

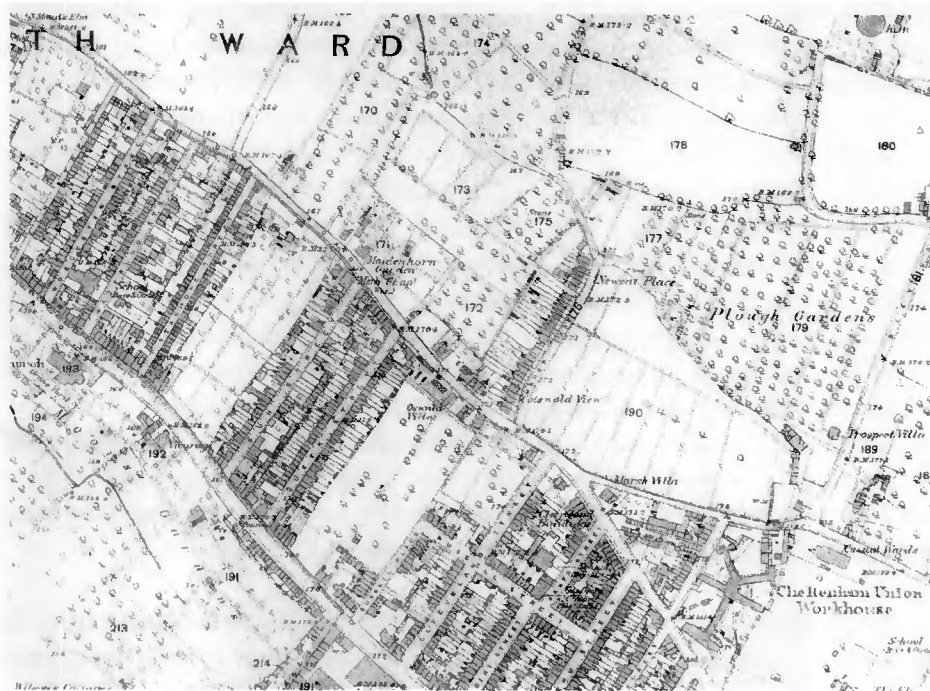
## A CASE OF POVERTY IN LATE VICTORIAN CHELTENHAM

by Ron Edlin

The problem of widespread poverty attracted an increasing amount of attention during the last twenty years of the nineteenth century largely as a result of the exposure of conditions in the poorer districts of London and a growing fear of social unrest. While most of the attention was, understandably, focused on the capital, smaller towns and cities faced similar problems. In Cheltenham for example a local newspaper, as early as 1880 claimed that this 'wealthy and religious town... contains a large poor population, many of whom live in almost constant want, and are exposed to very serious suffering'.<sup>1</sup> In 1882, a relatively prosperous year, an appeal for funds by the local branch of the Charity Organisation Society claimed that there were many thousands of poor in the town. It argued that the 'parish allowance' should be increased by 6d. or a 1s. 'Half a crown and a loaf of bread are not a large weekly allowance when 1s. 6d. is deducted for rent'.<sup>2</sup>

Increased awareness of poverty did not however produce any improvement in the methods used to alleviate the consequences and there is a good deal of evidence that in Cheltenham the funds allocated to poor relief declined during the last two decades of the century. The local Board of Guardians for example seemed primarily concerned to avoid increasing the poor rate and the number of people receiving the 'parish allowance', or out relief, declined steadily from the early 1870s regardless of economic fluctuations and changes in employment levels. There was also, of course voluntary giving, for much of which the Church was probably responsible but a significant proportion of Church giving went to religious projects such as church buildings and overseas 'missions to the heathen'.<sup>3</sup> Later in the century the claims of London based charities became an additional drain on local resources, 'charitable piracy' as the *Cheltenham Looker On* put it.<sup>4</sup> In spite of its attractions as an exclusive leisure resort and non industrial residential town Cheltenham in the late Victorian period was clearly not an ideal place in which to be poor as the Smith family discovered in the early summer of 1886.

On Monday 24 May of that year John Smith, his wife Minnie and their baby daughter Louisa arrived in Cheltenham and found lodgings at Mrs Vicara's lodging house, 21 Stanhope Street in the North Ward. Originally from Birmingham they had been travelling around the country for the past twelve months seeking work and before moving to Cheltenham they had stayed in Gloucester for a short time. While in Gloucester Louisa had been treated for bronchitis and whooping cough at the Children's Hospital. Mrs Vicara later testified that she was still very ill when the family arrived but did not appear to be neglected. By the Wednesday the child's condition had deteriorated and on Mrs Vicara's advice Mrs Smith took her to the workhouse to obtain an



Detail from the 1884 OS map (Gloucestershire Collection)

order enabling her to seek medical assistance. The Relieving Officer for the North Ward, Mr McCraith informed her that a medical order could only be issued to the head of the family and advised her to tell her husband that he would have to go to the workhouse. John Smith however had earlier set out for Tewkesbury where there was a prospect of employment and did not return to the lodgings until late that evening.

The following morning Mrs Smith again went to the workhouse and at approximately 10.30 a.m. saw McCraith who refused to issue an order immediately because he was required to attend a meeting of the Board of Guardians. Mrs Smith

pointed out that the Louisa was dangerously ill and mentioned that she had received treatment in Gloucester. McCraith however insisted that his duty to the Board took priority and instructed Mrs Smith to wait until the meeting ended. The waiting room had no fire however and after some time she went to a nearby public house, the Old Cherry Tree Inn where she was allowed to sit by the fire. The landlady of the inn was clearly concerned about the child's condition and warmed up some broth of which the baby took a little. She later testified that the child suffered several convulsions. A member of the public also became concerned and, after questioning Mrs Smith went to the workhouse where he explained the situation to one of the Guardians, Mr Price who immediately went to the inn. Having seen the child Price returned to the workhouse and soon after McCraith left the meeting and issued the medical order. Around 12.30 Mrs Smith called at Dr Bevan's house only to find that he was not available. She was assured however that he would visit her lodgings as soon as he returned. In the meantime the baby was treated with linseed oil poultices applied to the chest and back but suffered further convulsions. John Smith paid a further visit to Bevan's residence but he was still unavailable. Some time between 2 p.m. and 4 p.m. Louisa died. A Dr Walters arrived at the lodgings at 6 p.m.

An inquest into Louisa's death was held at the Barley Mow public house on Saturday 29 May and perhaps its most notable feature was the hostility shown towards McCraith. It was perhaps inevitable that Relieving Officers would be unpopular among the poor but the strength of feeling evident in this case suggests that McCraith was hated by a much larger section of the population. One of the Guardians later recalled overhearing one jurymen, a licensed victualler remark that 'That old McCraith ought to be hanged'. The jury seemed to have arrived at its verdict before the inquest commenced and at the outset announced its intention to add a 'rider' to the Coroner's findings. Various members continually demanded a more aggressive line of questioning and several times during the proceedings the Coroner threatened to adjourn the proceedings on the grounds that 'there is too much feeling in this matter'. McCraith claimed that on the Wednesday morning he 'could not see anything in the condition of the child to indicate immediate danger' and his insistence that John Smith should attend the workhouse was in accordance with the 'rules' laid down by the Board of Guardians. He had however waited until 3 p.m. expecting that Mrs Smith would return. Had she done he would have issued the order even if Mr Smith had not been available. There is however no evidence that he made this point to Mrs Smith. As regards his actions on the Thursday morning he maintained that his attendance at the Board meeting was his primary duty. At this point the Coroner adjourned the inquest partly to allow the bad feeling to subside but also because he wished to hear the views of the Guardians on the case particularly with regard to the rules governing the issue of medical orders.

When the hearing reconvened on the following Monday morning at the Barley Mow the Guardians were present in force. The Coroner welcomed the acting vice-chairman of the Board, Mr Parsonage and the Clerk but expressed some surprise that four other Board members had also felt it necessary to attend. The meeting was then moved to the workhouse boardroom where perhaps the Guardians felt they were on stronger ground. Parsonage stated that the rule governing the issue of medical orders was a by-law which, while recorded only in the Board minutes was well understood by the poor. It was intended to prevent wives 'pauperising' their husbands while they were at work but the attendance of the husband was only required if, in the opinion of the Relieving Officer the case was not urgent. The Coroner was clearly rather sceptical about this statement and asked 'is it not too much to put the Relieving Officer in the place of a medical man?' Parsonage however claimed that McCraith had been a Relieving Officer for twenty years and was sufficiently experienced to judge the child's condition. Since there is no indication that McCraith carried out an examination this comment seems somewhat irrelevant particularly when Parsonage went on to argue that McCraith's reluctance to issue a medical order on the Wednesday was due to Mrs Smith's failure to advise him of the severity of Louisa's illness. When asked why she had not done so Mrs Smith replied that she had not known that it was necessary. She had experienced no difficulty in obtaining treatment in Gloucester and assumed it would be the same in Cheltenham. The Coroner seemed curiously reluctant to point out the weakness of Parsonage's argument. While he accepted that to some extent Mrs Smith was to blame he observed that she could not have known of the local rules governing the issue of medical orders in Cheltenham since they were not displayed.

On the Thursday Mrs Smith had of course been more explicit and a witness, Ruben Hurst a workhouse inmate acting as McCraith's porter described the child as 'wheezy' and no doubt very ill. There was clearly an urgent need for medical attention but despite this the Guardians claimed that McCraith had acted properly in attending

the Board meeting before issuing the order. It is worth noting that the published report of the meeting in question gives no indication that McCraith's presence was essential or that he made any contribution to the proceedings. The only items on the agenda were the routine weekly relief statistics and a discussion document entitled 'Religious Solicitude for Tramps'.<sup>5</sup>

At the closing stages of the enquiry McCraith, in what seemed to be an attempt to shift some of the blame onto John Smith, asked why he had not accompanied his wife to the workhouse on the Thursday and when she went to Dr Bevan's residence. Mrs Smith replied that he perhaps did not realize just how ill the child was but 'I did'. She then went on:

*I am twenty seven years old and have had eight children altogether, only two of the eight is living. One lived fourteen months, another a year and ten months, another twelve days, another three years and ten months, another five years and another one day after its birth. Four of them died last summer from whooping cough and bronchitis, and one died of consumption. The two children living are aged five and seven.*

At this point she fainted and was carried from the room.<sup>6</sup>

This statement although incomplete conveys some idea of the reality of long term poverty in the late Victorian period and the feeling of helplessness and frustration that many poor people must have experienced when confronted with the harsh unfeeling bureaucracy of the Poor Law. It did not however provoke any expression of sympathy for the Smith family or any demand for change in the local Poor Law procedures. The Coroner's verdict merely cleared McCraith of negligence and found that Louisa Smith had died of convulsions. The jury restricted its comments to attacking McCraith and its 'rider', which the Coroner allowed in spite of strong opposition from the Guardians stated that 'We think Mr McCraith is to blame in not giving the mother an order to take to a medical man on the Thursday morning, and hope he will be more careful in the future'. The Guardians, at the weekly Board meeting following the inquest were almost unanimous in condemning the attitude and composition of the jury and expressing their support for McCraith. One member did raise the possibility of amending the rules for the issue of medical orders but received no support.<sup>7</sup>

The views of the local press seemed to be based on political considerations. The *Free Press* and the *Examiner*, both Liberal papers endorsed the Coroner's verdict but condemned the jury for its behaviour at the inquest and for unjustly criticizing a valuable public servant.<sup>8</sup> The Conservative *Echo* took the opposite view claiming that the evidence submitted at the inquest indicated that McCraith 'was guilty of - to put it mildly - a little carelessness'. Its main criticism was however reserved for its Liberal rivals for their attempts to 'white wash' the Relieving Officer and to 'black wash' the jury.<sup>9</sup> Only the *Mercury* seemed genuinely outraged on humanitarian grounds informing its readers that the case demonstrated that 'a vile, unchristian like if not absolutely brutal system is encouraged at your workhouse, which is a disgrace to common humanity'.<sup>10</sup> It argued that the decision reached at the inquest did not reflect public opinion which feels that the 'hard line of duty should give way to the more blessed quality of humanity'. There is however little evidence that these views were widely shared.

## References

<sup>1</sup> *Cheltenham Examiner (Examiner)*, 2 June 1880 p.4

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* 22 Feb 1882 p.4

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* 23 Dec 1885 p.4

<sup>4</sup> *Looker On*, 26 March 1892 p.299

<sup>5</sup> *Examiner* 29 May 1886 p.3

<sup>6</sup> Full reports were published in the *Free Press* 5 June 1886 p.2, *Chronicle* 5 June 1886 p.2 & *Examiner* 2 June 1886 p.3

<sup>7</sup> *Examiner* 9 June 1886 p.3

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 2 June 1886 p.4 & *Free Press* 2 June 1886 p.2

<sup>9</sup> *Echo* 2 June 1886

<sup>10</sup> *Mercury* 5 June 1886 p.2