



ALL CHANGE OR MORE OF THE SAME? LIFE FOR THE PAUPERS OF LEWES AFTER THE POOR LAW AMENDMENT ACT OF 1834.

Ann Holmes 2011

The following racy description of a parish Beadle's visit to the Workhouse (by Boz) is from Bentley's Miscellany:—

“ ‘ Goodness, gracious! is that you, Mr. Bumble, Sir?’ said Mrs. Mann, thrusting her head out of the window in well-affected ecstasies of joy. ‘ (Susan, take Oliver and them two brats up stairs, and wash ’em directly)—My heart alive! Mr. Bumble, how glad I am to see you, sure-ly!’

“ Now Mr. Bumble was a fat man, and a choleric one; so, instead of responding to this open-hearted salutation in a kindred spirit, he gave the little wicket a tremendous shake, and then bestowed upon it a kick, which could have emanated from no leg but a beadle's.

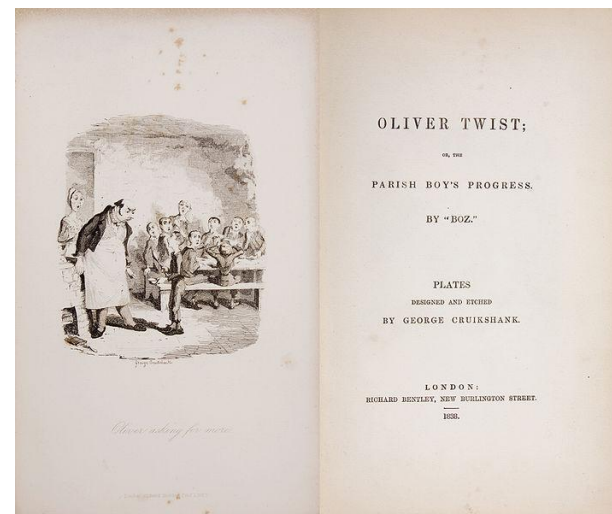
“ ‘ Lor, only think,’ said Mrs. Mann, running out,—for the three boys had been removed by this time,—‘ only think of that! That I should have forgotten that the gate was bolted on the inside, on account of them dear children! Walk in, Sir; walk in, pray Mr. Bumble; do, Sir.’

“ Although the invitation was accompanied with a curtsy that might have softened the heart of a churchwarden, it by no means mollified the beadle.

“ ‘ Do you think this respectful or proper conduct, Mrs. Mann,’ inquired Mr. Bumble, grasping his cane,—‘ to keep the parish officers a-waiting at your garden-gate, when they come here upon parochial business connected with the parochial orphans? Are you aware, Mrs. Mann, that you are, as I may say, a parochial delegate, and a stipendiary?’

actu
his
nu
ver
ho
big
beg
pai
the
bo
bat
me
leg
as
ter
Ne
wa
he
cor
he
his
liv
bre
als
his
cal
ma

The reforming Whig Government of the early 1830s was determined to correct the inefficiencies and costs of the old Elizabethan Poor Law . It had become very expensive to provide support for the poor at a time when agricultural and industrial changes were revolutionizing traditional working patterns. The Napoleonic Wars and their aftermath had made jobs hard to find for a rapidly growing population. I have been looking at the implications for Lewes of the new legislation which was brought in to improve matters. Ultimately the poor of Lewes ended up in the workhouse you see above but that did not happen until the late 1860s. This article concentrates on what happened in the years before and immediately after 1834



The Sussex Advertiser of the 6th February 1837 reprinted this very early instalment of Oliver Twist from a London newspaper. The writer, Boz, was ,of course, Dickens. His novel, which was published in the following year, gives us his version of the effects of the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. Poor Oliver personified the awful fate of those who were unlucky enough to be driven into the workhouse in order to live. Did the Lewes poor suffer in this way?

AN
ACT
FOR THE
AMENDMENT AND BETTER ADMINISTRATION
OF THE
Laws relating to the Poor
IN
ENGLAND AND WALES.



LONDON:

PRINTED BY GEORGE EYRE AND ANDREW SPOTTISWOODE,
PRINTERS TO THE KING'S MOST EXCELLENT MAJESTY.

1835.

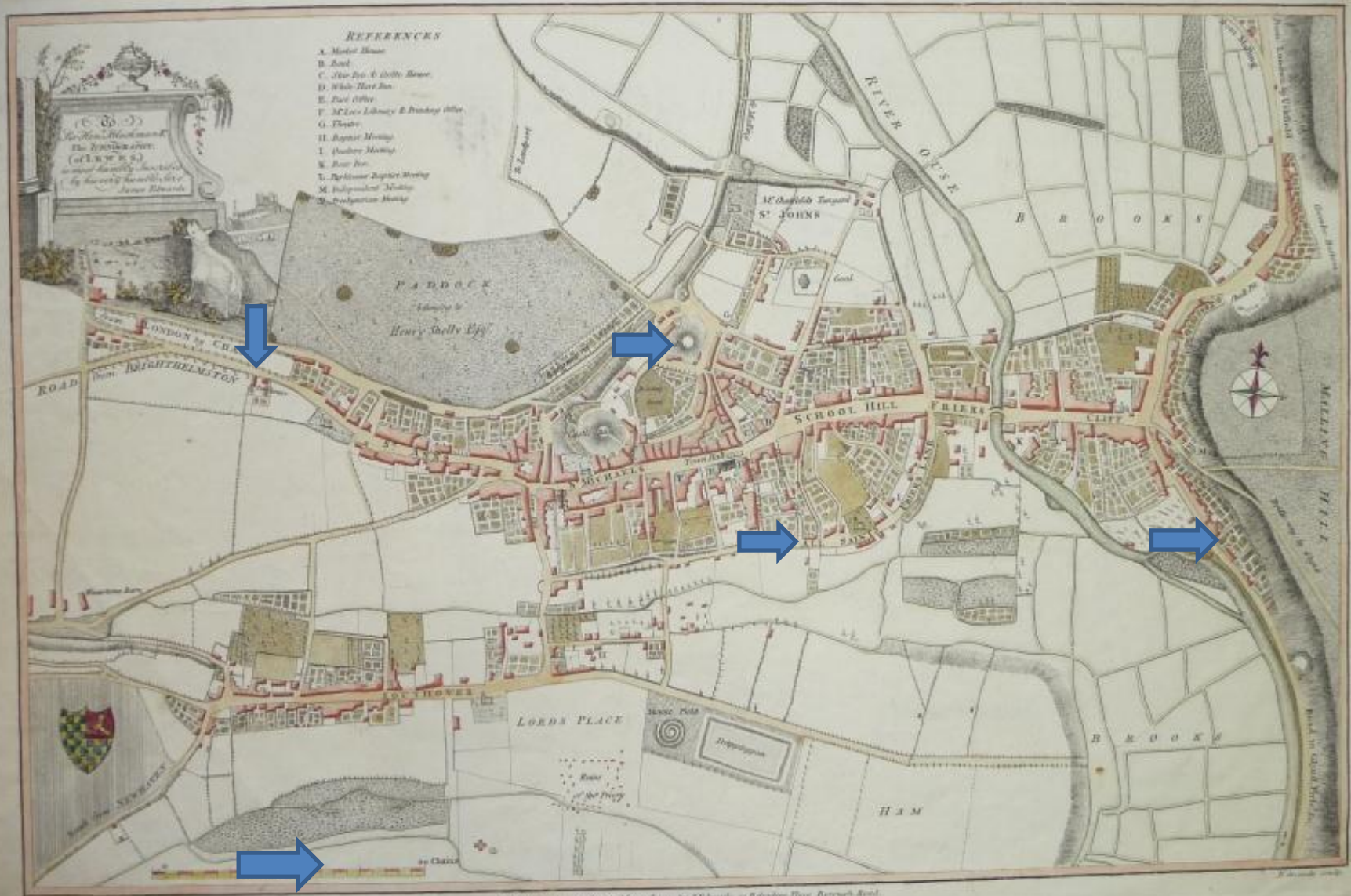
Melbourne and his Government were under huge pressure from rate payers to bring about change. They were also influenced by thinkers like Malthus, Ricardo and Bentham. It was argued at the time that the harsh rules listed below were intended to be in the interests of rich and poor.

- *No able-bodied person was to receive money or other help except in a workhouse.*
- *Very harsh conditions in workhouses to discourage people from wanting to receive help.*
- *Workhouses to be built in every parish, or if parishes were too small, in unions of parishes.*
- *Ratepayers had to elect a Board of Guardians to supervise the workhouse, to collect the Poor Rate and to send reports to the Central Poor Law Commission.*
- *A three man Central Poor Law Commission appointed by Government to be responsible for supervising the Amendment Act throughout the country.*

The impression we may have from our reading of Dickens is that, despite the good intentions of at least some of the reformers, 1834 marked a watershed in the care of the poor and a change for the worse. To understand if this was so we need to look at what Lewes parishes provided before that year. In fact there were workhouses in Lewes before 1834, as there had been in some parts of the country since the seventeenth century and especially since 1723 when a law was passed giving parishes the option of refusing to give relief except in a workhouse.

According to Houghton (*A Look at Lewes. The High St. of Lewes 1998*) Numbers 121 – 3 High St were the **poorhouse of St Anne's parish in 1735**. If so, they were replaced at the end of the century by the Pesthouse buildings at the corner of what is now St Anne's Crescent. Inoculation had reduced the danger from smallpox and therefore the need for an isolation hospital in Lewes by 1793 when the Pesthouse was let to a Mr. Kennard, "farmer of paupers". In 1809 St. Anne's parish overseers bought the property and continued to use it as a workhouse. The remains of St. Nicholas Hospital on Spital road, where the poor had found help centuries before, were still being used as alms houses through the early 1800s.





Edwards 1799

Approximate position of known Lewes
parish workhouses before 1834



St John's Parish had a workhouse at the "Old Poorhouse" on Castle Banks. It was built in the 17th century after *"The Lords of the Barony granted a parcel of land lately part of the Lord's waste, called the Castle Banks, for the use of the poor."* John Rowe, quoted by Mrs Dudeney. It also housed paupers from the Castle Precincts which was outside the parish .

All Saints Parish had a workhouse in School Hill until 1758 when it was moved to a new building on the west side of St. Nicholas Lane. At one time it was number 6 St. Nicholas Lane.

Southover Parish had some cottages which were sold with the permission of the Poor Law Commissioners in 1836.

Cliffe Parish shared a Pest House and probably later a workhouse with Malling. Horsfield (in his history written in the 1820s) says a workhouse was built by subscription in 1795 *"at the base of the hill, behind the Thatched House Inn"*. This pub was at number 37 South St and was there from at least 1803 to 1938. There are modern houses there now, set back from the road, next to a building which is still labelled "The Old Union master's". (It was to this workhouse that the victims of the Lewes Avalanche were brought in December 1836.)

There were probably alms houses elsewhere in the town.



The Old Union Master's House, 41 South Street. The Workhouse was set back to the left of this building behind The Thatched House Inn

It was certainly the case that poor people were also being helped in their own homes in Lewes before 1834. Every session of the St Ann's vestry was largely concerned with such requests for help. The meetings were held alternately, at least from 1801 when they began to keep minutes, at Pelham's Arms and the Sign of the Running Horse (at 21 Western Rd. which used to be the Post Office) or by the 1820s in the Black Horse. On the 31st March 1807 it was decided that no more than 5/- was to be ["expended of Parish Money for Liquor and 2/6d for use of a room."](#) So even then they were worried about costs.

**List of men, women, boys and girls in
ST JOHNS Poorhouse 11/6/19** from
parish document (PAR 412/37/12)

MEN		WOMEN	
Thomas Hare	76	Jane Hare	70
James Pettitt	75	Mary Ade	83
Thomas West	73	Ann Pettitt	53
John Grover	47	Eliz. Conner	49
		Eliz. Cooter	48
BOYS		Mary Baker	42
John Merricks	16	Mary Diplock	25
Thos Nye	13		
Wm Waller	13	GIRLS	
Henry Soper	13	Maria Baker	15
Wm Waller	11	Frances Baker	12
John Hare otherwise Williams	8	Frances Conner	11
George Walker	8	Elizabeth Phillips	3
John Waller	8		
Thomas Baker	8		
Henry Steer	5		
Henry Phillips	8 months		

There was concern for the morality of the poor too: on the 1st February 1802 it was decided “That Willm Huggett and wife now living apart be not allow'd any more Releife from the parish they come to live together as man and wife ought to do”. The records of other parishes survive too and we can find the names of many of those who were helped in them. For example, one document listing those paupers in St. John’s workhouse in June 1819, and another listing those receiving permanent relief outside the Poor House in March 1826 are to be found in the record office. The legal costs to the parishes of establishing who had a right to help were large, and so was the provision of rent money, food and clothing. St Anne’s Poor Rate book which was kept from 1745 proves rates in Lewes were going up fast. The main rate payers, the Shelleys and the owners of Ashcomb and Houndean farms were paying 2/- in the pound in the mid-18th century and 4/- by the 1820s when the Poor rate was also being collected far more often. The Sussex Advertiser reported in September of 1833 that the Poor rate returns to Parliament showed that Sussex was second only to Middlesex in expenditure on the poor out of 40 counties. So it is likely that many people in Lewes would have been in favour of the new legislation.

List of Paupers receiving permanent Relief out of the Poor House from March 25th 1826 (PAR 412/37/18)

Paupers names	No. in family	Money weekly s. d.	Flour weekly Gals.	Annual Rents £ s.
Alderton, Thomas	9		1 1/2	6 0
Breach, Widow	1	3 6		
Breach, Edward	2	6 0		
Blaber, Richard	1	3 6		
Blaber, Richard, Jun.	7		2	7 0
Bonner, Widow	1	2 6		
Brown, William	6	1 0	2	
Bates, James	5		1	
Chandler, Edward	9		2	4 0
Clark. Thomas	3	4 0	1	
Chapman, Charles	7			7 0
Camfield's Child	1	2 0		
Card, Widow	1	2 0		
Dunton, Widow	6	6 0	2	
Fowle, Susannah	1	3 6		
Fowle, Humphrey's girl	1	2 0		
Goldsmith, Widow	1	3 0		
Gates, Widow	1	3 0		
Hurst, Widow	6	5 0	2	
Herriott, James	6		1	5 17
Hubbard, William	2	2 6	1	
Hoather, Thomas	9		4	
Knight, Mrs	1	1 0		
Luck's child	1	2 0		
Lewry, Stephen	7		2	
Morris, William	2	4 0		
Newnham, Ann	2	4 0		
Pettett, Widow	1	2 0		
Parks, Widow	3		2	
Phillips, Thomas	8	2 6	4	
Powell, Peter	8		3	
Short's child	1	3 0		
Tompsett's child	1	3 0		
Towner's child	1	2 0		
Taylor's child	1	2 0		
Walker's child	1	2 6		
	124			

It is interesting to note that, according to this parish document, most of those receiving help from St John's parish were the elderly or the young but many at the time did not see it that way as can be seen by the next slide.

Thomas Davies
R. Wm. Lower
George Hackman
Stephen Duplock
overseers

CLAMOURS FOR CHANGE 1830s AND NOW

I think we might dispense with Water-carts altogether, and let the streets be watered by each inhabitant, similar to Cliffe – or by each inhabitant supplying some of their idle paupers to do the same.”

Letter to Sussex Advertiser 16/9/1833 attacking expenditure on watering the dusty streets.

“In those parishes in which drunkenness and profligacy mostly prevailed the rates were 4s or 5s in the pound, while in those where the people were ordinarily sober the rates were not more than 9d or 1s in the pound.”

Lord Howick quoted in Sussex Advertiser 28/4/1834

“The inhabitants of Lewes are often complaining of a great nuisance in the town from the importunities of sturdy beggars.”: suggesting Chichester’s solution where magistrates and overseers can send them to cells where they are fed bread and water and locked into sleeping rooms.

Sussex Advertiser 12/5/1834

Tory work and pensions spokesman Chris Grayling said the figures were “yet more evidence the Government has failed to get to grips with the problems in our welfare state.” he has called for reforms to encourage those claiming benefit to get back to work.

Kirsty Walker Daily Mail 2007

Incapacity benefit axed in four years: All payouts to go in crackdown on workshy.

Kirsty Walker Mail Online 15/6/2010

Benefits cheat UK: Court sees a staggering 23 cases of welfare fraud in just ONE DAY

Claire Elliott Daily Mail 5/3/2011

Certainly the Sussex Advertiser published articles and letters welcoming the change. All over the country people thought that the amendment of the old Elizabethan law would reduce the huge expense, the corruption, and the increasing greed from the “undeserving poor”. (Sound familiar?)

The Lewes Guardians, elected stalwarts of the 7 parishes of Lewes, first met in August 1835 at the workhouse of the parish of Saint John in Castle Banks. (Though meetings soon moved to All Saints and thence to an upper room in St. Michaels) This first meeting was rather later than other Sussex parishes as can be seen in the Sussex Advertiser newspaper which was publishing adverts for provisions for the poor and officials needed in the new bureaucracies. Relieving officers, who took the place of the old overseers, clerks, treasurers, auditors and schoolteachers had to be appointed by the new Unions. All had to be approved by the new Commissioners who seemed to sit in on a lot of meetings. Newhaven Guardians had already had a board meeting by February and were putting out tenders for building their new workhouse by April of 1835. It seemed, perhaps, that Lewes was dragging its feet but then I discovered a letter in the Sussex Advertiser on 20th July 1835 from Edwin Chadwick himself, the big brain behind the new Poor Law. He was replying to a letter from 243 ratepayers of Lewes who were complaining that the bar (presumably financial) that had been set to be a Guardian was too low and would result in too much choice! He said this would be taken into account by the commissioners. Perhaps this accounted for the delay. The Lewes Guardians made some very fast decisions after this. Immediate plans were made to separate the different categories of poor as the new law required. Men were to be separated from women, and both from their children. Three existing workhouses were to be used and the parishes were to be compensated.

The elderly were to be looked after by Thomas Marsh, aged 69 and his 62 year old wife, Mary, in the All Saints workhouse in St Nicholas lane. The able-bodied were at first sent to St Ann's workhouse but a report presented to the Guardians on 5/9/1835 said it was too dilapidated and small so it was quickly decided that they would go to Cliffe instead, not before one Edward Ashby had got into lots of trouble:

24/10/35 "A complaint having been made against Edward Ashby in Saint Ann's Workhouse for refusing to draw water in St John's Workhouse. Ordered that in case he again refuses he be taken before the magistrates for punishment." 14/11/35 "Ashby an able bodied Pauper at St Ann's Workhouse refused and neglected to do the work of digging and breaking Flints as ordered to do although he and his wife and children were wholly maintained by the Parish." 18/11/35 "The Clerk reported that the pauper Edward Ashby has been taken before the magistrate as directed at the last meeting and punished by three weeks imprisonment and hard labour." George Winhurst became Master of Cliffe Workhouse together with his wife, Susannah. He had to be reprimanded at least twice for harsh treatment of the inmates. The minutes record a couple of rebellions against him including one by three paupers who refused to work because "they did not like to wear a felon's dress". These weren't the only misdemeanours recorded in the minutes.

This suggests the Guardians were interpreting the new rules strictly but that they were also looking after the interests of the poor.

The children were taken to St John's workhouse in Castle Banks to be looked after by the newly appointed Schoolmaster John Sayers and his wife who was to be matron. They were to earn £8 10.0 a quarter. The minutes first mentioned the appointment of a Mr Simmonds who may have been the Jeremiah Simmonds who had "farmed the poor" of St. Ann's in 1829. If so, he now lost his job. A Miss Maria Evans was to be school mistress at a salary of £4.15.0 a quarter.

St Johns was considered “best calculated for the children as it is more centrally situated and we think it in every way adapted with suitable alterations and additions so as to affect a proper Division of the Boys and Girls.” But by 13/10/35 it was decided that “The house appropriated for the Children is situate in a very unhealthy spot.” There was slaughterhouse and drain nearby that were causing problems. In February 1836 34 children, were moved up to St Ann's which was now considered suitable, presumably because some changes were planned for the buildings.



St Ann's Hill from
Horsfield 1824

The children had been inoculated in January by either Henry Verrall or Henry Moon who had won the contract to be medical officers for the year. They were helped up St Ann's Hill by able-bodied paupers from the Cliffe workhouse. There had been controversy about macadamizing of the High Street but it had probably been done by now so the walk would have been easier than suggested by this illustration in Horsfield's book.

It is difficult to find lot of detail about how the children were treated when they got there but they were certainly to be instructed in the “[art of making list shoes and of plaiting straw](#).” Their new teachers had two weeks training in the “Subscription School” and a little more by the National School. A decision was made to allow the children to attend any church or Sunday school chosen by their parents and by May 1836 the gallery of St Ann’s was reserved for pauper children accompanied by their teachers. Not all of this was new. There is evidence that pauper children had had some education at least since the late 18th century. There is evidence of rebellion among the children too: In March 1836 Wm Sayers, master of St. Ann's workhouse made a complaint against Thomas Stevens and Richard Simmons for running away from House and disorderly conduct and also George Townshend, Henry Champion, Edward and Joseph Pilfold for disorderly conduct. The Guardians ordered that the boys be reprimanded which was done by the Chairman. George Townshend was then sent home to dad with his brother.

Thus far it seems that the Lewes Guardians were cooperating with the Commissioners but there are signs that they were inclined to be more lenient than in some parts of the country. Because changes to the old workhouses were going to be expensive they were already considering building a new one by October 1835. They soon chose the site where the new workhouse was eventually built in the late 1860s – this is the one you saw on the first slide. (It was pulled down 100 years later to build the Abergavenny flats.) It was described as 7 acre plot of arable land to the left of the Brighton Road, opposite where the gates of the new barracks once stood. It is interesting that the land belonged to Thomas Tourle, one of the Guardians. But before they chose this site they considered building it in the Spital triangle which they considered too small, at premises at the top of Southover Street which were too expensive, on land in Garden St, Southover, adjoining Ham Lane, which was too marshy, and to the right of the road leading from the Spital to Spital Mill.

This, they said was “too keen for the aged from its elevated situation and being exposed to the northerly winds.” The inhabitants of the Nevill Estate might be amused by this but it did show the Guardians cared! Those who planned the Brighton Workhouse (now Brighton General Hospital) at the windy top of Elm Grove clearly did not have these reservations.

Advertisements placed in the newspaper in August 1835 for tenders for provisions stipulated “Good bacon”, “Good tea”, “Best yellow soap” Presumably these were intended for the paupers. Other nearby Unions asked for good quality too. An attempt was made in November to give “every Encouragement to the industrious and well conducted Paupers by allowing them a small quantity of table Beer as a special indulgence whilst employed in hard labour” The Poor Law Commissioners objected to this. In January the Guardians tried again, asking that “Wholesome Beverage” be allowed to the paupers in workhouse diet. This was withdrawn at the next meeting following orders from Commissioners. The beer debate seems to go on until at least 1837.

Children were at first allowed to stay with some able bodied paupers and outdoor relief continued to be given for some time. The Board of Guardians asked that some of the aged and infirm married paupers for example Arthur Donald aged 91 and wife aged 70 and Aetwell Boxall aged 79 and his wife aged 75 should be allowed to be together in “sleeping apartments by themselves detached from the other paupers in consequence of their extreme age.” On the 9/1/36 the Guardians asked that Reporters be allowed at meetings of the Guardians but by next meeting they had been told by the Commissioners that meetings should be “strictly private”.

By 1838, a year after the publication of Oliver Twist began, there is strong evidence that many in Lewes were now disappointed at the way in which the new law operated and a Town Meeting was ready to petition Parliament to have it changed. Speakers at the meeting said that any labourer with a family of 4 earning less than 12/- a week had been severely affected by the operations of the act.

The 150 householders who attended the meeting strongly objected to the separation of families and sexes and suggested that the increase in crime was the result of the new Poor Law. They also objected to the fact that local officials had to be centrally approved. This seems to refer to a controversy about Mr Kell, the town clerk, who had been anonymously accused of some misdemeanour. The Guardians insisted "[Mr Kell discharged his duties with honour and fidelity.](#)" Two, including the chairman, resigned when the Commissioners refused to divulge their sources! So, those who attended this meeting certainly thought things had changed for the worse. They were ready to petition Parliament to change the Poor Law Amendment Act – a law which they had, for the most part, welcomed only a few years before.

BOROUGH } At a Meeting of the Inhabitant Householders of the
of } Borough of Lewes in the County of Sussex holden at
LEWES } the County Hall in Lewes aforesaid, on Wednesday
the fourteenth day of March one thousand eight hundred and
thirty eight in pursuance of a Requisition to the High Constables
for the purpose of petitioning both Houses of Parliament for an
Alteration of the poor Law amendment Bill signed by 150 Inhabitant Householders

GEORGE MOLINEUX ESQUIRE, Senior Constable in the Chair.

Moved by Mr. Michael Irish and seconded by Mr. Stephen Rusbridge and carried unanimously. That this Meeting consider that the present poor Law Amendment Act is oppressive in its operations and that it requires alteration.

Moved also by Mr. Michael Irish, seconded by Mr. Stephen Rusbridge and carried unanimously. That this Meeting consider it necessary to petition both Houses of Parliament for an alteration of the Act. At this Meeting Mr. Michael Irish produced and read a petition to be presented to both Houses of Parliament praying for an Alteration of the Poor Law Amendment Act which was as follows:—

TOWN BOOK OF LEWES 1837-1901

The PETITION of the undersigned Inhabitant Householders of the Borough of Lewes in the County of Sussex agreed upon at a public Meeting holden at the Town Hall on Wednesday the fourteenth of March 1838.

WE your Petitioners beg most respectfully to state to your Honorable House that we view with most painful feelings the vast increases of destitution shown by a multitude of distressed Subjects of these Realms continually passing and repassing upon the Public Highways whose only means of obtaining sustenance appears to depend upon the casual Charity of passers by.

We also beg to assure your Honorable House that to our own knowledge great distress and privation prevail among such of the resident Agricultural and other Laborers as well as Mechanical where the Family contains more than four persons and where the average of wages does not exceed twelve shillings per week—these privations are greatly increased by the severity of the poor Law amendment Act withholding any relief to able bodied persons unless by admission into the Union-Workhouses by the regulation of which the Husband Wife and Children are placed in separate Workhouses usually many miles apart. This separation is we conceive totally at variance with the principles of the British Constitution—to these Causes we attribute the frightful increase of crime in Sussex as well as other Counties—We also object to the power given by the Poor Law Amendment Act to the Commissioners to appoint or discharge any of the Union Officers—

SOURCES

Secondary Sources

- Brent Colin *Pre-Georgian Lewes* (Colin Brent Books 2004)
Brent Colin *Georgian Lewes* (Colin Brent books 1993)
Davey L.S revised by Kim Clark *The Street names of Lewes* (2010)
Horsfield *History of Lewes* Vol 1 (1824)
Houghton *A Look at Lewes. The High St. of Lewes* (1998)
Poole, Helen *Lewes Past* (Phillimore 2000)
Pocock David *Pesthouse Field: The Story of St Anne's Crescent* (1996)
Whittick, Christopher *The history of the hospital of St Nicholas and its successors* (Sussex Archaeological Collections Vol 148 2010)
- Higginbotham, Peter <http://www.workhouses.org.uk/>

Primary Sources

- Edwards Town Plan 1799 SHR 2869 & Map terminal LEW C-2-3 -1 ESRO
 Photocopy in Map Cabinets 1st floor Lewes Library
Minutes of Board of Guardians Aug 1835 – Mar 1839 G/6/1a/1 ESRO
Poor Rate Book 1745 – 1823 PAR 411/30 ESRO
St Johns parish records PAR 412/37/12, PAR 412/37/18 ESRO
Sussex Advertiser Lewes Library & Brighton History Centre
Town Book of Lewes 1542 – 1701 , Sussex Record Society Vol XLVIII 1945-6
Vestry Minutes Parish of St Peter & St Mary Without PAR 411/12/1 ESRO