

## “We Might be Trusted”: Female Poor Law Guardians and the Development of the New Poor Law: The Case of Bolton, England, 1880–1906\*

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**SUMMARY:** This article uses the only surviving working diary of an English female Poor Law guardian in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to explore two interrelated bodies of historiography. First, it engages with an historiography of the New Poor Law which has by and large seen the late nineteenth century as a period of atrophication. Second, it engages with a literature on female Poor Law guardians which has on balance questioned their achievements and seen such women as subject to all sorts of conflict and discrimination. The article argues that both perspectives may be questioned where we focus on local Poor Law policies and local women. Using the example of Bolton, in England, it is argued that the boards of Poor Law unions were riven by fracture lines more important than gender. Within this context, women of relatively high social status were able to manipulate the Poor Law agenda to make substantial changes to the policy and fabric of the late Victorian Poor Law. Rather than conflict, we often see a warm appreciation of the pioneering work of female Poor Law guardians.

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### I

The 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act replaced an English and Welsh welfare structure that had been in force since the fifteenth century, with the so-called “New Poor Law”. The legislation sought to move the focus of poor relief away from small administrative units such as the parish or town and towards much bigger “Poor Law unions” containing dozens of places and many thousands of people. It also sought to make the workhouse and indoor relief the centrepiece of English and Welsh welfare, and to impose more disciplined, centrally directed, administrative structures to facilitate the assessment and dispensation of welfare.<sup>1</sup>

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1. P. Thane, “Introduction”, in *idem* (ed.), *The Origins of British Social Policy* (London, 1978), pp. 11–20. The New Poor Law had been introduced primarily as a means of combating perceptions of ever-increasing numbers of able-bodied poor.

Historians disagree on what yardsticks we should use to judge the success or failure of the English New Poor Law.<sup>2</sup> They also disagree on what, if anything, actually changed after 1834 in terms of welfare personnel or the experiences of paupers.<sup>3</sup> These debates are well documented, but analysis of the New Poor Law is, in practice, very uneven on a chronological basis. Thus, in 1978 Pat Thane called attention to the relative historiographical neglect of the period between 1880 and the Liberal welfare reforms of 1906. Over two decades later, this relative weakness in the coverage of English Poor Law historiography remains. Finlayson's review of the key turning points in the history of the New Poor Law cites the periods 1830–1850, 1874–1880 and 1906–1911, leaving the period between 1880–1906 in historiographical limbo.<sup>4</sup> Driver's review of the New Poor Law ends in 1884; Martin's discussion of the nature of local poor law administration ends in 1865; and in general much more detailed local work has been directed towards the first fifty years of the New Poor Law than towards the two decades thereafter.<sup>5</sup>

Even general surveys, which do cover this period, conflict as to how it should be represented. Wood, for instance, labels the years 1865–1895 as “the coming of age of the Poor Law”, while the post-1895 period attracts the label “the doubts of middle age”.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, Rose talks of the 1880s and 1890s as an era of new departures, a period when the true potential of the New Poor Law was tested, after the 1860s and early 1870s had forced the Poor Law to undergo a “searching re-examination”.<sup>7</sup> And most recently, Lynne Hollen Lees's survey marshalls the whole of the 1860–1948 period under the heading “residualism re-evaluated and rejected”. She suggests that during the late nineteenth and early twentieth

2. We know little or nothing about the operation of the Welsh New Poor Law. This issue is explored in S.A. King and J. Stewart, “The History of the Poor Law in Wales: Under-Researched, Full of Potential”, *Archives*, 36 (2001), pp. 134–148. For a review of the earlier historiography of the English New Poor Law, see S.A. King, *Poverty and Welfare in England 1700–1850: A Regional Perspective* (Manchester, 2000), ch. 8.

3. Contrast, for instance, King, *Poverty and Welfare in England 1700–1850*, with K. Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty* (London, 1981).

4. G. Finlayson, *Citizen, State and Social Welfare in Britain 1830–1990* (Oxford, 1994).

5. See E.W. Martin, “From Parish to Union: Poor Law Administration 1601–1865”, in E.W. Martin (ed.), *Comparative Developments in Social Welfare* (London, 1978), pp. 25–56, and F. Driver, “The Historical Geography of the Workhouse System in England and Wales, 1834–1883”, *Journal of Historical Geography*, 15 (1989), pp. 269–286.

6. P. Wood, *Poverty and the Workhouse in Victorian Britain* (Stroud, 1991).

7. M.E. Rose, “The Crisis of Poor Relief in England 1860–1890”, in W.J. Mommsen (ed.), *The Emergence of the Welfare State in Britain and Germany, 1850–1950* (London, 1981), pp. 50–70, and D. Fraser, “The English Poor Law and the Origins of the British Welfare State”, in *ibid.*, pp. 9–31. Also E.P. Hennock, “Poverty and Social Theory in England: The Experience of the 1880s”, *Social History*, 1 (1976), pp. 67–91, and D. Thomson, “The Welfare of the Elderly in the Past: A Family or Community Responsibility?”, in M. Pelling and R.M. Smith (eds), *Life, Death and the Elderly: Historical Perspectives* (London, 1991), pp. 194–221.

centuries an 1834 poor law designed mainly for dealing with able-bodied men in rural areas came under pressure. Growing urban poverty,<sup>8</sup> the conclusion of social investigators that much poverty was involuntary,<sup>9</sup> the increasing effectiveness of pressure groups, and the progressive removal of certain types of pauper from the workhouse system compromised the basic foundations of a law that had implicitly blamed poverty on those who were in need of assistance. The result, she argues, following Karel Williams, was that workhouses were “reconfigured” into care institutions and that the post-1870 Poor Law was neither progressive or oppressive but simply slipping into atrophy.<sup>10</sup>

What is surprising about such charges of atrophy is that they are set against the backdrop of major changes in the gender composition of those in charge of the formulation and implementation of local welfare policy. Few women were involved in the formulation of Poor Law policy or the dispensation of welfare under the Old Poor Law or during the first few decades of the New Poor Law, but by the 1880s middle class women were beginning to apply their “domestic skills” to the task of “municipal housekeeping”.<sup>11</sup> Involvement initially took the form of workhouse visiting committees, voluntary organizations with a brief to inspect institutional welfare and improve it where possible. However, the 1894 decision to abolish the property qualification for people wishing to stand as Poor Law guardians<sup>12</sup> allowed women for the first time to stand for election to public office in the welfare sphere. Whilst the number of women elected never approached that of men,<sup>13</sup> many of them have become symbolic for feminist historians. The Countess of Warwick, who was elected as a workhouse trustee in 1895; Rosalind, Countess of Carlisle;<sup>14</sup> Mary Carpenter, pioneer of industrial schools; Louisa Twining,

8. For a well-balanced discussion of the issue of risk, see R. Floud, *The People and the British Economy, 1830–1914* (Oxford, 1997).

9. For general surveys, see D. Roberts, *Victorian Origins of the British Welfare State* (New Haven, CT, 1969); M.E. Rose, *The English Poor Law 1780–1930* (Newton Abbot, 1971); R. O’Day and D. Englander, *Mr Charles Booth’s Inquiry: Life and Labour of the People in London Reconsidered* (London, 1993).

10. L. Hollen Lees, *The Solidarities of Strangers: The English Poor Laws and the People, 1700–1948* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 231–232; Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty*.

11. The language of skills and housekeeping was used by women as a means of reducing the hostility of husbands and policy-makers to public work, effectively portraying such roles as a natural extension of their role as home-makers. Some of the key documents on the extension of women’s public roles are provided by P. Hollis (ed.), *Women in Public: Documents of the Victorian Women’s Movement* (London, 1979).

12. Policy in Poor Law unions was formulated by a “board of guardians”, with each district electing individual “guardians” to the position for a fixed term of office.

13. By 1895, there were 802 female guardians in England, with 86 in London and further 70 in Lancashire.

14. C. Roberts, *The Radical Countess: The History of the Life of Rosalind, Countess of Carlisle* (Carlisle, 1962).

“the originator of workhouse reform”,<sup>15</sup> one of the founder members of the Workhouse Visiting Society and Poor Law guardian for Kensington from 1884–1890; Harriet Martineau; Emily Davies; Mary Somerville; Octavia Hill; and Josephine Butler are just part of the list. Their experiences have stood for those of many others in the historiography of the English and Welsh welfare system, the same historiography that has seen the Poor Law atrophying in the late nineteenth century.

There are many reasons why the involvement of women administrators and policy-makers might have made little difference to the atrophication of the New Poor Law. Close central direction of policy may have left little room for radical change, or local practice may have become too embedded for a new broom to sweep it away.<sup>16</sup> Some historians, though, have seen gender conflict as an important issue in limiting the scope of female guardians. Digby has characterized women involved in public welfare as caught in the borderland between public and private roles, using the language of the domestic to extend their influence over real lives.<sup>17</sup> She argues that they faced explicit and large-scale hostility when their language and actions took them too blatantly out of the borderland between the public and private spheres. Even where such boundaries were not transgressed, implicit and small-scale hostility appears to have been the norm. Other commentators have supported this view. Patricia Hollis, for instance, claims that, “It took considerable courage to endure the snubs, smuttiness and cold shoulder treatment women met on many boards [...]. For the most part, women won grudging acceptance – it was seldom more than that – which they achieved by tact, persistence, silence and hard work.”<sup>18</sup> Autobiographical accounts, letters, and articles suggest that female guardians routinely faced the suspicion of those who wanted to keep local property taxes low, and there were persistent complaints about the costs of the amendments to workhouse regimes and other “domestic” matters over which women appear to have gained some provenance. Men also complained consistently to central government about “female sensibilities”, which made them ill-equipped to undertake the day-to-day work of Poor Law and workhouse administration. Consequently,

15. See L. Twining, *Recollections of Life and Work* (London, 1893). Also J. Perkin, *Victorian Women* (London, 1993), p. 217.

16. For more on these weaknesses see M.A. Crowther, “The Workhouse” in T.C. Smout (ed.), *Victorian Values* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 183–195; P. Thane, “Government and Society in England and Wales, 1750–1914”, in F.M.L. Thompson (ed.), *The Cambridge Social History of Britain* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 1–62; R. Humphreys, *Sin, Organised Charity and the Poor Law in Victorian England* (Basingstoke, 1995).

17. See A. Digby, “Victorian Values and Women in Public and Private”, in Smout, *Victorian Values*, pp. 195–217.

18. P. Hollis, “Women in Council: Separate Spheres, Public Spaces”, in J. Rendall (ed.), *Equal or Different: Women’s Politics 1800–1914* (Oxford, 1987), p. 198.

women were apparently excluded from the “real” business of the New Poor Law, such as decisions on changing the physical fabric of the Poor Law, staffing, or outdoor relief policy.<sup>19</sup>

In the face of such apparent hostility, historians differ on the extent of the achievements of female guardians. Crowther, for instance, contends that “women guardians initiated no striking new policies”, while Lewis suggests that “it is not my intention to claim that their work had a significant effect in terms of improving the welfare outcomes for the poor women and children who were their chief concern”.<sup>20</sup> Both Patricia Hollis and Phillipa Levine are more positive. They argue that women were at the forefront of pioneering new ideas and practices, which were subsequently adopted by the local government board, as well as forcing through considerable improvement in the day-to-day institutional lives of vulnerable groups of paupers such as women and children.<sup>21</sup> Even the most optimistic commentators, however, have suggested that women had little input into strategic policy-making. It is in this sense that atrophy and a changing gender balance amongst Poor Law administrators can be seen to coincide. This article, however, will argue that observations of atrophy and ineffectiveness are misleading. They arise from the fact that both historians of the New Poor Law and feminist historians have neglected detailed contextualized analysis of local Poor Law records for the period after 1880.

To understand and characterize the achievements of female Poor Law guardians, to embed those achievements in an understanding of what was possible, and to judge whether changes to Poor Law policy negate concepts such as atrophication, we must move from the national to the local stage. Yet, local studies of post-1880 Poor Law unions are rare.<sup>22</sup> Equally, the individual local working lives of ordinary female Poor Law guardians have remained obscure. Much of our perception of hostility, marginalization, and relative failure is based upon the words of the prominent female guardians and activists mentioned above. Their generalized experiences found expression in articles for journals such as *The*

19. For an excellent elaboration of these views, see L. Davidoff, *World's Between: Historical Perspectives on Gender and Class* (London, 1995). Also A. Digby and J. Stewart (eds), *Gender, Health and Welfare* (London, 1996).

20. M. Crowther, *The Workhouse System 1834–1929* (London, 1981), p. 78; J. Lewis, *Women and Social Action in Victorian and Edwardian England* (Aldershot, 1991), p. 204.

21. See P. Hollis, *Ladies Elect: Women in English Local Government 1865–1914* (Oxford, 1987); P. Levine, *Feminist Lives in Victorian England* (Oxford, 1990); A. Summers, “A Home From Home: Women’s Philanthropic Work in the Nineteenth Century” in S. Burman (ed.), *Fit Work for Women* (London, 1979), pp. 33–64; J. Liddington and J. Norris, *One Hand Tied Behind Us: The Rise of the Women’s Suffrage Movement* (London, 1985).

22. For an overview and the best recent study see E.T. Hurren, “Labourers are Revolting: Penalising the Poor and a Political Reaction in the Brixworth Union, Northamptonshire, 1875–1885”, *Rural History*, 11 (2000), pp. 37–55.

*Westminster Review*, in books and pamphlets, in newspapers, in their correspondence, and in their autobiographical writings.<sup>23</sup> Material on the day-to-day activities of female guardians, detailed strategy, the negotiation of authority in the Poor Law union boardroom, and the variety of tensions that ran through Poor Law boards in addition to those based upon gender, has rarely been deployed in this debate or related to wider Poor Law practice. To elaborate these issues, and produce a more rounded picture, we have to synthesize detailed local information from a wide range of sources, such as the minutes of boards of guardians, the minutes of the key subcommittees where policy was worked out, the minutes of workhouse visiting committees, newspaper reporting, and from the personal and working diaries of ordinary female guardians. Too often these remain hidden in local archives, private hands or the uncatalogued collections of English record offices. Thus, focusing on the New Poor Law in Lancashire, England, this article will attempt to address the complementary themes of local Poor Law practice after 1880 and the role and achievements of female welfare activists.<sup>24</sup> In particular, it will concentrate on Bolton Union. Here, the overlap of complementary sources such as union records, newspapers (which took a healthy interest in Poor Law matters), a consistently heavy female presence amongst Poor Law guardians, and the survival of material on the day-to-day activities of one of these women – Mary Haslam – allows us simultaneously to reconstruct local Poor Law policy during the “limbo” period after 1880, and to realize the need for detail on the role and strategies of ordinary female guardians.

## II

Female involvement in the policy making of Bolton Poor Law Union began with the formation of an active and influential workhouse visiting committee in 1885, and continued with a substantial elected female

23. See, for instance, the general discussion of the role of female Poor Law guardians in E. Pankhurst, *My Own Story* (London, 1914), though note also concerns over the provenance of this book.

24. Lancashire was the English county that had presented the most problems to the initial process of implementing the New Poor Law after 1834. Unionization was contested and slow, relations between boards of guardians and the central authorities were generally strained, and guardians throughout the county showed a remarkable reluctance to finance an effective Poor Law prior to 1850. For more on the early years of the New Poor Law, see A. Digby, *Pauper Palaces* (London, 1978); N.C. Edsall, *The Anti-Poor Law Movement 1834–1844* (Manchester, 1971); E.C. Midwinter, *Social Administration in Lancashire 1830–1860* (Manchester, 1969); P. Harling, “The Power of Persuasion: Central Authority, Local Bureaucracy and the New Poor Law”, *English Historical Review*, 81 (1992), pp. 30–53.

presence on the board of guardians from 1895.<sup>25</sup> Mary Haslam – founder of the workhouse visiting committee – was one of these guardians. Born into the Heywood family, considerable merchant manufacturers in Bolton, on 11 August 1851, she was engulfed in Unitarianism and Liberal politics from an early age.<sup>26</sup> Her father was a prominent reforming magistrate, making their house “the centre of much of the life and thought of the town”.<sup>27</sup> Mary Haslam’s unpublished autobiography notes, “I think this blending together of young and old, and the former hearing the grown-ups’ conversation, lead to a taste in public questions, and an interest in the latter which developed in later years”. She goes on, “I belonged to the mid-Victorian period and kept many doubts and ponderings to myself lest my environment should be shocked.”<sup>28</sup> Subsequent marriage into the Haslam family (in 1872) continued this philanthropic and radical “education”, with her husband (William Haslam) and brothers-in-law all prominent in local politics and administration. Mary Haslam is important in an English context because she kept a detailed working diary during her time as an organizer of the workhouse visiting committee and a Poor Law guardian. However, her experiences do much more than simply add another personality to the small collection of women reformers who are so familiar to us. Rather, the story of her involvement in workhouse visiting, the guardian elections of 1894, and her subsequent activity on the union board allows us to question broad generalizations about the ineffectiveness of women in local government and about the atrophy of the late nineteenth-century Poor Law.<sup>29</sup>

Mary Haslam first came to prominence on the Bolton Workhouse Visiting Committee (BWHVC) in 1885. It is important that we understand that this role and her subsequent work for the board of guardians was a seamless and self-reinforcing web. Thus, while women organizing workhouse visiting committees in other areas appear to have encountered

25. There were never less than five female guardians. While this number might seem small, it has to be related to the number of guardians who regularly attended board meetings. Since female guardians attended much more consistently than most men, their influence on policy was more powerful than a simple exposition of numbers might suggest.

26. See W.E. Brown, *Robert Heywood of Bolton, 1786–1868* (Wakefield, 1970). Though not central to this piece, the early life of Mary Haslam can be traced in considerable detail through the yearly diaries of Robert Heywood. See BRO ZHE/71/1–51, “The Diaries of Robert Heywood 1818–1868”. There are close parallels between the early history, education, and career of Mary Haslam and that of Emmeline Pankhurst; both had a liberal philanthropic upbringing and were elected as Poor Law guardians in 1894.

27. See BRO ZHA/17/11, “A Word Picture of My Life, by Mary Haslam”.

28. *Ibid.*

29. None of the Bolton female guardians were as active as Louisa Twining or Jenny Foster Newton, Poor Law guardian for Richmond at thirty-six, but Mary Haslam in particular provides records somewhat richer than any other collection of which I am aware. See T. Deane, “Late Nineteenth-Century Philanthropy: The Case of Louisa Twining”, in Digby and Stewart, *Gender, Health and Welfare*, pp. 122–142.

considerable hostility, the BWHVC seems to have been a vehicle for extending the influence of some of the most prominent women in Bolton. Its activities were openly welcomed by the newspapers, which never referred to “female sensibilities”, and even by many male guardians.<sup>30</sup> The early history of the committee can be traced through newspapers. However, during the most active phase of the organization in the run-up to the 1894 elections to the board of guardians, the working diary of Mary Haslam provides a key insight into the role, achievements, and strategies of women in the development of policy in Bolton Union.<sup>31</sup>

Her diary shows that some of the work of the BWHVC was recognizably “domestic housekeeping” of the sort explored in much of the historiographical literature. For instance, the committee was active in brightening the specialist units of the workhouse, such as the maternity wards, in regularly redesignating room usage to prevent boredom, putting up pictures, and in questioning and changing the dress codes of children and the old.<sup>32</sup> Less familiar in the current literature is the way in which these women sold reform on more fundamental care issues to the male guardians and to workhouse staff. In July 1894, for instance, the BWHVC “recommended” to the guardians that they provide dedicated birthing rooms as well as convalescent beds for recuperating mothers. The expenditure was accepted and the work completed by 15 August. With a paid midwife already in place, this concern with the issue of maternity placed Bolton at the forefront of more enlightened practice at the national level.<sup>33</sup> Other important ideas should also be noted. In September 1893 the committee put forward a plan for the classification of mental patients in the absence of adequate county asylums. This plan was accepted, without debate, by the male guardians. In November 1893, the BWHVC suggested a new policy whereby the task mistress was authorized to reward those who volunteered to give their time and work in the laundry, suggesting the allocation of £5 to £7-worth of stores for this purpose to be under the

30. The fact that the committee included the wives of some of the biggest ratepayers in the town may have smoothed their passage, but this was also the case in many other places where hostility was more marked.

31. Unless otherwise stated, the empirical narrative data which follows is drawn from BRO ZHA/17/17, “Diary of a Female Poor Law Guardian”, which also includes minutes of the workhouse visiting committee. Limitations of space mean that only a brief review of the richness of the Haslam archive (including travel diaries, personal diaries, and an autobiography) can be undertaken.

32. For discussion of the “prescribed list of subjects” on which workhouse visiting committees were allowed to comment to guardians in Sussex, see J.M. Coleman, *Sussex Poor Law Records: A Catalogue* (Chichester, 1960), p. 18. There were no such restrictions in Bolton, and the WHVC continued in the town throughout the 1890s, forming a powerful axis when aligned with female guardians.

33. See P. Thane and G. Bock (eds), *Maternity and Gender Policies: Women and the Rise of the European Welfare State, 1880s to 1950s* (London, 1991).



control of the task mistress. By January 1894 the women of the BWHVC had got the guardians to agree to the establishment of further isolation wards in the hospital, segregating consumptives from the rest of the sick. This created a system which, within two years, was to be commended by inspectors from the local government board. Later in the same year, the guardians introduced a scheme whereby young women leaving the workhouse were offered a halfway house, a base to re-establish work and friendship groups, before once more attempting to make their own way in the town. These were progressive ideas by whatever standard we want to measure them, and they suggest that, despite class boundaries, the women of the BWHVC had a considerable empathy with the poor. Such empathy went hand-in-hand with pragmatism and careful policy-making, implying neither a limited role for women, nor atrophy in local Poor Law policy.

Yet, perhaps more important than the ideas and policies of the BWHVC themselves is the fact that they excited so little conflict with workhouse staff or male guardians. Three important tactical aspects of the organization appear to have been important in defusing the potential conflict that the historiography suggests ought to have emerged. First, the BWHVC was chaired by John Haslam, Mary's brother-in-law and a prominent philanthropist and cotton spinner. This effectively pitted a major male rate-payer against minor male rate-payers in the negotiation of authority over the workhouse. However, it would be wrong to imply from this that female involvement in public life had to be underscored by male sanctioning. John Haslam was a figurehead and, as we shall see, Mary Haslam was sufficiently skilled at manipulating the male guardians not to require his practical support. Second, most of the reforms suggested and achieved were undertaken after extensive consultation with workhouse staff on the one hand, and individual male guardians on the other. Indeed, ideas on rewards for help in the laundry and building work in the insane wards originated with workhouse staff themselves. It is notable that in November 1894 one of the senior nurses felt able to remark to Mary Haslam that, "the place was different and they all felt it. She wished it was 'our own ladies' who were candidates for the poor law guardian".<sup>34</sup> This positive and even affectionate attitude apparently contrasts with the reception given to such women by workhouse staff elsewhere.<sup>35</sup> A "management style" of cooperation and conciliation thus enabled the women of BWHVC to traverse potential hostility and dress up potentially radical changes in the clothes of consensus. Finally, it is important to understand the language that marked communication between the

34. BRO ZHA/17/17, "Diary of a Female Poor Law Guardian".

35. See Deane, "Late Nineteenth-Century Philanthropy".

BWHVC and guardians. Their yearly report of May 1894, for instance, talked of the *necessity* of a nursing superintendent, a resident doctor (in which Bolton lagged behind other unions) and more paid labour in the workhouse, as well as their *suggestion* that one cottage home be devoted to sick children, and their *consideration* that reports suggesting the cook was idle and the doctor a drunk were worrying.

Reading meaning into language is, of course, fraught with difficulty, but this language and the strategy that underpins it appears so often in the working diary that we can and should analyse it. Thus, where they could call on precedents elsewhere (which they were active in uncovering) the women of the BWHVC were forceful in their recommendations of necessities to the male guardians. By the following year all of their “necessities” were in place. Where they wanted to achieve something for which there was less precedent, they offered suggestions, which were again well received. Where they dealt with an area where the seat of power was ambivalent – the employment of officers – they offered an opinion or “consideration”. This exposition of language is worthwhile because its character and range suggests a distinctive change-management strategy. Female activists were clearly acutely aware of the battles that could and could not be won, and of the consequences of failure. They were also clearly aware of the fault lines among male guardians themselves, and of the necessity of thorough research on all questions. The language that they employed might be regarded as somehow “passive”, but in practice the women of the BWHVC used that language, successfully, to implement a quite radical change and reform agenda. Indeed, these were principles that were to underpin the campaign of the BWHVC in the board of guardians’ election of 1894 and the strategies of female Poor Law guardians over the next decade. A review of both is important if we are to understand and characterize the role of women as policy-makers, the relationship between female guardians, the development of the Poor Law at local level, and the magnitude of local changes to welfare policy from the late nineteenth century.

The election campaign of 1894 saw the return of five female candidates. The contest was widely reported in local newspapers, with female candidates shown in a good light. When, on 8 December 1894, a rally was held in support of the female candidates, most of the town clergymen, some of the most influential members of the existing board of guardians, and some of the largest employers attended and lent support. The candidacy of the women cut across political groupings, and the language of those giving speeches was a careful mix of solid justification for women guardians and the need for local welfare reform. Thus, J.W. Scott JP sent a speech to be read out at the meeting in which he said “he felt deeply interested in the cause, believing as he did that it was a righteous one [...]. The thing was so self-evident that one was at a loss to know

what argument to bring forward [...]. It must be an unmitigated blessing [for the poor].”<sup>36</sup> The broad church of support garnered by the female candidates is evident from the fact that the election of five women would have been unthinkable without support across a wide range of the rate-payer spectrum.<sup>37</sup> This broad base of support was to underpin a much wider role for women in Bolton Union than existing generalizations allow.

When Mary Haslam and her female colleagues took their places on the Bolton Poor Law Union Board in January 1895, they approached their work with a vigour apparently lacking amongst the most prominent female Poor Law guardians whose experiences underpin much of our current understanding. Some of their initiatives were aimed at fostering improvement in areas highlighted by Hollis as “female responsibilities” – clothing, washing facilities, the quality of nursing staff, inspecting child placements, and arranging day trips for children.<sup>38</sup> These activities reveal a real concern for the lives of poor people, of the sort that we also saw manifested by the BWHVC. Thus, on 20 January 1897, Mary Haslam noted in her diary; “Decided to try stove in number 2 cottage (Mr and Mrs Taylor) so that children may have more variety of cooking in their food than is possible by its being prepared in the boiler.” In January 1895 Mary Haslam had “[e]nquired into under clothing of children and thought we had better speak with the matron with a view to substituting drawers for stays with the girls”, while in January 1902 she organized donations to the new workhouse library. Female guardians were also prime movers in raising the number of paid staff by over one third between 1895 and 1900, often in the face of intense opposition from those who wanted to “save the rates”. Thus, on 11 August 1897 there was what Mary Haslam termed a “warm” discussion about levels of nursing staff in the workhouse. She noted, “Chairman (Kearsley) contended there was pauper help in hospital and so might be in the new wards; contradicted by Mrs Ashworth. It was finally agreed to advertise for a man and wife [to staff the new sick ward] and extra help to be given by Holden and Nurse Hevey.”

Of course, the changes sponsored by female guardians were not always successful. When a motion to spend £50 on carpentry tools and carpentry training for pauper boys came before the board, the female guardians supported the venture but on 26 May 1897 one of the male guardians – Mr Cunliffe – led a vote against the scheme. It was lost by one vote. Mary Haslam noted,

36. BRO *Bolton Journal*, 8 December, 1894.

37. Contrast this election strategy with the low-key campaigns which Hollis in *Ladies Elect* believed were mounted by women candidates, or the very confrontational campaigns waged by activists in Chorlton Union.

38. See Hollis, *Women in Public*.

Mr C afterwards spoke to me about it, and after my explanation said “Oh I did not know all that”, to which I replied that two or three of us had gone into the question fully and might have been trusted! His other argument was that it was giving pauper boys advantages over others!

The opposition here was motivated by cost, and by the fear of encouraging pauperism, rather than any conflict with female guardians. The scheme itself is typical of many floated in late nineteenth-century Bolton to try and change the long-term prospects of poor children through education and training. Such schemes reveal an empathy for the plight of poor people on the part of female Poor Law guardians that is glossed over where we use labels such as “domestic” or “female responsibilities”, and which has considerable resonance with the work of the BWHVC in the 1880s and early 1890s.

This said, it is important to realize that Mary Haslam and her female colleagues sought to extend their influence to all aspects of policy formulation and implementation in Bolton Poor Law Union. In contrast to the prevailing image of women bullied by male guardians, unwilling to speak or fight a point, and isolated from the important subcommittees, these women put forward seventeen of the thirty-eight motions which were discussed at full board level in the period 1897–1901. They were vocal in debate. Thus, in May 1896 Mary Haslam noted, “Mrs Ashworth moved for me that deputation attend Central Conference in London in June to hear discussion re transfer of pauper Schools to Educational Authorities under new Bill.” On 24 February 1897 “Mr Watkinson and Mr Kearsley spoke on London conference. Also myself.” Moreover, female guardians were very active in the sphere of subcommittees, after rapidly appreciating that it was unusual for formal board meetings to query the recommendations of these groups. Between 1894 and 1906, women sat on all of the major committees formed by the union and were vociferous in their condemnation where women were not included. By late 1897, the point had been conceded that female Poor Law guardians should be free to choose on which of these subcommittees they sat.<sup>39</sup> Meanwhile, from the time of their first election in 1895, female guardians served on most of the important local relief committees, actively shaping the development of a policy of keeping people out of the workhouse and of granting “adequate” allowances. These women, then, were proactive reformers rather than mere passive symbols of widening Poor Law participation.

We can discern some of the impact of the reforming policies of female guardians by looking at the profile of recurrent expenditure for Bolton Union. Aggregate spending had begun to increase from the early 1860s, but was checked temporarily post-1871 in the “crusade against out relief”.

39. Contrast this experience with the generalizations of Hollis in *Ladies Elect*.

By 1890, aggregate annual expenditure was almost three times higher than it had been in the early 1850s, but there was a further very significant rise between 1895 and 1904, broadly contiguous with the activity of the first wave of female Poor Law guardians on local relief committees.<sup>40</sup> At the same time, it is difficult to see any trend for expenditure on indoor relief growing faster than that on outdoor relief. The opposite was true of other urban unions. This might be taken as a reflection of the underlying – empathetic and pragmatic – belief of female Poor Law guardians that the workhouse should not be a disciplinary tool to control the able-bodied poor.<sup>41</sup>

For those who required institutional care, the biggest achievement of Mary Haslam in particular was to foster continual development of the Poor Law fabric. One example must stand for many. In May 1895, the hospital subcommittee voted six to five in favour of building a new hospital, with the two women on the committee leading the votes for the scheme. Mary Haslam recorded that “Mrs Ashworth spoke well”.<sup>42</sup> Unusually, the full board rejected the scheme. Mary Haslam noted “Warm discussion on the new Hospital plans. Matter ‘referred back to subcommittee and a smaller scheme to be brought forward instead’, 15 against present scheme, 9 for”. In response, Mary Haslam invited the chairman of the guardians to dinner and he “advised us [i.e. female guardians] to accept any proposal of the new committee for a new hospital so as to make a start”. Subsequently, the buildings subcommittee put forward new plans, for about half of what they had originally proposed, “decided to propose part of the scheme to go on with at once; and discuss the possibility of altering old hospital as well”. This was accepted by twenty-three votes to fifteen, and in the following year the rest of the scheme – involving new wards to allow further classification of diseases, a new fever hospital, and an isolation block for tuberculosis patients – was put in place. Just as she had done through the medium of the BWHVC, Mary Haslam sought cooperation with male guardians and fostered conciliation as a means of getting fairly radical measures implemented. This pragmatic approach should be regarded as an indicator of strength rather than weakness; new buildings for nurse accommodation and administration, and amendments to the fabric of the workhouse itself, flowed with relative ease after this episode. Mary Haslam spoke in many of the debates over expenditure in these areas. Between 1871 and 1905 Bolton raised £83,000 in loan capital,

40. For guidance on disentangling the accounts to produce the discussion which follows, see M. Crowther, “The Later Years of the Workhouse 1890–1929”, in Thane, *The Origins of British Social Policy*. All of the figures deployed here were drawn from BRO GBO/14/1–9, “Financial Statements of Bolton Poor Law Union”.

41. Thane, “Introduction”, p. 2.

42. BRO ZHA/17/17, “Diary of a Female Poor Law Guardian”.

the majority of it after the election of female Poor Law guardians in the 1890s.<sup>43</sup>

The impact of such investment on the lives of paupers and Poor Law staff must have been considerable. To take just one example – workhouse medical provision – the separate infectious hospital and close relationships between the Union and the Bolton Royal Infirmary ensured a dense and effective network of medical services in the area by the late 1890s. Consequently, the number of deaths in the workhouse complex remained remarkably limited for an institution of its size.<sup>44</sup> Clearly, the injection of female welfare agendas to local Poor Law regimes could facilitate considerable improvements in the lot of those falling within the ambit of the Poor Law.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, it is also important to recognize that investment expenditure of this sort raised the standing of Bolton Poor Law Union in national and regional terms. While less than fifty unions at national level had instigated any sort of quarantine for patients with tuberculosis in 1900, Bolton Union had an entirely separate building by 1897. The Union also invested heavily in cottage homes, and was amongst the first areas to discuss and adopt the case-paper system.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, by 1901, the board of guardians in general, and the women guardians in particular, were praised for their efficiency both by the local government board and the Bolton newspapers.<sup>47</sup>

Much more could be said about day-to-day activism. However, it is also important to appreciate that such female activism in Bolton did not generate the sustained hostility of male guardians, a familiar theme from our consideration of the operation of the BWHVC. There were, of course, underlying tensions, but the one example of direct male criticism of female guardians and their policies actually came from a lowly parish clerk. Thus,

Chairman called attention to remarks at Heaton parish, by clerk re the lady guardians' extravagance causing rise in rates. Voted by twenty against nineteen that the board write and request explanation of the same. Got consent of lady colleagues to solicitors' letter being sent from us to Mr Fearnhead. This done Mr Cooper [the chairman] approved. Also several of the men.<sup>48</sup>

43. BRO GBO 14/9, "Financial Statements".

44. See BRO HBO/1/4/1, "Bolton Royal Infirmary: Medical Committee Minutes", and BRO HFA/1/1, "Register of Patients Admitted to Farnworth Infectious Diseases Hospital". Also BRO GBO/5/18, "Deaths in Bolton Workhouse 1896–1903".

45. More widely, while the stigma of the workhouse may have remained, there is accumulating evidence that out-relief in particular came to be written into peoples' expectations in welfare terms by the later nineteenth century. See P. Mandler (ed.), *The Uses of Charity: The Poor on Relief in the Nineteenth-Century Metropolis* (Pennsylvania, PA, 1990); J. Robin, "The Relief of Poverty in Mid Nineteenth-Century Colyton", *Rural History*, 1 (1990), pp. 193–218.

46. See T.S. Ashton, *Economic and Social Investigations in Manchester 1833–1933* (Manchester, 1946).

47. BRO, *Bolton Journal*, 7 July 1901.

48. BRO ZHA/17/17, "Diary of a Female Poor Law Guardian".

There are two points of interest in the response to this familiar charge levelled against the female guardians. First, those who voted for the letter to the clerk included some of those who were implacably opposed to the women on other issues. Second, the response on the part of the female guardians themselves was swift and severe, a measure of their confidence both in respect of their position as guardians and their status in the wider community.<sup>49</sup> The fact that their letter gained the explicit support of the chairman and fourteen other male guardians suggests that this confidence was not misplaced.

Even when men and women directly opposed each other on the board, we must be careful of our reading of the situation. Thus, in January 1898 Mrs Ashworth was censured for publicly criticizing workhouse procedures, on the face of it an example of the hostility which women could face when overstepping the boundaries of their Poor Law roles.<sup>50</sup> However, the censure motion was only carried by twelve votes to ten, with Mrs Ashworth gaining the support of five male guardians. Moreover, the motion was carefully framed so as to enforce the position of collective liability without criticizing the work of women. We might read this as criticism by the back door, but male guardians were censured in the same way if they “went public”. Nor does Mary Haslam write of her outrage at the process of censure, suggesting that she recognized the need for collective liability. Indeed, one might argue that this very notion was one of the very reasons that female Poor Law guardians in Bolton could have such an important role.

What tension there was in the boardroom appears to have soon dissipated. Thus, during the first four years after women were elected for the first time in 1895, some male guardians were prone to insisting that subcommittees contain “no ladies”. Such feelings may reflect gender antagonism, but equally it might reflect the fears of minor rate-payers about the capabilities of the women, and thus their influence. They were right to be concerned about such capabilities. In practice, the “no-ladies” cry was defeated on every occasion, as Mary Haslam invited key male guardians to dinner and canvassed votes in advance of board meetings. Once the committees were convened of course, women had to find their

49. As with the BWHVC, female Poor Law guardians represented some of the most economically secure family groupings in Bolton. All of them held property in their own right, and reports of dinner parties in the Bolton newspapers suggests that these women were active in courting the public opinion of some of the most influential members of the local community. However, there is also evidence that they “sold” reform to the wider populace through the newspapers and through their support for the Bolton Society for the Return of Women Guardians. By 1900 there were nine female guardians and their combined economic power had been diluted.

50. For more on this, see A. Digby, “Poverty, Health and the Politics of Gender in Britain 1870–1948”, in Digby and Stewart, *Gender, Health and Welfare*, pp. 67–90.

feet. Tensions could ensue. Thus, in June 1896 Mary Haslam recorded a forthcoming absence from her buildings subcommittee and, "I asked for a lady to take my place as I shall be absent, and all four are added protection".<sup>51</sup> Just one year later the character of opposition had changed, and she felt no similar compunction to cover her absences in this way. By then, female Poor Law guardians had engaged in pragmatic and well-founded reform; they had earned respect rather than rising to gender conflict. These strategies were employed elsewhere. In 1895, for instance, the women on the board (with the support of substantial numbers of male guardians from across the social spectrum) obtained a narrow vote in favour of regular attendance at north-west Poor Law conferences. The issue never reared its head again. Indeed, the overwhelming impression is of the lack of gender tension and the warm, if hard-earned, appreciation of the work of female guardians. The same Mrs Ashworth who was censured one year drowned at Whitby the next, and the motion of the board referred to her untiring work and recorded considerable sorrow at her death. The same board thought enough of Mary Haslam (or were sufficiently cowed to ensure that she was kept in touch) to send a Christmas card all the way to St Moritz in 1897 and openly to support plans to give her honorary citizenship of the town.<sup>52</sup> Such estimators of esteem are missing from much of the current historiography.

A detailed reading of Mary Haslam's diary and the various union records which overlap with it reveals four key characteristics or strategies for the making of a successful and, in policy terms, influential female guardian. These are familiar from the tactics of the BWHVC. First, Mary Haslam was phenomenally well-informed. She attended regional and London-based Poor Law conferences, but also visited other Poor Law institutions in the north-west (Chorlton, Rossendale, Burnley, Ormskirk) and elsewhere (Whitechapel, Lyndhurst, Prestwyche). This reflected her independent means and economic power, which, even apart from the standing of her husband, made her more important than many of the male tradesmen on the board. Her arguments for change could thus be supported with direct evidence from other communities, giving them much more force. Second, Mary Haslam was assiduous in networking other (male) guardians at an individual level. When the proposals for a new hospital were in doubt, for instance, she talked extensively with the chairman of the board, agreeing, as we have seen, that they should force through the commencement of part of the scheme on the basis that the rest would then become undeniable. Even the local government board inspector, Jenner Fust, was not beyond manipulation. He agreed, in

51. BRO ZHA/17/17, "Diary of a Female Poor Law Guardian".

52. The contrast with the picture of hostility mounted by Hollis, *Ladies Elect*, could not be more starkly drawn. The question of the representativeness of Mary Haslam is addressed below.



September 1896, to help Mary Haslam in her plans to reform the cottage home system in the Union. Third, the language used to press a determined agenda of reform was not that of conflict. While Emmeline Pankhurst and Selina Cooper were *demanding* change in other Lancashire unions and alienating male board members, Mary Haslam was *suggesting* change, pointing to best practice elsewhere, and putting gentle pressure on fault lines which ran through Poor Law administration. Fourth, Mary Haslam was successful because she was sensitively aware of the fact – apparently ignored by many historians – that gender contests were only one, and often not the most important, focus of power relationships and tensions which ran through the boardroom.

The latter point is very important; where we accept that board policy was the outcome of multi-layered power relations, generalizations on the experiences and role of female guardians lose much of their foundation. Thus, from the 1880s, the most important votes on the Bolton board were very close indeed. The social composition of the guardians (based on occupational labels and magnitudes of tax payment) suggests that one reason for this may have been tensions between different social and economic groupings of ratepayers. Mr Shippobottom, for instance, was a vocal opponent of schemes involving increased expenditure. While he certainly engaged in vigorous debate with Mary Haslam, this was less because she was a woman than because she had allied herself with the “damn the rates” group, which had existed on the board for over twenty-five years. Other important conflicts also overtook the issue of gender. There were persistent struggles between the Bolton board and local government inspectors from the 1870s, while positions on religion, residence, and character also divided the guardians as a group. The latter could be particularly important. Mr Dearden and Mr Crompton attracted the contempt of both male and female guardians for their nit-picking, to the degree that even their natural social allies would vote against motions which they supported. On 27 October 1897, for instance, Mary Haslam noted “Great delay in business due to interruption by Dearden and Crompton; extreme tedium of the latter”. The board was also polarized along the lines of temperance, with vocal opponents of the spending plans supported by female guardians joining them in voting against motions which involved the introduction of drink to the workhouse. Thus, on 4 December 1901, Mary Haslam noted,

At Board. Resolution re xmas dinners. “A limited quantity of roast beef and plum pudding, with one pint of tea, coffee, cocoa or milk, snuff and tobacco for the adults and oranges and nuts for the children” passed without dissent so we hope the question of beer is dismissed forever.

Nor should we forget the issue of politics. While Mary Haslam was willing to court the support of the Primrose League to further the election

of female guardians, it is clear that most of the female guardians who were elected had the support of the Liberals in the town. They joined a substantial male Liberal grouping on the board, and stood in opposition to the likes of Shippobottom, Dearden, and Crompton who were prominent Conservative voices. The election of male and female guardians drawn from the labouring classes from the late 1890s added another political and social dimension to this jigsaw.<sup>53</sup> It is important not to overstate the practical as opposed to ideological divisions which differences of political hue could engender, but it is clear that this potential source of conflict was a further fault line running through the boardroom. Female Poor Law guardians saw such conflicts and navigated them without fostering gender conflict. They found their strength in cooperation rather than conflict.

### III

The working diary of Mary Haslam appears to be a unique document, but the lessons that we can draw from it probably have wider applicability. Using a detailed review of Poor Law practice to move from the general view on female guardians offered by autobiographical and other accounts of prominent activists, to the specific day-to-day activities of ordinary local government women opens up the possibility of an exciting re-interpretation of existing historiography. The strategies and achievements of Mary Haslam remind us that, despite broad national generalizations about late nineteenth-century atrophy, we must allow for the fact that in some areas at least the New Poor Law could become a vibrant, flexible, and dynamic institution. From the 1890s, it gave women the opportunity to bring fundamental reforming talents to the field of social care, engendering a new perspective on the mechanisms of Poor Law delivery and on the poor themselves.

In the Bolton context, Mary Haslam was a key player. While this review of her working life has been necessarily brief, it tells us enough to question generalizations such as those advanced by Rubinstein that, “[t]he novelty of being an elected woman, her minority status and the inhibitions of education and socialization meant that it was often difficult to institute policies of aggressive reform”.<sup>54</sup> When she was feted with the accolade of honorary citizenship, few of those applauding would have been untouched by the range of Mary Haslam’s activities, which ran from the cause of suffrage to countless small acts of charity. That Mary Haslam was

53. Nor was gender itself unproblematic. Female guardians did not always view issues in the same way and there were also tensions between working- and middle-class women. The Bolton Association for the Return of Women as Poor Law Guardians was formed in 1897 with an implicit brief to encourage women of the labouring classes to become guardians.

54. Rubinstein, *Before the Suffragettes*, p. 167.

relatively wealthy in her own right, a Liberal and married to a prominent Bolton citizen is not to be denied. However, her work for the Poor Law involved strategies and ideological perspectives that could have been shared by reforming guardians of both sexes, even if she brought her own particular style and language to the issues involved. She observed and exploited numerous fault lines running through the task of Poor Law administration, pushing forward a clearly defined, and cogently argued, agenda of welfare reform. Indeed, no amount of snippets from her working diary can convey the detailed calculation that underpinned her Poor Law activities. Sometimes she pushed harder, sometimes softer, sometimes proposing motions, sometimes getting others to propose motions, sometimes even voting against reforms in which she had a long-term interest because there was no hope of winning the point on a particular occasion. All of this was achieved with remarkably little gender tension, and the idea that conflict was inevitable as women extended their public persona is not one that fits where women, as in Bolton, employed pragmatic, cooperative, well-informed, and sensitively framed agendas of reform. In the sense that it is conflict and confrontation rather than success that grabs the headlines and dominates the sources, the hostile strategies and responses of the few prominent women who dominate current historiography may have clouded the success of numerous female Poor Law guardians at local level.

More work is needed on this issue. We should remember, however, that if Mary Haslam is one of the best-documented strategists, she was not alone in her reforming zeal in the Lancashire context. The broad swathe of Lancashire unions from Rochdale in the east to Southport in the west contained a dense network of women – administrators and radicals – who were accelerating the process of social reform. Selina Cooper, Hannah Silcock, Sarah Reddish, Alice Collinge, Elizabeth Lees, Hannah Mitchell, Emmeline Pankhurst, Teresa Billington, and Annie Kenney are just a few of the many women engaging in Lancashire local government by the 1890s. Their diaries, letters and other material wait to be explored in a number of local archives. That we should undertake such exploration is perhaps demonstrated best with a single simple statistic. After “the crusade against outdoor relief” of the 1870s and 1880s faltered, Lancashire Poor Law unions accounted for almost one-third of all authorized national capital expenditure, suggesting very considerable regional dynamism in Poor Law practice.<sup>55</sup> If the experience of Bolton Union has wider resonance, then female Poor Law guardians will have fundamentally influenced the level and form of this investment expenditure elsewhere in the county. In this sense, it is unfortunate that the call of Liddington and Norris for a more complex appreciation of female radical activity in this area has gone

55. See F. Driver, *Power and Pauperism: The Workhouse System 1834–1884* (Cambridge, 1993).

unheeded.<sup>56</sup> To achieve more, we must move from the general to the local in understanding the developing welfare system after 1880. We must also avoid the temptation to judge the New Poor Law and its administrators against national and general yardsticks in the late nineteenth century, when they had always been judged against local and specific ones before.

56. Liddington and Norris, *One Hand Tied Behind Us*. We should not, of course, forget that this area of Lancashire was also the focus for much in the way of alternative welfare structures. The Settlement Home Movement, for instance, was very active in Liverpool.