

THE SHOCKING OCCURRENCE AT STROUD WORKHOUSE, 1849.

by Philip Walmsley

In the *Gloucester Journal* of 8 September 1849 appeared the following:

Shocking Occurrence. - On Thursday evening an idiot boy came by his death in a horrible manner at the Stroud Union Workhouse. The attendants had put him in a warm bath, by order of the medical officer, and at the same time their attention was engaged in restraining a refractory lunatic and assisting a cholera patient who had just been brought in. The boy screamed violently, but no notice was taken of him as it was his practice to do so, and it never occurred to the attendants that the water was too hot as a woman had just previously used the bath. It turned out, however, that the steam by which the bath was warmed had been turned on from the moment the woman quitted, and the poor boy was literally boiled to death. The affair came before the Stroud Board of Guardians yesterday, when the following resolution in relation to the case was passed:- The Board of Guardians having received the report of the death of Charles Ireland, a pauper idiot, and an inmate of the workhouse, who lost his life by being unintentionally put into an over-heated bath, - Resolved that an application be made to the Poor Law Commissioners, requesting them to investigate the case.

And so began the exposure of the Stroud Workhouse scandal, which was to occupy many more column inches in the two following issues of the paper. After that the subject disappeared, and must then be followed to its lame conclusion in the pages of the Minute Book of the Stroud Board of Guardians.

In the Stroud district, as in the southern half of England generally, there had been little resistance to the application of the New Poor Law after its passing in 1834.

Two years later the old parish system was replaced by one based on larger areas, the Stroud Poor Law Union containing fifteen parishes centred on Stroud. To administer it was the duty of the Board of Guardians of the Poor, nominally an unwieldy body of over fifty, of which nearly half the members were the local magistrates headed by Earl Ducie and two former Stroud MPs,

W.H.Hyett of Painswick and David Ricardo of Gatcombe Park, though few of these chose to be active. The active guardians were mostly those nominated by the parishes, and by occupation or status they identified themselves as farmers, cloth manufacturers or ill-defined 'gentlemen'.

THE POOR LAW SYSTEM

The system they had to work was highly centralised, the three Poor Law Commissioners at Somerset House regulating in considerable detail the local administration of the poor law. By the standards of their time the Stroud guardians were not hard-faced administrators of this system, on several occasions seeking to mitigate what they clearly considered to be the excessive harshness of the Commissioners' regulations. But the New Poor Law was designed to reduce expenditure, and the necessary neglect and cheese-paring which ensued were bound to be productive of 'scandals'. Several poor law unions experienced these in the years that followed, the most notorious being that at the Andover workhouse in 1845, when after the introduction of a dietary based on oatmeal gruel labourers were found eating half-putrid gristle



Stone Manor, built as the Stroud Poor Law Union Workhouse.

and marrow from bones in the yard provided for grinding into fertiliser.

The first major object of the Stroud guardians was the construction of the new workhouse at the 'top of town', a building first occupied at the end of 1838. At the same time, after the introduction of the registration of births, marriages and deaths from 1837 there was built at the junction of John and Union Streets a 'register office', which also contained the guardians' board room and office. The designs for both buildings were produced by the Painswick surveyor and architect Charles Baker, who had already designed the Subscription Rooms and the Bedford Street Congregational Chapel, though the architect George Basevi, W.H. Hyett's brother-in-law, seems to have produced the basic plan used by Baker for the Subscription Rooms. All these buildings still stand, the workhouse, renamed Stone Manor, now adapted for housing.

The union workhouse was the centrepiece of the New Poor Law. Stroud workhouse was built to house up to 500 paupers, although the number of inmates seems never to have approached this, the 1841 census stating the number of workhouse residents as 282, and that of 1851 as 295.



The old Registrar's Office at the corner of Union and John Streets.

The staff to look after these were few in number. After the appointment of a clerk, *The Gloucester Journal* of 6 October 1838 advertised six posts - a master and matron, a schoolmaster and schoolmistress, these four posts to be occupied by married couples "without incumbrance", a nurse, and a porter who could mend shoes. Later, a tailor, a cook and a laundress were added, and also what we should now call a boilerman but which was then termed a 'fireman', to superintend the steam apparatus for the laundry and bathroom. With such a small number of staff, eight to look after nearly three hundred, much of the work had to be done by the inmates; in the male wards pauper wardmen were appointed to undertake the routine work of the ward.

The danger therefore existed that, with a staff so necessarily overworked, the system would break down, as it did on this occasion.

When a new entrant arrived, there took place the process of 'washing in', the new inmate being given a hot bath in one of two fixed baths. These were heated by jets of steam, and in order to economise the water was not normally changed between successive bathings. On the day in question a vagrant suspected of suffering from cholera was brought in, and the water heated preparatory to his bath. The medical officer called to examine the cholera patient was also asked by the workhouse master to certify a recently arrived woman as insane. She also had to be 'washed in', after the cholera patient.

'WASHING IN' YOUNG IRELAND

Before either of these could use the bath the laundress, who also helped the nurse, used it for a third newcomer, a woman, who bathed as the water was heating up. It was already uncomfortably hot when she got out, as steam continued to be passed through. For some unspecified reason the medical officer had also told the nurse that the mentally defective boy, Charles Ireland, should be bathed, but as she was attending to other matters she instructed a wardman,

Edward Woodman, to deal with him. Although only possessing one hand and not knowing what a thermometer was, Woodman had acted as nursing attendant to the boy.

To speed matters he asked another pauper, Thomas Smith, aged seventy-four, to help undress young Ireland. Then, with the steam still passing through, the boy was forced into the overheated bath. He screamed as soon as he touched the water, and Smith said he thought the water was too hot, whereupon Woodman rapidly passed his hand over its surface and said, "Oh, no. I have borne it hotter myself."

Although refusing to sit down and continually screaming, the boy was forced to remain in the bath for several minutes. Hearing the screams, the master sent the porter to investigate, and, when he found the boy still being held in the water with the temperature now rising towards boiling point, he had him taken out. As a result of the scalding to which he had been subjected he died five or six hours later.

THE INQUEST

The inquest was held next day. The coroner who conducted it with 'a respectable jury' was John Garlick Ball, formerly practising as a solicitor at Minchinhampton, and since 1848 of Badbrook, Stroud. He had been elected coroner in the fiercely fought contest of 1831, and since then had shown himself persistently assertive of what he considered to be the public good. On several occasions since 1836 he had written to the Board of Guardians about the circumstances in which paupers had died, most recently in July when a woman had died as a result of an accident on a workhouse staircase.

In this inquest, his knowledge of the regulations of the Poor Law Commission enabled him to note how the workhouse staff had ignored them. The first irregularity was the surgeon's failure to enter his instructions for bathing the paupers in the medical relief book. This was held to be necessary so that the workhouse master might know what had to be done and would see to its implementation, either by the nurse or himself. As no order had been written down, the master could not be held responsible. On the other hand, the nurse had certainly acted irregularly, firstly by attending to an order that was not formalised by being written, and secondly by not checking the temperature of the water in the bath.

After an inquest repeatedly adjourned in order to complete the enquiries, the verdict of the jury concluded with the statement that 'although they cannot concur in a verdict amounting to manslaughter against any individual, they were still unanimously of the opinion that the said Charles Ireland was killed for want of proper persons being appointed to superintend the bath'. They then made a series of recommendations to the Board of Guardians, the most important being that when the surgeon ordered baths for the sick they should be entered in the medical relief book, that it should be the duty of a 'proper person' to supervise the use of the baths, and that the temperature of the water should be recorded both on getting into, and out of, the bath. The coroner also suggested that there should be a bath exclusively for the sick in the sick ward.

FURTHER INVESTIGATIONS

On being informed of the accident at their next meeting, the Board of Guardians decided to ask the Poor Law Board to investigate the case.

The Poor Law inspector, a Mr Greaves, deputed to do this arrived in Stroud a fortnight later. He held his enquiry at the workhouse, where, besides the workhouse master and surgeon, evidence was also given by the coroner. The facts given at the inquest were repeated, but the surgeon and master showed their disagreement with the official regulations and the recommendations of the inquest.

The surgeon Edward Gardiner said that he had always found his verbal orders attended to and could see no advantages in having them written down in the medical relief book. Nor, when there was a portable bath available, was it necessary to have a fixed bath in the sick ward. Instead, he recommended various changes of routine to make a repetition of the accident unlikely, including the use of a coloured-spirit thermometer.

The master of the workhouse, William Sherborne, made no mention of the lack of written notification to him. He was clear who was most to blame. Looking after the steam apparatus was

the responsibility of the boilerman, William Chew, and it was his job to fill the bath with warm water and to turn off the steam before the patient got in. Unfortunately, 'Chew was not so attentive to his duties as he ought to be'. The nurse too had duties, but when males were bathing these were limited to testing the temperature of the water, a duty she had neglected in this case. So far as the second recommendation of the inquest was concerned - that a 'proper' person should supervise the use of the baths - the master's opinion was that the recommendation was impracticable because the workhouse had to use pauper wardsmen to do the job. Any inmate who showed the least likelihood of being able to earn his own living outside the workhouse would be encouraged to leave, so that it was impossible to find among the residents a 'trustworthy' person.

The enquiry over, the boilerman Chew resigned without waiting for what looked like an inevitable dismissal, although he had only been appointed two months before, at a salary of twelve pounds per annum.

A fortnight later a letter based on the inspector's report was received from the the Poor Law Board, and the guardians considered it at their next meeting. In their letter, the Board set out the respective duties of those concerned with the use of the bath, and made other recommendations. Those parts of the letter which referred to duties were to be read to the appropriate employees, as a result of which the nurse and the laundress attended the next meeting, and were duly admonished. The boilerman Chew, having left, was now no longer amenable to disciplinary action.

RECOMMENDATIONS IGNORED

As to the letter's other recommendations, the guardians noted

and shelved them. A new safety valve was not needed for the boiler as the present one was adequate. They accepted the master's view that paid male attendance on the sick was unnecessary, though if he changed his mind the board said they would reconsider the matter.

And this to all intents and purposes disposed of this unhappy episode. The *Gloucester Journal*, having reported extensively on the subject for three weeks, dropped it. Depending as it did on its local correspondent, it had no further news to report.

The chief culprit had been found to be Chew, the boilerman, with lesser blame attached to the nurse, Eliza White. The event could be blamed on the personal negligence of these two. No-one of course mentioned the inherent defects of a system based on minimal professional care. The matter was now concluded.

Each year the guardians entertained their chairman to dinner. It may be confidently stated that at the next dinner no reference was made in the speeches to the sad case of Charles Ireland.

NOTE

The Poor Law Commission was officially re-named the Poor Law Board in 1847, but the old name remained in wide currency. The two terms have been used interchangeably above.

The sources of this article are to be found in the *Gloucester Journal* of 8, 15 and 22 September 1849, and in the Minute Book of the Stroud Board of Guardians GRO.G/STR.8a/7. The author wishes to thank the staff of Gloucester City Library and of the County Record Office.