

'DEATH FROM STARVATION'

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This is a local study of events in the Uxbridge Union illustrating the working of the new Poor Law (1834) in the early 1840s.

Accounts of the inquests on the deaths of four paupers in the Uxbridge Union between February 1844 and February 1845 appeared in *The Times* under these headings:

'Dreadful Cruelty';

'Death from Starvation';

'Suicide of a farm labourer through dread of a Union Workhouse' and

'Dreadful Distress in the Uxbridge Union'

John Walter, Proprietor of *The Times*, strongly opposed the new Poor Law.

The Uxbridge Union was based on the market town of Uxbridge on the western edge of Middlesex; made up of the parishes of Harefield, Ickenham, Ruislip, Northolt, Hayes, West Drayton and Hillingdon. The Union Workhouse opened in December 1837.

Four Medical Practitioners were appointed to deal with the sick poor. They were each paid £50 per annum.

One Relieving Officer was to visit each parish twice a week.

Contentious issues thrown up by the **Poor Law Amendment Act passed in 1834** were:

The Abolition of Outdoor Relief, which had sustained many poor people in times of temporary distress;

The 'less eligibility' principle, whereby life in Union Workhouses was to be less comfortable than in the poorest labourers' cottages;

The Workhouse Test

The Workhouses offended Victorian sensibilities by dividing families, housing men, women and children separately. This was seen as especially cruel to elderly couples in their declining years.

General Outdoor Relief Prohibitory Order 2 Aug 1841

Exceptions might be made in cases of sudden accident or sickness, when Relieving Officers could give relief in kind for a limited period.

The Home Secretary had suggested that some relaxation was being considered in respect of widows. This encouraged one of the Uxbridge Guardians, Benjamin Armstrong, to persuade the others to continue to grant outdoor relief to five widows living in Ruislip Alms-houses, (see Fig. 8) on the grounds that once their furniture had been sold they would never be able to set up independently again.



Uxbridge Magistrates' Court

Fig. 1

Charles Woodbridge 1796-1879
Uxbridge solicitor who was Clerk to the Uxbridge
Board of Guardians

The Clerk, Charles Woodbridge, (see Fig. 1 above), wrote to the Poor Law Commissioners giving the infirmities and ages of the women, and seeking their consent to the Guardians' actions. The Commissioners accepted that relief was appropriate for four of the widows, but not for 55-year-old Ann Webb, who had a 15-year-old son who should be capable of providing sufficient income. They reluctantly gave their consent however, because of the short time that the order had been in operation. Ann Webb and her, by then 25-year-old, son were still living in the almshouses in 1851.

Benjamin Armstrong was so delighted with this success that he wrote to *The Times* in December 1841, encouraging the Guardians of other Unions to test the order.ⁱ This exchange between Guardians and Commissioners shows the tension between local officials and central authority.

Emergency outdoor relief

The account of the inquest on William Terry appeared in *The Times* 31 October 1844 under 'Death from starvation'.ⁱⁱ

He had been born in Ruislip, but lived in a loft above an outhouse in Pinner, and sometimes came to his sister's house at Ruislip Common on a Sunday 'to get a bit of dinner'. His sister was Mary Lavender who lived in Withy Lane (see Fig. 2). That autumn he appeared to be very ill and the owner of the loft apparently fearing that he was dying, arranged for a boy to bring him over to his sister's in a dung cart. Mary Lavender and the boy helped him into the cottage in Withy Lane and onto a chair, but he was faint, and nearly fell off it two or three times, so they took him up to bed. He drank a little milk, but was unable to eat any bread in it. Mary was in some distress herself as her husband and son were both out of work and she had no money. She said that she knew that she could not get any relief without going to the Relieving Officer four miles off at Hillingdon.

The next morning, although it was raining fast she walked to Hillingdon to the Relieving Officer's house. He was out and

she was told he was at Uxbridge church, but she missed him there too and in great anxiety she went directly to Mr Rayner, the Uxbridge surgeon responsible for the medical care of Ruislip paupers. He said that he was coming to Ruislip and would call, which he did that afternoon, not long after Mary herself returned, having by that time walked ten miles. William Terry was by then beyond help and died three hours later. Mr Rayner's opinion was that death was due to exhaustion and want of food and the other necessities of life.



Fig. 2

A view in Withy Lane taken in 1978
Mary Lavender lived in a cottage in the
lane with her husband, James.

Her brother, William Terry died there 'for
want of food and the other necessities of life'

The inquest was held at The Six Bells, Ducks Hill, (see Fig. 4) a stone's throw from Withy Lane, with Thomas Wakley as coroner. Thomas Wakley, (see Fig. 3) founder of *The Lancet*, was a medical reformer and radical MP and strongly opposed the Poor Law. He believed that all Coroners needed to be medically qualified and was Coroner for West Middlesex. He insisted upon holding inquests on paupers who died in workhouses

and prisoners who died in prisons. It may have been because of his reputation and the fact that he and the editor of *The Times* shared the same view of the new poor law that the inquests were reported in such detail.

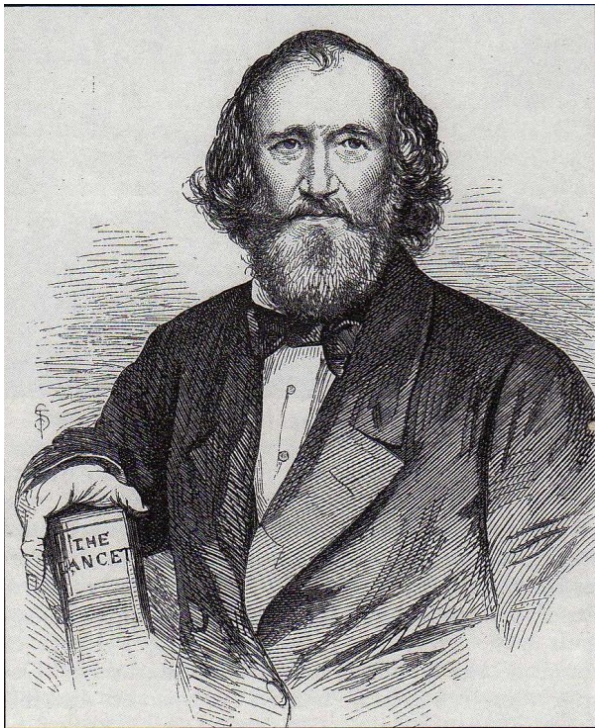


Fig.3
Thomas Wakley

He persistently questioned the surgeon about the ordering and supply of necessities for the sick in the Uxbridge Union and was clearly shocked and angered by the replies. Apparently when a doctor ordered goods, for example half a pound of mutton, on medical grounds, the order had to be taken to the Relieving Officer who had discretion as to whether or not the goods were really needed and who could over-ride the doctor's medical judgment.

This was in fact an old grievance, which had been aired in March 1841, when Mr Rayner had written to the Guardians about his authority to order any description of diet to sick paupers.ⁱⁱⁱ The reply had been unequivocal. '...an M.O. is not empowered to order articles of Diet for Pauper Patients under his care.' Such a power would be equivalent to giving relief which the Law has vested generally in the Guardians and Mr

Rayner had evidently communicated his disquiet to Mr Wakley, and to the annoyance of the Guardians, he had brought the matter up in the House of Commons and it had been commented upon in *The Times*.^{iv}

Mr Wakley said "This is monstrous....the food is prescribed medically, yet the medical authority is not supreme. I wonder that my medical brethren submit to such an arrangement, which is most cruel to the poor." A Juryman added "And when half a pound of meat a day is ordered, they never allow but three pounds in the week, not thinking, I suppose, that the poor ought to eat on Sunday." Mr Wakley then drew a comparison between the way sick prisoners were treated in gaol, where medical orders were paramount and arrowroot, sago, wine, jellies, fish and fruit were provided without stint, and the management of the unoffending poor in their own homes. "The facts disclosed were absolutely revolting".

Whilst giving evidence Mary Lavender had mentioned that her brother had been in the Union Workhouse (see Fig. 6) twice, the last time being three years previously when he had had a bad leg. He had said that he would never go in there again if he could only get one meal a day out of it.

Correspondence in *The Times*^v showed that obliging paupers to walk many miles for perhaps one loaf of bread, and the practice of translating an order for half a pound of meat a day into 3lb a week, were commonplace practices.

The case focused unwelcome public attention on the workings of the Uxbridge Guardians and the Poor Law Commissioners wrote to them on the 6 November^{vi}, asking for an explanation of the circumstances. Only three days later, on the 9 November 1844, *The Times* carried yet another embarrassing headline:

'Suicide of a farm labourer through dread of a Union Workhouse'^{vii}

This brought the 'Workhouse Test' into question.



Fig. 4

The Six Bells where Thomas Wakley presided over the inquest of William Terry



Fig. 5

Mr Lipscombe of The Case is Altered discovered William Haynes' body in a ditch in Southill Lane (or Giddy Street) on a Sunday morning in 1844.

William Haynes, who was nearly 70 years old, was a labourer and lived in Eastcote.

The body was found in a ditch in Southill Lane at about mid-day on a Sunday morning, apparently resting on hands, knees and face, by a local publican, Mr Lipscombe of The Case is Altered. He had cut his throat. A razor lay under one arm and there was a great deal of blood on the ground and running into the ditch. William Haynes had been a good and sober man who had worked as a farm labourer and who had providently been paying money into a club for 40 years to provide for himself and wife in times of sickness. Being feeble, he had been drawing out six shillings a week for the past seven weeks, but believed that the club was in a very bad state and likely to be broken up.

Evidence from William Haynes' son suggested that his father had not actually been short of food, but had complained of a pain in the head and had seemed very low and dejected for about two months past and "wizzy wozzy", although "quite right in the head".

Another witness, Mr Jenkins, who lived at Eastcote Cottage in Wiltshire Lane^{viii}, knew the deceased "as a very excellent person" and had employed him to bind hay and to do other jobs on occasion. About seven weeks previously he had seen him looking dejected. He had said that he was afraid that he and the old woman would be starved to death this winter and that he should have perished for want the last winter if Mr Jenkins had not helped him. When Mr Jenkins said "Well, at all events, should it come to the worst you could go into the house" William Haynes had replied sharply "No, I would rather starve to death. No, I should rather die a dozen deaths than go there, and be separated from my poor old woman in her old age".

Mr Jenkins said that he believed "in his conscience that it was his dread of being ultimately compelled to go to the union-house that had caused him to commit suicide. He had not the slightest doubt of it."

A leader appeared in *The Times* two days later^{ix}:

An appalling example of the working of the workhouse test

'Here is a poor man of a superior cast, a steady, industrious, well-behaved man, whom nobody has anything to say against, and who appears, from things that came out in course of the evidence, to have been even something more than respectable - a man of exceedingly good and honourable character and feeling, - here is a man whom one would put forward as a sample of an English labourer actually preferring death to going into a workhouse. People say that the poor will go into a workhouse rather than starve - rather than endure real biting distress; that therefore it proves whether persons are in such distress or not. But even this grinding miserable theory, it seems is falsified by the fact. As a matter of fact it is shown that the poor will go on enduring the bitterest distress, deprive themselves of the very necessities of life, and actually put themselves to death, rather than go into a workhouse.'

William Haynes had been one of the 'deserving poor'.

And so we come to the Murrells.

John Murrell, the six-month-old son of Martha and William Murrell, died at the Union Workhouse at the end of January 1844 and an inquest was held there before Mr Wakley and Mr Mills on the 31st and reported in *The Times* on the 1 February under the heading 'Dreadful Cruelty'.^x Almost exactly a year later, on the 4 February 1845, the same newspaper carried a report of a lengthened inquiry held at The Six Bells, Ruislip, into the death of William Murrell, aged 28, 'whose death it had been stated had been caused by a want of the common necessities of life.'^{xi}

William Murrell had gone to Iver, Bucks and married Martha in or about 1842. The baby, John, must have been born in the summer of 1843. William was in Aylesbury Gaol for stealing potatoes in January 1844 and Martha

and the child, being destitute, had gone into the Eton Union, where the baby became very ill. When in the last week of the month he was pronounced to be 'in a dying state...and expected to expire at any moment' the Eton Guardians decided to send the mother and child to Uxbridge in an open cart and in the inadequate clothing that they had arrived at the workhouse wearing. There was no flannel or wrapping of any kind for the baby, who was suffering from a disease of the lungs, but he had been blistered on the chest (a remedy) and a linen rag was placed over the sore. The Eton Relieving Officer who was driving the cart was moved to offer Martha his great coat to cover the child. John was worse upon arrival at Uxbridge, was seen by a doctor, who's orders were not carried out and the child died at 6 o' clock on the Friday morning.

The inquest jury condemned both sets of Guardians in a strongly-worded verdict. They said that... 'the removal of the said child from the Eton Union workhouse under the circumstances was cruel in the highest degree, and disgraceful to the management of the Eton Union workhouse, and that the non-administration of medical or other remedies to the said child in the Uxbridge Union workhouse ought to be visited with the severest reprehension.'

By August 1844 William was out of gaol, but also out of work, 'except an occasional job or two'. Early in December William borrowed a horse and cart and took the family and their few belongings to Ruislip, where his father still lived. William and Martha found a lodging in the old workhouse, (see fig. 7), which had been divided into tenements that were let to poor people by Ralph Deane of Eastcote House, who had bought it when all the village workhouses had been sold to provide money to build the Union House.^{xii}

The couple's only food was some potatoes which William had been given in Iver in return for 'doing up' a garden and a few more that his father had provided as seed to grow in the garden, supplemented by two pennyworth of sprats and occasionally a half loaf of bread. Eventually he found work in

the woods, cutting pea sticks and carrying them to the road to be carted, but in his weakened condition through lack of proper nourishment, he found that the most he could earn in a day was nine pence and was forced to give up.

In January 1845 he was very ill and Martha left home between 7 and 8 o'clock on a Tuesday morning to walk to the Relieving Officer's house at Hillingdon to ask for medical relief. She was given an order for Mr Rayner to attend her husband and took it to the doctor's house in Uxbridge and then walked back to Ruislip Common, where she arrived about mid-day, having walked some ten miles without food and bringing nothing but a promise of a visit from the doctor. Mr Rayner duly arrived and gave her an order to the effect that she should receive food and other necessities. Still hungry and very weary Martha set off again to the Relieving Officer's house so that he could exchange Mr Rayner's order for an order for Mr Collins, who had a grocery on Breakspear Road a short distance from the old workhouse. The order was to supply goods to the value of three shillings. She had been obliged to walk 20 miles during the day to get the food for her sick husband and herself, both of whom had fasted until she finally arrived home in the evening.

Three days later she attended the Board of Guardians at the Union Workhouse seeking more help. Mr Pearce, one of the Guardians who was from Ruislip, promised to set William to work 'in grubbing' on the Monday morning. In the meantime Martha was given a meal at the workhouse and Mr Stratton, the Relieving Officer arranged to meet her at Ruislip church on the Saturday morning. He gave her three loaves and one shilling and eightpence halfpenny.

William Murrell who had hurt his foot on a stump, became very ill over the weekend. A neighbour saw him on the Sunday, lying on his face on a chaff bed, with a stiff neck and his jaw locked (presumably tetanus), although sensible. Another neighbour, Mrs Allday went to Uxbridge herself on the

Tuesday, to fetch Mr Rayner, but William Murrell died before he arrived.

At the inquiry into the death held at The Six Bells by Thomas Wakley, the foreman added "that the jury could not separate without expressing their great dissatisfaction and disgust at the continuance of a system which compelled the poor, in the hour of sickness and destitution to travel so many miles as it was proved that the wife of the deceased man was compelled to walk before she could obtain the relief that was necessary for their wants".^{xiii}

The William Terry and William Murrell cases illustrate the difficulties of the poor in obtaining emergency relief even when it was permissible and had been granted by officials. Following William Terry's inquest the Guardians changed the policy of supplying articles of diet to sick paupers only when the Relieving Officer had endorsed the medical men's decisions. The revised regulations were received at the Poor Law Commission on the 19 November 1844.^{xiv} They were 'to be communicated to the several Medical Officers with the Boards request that in giving these Orders to their patients they will explain to them that it will no longer be necessary for them to take the orders to the Relieving Officer but to deliver them to him when he visits the parish and that in the mean time the Trades people will supply the Articles therein ordered'. Unfortunately communication broke down and the poor themselves remained unaware of the change and three months later Martha Murrell walked 20 miles to obtain food for her sick husband.

William Haynes' suicide shows the strength of the fear of the new workhouses in the minds of the poor. According to the Guardians they rarely admitted elderly couples to the 'house', always giving outdoor relief 'unless under very peculiar circumstances'. This was another fact that was clearly not understood among the working population. *The Times* leader 12 November 1844 believed that it showed the uselessness of the Workhouse Test '...there are hundreds of cases, up and down the country, where the poor submit to a gradual and slow death rather than encounter the union... The poor go on from day to day with indifferent and noxious food....they fall victims to the ague, typhus fever, or to consumption; their constitution is undermined by their low living, and they bring disease in some shape or other upon them - all because they will not go into a workhouse.'

These three tragedies may have been partly due to misunderstanding.

Baby Murrell's death demonstrates the callousness of workhouse officers, getting rid of a dying child to save expense and fully deserved the censure that ensued.

Let Charles Woodbridge, Clerk to the Uxbridge Guardians, have the last word. 'The Guardians have no hesitation in stating that the system has worked well in the union and compared with the old system the benefit to both Ratepayers and Paupers is incomparably superior and that anything like a return to the old system of maintenance of the indigent would be a most cruel and wicked injury to the poor.'^{xv}



Ken Pearce

Fig. 6
Uxbridge Union Workhouse during demolition in 1967.
William Haynes apparently 'preferred death to seeking shelter there'



Fig. 7
Ruislip Workhouse which was converted into small tenements for poor people by Ralph Deane.
William Murrell and his wife were living in one of them at the time of his death in 1845



Fig. 8

Ruislip Alms-houses or Church House

The Uxbridge Guardians decided to continue granting the five widows living here in 1841 outdoor relief, notwithstanding the newly issued General Outdoor Relief Prohibitory Order.

ⁱ *The Times*, Tuesday 14 Dec 1841, p5, 'UxbridgeUnion', Category : Letters to the Editor.

ⁱⁱ *The Times*, Thursday 31 Oct 1844, p6, 'Death from Starvation': Category: News.

ⁱⁱⁱ LMA: BG U2, p252

^{iv} LMA: BG U2, p258

^v *The Times*, Friday 1 Nov 1844, p6, 'An Inhabitant of Uxbridge', Category: Letters to the Editor;

The Times, Monday 4 Nov 1844, p6, 'Treatment of the Poor...' Category: News;

The Times, Thursday 7 Nov 1844, p5, 'The New Poor Law', Category: Letters to the Editor.

^{vi} National Archives: MH 12 7877

^{vii} *The Times*, Saturday 9 Nov 1844, p5, 'Suicide of a farm labourer...' Category: News.

^{viii} Bowl, Eileen M. *The Goodliest Place in Middlesex*, 1989, p218

^{ix} *The Times*, Tuesday 12 Nov 1844, p4, 'An appalling example of the working of the Workhouse Test', Category: Editorials/Leaders.

^x *The Times* 1 Feb 1844, p 7, 'Dreadful Cruelty', Category: News.

^{xi} *The Times*, 4 Feb 1845, p5, 'Dreadful Destitution in the Uxbridge Union', Category: News.

^{xii} NA: MH 12 7877, 7 Feb 1845 reverse.

^{xiii} *The Times*, 4 Feb 1845

^{xiv} NA: MH 12/7877.

^{xv} NA: MH 12 7877, 7 Feb 1845