miss new episodes, which are released throughout the year.

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Finally, thank you to all our experts who contributed to this episode. The readers were Andrew Ashmore and Tash Walker. The song we included was The Testimony of Patience Kershaw by The Unthanks, thanks to: Annie Reed, Katy Spicer, and The Unthanks. Reproduced under license from The Unthanks and The English Folk Song and Dance Society. This episode was written, edited, and produced by Tash Walker and Adam Zmith of Aunt Nell, for The National Archives.

You'll hear from us soon!