GROWING OLD IN ENGLAND
1878 TO 1948

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DECLARATION

Except where otherwise indicated
this thesis is my own work.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis deals with the experience of old age for working-class old people in England in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It covers a time period from the beginning of the agitation for old age pensions in 1878 to the implementation of the Beveridge Plan in 1948, thus extending over the last three generations of the Poor Law and the decades generally thought to mark the birth of the Welfare State. The thesis is in three parts. The first deals with age and employment, the second with the living conditions and health of the elderly at home and in institutions, and the third with old people and the community.
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INTRODUCTION

"It is shown that 58 per cent of all the adult paupers ... are old people of sixty-five years of age or more. This conclusion is not drawn from the evidence of a single investigation only. It is no irresponsible offspring of the fervid imagination of a speculative statistician. It is the simple conclusion to be gathered from a series of impartial official investigations."

- William Sutherland, campaigner for old age pensions, 1907.1

In this thesis I deal with the experience of growing old in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. My subjects are elderly people from that rich mine of statistical information, the English working class. Sometimes the available figures refer to the entire aged population, and sometimes the occasional clerk or small tradesman makes an appearance on the fringes. The history of ageing for the English middle classes remains largely an untrodden field, no doubt due to the relative scarcity of statistical sources.

This study is not restricted to those of current pensionable age. Where "elderly" people are mentioned, these are in their fifties or early sixties, or old people of unspecified age; when people are referred to as "old", they are definitely aged over sixty and usually older. "Older" people comprises both these groups. People in their forties figure infrequently and are, unoriginally, referred to as "middle-aged". Much of what is said about old people, especially on the issue of living standards, applies equally to other poorer working-class groups; but where evidence exists relating solely to the elderly, this is used in preference to more general material.

Although the thesis is entitled, "Growing Old in England", some of the national statistics used refer to England and Wales or even to the United Kingdom. Occasionally, when evidence which sheds light on the English experience is available from Wales, Scotland or, very rarely, Ireland, this is used, but its source is stated in the text. The experience of old people in these countries has distinct features which are perhaps better dealt with in a separate work.

My aim has been to provide a balance of evidence from different parts of England. Generally, a wide range of useful sources are available for the rural elderly throughout the period, especially for the South and East Anglia. On the other hand, apart from a few
surveys and miscellaneous fragmentary gleanings, the lives of old people in smaller provincial towns are relatively poorly documented in contemporary sources, as are those of the aged in the Midlands and the industrial North-West: these areas would no doubt repay further study. Inevitably, London looms large, offering both the richest and most comprehensive information for any given time and also the best, and sometimes almost the only, material for comparisons over time.

It is sometimes said, for instance by David Thomson, that "London [Poor Law] Unions were never representative of anything but themselves"; but no place is without its distinctive peculiarities. Excellent and illuminating studies have been produced in recent years by Thomson himself and by Jill Quadagno, based very largely on information obtained from the Bedfordshire Union of Ampthill and the village of Chilvers Coton, near Coventry, respectively. Yet neither of these places could be described as typical. Ampthill was a small rural Union chiefly notable for its Poor Law riots in 1835 and the fervour with which its officials administered the New Poor Law; indeed, the very fact that its records are so complete underlines its peculiarity. Chilvers Coton was a rural parish suffering from the collapse of the cottage industry of ribbon weaving at a time when cottage industry in most parts of England had long been moribund. Thomson and Quadagno are both careful to provide data from other parts of England with which to compare and amplify their local information; nonetheless, like all good historical studies, theirs are valuable primarily because they allow us a glimpse into a specific time and place, not in spite of this.²

Moreover, London was no Brigadoon, but the home, from 1881 to 1951, of a fairly constant 20 per cent of the population of England and Wales, or 7,256,000 of 36,070,000 people in 1911. In this year, London and the other great English conurbations held 41 per cent of the English and Welsh population; by contrast, less than 20 per cent of the population dwelt in rural areas, and fewer than one in twenty of the male workforce was employed in agriculture. The use of a great deal of evidence from London and other cities such as Liverpool and York - these being also fertile fields for the study of old people - thus reflects the experience of a very large proportion of the English population in this period. Nonetheless, wherever possible, material from such cities and from rural areas is supplemented by other sources.³

The choice of time periods is imposed by political events. In 1878, Canon W.L. Blackley published an article in the Nineteenth Century advocating old age pensions, and although this was by no means the first such article, it led to the three Select Committees on National Provident Insurance in the 1880s. It was no coincidence that this first flush of interest occurred only a decade after the Poor Law Board, soon to be the Local Government Board,
introduced its policy of "strict administration", with a severe tightening of eligibility for Poor Law relief which led to a reduction of the total number of relief recipients by 194,000, or 18.5 per cent, between 1870 and 1873 alone. However, the group initially most severely affected by this change was probably the unemployed and their families, and not surprisingly, the 1880s saw the main focus of community concern on the newly discovered "problem of unemployment". In 1889, Prince Otto von Bismarck introduced old age pensions in Germany. 4

Although the "problem of old age" would no doubt also have seized community attention sooner or later, the work of Canon Blackley and the National Provident Insurance Committees, along with developments in Germany, helped to focus the attention both of Joseph Chamberlain and of the great social investigator, Charles Booth, on the plight of the aged poor. This led to an explosion of interest in the issue which finally culminated in the Old Age Pension Act of 1908: this provides a convenient midpoint to the thesis. In 1925, contributory pensions were introduced, and in 1929, the Poor Law Guardians made way for the new Public Assistance Committees, under the aegis of the Local Authorities. From 1940, responsibility for the welfare of old age pensioners, apart from medical and institutional relief, was transferred from Local Authorities to the Assistance Board: however, a small minority of old people still remained on Public Assistance rolls. In 1948, the final death knell of the Poor Law sounded, with the introduction of comprehensive national insurance in the Beveridge Plan; this offers a neat conclusion to the period, which thus encompasses the three final generations of the Poor Law. 5

These events have been fully discussed by Pat Thane in her work on the development of old age pensions policy, and for the later period by a large number of authors. Aside from their effects on the lives of working-class old people, they are not within the scope of this thesis. 6

My thesis is in three parts. The first consists of two interconnected chapters on age and employment; the second of three interconnected chapters on the living conditions and health of elderly people at home and in institutions; and the third of two chapters on old people and the wider community. The latter of these chapters deals mainly with the work of the Assistance Board in the 1940s, and thus serves as an epilogue. The three parts thus deal in turn with older people in the marketplace, at home, and in the community; but as always, these aspects of life are so intertwined that each intrudes continually on the others.

The chosen time frame offers the opportunity for a long sweep analysis, which tends to highlight continuities in the experience of old age over the decades, in contrast to studies
which take a "before and after" view and thus unavoidably emphasise discontinuity. For this period, commonly thought of as marking the birth of the Welfare State, the discontinuous or "before and after" analysis has long predominated, an imbalance which has been compounded by the tendency of many studies of nineteenth century social issues to break off at the First World War or, at the latest, in the 1920s. Although more longitudinal analysis of this period is now being undertaken, most notably by Paul Johnson on the history of ageing and retirement, there is still room on this side of the scales to right the balance.7

Although my time period is determined by political developments, it is also expedient in terms of historical sources, effectively starting with the 1881 Census and the mass of Government reports on the "problem of old age" from the 1880s, and more especially the 1890s, to 1908, and ending with the fresh outbreak of interest in the "problem" in the 1940s. For the 1880s, the main existing material on old people is contained in the Census of 1881, the Select Committees on National Provident Insurance, Ministry of Health records and those of individual Poor Law Unions and the survey material compiled by Charles Booth from 1886. In the 1890s, the field widens considerably due to the explosion of popular concern about the aged poor. For this decade and the 1900s, there is an immense volume of published and unpublished material, including a number of excellent surveys and a plethora of Government reports.

For the three decades following the introduction of old age pensions, there is a scattering of Government enquiries and a good deal of information contained in sources dealing with wider groups in the population, such as social surveys of various towns and cities and studies of working-class health and unemployment. The 1940s saw a veritable rash of studies of the aged, starting with the many superb reports produced by the officers of the Assistance Board during the Second World War, followed in its wake by a number of invaluable large scale surveys by the Central Office of Information Social Survey, the Nuffield Foundation and others.

In addition, and for the whole period, there is the work of working-class autobiographers and other memoirists, and collections of working-class reminiscences by contemporary and modern authors. Much use has been made of modern research using Poor Law, Census and other data for this period, such as the works by Thomson, Quadagno and Johnson, cited above, and by Chris Gordon and Stuart Riddle, among others.8 Secondary authorities are constant reference points for information on the wider social, economic and political background of the period; and on topics specifically discussed in this thesis, the work of Pat Thane, Noel Whiteside and Margaret Crowther has been especially valuable.9
Most of the sources used offer information in a range of forms including statistics, case notes and impressions and anecdotes, and I have sought throughout the thesis to strike a balance between these forms. Some sources, in particular the Booth Collection and the New Survey of London files in the British Library of Political and Economic Sciences, and the Assistance Board files in the Public Records Office, are such rich and varied compilations of statistics, case notes and other information that they merit a thesis in their own right.

Some other sources are fragmentary, with the lives of poorer working-class people as usual being glimpsed mainly through the distorting mirror of official case notes, the scribblings of the charitably inclined, and suchlike, too often written expressly to justify decisions to refuse assistance, consign to the workhouse, or bully in one way or another. Throughout one is faced with the perennial frustrations of the writer forced to use someone else’s statistics or to convert incomplete or unsatisfactory compilations of data into useful figures. In particular, there is a dearth of statistical information on older women, who thus must often be consigned to impressionistic postscripts on the activities of their menfolk. Moreover, late nineteenth century statistics are almost invariably eccentrically compiled and tabulated, and even mid-twentieth century figures are not free from the effects of moral categorising, strange combinations and arbitrary exclusions. Often the most tantalising data are rendered almost useless to the historian by the arrangements with which the original collectors have suited them to their own purposes. Sometimes valuable information can be obtained from such tabulations by approaching them crabwise, from odd angles, and snatching bits and pieces to be recombined in more suitable form; sometimes even this is not possible.

Such hindrances are no doubt common to all historians and to many other writers. To close with a quotation more reflective in tone than the one with which we began, this time from Charles Booth on his first paper on the aged poor in 1892,

He did not think the figures given were at all satisfactory: they were a perfect quagmire through which he had waded to the best of his ability. He did not think the conclusion he had arrived at was very much out, and ... [it] seemed to him there was enough material for a very good discussion.10
NOTES


7. See, for example, the works mentioned above; P. Johnson, The Economics of Old Age in Britain: a Long-Run View, 1881-1981, Centre for Economic Policy Research Discussion Paper No. 47, London, 1985; and later works.


CHAPTER ONE

"THROWN OUT OF WORK BY AN IMPROVEMENT":

AGE AND EMPLOYMENT PART I

"There was a time of day, I think, when it was stated that the workman was too old at forty, but when the war came along he was not too old at seventy".

- C.W. Bowerman, MP, to Ryland Adkins Committee, 1919.¹

"They turned me out at sixty-five, if they want me back now they can whistle for it, war or no war".

- Retired builder to Assistance Board investigator, 1941.²

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Statistical Background

"Thrown out of work by an improvement": this note by the Clerk to the Stepney Guardians, John Jones, on the case of an old man in Poplar Workhouse in 1889 could almost serve as a summary of the employment of old people in English society, and in other industrialised countries, in modern times.³ For there is no doubt that the last century has seen the transition in England from a community in which most old men, and a large minority of old women, could be classified as in the labour force, to one in which a very small minority continue in employment. According to the 1881 Census, the first to contain information on retirement, more than 73 per cent of the male population of England and Wales aged over sixty-five was occupied, a figure which declined steadily until 1901, remained roughly stable in the years until 1921, then fell rapidly to the historically low level of 11 per cent in 1981. At the same time, occupation rates recorded in the Census for women over sixty-five declined from 18 per cent in 1881 to just over 5 per cent in 1951, then showed some tendency to increase due to the rising workforce participation of older married women.⁴

Hence the proportion of old people who are now classified as occupied is between one-third (women) and one-seventh (men) of that a century ago. This is a dramatic change, and one which some sociologists, such as Peter Townsend, Chris Phillipson and Alan Walker, have seen as marking the "invention of retirement" by the State and the marginalisation and
enforced dependency of the elderly population. Noting the growing use of set retirement ages and superannuation schemes in industry in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the introduction of old age pensions in 1908 and the development of Trade Union superannuation, these writers have suggested that the Government, employer groups and in some cases, Trade Unions, adopted a deliberate strategy aimed at excluding old people from the workforce. Their work echoes a belief common in our society, and especially amongst the elderly themselves, that until recent years, most old people continued to work happily and productively in their lifetime jobs, maintaining their social and economic position until the day they died.5

Historians, on the other hand, have tended to take issue with this view, with authors such as Paul Johnson, Pat Thane, Richard Smith and David Thomson arguing for a more complex process of change in which the economic and social choices of old people themselves have played a crucial role, and in which strong continuity is maintained with the experience of the elderly in previous centuries.6

Considerable vigour has been added to this debate by current fears about the ageing populations of western nations and their growing dependency ratios. The socioeconomic role of the aged is a topic of pressing interest in the developed world, and information on the changes in that role over time may be of some importance in the development of Government policy and industrial practice. Inevitably, the debate is informed by modern judgements on the social and economic utility of workforce participation by the aged, and writers do not always remember to step back and try to understand how previous generations of old people felt about working and giving up work, and how their workforce participation was viewed by their contemporaries. When this is done, the much-quoted Census statistics may appear in an altogether more revealing light. As Paul Johnson has observed in a recent paper,

... the experience of retirement may have changed over time and varies greatly between individuals. This means that considerable care must be taken in relating census descriptions of the structure of the labour force at different times to behavioural changes that may affect the retirement process and individual retirement decisions.7

This issue is the subject both of this and the following interconnected Chapter on age and employment. Hence it may be useful to start with a close look at the 1881 Census as the first comprehensive source of information on retirement rates. An examination of the Enumerators' Books for particular districts reveals some interesting points. For instance,
the Enumerators' Books for Stepney, a largely working-class district in London's East End dominated by dock and waterside employment, contain very few mentions of retirement. In an area with a population of nearly 20,000, more than 2,000 of whom were over fifty years of age, about twenty people were recorded as "retired". These were almost exclusively confined to lower middle-class occupations: "retired captain", "retired Master Mariner", "retired farmer", "retired clerk" and "retired butcher" all appeared more than once. In addition, one "superannuated customs officer" and just over a dozen elderly people said to be living on their financial or property investments could be added to those definitely outside the labour force. A further search reveals another thirty or so old people, nearly all women, stated to have been "formerly" in certain employments: for example, "formerly a dressmaker", "formerly a cook" and -one of the few male entries -"formerly a publican".8

From here, however, we move onto more uncertain ground. A very large number of women of all ages, and a few old men, were classified according to their relationship with the head, or former head, of the household, but with no further information: these comprise mainly wives, widows, daughters, parents and parents-in-law. These people would have been classified as being outside the workforce, but in fact this would not always have been the case. Under-recording of women's occupation rates in the Census has long been documented, and in this Census is apparent from a comparison of female occupation rates recorded in Charles Booth's more detailed street surveys of similar districts in 1889.9

In a few dozen such cases, mainly in families of small tradesmen or artisans, these relatives were firmly stated to have "no occupation", "nil" or to be "unemployed". These descriptions were applied most usually to wives, mothers and daughters and were no doubt intended to convey that these families could afford a role of genteel domesticity for their womenfolk: to quote one of Elizabeth Roberts' Lancashire informants, "them tradesmen were very proud of being able to keep their wives you see". The term "unemployment" had not then become restricted to its current meaning, and those who were unemployed in the modern sense were more likely to be recorded, if at all, as "out of employ".10

Another important group of retired old people might be found amongst those classified as pensioners and annuitants, and of course, as paupers: as Sidney Webb remarked in 1890, all paupers over sixty enumerated in the 1881 Census had, in the published figures, been "discreetly and humorously merged ... in the class 'retired from business'". A search for poor relief recipients among the Stepney entries, however, is almost in vain. Here, in a district where, according to the Charity Organisation Society, no less than half the population over sixty-five was receiving Poor Law Relief in the 1870s, there were only two references to elderly paupers. Although "strict administration" in the Stepney Union had by
1881 led to a sharp reduction in outrelief numbers, comparison with the Union records shows that pauperism amongst the aged was seriously under-recorded in this Census District.\footnote{11} Instead, the disappearing paupers would probably have been classified according to their marital status - for instance, "widow, sixty, nil"; their former occupation or their occupation when in health - for instance, "general labourer, ninety"; or their current employment - for instance, the many needlewomen, washerwomen and charwomen who may have earned a couple of shillings to eke out poor relief.

The Stepney area was comparatively richly endowed with almshouse and pension charities and, because of its proximity to the docks, was a district popular with army and navy pensioners. It is therefore surprising to find little more than a dozen "pensioners": the category was so rare, in fact, that the Enumerator had difficulty remembering how to spell the word between infrequent entries. This group comprised mainly widows of small tradesmen, navy, army and docks pensioners. Nearly half were under sixty-five and some were stated to be currently employed. As most army and navy pensioners were employed, they were probably mainly classified according to their current occupation: and no doubt other pensioners escaped this classification for the same reason.\footnote{12}

Oddly enough, the largest group of old people not categorised by occupation or marital status were "annuitants". Nearly a hundred people aged over fifty were so classified, most of them in three large almshouses. Many of these people were in their fifties or early sixties and some were definitely stated to be occupied. In other cases, it is unclear whether the occupation referred to was their former or current employment. A significant number of almshouse residents were not described as annuitants but were classified by occupation, even though both their age and address suggest that they were in fact retired.

This information casts considerable doubt on the validity of the occupation rates recorded in the Census. It is clear that many women, and some pensioners and annuitants, would have been classified as outside the labour force although they were in employment. Equally, a number of people who were not occupied, or who may have had very small or occasional earnings but were primarily dependent on other means of support, would have appeared amongst those in the labour force. By modern definitions many of these people would be considered to have been retired, although their classification for the Census shows that they - or their families - probably did not think of themselves as such.

The problem is also apparent from an examination of the records of elderly people classified by occupation. Although all of these people would have been included in the labour force statistics, the scant accompanying information often tells another story.
Sometimes the employment listed was token in nature or clearly not sufficient for support. Pew opening, for example, would bring in only a few shillings a quarter and was one of the more obvious cases in which payments represented not so much a return for useful services as a thinly disguised charity: this issue is discussed below. Sometimes disabilities severe enough to be noted by the Enumerator indicate the unlikelihood or impossibility of a person pursuing the stated occupation: examples include a blind waterman aged seventy-eight and a deaf and dumb general labourer of seventy-two. Being somewhat more detailed, Booth's surveys of nearby areas in 1889 contain many more such cases, including a one-armed porter, a labourer who went about on two sticks, and an odd job man who was paralysed, had a broken arm and used crutches, as well as a number of token employments such as bell ringing. 

Often those who were recorded as out of employ or ill at advanced ages would have had no chance and little expectation of re-entering the workforce. In other instances, extreme old age or the employment practices of particular trades render it improbable that the person was pursuing gainful employment in their trade: examples are general labourers in their eighties and nineties and railway and maritime trades employees in their sixties and beyond. Indeed, the very fact that a seafaring man was on shore for the Census shows that he was not currently employed: to quote one of many examples from Booth's street surveys,

Seaman, does not go to sea very often as he is old. Wife is a dressmaker. Has a struggle. Man used to drink.

From this analysis, it is apparent that the labour force figures for the elderly in the 1881 Census are not comparable with modern Census data and do not give a reliable picture of retirement rates. One reason for this is that old people, particularly old men, tended not to think of themselves as "retired". In a society which was much more rigidly stratified by occupational status than is ours today, old men were likely to classify themselves, and be classified by others, according to the occupation they pursued in the prime of life. This was so even when their current occupation was quite different, as for instance when they had lost skilled employment and moved into labouring or other residual work. It was also the case when they were unemployed or outside the workforce due to illness and when they were living on poor relief, pensions, help from relatives or charity. They were, after all, members of the "working class", and remained so whatever their age.

As Arthur Woodworth found when conducting a census of unemployment in twelve very disparate areas of Britain in 1895-96, working men in all districts stubbornly continued to
classify themselves according to trades "they once worked at but may have no hope of returning to". This obstinacy could be shared by their contemporaries, as for instance the Clerk to the Stepney Guardians, the redoubtable John Jones, who in 1889 condemned an edgetoolmaker in his eighties for having "neglected his business ... [so that] trade fell off": this man was senile. The old man gasping on his death bed was still a "labourer", though he might have earned only a few shillings in as many years. The fact that his actual means of support was an effective pension in the form of Poor Law Relief was subsidiary: as one colliery worker told the Royal Commission on the Aged Poor (Aberdare Commission) in 1894, only those who entered the workhouse were considered by the working class as paupers.15

By the same token, old women were likely to define themselves, and be defined, firstly according to their marital status, and then very often by their husband's or father's occupation or former occupation, with their own livelihood mentioned in third place if at all. Perhaps because of their more ambivalent attitude to paid employment, they were also more likely to qualify themselves as "formerly" occupied: that is, as retired. Retirement as an accepted category was largely confined to the middle class, who were more likely to be able to afford a formally defined period of leisure in later life, and to regard this as a badge of status akin to the genteel idleness of their social superiors.16

These patterns were obscured by the lack of detail in the Census records, but they are shown in endless repetition in contemporary surveys and Poor Law case notes. Because these sources often supply somewhat more information on their subjects, those appearing in the Census as, for instance, "engineer", "farm labourer", "printer", "widow of labourer" and "single woman, nil", might respectively become "engineer, now casual dock labourer, wife chars"; "farm labourer, then stone-breaking, now parish relief"; "printer, paralysed, wife washes"; "widow of labourer, parish relief, sewing"; and "single woman, daughter of labourer, parish relief, washing and charring, seasonal field work". Such entries can be found in almost every published house to house survey which included old people, from Booth's 1889 London survey and his and J.A. Spender's parish surveys in the 1890s, to the early twentieth century surveys of provincial and industrial centres by B.S. Rowntree, A.L. Bowley and others.17

The surveys show clearly what the Census has only led us to suspect: the marginal and casualised nature of the elderly workforce. Further evidence of this is found in the random sample survey of nearly 13,000 people aged over sixty-five conducted for the Hamilton Committee in 1899. While the 1901 Census recorded just over 61 per cent of all men over sixty-five, and 13 per cent of women, as occupied, data provided to the Committee present
a different picture. Of those in this age group who were not living in institutions, less than 49 per cent of men and less than 16 per cent of women had incomes from all sources of over 10s. per week, and a large proportion of these would have been outside the working class. 46 per cent of men and 74 per cent of women had incomes under 10s., and no information was available on the incomes of a further 5 per cent of men and 11 per cent of women. These figures were fairly uniform for the whole of England and Wales, with the percentage having income of less than 10s. rising from 36 per cent of males in London to 49 per cent in both rural and mining districts: for females, the regional figures varied by less than two per cent from the national average.18

Any assumption that the 46 per cent of men with incomes under 10s. were those who were retired would be incorrect, as about half of these men received income from earnings in the previous year. Clearly, however, men with earnings in this range were not in regular employment at standard adult wages, which even in rural districts were by then more than 10s. per week. Overall, at least 18 per cent of men in the sample and 12 per cent of women were stated to have income from earnings averaging between 1s. and 10s. per week over the year. Many other old people in the sample would also have had earnings of below 10s., which are however impossible to isolate because of the incomplete breakdown of means and the exclusion of poor relief recipients from some of the tables. Unfortunately, it was quite common for elderly women to be in substantial employment while earning less than 10s. a week. Nevertheless, of those not receiving poor relief who had incomes of between 1s. and 10s., nearly half had total income under 5s.. This suggests that for most old women who worked, as for a large proportion of old men, employment was part-time or irregular. While they were not "retired", their attachment to the labour force was often insecure, having much in common with those modern retirees who may do a little contracting or fill in occasionally when extra hands are needed.19

Similar results are shown in the information obtained by Charles Booth from 262 rural parishes in England and Wales in 1894. 9,125 people of all classes, who were aged over sixty-five and not living in an institution, were included in the survey (4,450 men and 4,675 women). The great majority of those included, however, were agricultural labourers, their wives and widows. As the income of the spouse was listed for each married person, and separate results for men and women were only partially broken down, the survey may best be treated as one of elderly households, or more accurately, income units. Of the whole sample, 4,244 or 46 per cent of income units listed earnings as a source of income; however, this income was supplemented by poor relief, charity or relatives in 1,328 cases. Thus nearly a third of income units with earnings required other support to bring them to subsistence level; or, to put it another way, under a third of the sample was solely
dependent on income from employment. 43.6 per cent of men in the sample had earnings as their primary source of income and were not receiving substantial income from poor relief, charity or relatives; for women this percentage was 21 per cent, although in both these cases the earned income of the spouse is also included. Earnings were the primary source of income of only 8 per cent of widowed or single women. Of 548 working class men who volunteered information on the amount of their earnings, 41 per cent earned less than 10s. - that is, less than standard adult full-time wages, even for farm labourers - and 68 per cent earned less than 12s.. 13 per cent earned less than 5s., and in the North, this proportion rose to 21 per cent, which could however be a result of small sample size. Details of women's earnings were given in only 110 cases, with only 5 earning over 6s. and about half with less than 2s.. As discussed below, there is substantial evidence that agricultural workers were more likely to be employed in old age than the rest of the workforce; nonetheless, it is clear from these figures that even they were not usually employed full-time at adult wages.20

The proliferation of social surveys from the 1890s onwards allows us to chart a trend which, gradually taking hold at first, accelerated rapidly from the 1920s. The word "retired" began to percolate downwards from small tradesmen to artisans and, more slowly, to the unskilled; the words "former" and "formerly" lost their close association with the feminine gender; and the descriptions "pensioner" and "supernannuated" began their rise to prominence. Records of the New Survey of London in 1930-31, the Social Survey of Merseyside in 1929-32 and Rowntree's 1936 enquiry in York suggest that this transformation had almost been accomplished, with pensioners and retirees generally recorded as such. Whereas in previous years, old people receiving outrelief had rarely classed themselves as paupers, those receiving old age pensions seem happy to have labelled themselves as pensioners; and, more importantly, many now apparently regarded themselves as retired, even when they had small earnings from part-time or occasional work.21

However, it is by no means safe to assume that even the 1931 Census data are comparable with modern figures on retirement. The occupation rates of those over sixty-five - by then just over 48 per cent for men and a little over 8 per cent for women - would still have been swollen by a considerable number of old people who considered themselves available for work, but who, in the prevailing economic climate, had little chance of regaining substantial employment. For instance, of the 17 per cent of "occupied" males over sixty-five who stated that they were unemployed, few would have been likely ever to return to work. It is worth noting that in their work on United States Census data from the early
twentieth century, Roger Ransom and Richard Sutch chose to exclude those who reported six months or more of unemployment from their labour force estimates.22

Ministry of Labour surveys illustrate the problem. In 1927, a sample survey of 80,233 insured workers found that unemployment benefits drawn exceeded contributions for the insured male population over sixty. This survey registered unemployment among men aged 65-69 who had managed to remain in insurable occupations of over 17 per cent, compared to less than 10 per cent for all insured males. In addition, many men dropped out of insurance in their fifties and early sixties, and a large proportion of elderly insured men were known not to have registered as unemployed in order to retain their insurance books, which could be needed for casual work or to regain jobs after a lay-off.23 In 1929, a sample survey of 95,000 insured workers aged over sixty-five showed that only two-thirds of the men and three-fifths of the women were in "fairly regular" employment: that is, for at least 26 weeks in the year. For those in full-time employment, the average loss of time through ill-health was twenty per cent.24

The size of the gap between the Census occupation rates and numbers actually in employment in 1931 are suggested by Chris Gordon's work on the New Survey of London files. Conducted over the same period as the Census, this large scale survey showed only 32 per cent of men over sixty-five with earnings from employment, and this in London where unemployment was lower and occupation rates for the elderly somewhat higher than average. As David Caradog Jones remarked of the Liverpool dock labourers in 1932,

most of those over sixty-five who described themselves as "earners" are ready to work an occasional day or two from time to time, though they might more accurately be described as "retired".25

Up to 1931 and even beyond, the Census recorded changes in the way old people defined their workforce status. It is thus a valuable source of information on the transformation of working-class ideas about retirement, but it can be less than helpful on the issue of actual employment patterns. Researchers who have compared Census material with sources of statistical information other than the social surveys may also have noticed inconsistencies. For instance, the Amalgamated Society of Engineers' reports from the 1880s to the 1890s showed an average age at superannuation of about sixty-two, and an average age at death for all members which was considerably lower, with only 8 per cent of total deaths in 1892 occurring at sixty-five or over. These figures led contemporaries to assert that only eight out of a hundred engineers lived to old age: a proposition which seems widely at odds with late nineteenth century life expectancy, which stood at just under sixty for men aged
twenty-one in 1890 and just under sixty-two for women. This claim is also inconsistent with the Census and contemporary surveys, which are positively swarming with elderly engineers in numbers which bear no relation to the age distribution of their Trade Union.26

A closer look at these sources, however, shows that many of these men would not have figured in the Union's records because they had dropped out of their trade before becoming eligible for superannuation, sometimes to start small business ventures, but more usually into unskilled employment or destitution. At the extreme, evidence from Poor Law officials suggests that elderly engineers and other artisans were well represented in workhouses and casual wards: the latter partly as a survival of the tradition of going "on tramp". Other skilled trades showed a similar pattern, although in some cases the highly improbable claims about numbers surviving to old age - for example, six of a thousand railwaymen or sixteen of a thousand miners - sprang from a failure to grasp the effect of trends in sectoral employment on age distribution: both railways and collieries were taking on large numbers of young men in the later nineteenth century, although they supported only an ageing workforce by the 1920s and '30s.27

The Engineers' records also illustrate trends over time. Throughout the period when, according to the Census, the rate of retirement was rising steadily, elderly engineers showed considerable stability in their employment patterns. Indeed, the average age at superannuation rose from 61.5 in 1885 to 63.5 in 1907, reaching a high wartime level of 65.9 in 1941. Other Trade Unions, such as the Friendly Society of Ironfounders and the Operative Plumbers, showed similar patterns, with the average age at superannuation in the 1890s remarkably concentrated around the age of sixty-three, despite the very disparate regulations governing Union funds. Although, as the Labour Correspondent of the Board of Trade, C.J. Drummond, noted in 1895, it was not uncommon for men to receive superannuation in their thirties or forties, such cases did not usually live very long; he found that the average age of all those receiving pensions from the London Society of Compositors - that is, not just new entrants - was just under sixty-eight.28

Retirement around the age of sixty-three seems to have been common not only amongst Trade Union superannuitants. This was also mentioned by James Callear to the Aberdare Commission in 1895 as the typical age at which former artisans could no longer obtain any work at all, and in 1894, J.A. Spender found that his rural informants were in "general agreement" that a farm labourer "with good health and an allotment" could support himself "until about sixty-two or sixty-three". In 1919, sixty-three was the average age of retirement of North Western Railway Company employees, although the Company's official retirement age was sixty-five. Government surveys of industry during World War
II and after are also surprisingly consonant with these figures, with the average age of retirement from full-time work at sixty-two for men in 1950.29

Greater workforce participation of the elderly in both World Wars - which Sidney and Beatrice Webb called "the mobilisation of septuagenarians" - was accompanied by an exceptionally high rate of claim under the National Insurance Scheme. For instance, in 1918, 17 per cent of insured men aged 65-70 were estimated to be receiving disablement benefit, and a further significant proportion were drawing sickness or unemployment pay. In 1945, no less than 42 per cent of insured men aged 60-64 received sickness or other benefits. During both Wars, pension authorities noted that many old people who returned to employment were rapidly forced out by ill-health.30

William Beveridge's judgement in 1908 that sixty-three was the highest age at which the majority of men could support themselves in full-time employment, was thus borne out by a substantial body of statistical and other evidence into the 1950s. Interestingly, work by Ransom and Sutch and Samuel Williamson on the United States evidence lends weight to this view, showing sixty-two as the median age of voluntary retirement for men in the 1900s, while Christoph Conrad's work on Germany from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century also reveals a heavy concentration of pension awards for retiring workers of both sexes in the early to mid-sixties.31

The slight but significant rise in the Engineers' retirement ages provides evidence that retirement trends in at least one large occupational grouping were moving in the opposite direction to those recorded by the Census. They present an interesting parallel with the work of Ransom and Sutch and others, who have shown a definite rise in workforce participation by men over fifty in the non-agricultural sector of the United States economy from 1900 to 1930.32

Recent and not yet published work by Paul Johnson on the English Census also indicates that, when adjustment is made for sectoral shifts in employment, labour force participation rates for men over sixty-five showed little variation between 1891 and 1921. In other words, Johnson argues, while a decreasing percentage of old men returned themselves as being occupied, this was mainly because the agricultural sector provided a declining proportion of total employment.33

In every Census since retirement figures were first collected in 1881, agriculture has recorded a comparatively elderly workforce. Of course this was partly the consequence of the movement of younger workers into other sectors. Yet it was undoubtedly also the case
that in agriculture, men were - and still are - on average able to go on working for longer than their industrial counterparts, even if only seasonally or at reduced wages. The reasons for this probably lie partly in the nature of farm work, which could often be relatively self-paced and in which experience at a wide range of tasks was at a premium; for this reason, as in repair work in industry, the old were not at such a disadvantage. No doubt, attitudinal factors were also important, as were the low rates of pay and difficulty attracting other labour. But whatever the reasons, old men could often keep working at least into their mid-sixties in agriculture, as Government in the 1920s, '30s and '40s show. Contemporaries were clearly aware of this distinction between the country and the town: as Charles Booth wrote in 1894, summarising the results of his survey of Poor Law Unions in England and Wales,

In the country, old men ... even when feeble and ailing can still obtain and do some agricultural work. Whereas in towns they not only break down at an earlier age, but are accounted "incapable" sooner still. ... In one way or another effective working life is ten years longer in the country than in the town, or speaking generally, is as seventy to sixty.34

Booth's judgement here may have been a little sanguine, and elsewhere in the same volume, describing individual villages, he observed that work after age sixty-five was "more casual ... light jobs at a lower rate of pay". Certainly, agricultural labourers, such as Aberdare Commission witness Edwin Nokes, generally claimed that their useful working life ended somewhere between sixty and sixty-five. Probably the main difference, at least in the earlier period, lay in the rural workers' better chance of being kept on at much reduced wages and the greater availability of seasonal work, roadwork and stone-breaking.35

While the movement away from agriculture meant that the proportion of the elderly population recorded as in the workforce was declining, Johnson's figures show that old men in other sectors were in fact slightly more likely to be occupied than in previous years. His adjusted estimates give labour force participation rates for males over sixty-five of 57.9 per cent in 1881, falling to 56.6 per cent in 1891, 56.0 per cent in 1901 and 53.9 per cent in 1911, and rising again to 55.9 per cent in 1921. This certainly paints a different picture from the fall in non-adjusted participation from 73 per cent in 1881 to 58 per cent in 1921, and shows the dramatic effect on old age employment of the shift away from agriculture. Significantly, Johnson has also found an absolute increase in labour force participation rates for men in their fifties in the three decades from 1881. As he remarks, his analysis suggests that
the incidence of [male] retirement in Britain would have been virtually constant between 1881 and 1921 had it not been for substantial structural change in the economy ... non-agricultural labour force participation rates for men over sixty-five were considerably lower in the late nineteenth century than has hitherto been believed.36

For English workers, the significant change during this period was not in the age of retirement from substantial employment in a "career" or major lifetime occupation, but in the source of livelihood adopted after this event. As authors such as Leslie Hannah have shown, the shedding of elderly workers was indeed becoming more regularised in the later nineteenth century, and retirement at specified ages was increasingly common as the twentieth century progressed. Undoubtedly, this followed the growth of public sector employment and of large firms. To quote Paul Johnson, the requirement for workers to retire in exchange for a company pension was

a publicly acceptable way of forcing them out of the labour force which [did] not undermine the working of the firm's internal labour market.37

However, the set retirement age was merely a formalisation of practices which already existed. In fact, as Samuel Williamson and others have suggested with regard to the United States, the widespread use of the age of sixty-five for men and sixty for women may have served to keep many elderly people in their jobs longer than would otherwise have been the case. Pension plans probably increased the job security of the elderly and made lay-offs and terminations of those in their late fifties and sixties less likely, as well as giving ailing workers a goal to aim for and a reason to stay on just a few more years.38

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Ageing, Accidents and Illness

As far back as historical records go, older people, sometimes in their forties and fifties and usually in their sixties, found themselves out of work or demoted to lower pay or lesser jobs often before they were ready to go. As Francis Bacon rather unsympathetically remarked in the sixteenth century,

Nay, retire men cannot when they would, neither will they when it were reason, but are impatient of privateness even in age and sickness which
require the shadow; like old townsmen that will be sitting at their street
door, though thereby they offer age to scorn.39

Early poor relief legislation frequently referred to the aged, and research has shown that, at
least from the seventeenth century, a large proportion and sometimes the majority of
working-class people in their sixties and over were receiving Poor Law Relief.40 In the
1870s and 1880s respectively, Canon Blackley and Charles Booth used different methods
to arrive at the same conclusion: that of all those reaching age sixty-five, over forty per
cent received Poor Law Relief in their final years. If it had been possible to exclude those
outside the working class from these figures, they noted, the percentage would have been
substantially higher, probably with a majority receiving relief.

As these were the decades when "strict administration" of relief to the elderly reached its
zenith, this percentage may have been historically low. In 1892, when poor relief numbers
were undoubtedly at an historic low point, more than a quarter of all those sixty-five and
over received relief during the year, rising to well over one-third in London.41

The association between old age and employment problems had long been more generally
recognised as an issue of community and legislative concern. The Statute of Labourers in
1351 exempted men over sixty and women over forty from compulsory employment at set
wages, and later laws excused men over sixty from severe penalties for vagrancy and from
military service and other civil duties. Several of the various pension schemes put forward
from the seventeenth century also settled on sixty as their age of eligibility, although some
schemes introduced in the nineteenth century adopted earlier ages, especially the small
number which included women. A few village collecting societies, on the other hand,
favoured ages of up to seventy, perhaps reflecting the better prospects of regular work -
albeit at reduced wages - for the rural elderly.42 However, it was certainly recognised that
employment problems due to age could begin much earlier. Indeed, the 1875 and 1887
Friendly Society Acts defined "old age" as any age over fifty, while many almshouse
charities and the great majority of Trade Unions set eligibility for superannuation at fairly
young ages: as young as forty in some cases.43

These rules and regulations reflected community definitions of old age: as Geoffrey Oxley
has noted, many respondents to the Poor Law Commission's questionnaire in 1832 spoke of
fifty as the onset of "deserving" old age, and the Stepney and Whitechapel Poor Law Union
records of the 1880s and 1890s still classified many in their fifties as poor due to "old age".
In some cases, workers were described as "old" while still in their forties, and Booth's
surveys contain many examples of "old" women with children of school age or younger.44
Definitions of old age were thus reasonably fluid; but more often than not, the age of sixty was seen as the most convenient demarcation point. Certainly, as Joseph Chamberlain remarked, it was the Friendly Societies' "ticklish time", when claims often began to exceed contributions. And in 1919, despite continuing high levels of employment following the War, the Industrial Women's Organisations representative, Mrs E.M. Lowe, told the Ryland Adkins Committee that a survey of members of the Organisations showed an overwhelming preference for a pensionable age of sixty; as, incidentally, did the members of several other labour organisations. Moreover, she added,

out-relief under the Orders of the Local Government Board may be given without question at sixty years of age ... [and] the Court of Referees dealing with unemployed persons, does not recognise women of sixty years of age as employable.45

By the mid-nineteenth century, both economic constraints and precedent were apparently gathering force behind the age of sixty, which was increasingly adopted both for public and early private sector schemes. Pensions at sixty might have become an accepted fact, had it not been for the rapid increase in adult life expectancy in the late nineteenth century.46

It is often forgotten that, until the late nineteenth century, most working-class people who reached adulthood did not survive to reach sixty. Most workers, in fact, never experienced what we now think of as "old age", and so had some chance of remaining in their lifetime jobs until their final illness, often in middle age. In addition, until the early nineteenth century, over a third of the workforce was still employed in the agricultural sector, in which they had a reasonable chance of retaining their jobs, although at lower wages, at least into their sixties.47

It is these two factors - low adult life expectancy and the predominance of agricultural employment - that have probably given rise to the common belief that, until the twentieth century, old people worked in their usual jobs, for their usual wages, until they died, without ever suffering the loss of income and status that often accompanies retirement today. These factors were also responsible for the ability of many early to mid-nineteenth century pension schemes, Friendly Societies, Trade Unions and village clubs to remain solvent on precariously small capital: they could simply rely on enough of their members dying before they reached old age.48
By the 1880s, this was rapidly changing. The 1881 Census showed that nearly 90 per cent of the workforce was employed outside the agricultural sector, mostly in the industrial and service sectors where employment for the elderly was not easy to come by. And now, over the space of a generation, adult life expectancy rose so strongly that suddenly, most workers could expect to survive to their sixties. Because of the shift in employment and the sheer numbers now competing for such light jobs and "pension posts" as the industrial sector offered, it is likely that relatively fewer old people were able to retain regular employment into their mid-sixties than had been the case fifty years earlier. It was not that England was changing from a society in which old people went on working to one in which they did not: rather, more people were living long enough to encounter the employment problems which had always dogged the elderly; and moreover, a far greater proportion was encountering the particularly acute employment problems which existed in the towns.49

Contemporary Friendly Society records provide an excellent illustration of these changes. Friendly Society officials noted that numbers of elderly members had increased dramatically between the 1840s and the 1890s, not only because of the maturing of their membership, but also due to the increased life expectancy of younger adults. More significantly, Societies such as the Manchester Unity had experienced a marked increase during these years in the percentage of members aged over sixty-five who were drawing an effective pension in the form of extended sick pay: to quote Bentley Gilbert, "they could not work, but they did not die". For instance, in 1891, the Hearts of Oak found that no less than 72 per cent of members aged over sixty-five were drawing sick pay, although this figure was unusually high. Some officials were inclined to attribute this to malingering, but Sir Edward Brabrook, the Chief Registrar of Friendly Societies, observed that competition for employment was at the root of the problem.50

Naturally, these trends placed tremendous strain not only on Friendly Societies, but on state and private pension schemes and Trade Union superannuation funds, leading in many cases to their collapse. Even actuarially-based schemes were hard hit by the developments, with a number forced to wind up and many more having to restrict eligibility and raise contributions. New actuarial calculations showed that pensions at sixty would require the Government, industry and workers to dig deeper into their pockets than was then thought possible, and increasingly the ages of sixty-five and even seventy featured in discussion.51

But while in Westminster the introduction of old age pensions continued to be thwarted by what F.H. Stead called "the pressure of forces which move in darkness and operate under cover of fiscal difficulties" (perhaps the most apt description of a Treasury official ever penned), in the rest of England, old people struggled on much as they always had. And
fortunately, because of the interest generated by the pensions issue, considerable attention was focused on their struggles, with a number of excellent surveys and studies, most notably by Charles Booth and J.A. Spender. The most comprehensive of these was Booth's 1894 survey *The Aged Poor in England and Wales*, which provides considerable information on the employment patterns of the elderly, based on the responses to questionnaires distributed to the Boards of all Poor Law Unions in England and Wales: his response rate was about forty per cent.\(^2\)

A few of Booth's respondents were sanguine about the employment prospects of the elderly, and his Nottingham informant noted helpfully that "as a rule, [they] are less energetic than the young". Generally, however, they painted a fairly depressing picture. As he summarised,

> the reports from the large manufacturing centres are almost uniformly bad ... even in [the] rural districts, the aged very often can get little regular work. ... "Odd jobs", "occasional stone-breaking", "a little hawking" is all that offers for old men in most cases .... In some places work for the old of both sexes is scarce ... washing and charring seem scarce and earnings precarious.\(^5\)

Booth found very few districts in which older workers were said to be kept on at the same wages until illness or frailty drove them out of the workforce altogether. Other sources show a further small minority of workers who were able to manage the transition to old age with their dignity and status intact. For instance, J.A. Spender reported that railway engine drivers and other particularly well paid artisans were often able to set themselves up in small business ventures: unfortunately, as other surveys showed, these almost as often failed. Railway shunters, Spender claimed, had "the kind of career which is desired by all classes", generally ending up as country station masters.\(^5\)

Some favoured workers could gain other positions of trust, for instance as foremen or storemen in the towns and carters and husbandmen in rural areas; but such jobs, as well as the more marginal "pension posts", were probably harder to come by as more workers survived to old age and as industry restructured and rationalised. Although one is always wary of claims that things were better in the old days, it is significant that so many of the respondents to Booth's 1894 survey believed that competition for light jobs suitable for the elderly had increased sharply: in Booth's own summary,
excepting in rural districts, there appears to be increased competition for such work as the old are able to perform. In this competition the old and young meet, for industrial strength has its second childhood.55

Beveridge also discussed this problem in 1909, remarking that

although "old men's" places are spoken of, the actual men would often be at most middle-aged and with a long character to back them.56

Firms which pensioned their workers commonly claimed that they were happy to go, particularly in the case of women who had households to run or men who had gardens or allotments or the prospect of odd jobs. A few paternalistic employers tried to cater for the social needs of their pensioned workers, and in the 1930s, J.B. Priestley's English Journey took him through the club-room at the Cadbury factory in Birmingham, where retirees spent their days playing draughts and billiards. Working-class autobiographers from reasonably well-off artisan families sometimes have happy memories of their relatives' and neighbours' old age. For instance, Edward Ezard remembers old men doing "little handicraft jobs in the hut at the bottom of the garden"; Chelsea Pensioners, he notes, often tended little gardens and sold flowers to passers-by. Phyllis Willmott recalls her grandfather assiduously collecting pensions from various employers and for his soldier sons' wartime deaths in order to finance a long and fruitful retirement spent mostly in the garden and helping around the house.57

Even at the lower end of the occupation scale, some fortunate and enterprising old men were able to jump before they were pushed: for example, seven former agricultural labourers interviewed by the Aberdare Commission had become, respectively, a market gardener and a wood-dealer, both self-employed, a Friendly Society collector and lamplighter, a Trade Union official, the local parish roadman, a working gardener and an odd job man. Several of these men had recourse to other work as well, and sixty-seven-year-old Thomas Pitkin described his activities thus:

I am working on my land [allotment] a bit, and catch a few odd jobs ... I have done a little on the bye road this winter and ... I sell a little garden seed and such things at the present time just for two or three weeks.58

However, Booth's 1894 survey shows that the great majority of men and women in their fifties and sixties found themselves working for reduced wages or being moved into work which was often not so much less demanding, as simply less desirable and more poorly
paid. Old factory hands were "removed from the manufacturing cycle and presented with a broom, shovel and wheelbarrow", old farm workers were commonly employed at stone-breaking and roadwork, old artisans gravitated to repair work, old miners were moved to the pithead, old dressmakers found rough sewing work and old servants turned to daily work and charring. In the printing and textile industries and in home work, piece work or bonus rates imposed what Leslie Hannah has called "a natural process of retirement", as inability to keep up the pace took its toll on earnings. But however the transition was made, it was likely to be traumatic. As an elderly engineer explained in the 1930s, having to turn to unskilled work "tears you up in here ... I lay awake nights, and it's a nightmare."

As we have seen, ill-health became an increasing barrier to employment as age progressed. In 1938, the Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, responded to the British Legion Report on the Condition of Prematurely Aged Ex-Servicemen in the following rather smug terms:

The fact that a little over two per cent of the survivors of the Great War, who are now of an average age of about fifty, were ... suffering from incapacity and in need, would not be any ground for supposing that their case is substantially different from that of the civilian male population at large. Indeed, on figures obtained by the Ministry of Health, it would appear that over three per cent of the male population of ages forty to sixty-five were in Municipal Hospitals or in receipt of domiciliary assistance on a given day.

Moreover, these figures almost certainly represented an improvement in the health of males in the 45-64 age group, whose life expectancy and labour force participation rates had increased significantly since the 1880s. In 1890, nearly 80 per cent of total sickness experienced by members of the Ancient Order of Foresters, measured by duration of claim, was in the 60-80 age group; although, as the Rev. J. Frome Wilkinson noted, much of this was "not really sickness at all, but simply natural decay": that is, de facto retirement pensions. In 1946, a sample of 6,950 people taken by the Central Office of Information Survey of Sickness found that nearly 90 per cent of those aged over sixty-five had been ill in the last three months, with twice as many illnesses as there were people. The health of those aged 16-64 was not very much more satisfactory, with 75 per cent reporting illness. Nonetheless, the author was pleased to discover a neat rectilinear relationship between ill-health and age:

The regression equation [he declared] is y = 26.15 - .1452x, where x is age and y, the percentage expected free from illness.
Behind this equation was the sad procession of illness and accidents which often marred the closing years of a worker's career. Bill Williamson poignantly describes the end of his grandfather's working life in the Northumberland mines in these words:

My grandfather was ill with pleurisy in 1922 and 1923 and had three spells off ... in 1925 he suffered from an accident in the pit ... the tendons of his left hand were severed ... in 1924 he had damaged his toe in a fall of slag but continued to work, hobbling badly, driven by a grim need not to lose time ... lurking behind him ... was unemployment and the detested [Household] "Means Test". ... Still in his early sixties ... he was starting to get "dizzy turns" in the pit ... the doctor advised him to leave ... he carried on ... in 1934 ... he had another pit accident. ...A falling stone nearly severed his nose ... he was put on lighter surface work. This did not suit him because the pay was low. He always tried to work on Sundays to get an extra day's pay. The dizziness persisted ... at the age of sixty-two ... he left the pit ... he had been ill and off work and he simply never returned.63

Miners were, not surprisingly, particularly likely to suffer from work accidents, and in 1925, the Commission on the Coal Industry calculated that the average mineworker would have seven minor accidents during a forty year working life, and faced a one in five chance of serious injury; his risk of disabling disease was put at one in three.64

But work-related accidents were common in all manual employments: in the 1890s, Sir Arthur Forwood calculated in each year, one in eight workmen was incapacitated for several weeks and more than one in three hundred permanently disabled or killed. In Bromley Workhouse, Stepney, in 1889, at least 40 out of over 250 male inmates aged over fifty had originally arrived there following accidents, almost all occurring at work. Not being able to re-establish themselves in employment - often despite heroic efforts - they were forced to remain. For instance, one unfortunate man, a coalporter, had suffered six accidents in three years from trying to keep on at odd jobs with a crippled knee: this was the same man who was criticised by John Jones, the Poor Law Clerk, for having inexplicably failed to provide for his own old age while supporting his own family, his mother and his mother-in-law on unskilled wages. In 1929, of the 177 London dock workers aged over sixty who were removed from the Register, 110 lost their place due to illness or accident. Of the remainder, 37 were dismissed for failure to obtain a reasonable amount of work and 30 for not consistently following port employment: categories which no doubt concealed many other cases of frailty and failing health.65
There was a widespread view, throughout the period and into the 1950s, that the likelihood of work-related accidents increased with age. In fact, investigations, including those by S.J. Chapman and H.M. Hallsworth in 1909 and the National Advisory Committee on the Employment of Older Men and Women in 1953, found that the reverse was true. The popular impression may have arisen from the fact that, as surveys in the 1940s and 1950s show, time lost due to each accident certainly increased with age. As well, the likelihood of other types of accident, such as domestic accidents, did seem to rise for the elderly. Most significantly, an accident which dealt the final blow to the employment prospects of an elderly man clearly had more far-reaching social consequences, and was thus more "visible", than one which was shrugged off by a younger and more vigorous colleague. Hence employers who in the 1890s and 1900s were said to be using the Workmen's Compensation Act as a pretext for dismissing their elderly workers were responding to social reality: the lack of any evidence that insurance underwriters varied their premiums by age was beside the point.
NOTES

1 Departmental Committee on Old Age Pensions (Ryland Adkins Cttee), BPP 1919 XXVII (Cd. 410), p. 119.


3 British Library of Political and Economic Sciences (BLPES), Booth Collection B166 (Case Notes compiled by the Clerk to the Poor Law Guardians, Stepney Union, 1889, p. 114).


8 PRO RG 11/461-464 (1881 Census Enumerators' Books Stepney). All quotations from this source used in this chapter are listed in order here (if more than one occurrence, only one is listed): RG 11/462 (Ratcliff 2a, p. 3); RG 11/462 (Ratcliff 9 I, p. 36); RG 11/463 (Ratcliff 7, p. 56); RG 11/462 (Ratcliff 2b, p. 9); RG 11/463 (Ratcliff 8, p. 7) [retirees]; RG 11/462 (Ratcliff 3, p. 26); RG 11/464 (Ratcliff 9 I, p. 26) [means]; RG 11/464 (Ratcliff 9 I, pp. 23, 46) [former]; RG 11/463 (Ratcliff 5, pp. 4, 10; Ratcliff 6, p. 3; Ratcliff 8, p. 30) [unemployed]; RG 11/462 (Ratcliff 1, p. 33); RG 11/463 (Ratcliff 5, pp. 22, 43; Ratcliff 7, p. 25) [paupers]; RG 11/463 (Ratcliff 7, p. 104); RG 11/464 (Ratcliff 11, p. 9) [pensioners]; RG 11/461 (St John's Wapping 2, pp. 5-7); RG 11/462 (Ratcliff 3, p. 34); RG 11/464 (Ratcliff 11, pp. 36-37) [annuitants]; RG 11/461 (St John's Wapping 1, pp. 42, 43, 49); RG 11/464
(Ratcliff 9 II, p. 24); RG 11/462 (Ratcliff 4, p. 34; Ratcliff 2b, p. 9) [token or improbable employments].


13 BLPES, Booth Collection B71, p. 71; B77, pp. 11, 43; B72, p. 224; B74, p. 172.

14 Spender, State and Pensions, ch. 2; BLPES, Booth Collection B72, p. 233.

15 A.V. Woodworth, Report of an Enquiry into the Condition of the Unemployed, London, 1897, p. 31; Royal Commission on the Aged Poor (Aberdare Commn), BPP 1895 XIV (Cd. 7684), p. 860 [James Burton]; BLPES, Booth Collection B165 p. 1002 (lunatic asylum inmates); see n. 15.

16 BHU/LSE Pensions Working Paper No. 1, pp. 4-5; Thane, Ageing and the Economy, pp. 4-5.


18 Report of the Departmental Committee on the Financial Aspects of the Proposals ... (Hamilton Cttee), BPP 1900 X (Cd. 67), Appendices.

19 Ibid.; Johnson, Economics of Old Age, p. 5.


28 Beveridge, *Unemployment* (1909), p. 122; PRO CAB 87/81 Item 100 (Beveridge, Revised Draft Report, pp. 29-30); Sutherland, *Old Age Pensions*, pp. 116-129; Aberdare Commn, BPP 1895 XIV, pp. 568, 572 [Drummond]; Appendix VI.


33 Johnson, "Employment and Retirement of Older Men".

Ibid.; see also pp. 390, 410ff; Aberdare Commn, BPP 1895 XIV, pp. 818, 814, [E. Nokes, J. Callear and others]; Spender, State and Pensions, p. 20; P. Horn, "Old Age and the Oxfordshire Agricultural Labourer", Oxoniensia, 38, 1973, 373-380, p. 378; Quadagno, Ageing in Early Industrial Society, pp. 142. 166; and see below.

Johnson, "Employment and Retirement of Elderly Men".


Williamson et al., "Retirement ...", pp. 9-11; and see below.


Blackley, "National Insurance", p. 840; Booth, "Enumeration and Classification ...", pp. 631-632 and Discussion, p. 66 (see n. 9); Aberdare Commn BPP 1895 XIV, p. 6 [Sir Hugh Owen].

Lord Amulree, "Welfare of the Elderly", Modern Geriatrics, 1, 1971, 330-335, p. 331; de Schweinitz, England's Road, p. 8; Thomas, "Age and Authority", pp. 236-237; Roebuck, "When does 'Old Age' begin?", pp. 418-420; and see n. 29.


G. Oxley, Poor Relief in England and Wales, 1601-1834, London, 1974, p. 58; BLPES, Booth Collection see n. 9; also B71, pp. 54, 75; B72, pp. 29, 256; B74, pp.

Chamberlain to Dilke, 1892; quoted in Williams (Thane), "Development ...", p. 72; Ryland Adkins Ctte, BPP 1919 XXVII, pp. 223, 226, 125, 202 et al. [Lowe, G.H. Stuart Bunning and C.W. Bowerman, M.P., J. Errington]; Select Committee on National Provident Insurance, BPP 1884-85 X, p. 52 [C. Symes]; and see below.

See n. 33; Thane (Williams), "Development ...", Appendix C.


See below and nn. 45, 46.

Johnson, "Employment and Retirement of Older Men"; and see n. 42.


Quoted in Williams (Thane), "Development", p. 210; Booth, Aged Poor, Part 3; Spender, State and Pensions.

Booth, Aged Poor, p. 200 [Nottingham]; pp. 218, 142, 311, 254 (quotations from summaries of conditions in the Midlands, the Northern and Southern districts and the West (mainly Wales)).


Spender, State and Pensions, p. 31; Booth, Aged Poor, pp. 108, 110, 112, 114 et seq.; W. Beveridge, "An Analysis of Unemployment II", Economica, new series, 4,
1937, 1-16, p. 16; Stedman Jones, Outcast London, pp. 113, 121-122; Riddle, "Age, Obsolescence and Unemployment", p. 523.

56 Beveridge, Unemployment (1909), p. 121.


61 See n. 29; PRO AST 7/ 377 (Chamberlain to Maurice, draft, n.d. (1938)).


"They never saw a batch of old horses who had not some over and did not possess an economic value. Thousands of men had a value, but no-one seemed to have hit upon a plan by which that value could be realised."

- Jesse Hawkes, Mailing Guardian, Poor Law Conference, 1898.1

Age and Unemployment

As we have seen in Chapter One, the loss of regular work at standard wages was a fact of life for most in their fifties and sixties in this period: some casual workers, in fact, had never been lucky enough to have it. Frequent unemployment was a way of life even for the majority of late nineteenth and early twentieth century urban workers, who comprised the great bulk of the workforce. Professor Leone Levi estimated that the average employed male aged under sixty could expect four weeks' idleness per year in the 1860s, while Beveridge found that in the early 1900s, between one-fifth and one-third of the members even of skilled Trade Unions received unemployment pay in each year.2

Some older workers were undoubtedly discharged solely because of their age, especially in the female-dominated service industries: domestic service and the retail trades being the most notorious examples. Here, as the Pilgrim Trust Report noted in 1936, "a young appearance counts so heavily". In 1937, the Parliamentary Secretary's Committee on the Older Unemployed reported that several London stores had dismissed all female employees over a certain age: in one case, all those over thirty-five.3

Many more elderly people, however, lost their jobs not primarily because of their age. In fact, those in their fifties and beyond were overall not much more likely to become unemployed than younger workers. Some contemporaries, such as Chapman and Hallsworth in the 1900s and Beveridge in the 1930s, claimed that their risk of losing employment was slightly lower. On the other hand, more sophisticated statistical analysis by Mark Thomas has recently shown that older workers were somewhat more likely to lose
their jobs, at least during the early 1930s. In any case, this was not the heart of the problem. To quote a Ministry of Labour Memorandum of 1929,

The principle of ruthless scrapping and downgrading of workers as they become less efficient is a good deal diluted in practice. Employers in general do not discharge their employees for this reason unless some special occasion arises for doing so, such as a reorganisation of the works or a temporary stoppage.4

Unfortunately, due to the vagaries of the trade cycle and the large proportion of employment that was seasonal, irregular, temporary or with small and relatively unstable enterprises, such "special occasions" were never in short supply. When they arose, elderly workers were simply dumped onto the labour market along with large numbers of all ages, the victims of high workforce mobility and of economic crises great or small.5

The result was a game of industrial musical chairs in which the elderly were the losers. To quote Charles Booth in his 1894 survey,

They may not actually be dismissed, but if any mishap breaks the thread of their employment, it is difficult for a man of fifty to make a fresh start, and even at forty-five it is, in some trades, not easy to do so.6

Once out of work, men faced lengthening spells of unemployment and, by their fifties and sixties, had little chance of regaining full-time work. In a 1907 Treasury Memorandum, Roderick Meiklejohn observed that

It was safe to say that after forty-five, it becomes increasingly difficult for a man to obtain employment in most of the skilled trades; ... for those over fifty-five, the chances of getting regular work are rare. For the unskilled labourer at fifty-five, the opportunity is still less.7

Evidence of the higher duration of unemployment for the elderly is plentiful and conclusive. For instance, in a reasonably good year, 1895, the average days lost (in excess of 3 days) through unemployment by all members of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers was 15.1. Those aged 55-64 lost more than twice as many days at 33.1. For those over sixty-five, the average was 26.9 days: presumably, by this age, many of the long-term unemployed would have left the Union. For those engineers who were actually
unemployed, these figures translate into 108.9 days at 55-64, compared to 53.9 days at 25-34.8

In 1906-07, the Stepney Distress Committee found that of more than 100 applicants who had lost permanent jobs, over 70 per cent had failed to recover regular employment during the year: the overwhelming majority was aged 35-55. From January to May 1906, 43 per cent of applicants to the Edinburgh Distress Committee were aged over forty, and in the following twelve months, this age group accounted for 48 per cent of re-registrations, as well as 42 per cent of new applications. And in 1929, a Ministry of Labour survey showed that for unemployed insured males, average days lost peaked at between 182 and 183 for those aged 55-64; for those 25-34, the average was 139.9

By 1936, with the Depression beginning to lift, the Pilgrim Trust found that 10 per cent of all men aged 60-64 had been unemployed for over one year, compared to just over 2 per cent of all 25-34 year-olds. "Day after day, year after year, the same thing", one elderly man told the interviewer, "there are thousands of us, and our only future is the old age pension". The figures confirmed his pessimism: at nearly sixty, he had half as much chance of returning to work as a man of fifty, and only one-third that of a thirty-year-old. It was no wonder that J.B. Priestley saw these older unemployed men as "a series of personal tragedies".10

Not all those who suffered long periods of unemployment appeared in the statistics. Quite apart from those who were uninsured or failed to register for benefits or other assistance, as mentioned above, there were many thousands for whom long months or years of unemployment were broken only by infrequent casual work. To quote J.A. Dale, writing about the long-term unemployed in 1934,

quite a small amount of work removes a man from that class, though he may be in a desperate plight.11

Older women shared the problem of long-term unemployment, although as the Pilgrim Trust Report claimed, underemployment probably remained their greatest bane even in 1936. The special needs of older unemployed women were seldom recognised, and in 1911, Jeanette Tawney criticised the "indifference" of Poor Law and other authorities to the female unemployed in general. She noted a noble exception in Manchester, where the Distress Committee had opened two sewing rooms "to meet the needs of middle-aged women", especially widows and wives of the unemployed. In London, the Lady Superintendent of the Central Unemployed Body's workrooms - which catered for all ages -
commented to Tawney on the "general improvement in industrial capacity" which her clients achieved. This, she acknowledged, was a result both of their labour and the better nutrition which it bought them: she believed that in many cases the relief had "save[d] their homes".12

This problem still received little official attention in the 1920s, when it was left to a handful of charitable lodging houses and shelters to attempt to give older unemployed women a "fresh start" by securing placements for them. A small official step was finally taken in 1939, when the London County Council opened Carisbrooke House, a special institution for "able-bodied middle aged women", intended to "foster their sense of usefulness ... [and] recreate their self-confidence".13

It is difficult to assess the extent of female unemployment with any accuracy: because of the various household means tests and the Anomalies Order of 1931 amongst other factors, women were even less likely than older men to be registered or on relief lists if unemployed. Older women's tendency to gravitate to uninsured occupations and especially to casual and backyard employments such as washing and charring presents a further difficulty, making them most unpromising subjects for the statistician. As the London County Council's Medical Officer of Health reported in 1927

\[...\text{if [an unemployed woman's] appearance has deteriorated badly, she may be unable to find anything but the coarsest work (dish-washing in restaurants, step-cleaning, etc.) [at] 7d. or 8d. an hour for which her strength may not be equal}.14\]

Similarly, in 1936, the Pilgrim Trust Enquiry observed that older women in the industrial North-West could usually only obtain "the roughest type of shop and office cleaning, done by what is often referred to locally as the 'shawl type'". From 1922, the drift out of insurable employment was encouraged, not to say enforced, by the Ministry of Labour, through its policy of referring unemployed women to positions in domestic service where they would lose eligibility for unemployment benefit - as well as, in some areas, considerable social caste - and disqualifying them if they refused. This practice was particularly hard on older women, who were not only unable to compete for the more desirable types of domestic work, but were understandably reluctant and often unable to "break up their homes" to go into residential service.15
Nonetheless, the Pilgrim Trust Enquiry found that, of women in Blackburn who had been registered as unemployed for more than a year, 47 per cent were over forty-five, while in Leicester, 43 per cent were over fifty.

It will be seen [the Report stated] that the age group 45-64 is pretty well divided between those who still consider themselves fit and able to return to work and those who for a variety of reasons feel themselves to be handicapped by personal factors ... [the former] suffer real distress on account of the fact that not their capacity for work, but their age appears to be the cause of further unemployment.16

They were not alone in this feeling. Contemporaries observed that purchases of hair dye - and the use of domestic substitutes such as mixed soot and butter - were largely restricted to older men: in 1894, J.A. Spender spoke of the "pathetic, blundering attempts" of men in their fifties to conceal their age. "If you looked older, your job was finished", recalled one railwayman's son, while both the engineer Alfred Jephcott and Shoreditch Guardian Joseph Cox told the Aberdare Commission in 1895 that a man could not obtain employment, regardless of capacity, "if he show[ed] grey hairs on his head". The appearance of the elderly unemployed could be a barrier for other reasons: skilled craftsmen such as metalsmiths and instrument makers often claimed they were unable to return to their former occupation with hands roughened by casual labour.17 By contrast, commentators spoke of "the look of the permanent 'out of work'", with the characteristic soft hands and "starved grey look". Even in 1936, the Pilgrim Trust Report described older men

who step forward ... with the feeling that this is only another in an unbroken series of failures which they count by years: often the appearance of their hands and faces is tell-tale.18

Thus, while one of Booth's 1894 respondents described the majority of old people as "utterly incapacitated" by "work[ing] to extreme old age for small wages", age and appearance kept many others out of work when they still had years of labour left in them. In the 1890s, many workhouses seem to have hosted a small collection of former artisans in their fifties or sixties who, as Joseph Cox remarked,

really make themselves useful and seem to take a pleasure in their work.

Indeed, some of them could earn their living or more.19

Cox was on the Board of Guardians of Shoreditch, whose Workhouse boasted
3 carpenters, 8 engineers and stokers, 10 shoemakers, 10 tailors, 1 blacksmith, 12 men who are wardsmen, 3 who are bakers, 12 who do kitchen and scullery work, 12 who are painters, 10 who act as messengers, and there are 3 polishers, 1 bricklayer, 1 flock bed maker, and 1 bookbinder.

Nearly all were old men, so that more than a third of the 190 men over sixty in this Workhouse were employed in its maintenance. While this was certainly a unusually high proportion, the range of activities was not uncommon. Thus, the male inmates of Whitechapel Workhouse were able to assist in its upkeep with "carpentry, tin-making, mat-making, mat-weaving, shoemaking, tailoring, basket-making, painting, glazing, [and] chimney sweeping". In Wandsworth and Clapham Unions, the inmates "could work and teach others at their various trades", and had renovated the dining hall, saving the Union one hundred pounds. Even older men, a Lewisham Guardian cheerfully remarked, "were able to sit down at woodchopping". In a survey of 50 rural Unions in 1899, the Rev. Charles Cox found that several

use casuals for household repairs and redecorating - and those with skilled trades are often glad to spend weeks or even months in a [Work]House on the usual inmates' fare doing up the wards ... 21

From the 1900s to the 1930s, both official and popular concern with industrial efficiency were at their peak. For this reason, considerable attention was paid to the employability of Labour Exchange applicants, casual ward inmates and the unemployed in general. The unemployed themselves often shared this concern: to quote a skilled Trade Union official in 1922,

it is quite pathetic to see how nervous some of the fellows get when there is a chance of a job. They are not sure that they will still be able to do. 22

In 1936, the Pilgrim Trust Report noted that older women in particular were liable to "nervousness and diffidence" and to underrating their employability, with complaints of bad eyesight springing mainly from loss of confidence in the face of factory jobs which could require great speed and delicacy of touch. With employment picking up rapidly in early 1939, the London County Council's Public Assistance Committee was able to find placements for over 1,000 long-term relief recipients, although noting that many had very low self-confidence and lacked the ability to find work for themselves. Some required
several periods of temporary work "before they are capable of standing up to the demands of regular employment". Nonetheless, the report summarised, recipients

    do, in fact, appreciate and are grateful for the benefits of regular work, and are fully capable of carrying it out under suitable conditions. 23

Excellent work has been done on this complex issue by Noel Whiteside and others: here it suffices to say that in general, the physical condition of the elderly unemployed was no less than appalling. 24 However, investigators were sometimes taken aback to discover those they had confidently dismissed as "unemployable", happily returning to permanent work. Equally, those who troubled to study the health of employed people were shocked by what they found. For instance, in 1887, the Superintendent of Statistics, William Ogle, included in a house to house survey a number of questions about health and disabilities which were intended for the unemployed. The responses he received from men in work led him to conclude that they had misunderstood the questions: otherwise, he reasoned, how could 489 men in the sample of 29,551 describe themselves as "not physically equal to ordinary manual labour", although receiving wages, while a further 214 workers classed themselves as "permanently disabled"? However, it is likely that these men understood all too well. As the Political and Economic Planning (PEP) Report, Britain's Health, observed in 1937, British workers were indeed the C3 population, with a "very low average of health". Fortunately for them, employability is a relative concept. 25

Hence throughout the whole period, the ranks of the unemployed were swollen by disproportionate numbers of what one Poor Law Inspector called

    weakly or elderly men [and women] who while not suffering from any definite bodily ailment, are yet in these days of keen competition, hopelessly crowded out of employment. 26

Ogle's 1887 London census, mentioned above, found that 44 per cent of males over fifty-five described themselves as unemployed on the day of the Enquiry, compared to 23 per cent of those aged 25-55. Unemployed censuses in Manchester in 1909 showed that male Trade Unionists were significantly more likely to be unemployed at all ages over thirty-five, while women, whether Trade Unionists or not, were substantially more likely to be unemployed after thirty-five. After forty five, women's chances of unemployment increased further, with a representation amongst the total unemployed almost double their proportion in the workforce. A year later, Rowntree and Lasker surveyed unemployed
workers in York and judged that, of those who had lost regular work, 23 per cent were handicapped in obtaining jobs mainly by age.\textsuperscript{27}

Early surveys of both male and female applicants to Distress Committees and Labour Exchanges generally gave a ratio of applicants to the occupied population which peaked in the 35-44 age group; after that, older workers, while still over-represented, tended increasingly to shift onto poor relief rolls.\textsuperscript{28} This relationship was elegantly portrayed in a table produced by G.B. Morrison in 1911:

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\caption{MALE APPLICANTS FOR UNEMPLOYMENT AND POOR LAW RELIEF 1905-06}
\begin{tabular}{llll}
\hline
AGE & Proportion of male unemployment relief applicants per 1,000 male population in selected industries* & Ratio of male poor relief recipients per 1,000 male population in 1906 \\
\hline
15-19 & 5.1 & 1.7 \\
20-24 & 17.8 & - & 1.6 \\
25-34 & 23.6 & - & 2.9 \\
35-44 & 29.2 & - & 5.8 \\
45-54 & 24.7 & - & 11.4 \\
55-64 & 26.7 & - & 28.7 \\
65-74 & 11.4 & - & 70.3 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{*} Age distribution of unemployed based on applicants for assistance under the Unemployed Workmen Act 1905; age distribution of industries based on 1901 Census.}
\end{table}


This dovetailing of unemployment and poor relief was complicated even into the 1940s by the ubiquitous household means test, which forced the indigent on and off relief lists and unemployment registers at various stages of the family life cycle, depending on the earnings of the spouse or children still at home. As noted earlier, women were most likely
of all to disappear from the statistics as a result of the means tests, but older men with earning children were also disproportionately affected. From 1915, married women's eligibility for unemployment benefit was restricted, to be progressively tightened in the 1920s and virtually squeezed out of existence for most women by the 1931 Anomalies Order.29

The heavy labour often demanded in exchange for assistance by Distress Committees deterred some of the frailer and older male unemployed, but this was not always the case. As the Poor Law Inspector J.S. Davy remarked of Poor Law outdoor labour orders in 1879, the work was almost invariably accepted, however onerous.30 Age limits on some schemes such as those with labour colonies or emigration assistance plans barred some older applicants, as well as keeping away many who were reluctant to leave their families or to lose contact with former employers, workmates and the local employment network. Desperation, however, could pull the older unemployed in the other direction, as for instance the sizeable numbers of older workers still going "on tramp" between casual wards even in the 1930s. In 1897, Arthur Woodworth noted that of the unemployed men who told the Toynbee Trust that they were willing to move to the country to find work, "more than one-third were old men, forty-five or over", none of whom had agricultural experience.31

Trade Union unemployment, sickness and superannuation benefits and Friendly Society sick pay also affected these figures: Trade Unionists were unlikely to apply to Distress Committees or Labour Exchanges, and as Norman Dearle explained in 1908,

> the superannuation benefit ... often acts ... as a sort of unemployed fund for those whose age prevents them getting regular work ... [thus] providing information concerning the state of employment.32

In his work on working men's associations in 1889, J.M Baemreither wrote that "when a man is out of employ, a slight ailment or indisposition, which in better days he would have shaken off, is enough to put him on the sick list". Quite apart from the undoubted effects of unemployment and accompanying low income in causing ill-health, what Noel Whiteside has called "official jiggery pokery" often forced men and women onto sick pay or disablement benefit and out of the unemployment statistics.33 For instance, as we have seen earlier, the lack of provision for unemployment benefit by Friendly Societies left many older unemployed men on the pitifully inadequate rates of permanent sick pay, while Trade Union time limits on unemployment pay had the same effect. From 1911, National Insurance showed a similar phenomenon, with much higher rates of sickness claims amongst those in industries not covered by Unemployment Insurance. Sickness and
disablement benefit, were set much lower than unemployment benefit and had no dependants' allowances; on the other hand, they were free from the household means test and, from 1930, were partially discounted for Public Assistance; claimants were also free from the risk of losing benefit if they refused undesirable work such as domestic service or strike-breaking, or were reclassified as "not normally in insurable employment". Women's claims were also consistently higher, not only because of higher female morbidity, but because of restricted eligibility for married women, discussed above, and the drift, or rather flood, of unemployed women out of insurable employment. These are complex issues which are more fully discussed in Whiteside's work on health and unemployment; the issue of sickness and disability statistics is raised in Chapter Five.34

Those in receipt of Friendly Society sick pay did not always manage to keep away from the Poor Law: in fact, from the 1880s, reams of Government reportage and correspondence were devoted to the question of how sick pay should be treated for poor relief purposes. Similarly, from 1911, many of those on National Insurance sickness or disablement benefits were also obliged to seek Poor Law relief or Public Assistance. In some areas, such as London, it was reported that the great majority of recipients did so; in rural districts, most struggled on without.35

Thus, the leakage of the elderly from unemployment registers to poor relief or public assistance was obvious even in 1929, when over half of all male Public Assistance recipients registered at Stepney Labour Exchange were over fifty-five. Certainly, it was infamous among working people themselves: "I have had to go to the Guardians", confessed one elderly Trade Unionist to a colleague in 1922, "now I suppose I'll never work again".36

From 1911, however, the leakage lessened in slow stages as unemployment insurance and finally the Assistance Board drew in an increasing proportion of the elderly unemployed. Surveys from the 1920s began to reveal more fully the extent of the over-representation of older age groups among the unemployed. By 1922, a sample enquiry by Felix Morley of over 1,600,000 adults claiming benefit showed a severe disproportion of claimants to occupied population in the 45-65 age group for men and at all ages over thirty-five for women. This pattern held good for various occupational categories, but was particularly marked for skilled potteries workers in Stoke and less noticeable for clerical workers in Liverpool.37

Successive Ministry of Labour surveys throughout the 1920s and 1930s showed a growing preponderance of elderly men amongst the unemployed, rising to nearly one quarter of all
insured men aged 60-64 in 1938, compared to just one-tenth of those aged 20-34. By this
time, 48 per cent of male Unemployment Assistance Board applicants - that is, those who
had exhausted their statutory entitlement - were aged over forty-five, and 29 per cent, or
over 150,000, were over fifty-five: a third of the 45-64 age group had been unemployed for
over three years.38

The Ministry of Labour surveys provide an excellent illustration of the problem of
unemployment lag: that is, the tendency of economic recovery to absorb younger
unemployed people back into work, leaving a residuum of the elderly and less able. Thus,
when unemployment is high, the unemployed are closer in age and health profile to the rest
of the workforce; when it is comparatively lower, and especially as it wanes, their average
age and relative disability increases. For instance, in the deepening economic crisis
between 1927 and 1931, the New Survey of London found that the percentage of
unemployed male Londoners with serious health problems fell from 41 per cent to 33 per
cent, although their actual numbers rose.39

The older and frailer people left behind by a receding tide of unemployment become less
employable month by month as their time out of work increases, so that the elderly victims
of a recession may still be on the unemployment registers five or ten years later. Never
likely to return to work, they have in effect been compulsorily retired, although they may
refuse to accept this status. As PEP remarked with characteristic glumness in its 1935
Report, The Exit from Industry:

   In a sense, wherever the elderly worker exists there is an actual or potential
depressed area, due to his greater exposure and reduced resistance to
economic blizzards. 40

The phenomenon of unemployment lag had been observable in surveys of unemployment
and statistics of pauperism at least from the 1890s, and during the long years of high
unemployment in the 1920s and 1930s, it became increasingly apparent. Indeed, Paul
Johnson has recently suggested that the large extent of involuntary retirement due to
unemployment which existed during these years may have been a major cause of the
decline in the elderly male workforce between the 1921 and 1951 Censuses.41

By the mid-1930s, unemployment lag was sufficiently obvious to generate considerable
public concern, with the elderly long-term unemployed becoming the focus of anxious
study by the Unemployment Assistance Board, the Pilgrim Trust and others. To quote the
Parliamentary Secretary’s Committee Report on the Older Unemployed in 1937,
it seems necessary to kill the notion that a man's useful industrial life ends at forty-five, and that of a woman at forty.42

Some Public Assistance Committees, recognising the unbreakable hold of unemployment on most of its elderly victims, paid them special advanced age allowances. As Percy Ford wrote in 1939, "there are numbers of men over forty-five years of age who must be regarded practically as permanent pensioners". Even in the boom employment conditions of the Second World War and after, a small number remained unemployed, with factors such as their age, unemployment duration, disabilities, lack of geographical mobility and general unattractiveness to employers placing them more truly in the category of enforced early retirees.

In the main, the problem of the elderly unemployed in Hull is one of full employment [wrote A.G. Rose in 1953] ... they are neither workers, nor are they pensioners ... for many of them, "too old" is the only answer they are likely to be given.43

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Underemployment and the Fringes of the Labour Market

Thus, illness, accidents and unemployment most commonly precipitated the final phase in a dismal progress, when a man or a woman could no longer obtain regular full-time work even for reduced wages. In the 1880s and beyond, this final phase was usually one of makeshift and struggle. In the towns, old men turned to the meat market of casual labour.

Best-documented and largest of the employers of casual labour were the docks, especially those in London, Liverpool and Southampton, which, despite the introduction of strictly policed Employment Registers, continued by their very nature to require a large volume of casual labour well into the 1930s. For example, as far back as 1849, Henry Mayhew noted that the numbers of dock labourers employed in London varied by as much as 7,000 from day to day, and wrote of the scene outside the dock gates each morning:

the scuffling and scrambling, and stretching forth of countless hands ... some men jump upon the backs of the others ... all are shouting .... Indeed, it is a sight to sadden the most callous, to see thousands of men struggling
for only one day's hire, ... [knowing that] hundreds must be left to idle the
day out in want.44

Mayhew was one of the first to comment on the residual nature of dock labouring, and
compiled a long list of their former occupations - "master butchers, master bakers,
publicans, grocers, old soldiers, old sailors ... " and so forth. This list neatly parallels that
obtained by Charles Booth in 1889 for permanent labourers at the West India Docks: out of
214 men, he found that 43 were former artisans, 35 labourers, 29 porters, messengers and
warehousemen, 27 maritime trades workers, 21 service trades workers (servants, waiters,
etc.), 17 tradesmen, 15 soldiers, 11 white-collar workers, 7 busmen or carmen, 3 machine
minders and 2 police (4 were straight from school).45

Dock labour, Booth remarked, was a "last resort" occupation, and his figures show the high
average age even of the permanent labourers, very few of whom were under thirty. By
1931, when Percy Ford conducted his survey of Southampton, this effect was even more
marked, with local dockers having an average age of 47, compared to 38 for all occupied
Southampton males. As Ford noted, the ageing of the dock labour force was partly due to
the registration system, but was also a product of the late entry of workers into the trade:
two-thirds of all applicants for registration were over forty, and about half were former
seamen.46

The large numbers of men flocking to the docks might lead one to suppose that, at least
after Mayhew's period, work was readily available. This was not the case. As Mayhew,
Booth, Steel-Maitland and Squire, and the Toynbee Hall survey showed for London in the
1860s, 1880s, 1900s and 1920s respectively, and the Liverpool Joint Research Committee
and Caradog Jones for Liverpool in the 1900s and the 1930s, a younger casual worker
could expect on average two to three days' work a week in a reasonable year: old men
would be lucky to get any.47

Dock labour undoubtedly attracted so much public attention because it provided human
drama on a large scale. Nearly a century after Mayhew, in the 1920s, one working-class
autobiographer also described the scene at the gates:

I frequently saw scores of men at lunchtime (for men were often hired for
half a day) gather underneath the loophole of a warehouse trying to catch the
eye of the ganger picking out the biggest and his pals. It seemed to me at the
time an inhuman way of engaging labour. ... [my father] would come
home with his back lacerated and bleeding from the many boxes he carried
... [without] the protective head and back gear of a regular docker. 48

Outside the docks, another working-class writer recalled, "there would always be
ambulances standing by. Every day some of the casuals would collapse from hunger and
exhaustion". In 1894, J.A. Spender reported that the problem of older dockers unable to
carry out a full day's work was so well recognised that other men made it a practice to hang
around waiting to take their place: these men were known in Cockney slang as "knacker-
hunters". 49

Yet the huge scale of the human tragedy at the docks should not blind us to the fact that all
over England, the same drama was played out on smaller stages each day, with men
queuing at factory gates and hanging around building sites and traipsing from door to door.
Will Crooks recounted a typical day from his spell of unemployment in the 1880s thus:

I first went down to the riverside at Shadwell ... then I called at another
place in Limehouse ... . I ... walked eight miles to a cooper's yard in
Tottenham. All in vain. I dragged myself back to Clerkenwell. Still no luck.
Then I turned towards home in despair. ... 50

In 1895, a St Marylebone Guardian complained that his efforts to find employment for
casual ward inmates had been fruitless: having been to builders' yards, he knew that "they
could always take their pick from the large crowds of healthy strong men always gathered
there in hope of work". Records kept by the large East London men's shelter, Medland
Hall, showed that, of over nine thousand men who slept there in July 1897, all left in the
morning to seek work before 6.00 am, with more than 700 leaving before 4.00am. In 1910,
Rowntree and Lasker's survey of over 400 casual workers in York found them "generally
underfed": they gave case histories of a number of elderly men earning around five
shillings for one or two day's work per week at odd jobs such as rag-gathering. Even in
1936, the Pilgrim Trust Report described

old men who have not a remote chance of working again but yet make it a
practice to stand every morning at 6.00 am at the works' gates in the hope
that perhaps they may catch the foreman's eye. 51

In rural areas, seasonal field work was widely available. This was, however, quite
unsuitable for the frail elderly and those who had become unaccustomed to heavy outdoor
work, leading to distressing accidents when old people overreached themselves. By the
same token, the undesirability of roadwork and stone-breaking made these jobs peculiarly the preserve of old men: their appropriateness for the elderly was not a consideration.52

Old women who had been in the labour force all their lives were joined by large numbers who had worked on and off, who had not worked since marriage, or who, in some cases from genteel or artisan backgrounds, had "never expected to have to earn their own living". These women now found themselves eking out declining household income, supporting themselves in widowhood or becoming replacement workers for their ailing husbands. For those who had worked while their families were young, work in old age often represented an enforced return to the labour force after voluntary retirement in middle age when their children had begun to earn.53

In town and country, most of these women turned to washing, charring and rough sewing for those little better off than themselves. In 1919, a Pension Officer in London, Jane Stuart, told the Ryland Adkins Committee that female pensioners

have almost invariably been doing charring. A few have been doing odd jobs of needlework for some time. The majority have been doing office cleaning or casual work of the charring type. ... I do not find very many minding babies excepting the babies of their relatives - their grandchildren really.54

Such occupations were overstocked at the best of times, and in economic downturns were caught in a pincer grip between failing demand and a labour supply swollen by the wives of the unemployed. Old women had once been widely employed in seasonal field work, but by the late nineteenth century this practice was dying out, with survivals mainly in East Anglia and the poorer Western districts, as well as more generally in fruit growing and market gardening. Another common source of earned income for older women was provided by boarders and lodgers: such arrangements are discussed in Chapter Three.55

Many contemporaries believed that old women were better able to scrape together a living than old men, but this was debatable, and dependent on how far underemployment and starvation wages were judged preferable to outright unemployment. As Booth observed, and as his 1894 survey of the sources of income of over 9,000 rural old people showed, old women were often able to keep on earning for longer than old men, but their earnings were so small that they usually required supplementation from poor relief, charity or relatives at a much earlier age; this result confirmed that obtained in his study of poor relief recipients in two large metropolitan Unions, Stepney and St. Pancras, in 1889.56
Much was made by contemporaries of old women's services minding children and helping with housework. Certainly such work was an extremely important resource for old women in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: most women, whether "in the labour force" or not, probably did such jobs at least occasionally. Although for the majority, the income received -often in kind - supplemented other sources, some were wholly maintained in this way. Included here was a small minority who "paid for" board and lodging with married children with their domestic services: generally, however, even coresident old women had some small independent income from poor relief, pension or outside work.\footnote{57}

Michael Anderson has shown that a few families were prepared to take even unrelated old women into their households in return for domestic services. However, this was highly atypical and almost exclusively confined to districts of Lancashire and Wales where coresidence was relatively common and accommodation expensive and scarce. As Standish Meacham has pointed out, the marginal nature of such work is indicated by the fact that, in the overwhelming majority of cases, families who did not have aged parents needing support simply managed without. Even in Ireland, with a far stronger tradition of extended family households, the Dublin Board of Guardians failed in its attempt after 1911 to place relatively able-bodied old women with artisans' families to help with the children. Despite the five shillings' pension, it was said, there was "not sufficient compensation for having them in the place".\footnote{58}

Then as now, child care by the elderly could be satisfactory for all parties, but where the old woman was genuinely too feeble for any other work, there were considerable drawbacks. Some contemporary objections to "baby farming" were well founded. Most notoriously, infant mortality in the Lancashire mill towns fell markedly during the hard times of the Cotton Famine in the 1860s, when mothers were out of work and at home where they, not elderly relatives or neighbours, could care for their children. The effect of the changed circumstances on the mortality of these elderly relatives and neighbours is not documented, but is unlikely to have been so positive. The type of problem that could arise with these arrangements is illustrated by one working-class autobiographer, who remembers with bitterness being dragged into the bushes and sexually assaulted in full view of an aged playground attendant, who was too deaf and short-sighted to notice. Paid child minding was given to old women because they needed it, as is shown by community hostility to early creches as "taking the bread out of old people's mouths".\footnote{59}
This was a complex area, with women's paid employment shading into their domestic role until the two blended indistinguishably in the grey region between the market and domestic economies. As Charles Booth most perceptively explained in 1894,

> It is in home-work, or house-work of some kind, either for those with whom they live, or for others who in return give them food or a little money, that the great majority of old women find employment. This employment is, as a source of maintenance, very closely connected with assistance from children, and is in its essence social rather than economic. It can scarcely be said to provide a living.\(^6^0\)

Only Booth's attempted separation of the economic and the social betrayed his upper-middle-class male liberal background. It is of course true that, in most cases, these family and neighbourhood transactions were not economically rational in the sense that old women's services were paid at their current market value. Instead, they often operated on a different, longer term rationale of family or neighbourhood service exchange and bartering. Anderson's "adoption" cases probably represented the extreme end of this spectrum of mutual interdependence and exchange, which was such a crucial part of working-class women's lives. It would be equally wrong to overestimate either the market or the charitable elements of such transactions: in most women's lives, the balance between buying and selling and giving and receiving fluctuated according to family circumstances, with a final shift towards dependence in the last period of illness or old age.\(^6^1\)

Acknowledging this balance, Margaret Loane wrote in 1911 that many elderly people would have been unable to maintain themselves without "valid and recognised claims on the services of neighbours or relatives earned by former kindness and exertion". Thus small jobs were often given to the very old and frail - men as well as women - more from a sense of social obligation and return for past service to the family or community, than from any belief in their efficiency. This type of "pseudo-employment" was of undeniable economic importance. In the late nineteenth century, payment by relatives and neighbours in exchange for such small tasks probably accounted for a far larger proportion of old people's income than all formal charity combined. Some Poor Law authorities explicitly set relief at a level which required such supplementation, offering the workhouse to those who were truly beyond any work; most adopted the simpler expedient of paying below subsistence relief to all, letting the Deaths from Starvation Returns take the hindmost.\(^6^2\)

Although relatives and neighbours were the most important source of income for old people pursuing token or pseudo-employment, they were not the only source. Many
churches, for instance, offered a few small paid tasks such as the pew-opening mentioned earlier to their aged faithful: bell-ringing, church-cleaning and "looking after" halls and meeting rooms were frequent examples. At the very bottom of the employment hierarchy, there was a ragbag collection of old, underemployed and disabled people ostensibly selling their services to the public, but in reality more or less seeking charity: as W.H. Davies wrote of his own experiences as a tramp in the 1900s,

of course this business of hawking with a few cheap laces and a few packets of common pins and needles, was after all only another name for begging ... . In exonerating of this fraudulent selling, a man was expected to tell some tale of distress ... . Often [a householder] would pay for these useless things and not take them.63

Davies tried other employments such as hymn-singing in the streets, but found that all his needs were often met simply by kindly people whose houses he called at asking for water. He amusingly recounts his meeting with an old man who had deliberately picked "the worst assortment of berries I had ever seen in my life", and was trying to sell them only to those not likely to buy them, in order to get a penny or so of charity from each of them. "How do you think I could make my living if I sold them?", he asked Davies, "The market value of these berries is about one farthing ...". This enterprising old man derived much of his income from reciting epic poetry, although Davies seems to have suspected that people only paid to make him go away. In the 1930s, George Orwell came across many similar instances, and noted a hierarchy of street selling which shaded into outright begging, from street photographers and acrobats, pavement artists and organ grinders, through "people who sing hymns, sell matches, or bootlaces, or envelopes containing a few grains of lavender", to outright beggars. As Orwell observed, the line between employment and charity was impossible to draw.64

Yet whether old farm labourers finding work at harvest and hay-making and occasional odd jobs, artisans and others hanging around the towns in hopes of casual labour, or old women reduced to seasonal field work, rough sewing, washing, charring and small services for family and neighbours, old people struggled along sometimes for years before losing their battle with illness and economic reality. As the Warden of Browning Hall, F.H. Stead, wrote in 1909,

I saw men past work persist in trying to work. I saw men who trembled for very age hawking trifles in the streets ... to the burden of years, always hard
enough to bear, was added the still more crushing burden of want and shame and social neglect.65

Noting the periodic nature of poor relief payments to many in their sixties in the 1840s, David Thomson has suggested that this represented a struggle with the authorities to secure a place on permanent relief lists. Far more likely, given our knowledge of old people's behaviour in the late nineteenth century, was the struggle with their own ill health and marginal productivity: what Joseph Arch called "the toiling and moiling and patching and contriving" of old age and of working-class life in general. Indeed, E.H. Hunt has recently pointed out that Thomson's own evidence also tends to support this view. Poor Law authorities may have been only too ready to squeeze the last drop of work out of the elderly, but the determination to soldier on probably came as much from the old people themselves. Looking back on pre-pension days in 1934, George Cuttle spoke of the great age to which village folk were accustomed to work before seeking Relief ... work was graven on their minds, suggesting an effort prolonged beyond the age when it was reasonable.66

Hence survey records chart the inexorable decline through a series of increasingly low status jobs into indigence: for instance, all from Booth's 1889 survey, a mastmaker, turned labourer, turned nightwatchman, making a few pennies waking men in common lodging houses; a carpenter, turned occasional theatre-prop assistant, turned shoeblack; and a needlewoman, turned knitter, turned fishpacker. Similarly, from Beatrice Webb's and Ella Pycroft's records as lady rent collectors for Katharine Buildings in the 1880s: an army pensioner, turned prison warder, then odd jobs one day a week, then theatre extra; a gentleman's servant, turned horsekeeper, turned casual dock labourer; and a footman who "gradually drifted to docks". Even in the 1930s, such "careers" were not uncommon: Assistance Board investigators in 1942 mentioned, among others, an old woman employed "at a theatre, then lampshade-making, then cleaning" and an old man once "a shop assistant in fashionable establishments ... as he became older, his employment lay in less fashionable places".67

Surveys also reveal the courageous attempts to cobble together a living from various more or less unlikely sources: again from Booth's survey, "fancy shop, minds a baby, washes"; "tiework and washing, minds baby"; "goes about doing whatever she can"; "shoeblack, wife sells matches sometimes"; "any casual work he can get"; "makes things out of bits of wood"; and "sometimes goes out with a barrow".68
Sometimes they - and other contemporary sources - are scarcely less lurid in their details than the sensational exposes of Andrew Mearns, William Booth and others. They describe old women who worked in agricultural gangs or as market porters, chopped wood or picked through rubbish for a living, washed corpses or minded attempted suicides for the Police; old washerwomen "exhausted and gasping, surrounded by steaming laundry", or turning mangles which would strain a healthy man; old charwomen who did a full week's housework for two shillings or perhaps just for food, or who, although paralysed, managed to scrub with their left hand; old "bundles of rags" who "could be hired to drag a hundredweight of coke in a wagon a mile or more for threepence". They record old men who made their living collecting dog manure or cigarette butts; who swept street crossings or did pavement drawings or held horses' heads; who ran errands or wore sandwich boards or waited around the Thames where drowned bodies surfaced in hopes of a reward; who collapsed in workhouse stoneyards or died by the road between casual wards. They document benefit nights and "friendly leads" arranged by neighbours and workmates with such laudable objects as to provide an eighty-two-year-old former engineer and ship's captain with a piano organ, thus enabling him to make his living singing in the streets.

Changing Attitudes to Work in Old Age

As Gareth Stedman Jones has noted, nineteenth and early twentieth century sources are full of such "pathetic and gratuitous forms of economic activity". But the fact that they were so carefully detailed is significant, showing that contemporaries too felt concern and dismay when confronted by them. Working-class witnesses to the Aberdare Commission in 1895 spoke feelingly of old men reduced to labour in fieldwork gangs or "dragging themselves" on long journeys to summer stone-breaking jobs. For example, Sidney Ward described carrying baskets for an old man returning from a day of stone-breaking:

... he has had to stand for three or four minutes to get his breath, and if you spoke to him he could not answer you ... . He tried to work when it was cruel for him to go.73

In 1899, John Metcalfe spoke for many when he described

the sight of the aged of both sexes ... in hopeless fashion trying to keep up some form of independent career, by doing little bits of work which have nothing in the world to recommend them.74
An old man, Metcalfe felt, was "the lackey and menial of his fellow worker", derided by other adults and mocked in the streets by children, who were quick to sense his loss of status. Indeed, it is disturbing how many working-class autobiographers recall themselves as children harassing elderly people and interfering with their work. In the words of a topical poem in the Daily Chronicle:

Yer wants a job, yer dew,
And you're only sixty-tew!
Thanks, we've all the paralytics
As we're needing witharth you ... .

The changing attitude to old people's work is illustrated by the intense controversy which developed in the 1880s and '90s regarding workhouse labour. The most common tasks, stone-breaking for "able-bodied" males - including many elderly men - and oakum-picking for women and the infirm, were not only uneconomical but, as witnesses to Royal Commissions and innumerable speeches and articles attested, they were coming to be regarded as demeaning and particularly unsuitable for old people. "I hate to see the women at it, ... but I have my orders", wrote a rural Workhouse Master in 1899, and the Poor Law Inspector J.S. Davy spoke for many when in 1888 he described oakum-picking as troublesome ... dirty ... unprofitable ... and unfair; ... the beginner toils with sore and bleeding hands to very little purpose.

In addition, inadequate health screening of workhouse and casual ward entrants, and the propensity of many authorities to classify as "able-bodied" anyone who had not been admitted with acute illness, meant that there was never any shortage of scandals relating to the deaths of sick old men and women forced to break stones, scrub floors or similar.

In a society which still employed large numbers of old men in stone-breaking and roadwork gangs, and which accepted heavy washing and charring as suitable occupations for old women, this controversy heralded a transformation. By the late nineteenth century, most people believed that children should have time to play and learn and should not be shut up all day in factories or workshops or out doing fieldwork in gangs, and that women should have time to look after their families and should not be engaged in very heavy physical labour. Equally, they were coming to believe that old people should not have the last drop of work wrung out of them in exhausting and degrading employments.
This view was most forcefully put by Trade Union representatives and other workers, who until the 1920s showed surprisingly little interest in keeping the aged out of the labour market. Their vision, elucidated by working-class witnesses to various Government enquiries, at Trade Union Congresses and by delegates to the National Committee of Organised Labour on Old Age Pensions, was of old people freed by a modest pension from the necessity for constant labour, but able to supplement their income and maintain their interest in life with odd jobs and other less taxing employment.80

In keeping with this, most Trade Unions allowed their superannuated members to work at below Union rates or at least in other trades, and workers drew attention to the harsh effects of Friendly Society rules which proscribed all work for old people receiving extended sick pay.81 With a few exceptions such as George Lansbury and Will Crooks, Trade Unionists seem generally to have supported payment of pensions as of right even to those in substantial employment, and in 1925 the Contributory Pensions Scheme was widely accepted, despite its cost, because it was seen as adopting this principle.82

The feelings of old people themselves are, as always, more difficult to ascertain. Even in the 1940s and 1950s, survey questions on attitudes to, and reasons for, retirement, evoked totally different answers even from the same respondents, depending on their phrasing. This was clearly a subject which roused complex emotions. Nonetheless, the disproportionate gratitude with which many greeted the five shilling pension in 1908 is well documented, as is their pride in receiving contributory pensions in the 1920s and '30s and their relief at the introduction of the Supplementary Pension Scheme in 1940.83

Leslie Hannah has noted that the available statistics do not show significant hiccoughs in retirement trends following these reforms. However, these statistics may not reflect the experience of the very large proportion of older workers, and especially women, in casual work and uninsured occupations. Contemporary investigators certainly believed that the Pension Acts enabled the retirement of numbers of old people who, to quote Diane Ibberson of the Assistance Board, had been holding on in employment "long after they should have given up for reasons of health". In 1942, she described amongst others two cases with invalid husbands where the pension had been supplemented by the wife's wages as a cleaner; in one of these a rather frail woman with asthma and a severe hernia had worked as a hotel cleaner up to the age of sixty-eight; in a third case a woman with severe heart trouble, once in good employment as a charge hand at Liberty's, had struggled along as a cleaner up to the age of sixty-two, when the Doctor ordered her to give up and she
obeyed because it did not now mean a resort to Public Assistance or to the charity of grudging relatives.84

Similarly, in 1919, with the labour force participation of the elderly still high following the War, and the pension now way below subsistence level, Pension Officer Jane Stuart found that a good many when they get the pension give up some of their work because they are really not able to keep it on ... they look upon the pension as a means of relieving them from some of their work.85

As indicated by the rapid drop in their recorded labour force participation, old women in particular seem generally to have given up the unequal battle with needlework, washing and charring as soon as they were financially able. As Geoffrey Thomas and Barbara Osborne observed in 1950, most old women who continued to work probably did so from economic necessity rather than choice. In 1929, the New Survey of London found that female earners over sixty-five were not significantly less likely to be in poverty than their counterparts outside the labour force. Even in 1945, Thomas's survey for the Central Office of Information found very small differences in income between elderly women at work and at home. A history of sporadic employment or work in uninsured occupations meant that many women were not entitled to contributory pensions, and were thus obliged to provide for themselves. Other women from poorer households were forced by difficult family circumstances - for instance, the need to support relatives - to remain in the workforce.86

Many "retired" old women still welcomed occasional light jobs for relatives and neighbours. "They usually do a little 'obliging', and regard the few extra shillings earned in the week as legitimate perks", reported a London informant for the Nuffield College Social Reconstruction Survey in 1942. This source of income was particularly important in the employment booms of both World Wars, especially in the First, when the plummeting real value of the pension meant that old people had to find other resources to survive. Unfortunately, even "a little 'obliging'" was hard to come by when hard times emptied the purses of family and friends, or in poorer areas where there was not enough work even for younger women.87

On the whole, however, old women generally seemed to adjust fairly well to retirement, and could generally keep themselves fully occupied with the heavy demands of housework usually with primitive facilities and often in squalid surroundings.88
Even older widowed and single women showed a steady withdrawal from the labour market, and Frederick le Gros Clark estimated that of all working single women aged 45-54 in 1921, 18 per cent had left the workforce within ten years for reasons other than death or marriage: this compared to 8.4 per cent of men in this age group. Moreover, the vigorous campaigns of the 1930s for pensions at fifty-five for spinsters and widows left little doubt where their preferences largely lay. For some, financial worry, loneliness or a preference for employment marred retirement: for instance in 1934, J.B. Priestley described an old acquaintance, a retired Bradford weaver,

wishing she had strength enough to work more than those fifty years, wondering how to get through the coming week, and never asking herself, as she stirs in the dark mornings when she hears the hooter blowing and the clatter of feet outside, whether mills were created for men and women or men and women for mills.89

Nevertheless, probably because of their straitened working lives, frequent ill health and lifetimes of both caring for and supporting their own children, aged parents or other kin, single and widowed working women were said to be amongst those who most enjoyed the years of retirement. In 1915, Clementina Black remarked that

old age with a pension can be "the happiest years of her life" for a woman who has had to work to support her children.90

Old men's attitudes were more ambivalent, and a few actively resented the 1908 and 1925 Acts, which they felt had given their employers an excuse to dismiss them. As the Leeds informant of the Nuffield College Social Reconstruction Society illuminatingly observed in 1942, "younger men wish to retire at sixty, older men wish to go on working ... ". Most men seem to have disliked fixed retirement ages and wished to keep on at their old jobs as long as possible. "I do not think anything you offer would keep the ordinary man from trying to work as long as ever he could", declared George Dew of the National Conference of Friendly Societies in 1919. Records from the Cadbury Company and the Amalgamated Society of Engineers respectively show men retiring on average three-quarters and 2.5 years after becoming eligible for superannuation, probably indicating a stoutness of heart rapidly outflanked by weakness of limb.91

As noted earlier, both World Wars showed a dramatic surge in employment of the elderly: as G.M. Herford reported to the Assistance Board on old men in Stepney in 1941,
Several of the pensioners had got light jobs and took some pride in renouncing their Supplementary Pensions. A return to work is a joy for them ... . The War ... has put [them] back into circulation ... .

In both Wars, thousands of old men left the workhouse or Public Assistance Institution to take up jobs, and many gladly - and usually unnecessarily - returned their pension books. Here, as we have noted earlier, weakness of limb sometimes intervened again, with numbers reapplying for pension due to ill-health.

However, to quote the PEP Report, *Exit from Industry*, in 1935, "the tendency is to be employed intermittently or at light tasks at low wages": this finding was shared by Caradog Jones in his 1932 survey and by later authors. Interestingly, workforce participation of elderly men was strongest in areas where the proportion of working women was highest - in 1945, the coefficient was found to be .85 - suggesting that suitable jobs in light industry were needed to enable continued workforce participation. Unskilled workers were unlikely to keep on at their old employment: as Caradog Jones observed of Liverpool workers interviewed between 1929 and 1932,

many of those who from sixty to sixty-four were earning good wages, continue at their work after sixty-five, while the others who were already at a low wage level find it much more difficult to earn anything ...

Generally, as Thomas's enquiry for the Central Office of Information found in 1945, the old men who remained in employment were those whose industrial careers fate had always smiled upon: for instance, the greater a worker's continuity of employment before sixty-five, the better his chances thereafter. But even the most favoured employees could not continue forever. In 1947, a Nuffield Foundation survey of progressive employers -those belonging to the Industrial Welfare Society - revealed that despite the labour shortage, 40 per cent of all their elderly employees had been moved to lighter work: the proportion was substantially higher for the unskilled.

Economic factors certainly played a part: as the Central Office of Information investigation found in 1945, men who had retained full-time employment - often, as we have seen, the better paid - had far more economic incentive to work than did women. Some men who managed to combine private or contributory pensions with full-time work were, in contemporary terms, quite affluent, as PEP and others noted with disapproval. But the "extra bob or two" from employment, one man explained in the 1930s, could be crucial:
you can have that little extra to keep up your going to the club, or union dues - to keep on speaking terms with your friends.98

As this remark indicates, economic and social incentives to remain at work were inextricably entwined. In 1936, the Pilgrim Trust Enquiry found that many elderly men - and a few women - preferred to work although financially better off on unemployment or disablement benefit. This was not surprising, given a male working-class culture in which both social activities and status were so exclusively bound up with employment. For working men, leisure was largely restricted to the public house or club and gambling, all of which took money and the company of workmates. To quote the Pilgrim Trust Report, many old men faced

an empty future ... neither education nor work has ever given them an opportunity to learn how to spend leisure.99

Before the spread of mass home-ownership and working-class suburbia, gardening and "do-it-yourself" held attractions only for a fortunate minority, and the retiree's choice was usually between sitting at home getting in the way, or standing on street corners with the unemployed: "dragging about to save funeral expenses", was one old man's summary. And, sadly but revealingly, retirees often spoke in the past tense of their "life", meaning their working life: "it was the last thirteen years of my life", Thomas Pitkin told the Aberdare Commission in 1895, while William Webb remarked that Friendly Societies pay the chief part of their money in a man's lifetime. When he comes to be old they pay very little.100

Hence, whether dictated by illness or employment practices, an old man's transition to retirement was not often easy. There was a widespread belief that retirement itself led to ill-health, and as now, most workers knew of apparently fit men whose health had just "gone" the moment they retired. "I think the poor old chappie died of doing nothing", said Arthur Harding of his grandfather's death in the 1890s, while in 1919, T.D. Fenby of the East Riding of Yorkshire Pensions Committee felt that his clients "live[d] longer if they work[ed]". Various Nuffield Foundation surveys in the 1940s described old men as "dying from boredom", "having a strong sense of not being wanted" and "a tendency to brood", with one unfortunate man "a positive nuisance to his wife and himself".101 A survey of admissions to a psychiatric hospital in 1943 found that in extreme cases, the strain of retirement and associated loss of contacts could lead to mental breakdown, and this was not a new problem. In 1889, the Stepney Poor Law Union case notes record, among others, a
foreman of thirty-five years' standing who committed suicide on losing his place to a younger man, and a middle-aged shipwright in the Lunatic Asylum because he refused to eat ... being out of work had been a great trouble to him; [he] thought people thought him lazy.¹⁰²

The problem probably was, and still is, intractable. Yet unsatisfactory as it often was, formal retirement seems to have been judged preferable to the residual employments taken up by old men in the pre-pension era. Most men still held on to the higher income and social status represented by their career employment as long as their health and their employers permitted. But increasingly, once this was lost, they opted for withdrawal from the labour market. Odd jobs for neighbours or occasional "filling in" for an old employer were usually welcomed, but generally, the struggle on the fringes of the labour market was becoming a thing of the past. For most old men, retirement may not have held a great deal of charm, but with a pension it at least represented a degree of dignity and economic independence.

Enforced retirement at sixty-five or sixty was not the general rule even in the 1940s and '50s. Throughout the period, many firms, including those which had their own pension schemes, prided themselves on being open to negotiation when employees wished to stay on.¹⁰³ But the shedding of old workers had to be accomplished somehow, whether through the ignominious process of singling out the least competent for dismissal, or through the less humiliating but still traumatic approaches of retirement by unemployment, retirement by accident and retirement by illness, which had dominated in the late nineteenth century. Retirement at pension age was increasingly accepted by employers and employees alike because it removed much of the pain, uncertainty and inequity from the process.

As we have seen, formal retirement had long been common amongst the middle classes and was increasingly adopted for white collar workers throughout the nineteenth century.¹⁰⁴ It is no coincidence that its spread downwards followed the substantial increase in working-class standards of living in the mid-to late nineteenth century. Now workers too could afford to increase the premium they placed on leisure and, most of all, on dignity. Instead of waiting for each worker to fail in the struggle to remain in the labour market, departure at pension age provided an option of, dare we say, retiring gracefully. It may perhaps have been, and may still be, the least unsatisfactory answer to the apparently intractable problem of the effects of human ageing on the labour force. The elderly may indeed have been "thrown out of work", but this means of doing so was definitely an improvement.
NOTES

1. Poor Law Conferences, Reports, 1898-1899, p. 533 [Hawkes].


3. Pilgrim Trust, Men without Work, p. 252; PRO AST 7/314 (Parliamentary Secretary's Committee Report on Older Unemployed, 1937, pp. 12, 14); Poor Law Conferences, Report 1898-99, London, 1899, p. 531 [Epsom]; and see n. 82.


5. Ibid.


19 Booth, *Aged Poor*, p. 244 [Narbeth, Pembroke]; Aberdare Commn, BPP 1895 XIV, p. 201 [Cox].


22 Quoted in Astor et.al., *Third Winter*, p.118; see also p. 234; G.R. Searle, *The Quest for National Efficiency*, Berkeley, 1971, pp. 102ff; PRO CAB 58/146 (Min. Lab., Report ... on Claimants to Unemployment Benefit, 1928, pp. 8-20); MH 57/97 D (Reports by 33 Medical Officers on Vagrants, 1929); AST 7/317 (Brief Record of ... a Conference on ... Older Men, 2 June 1937, Pt. 3); Greater London Records Office
(GLRO), We/Cw/La 42 (Lambeth Casual Ward - Medical Officers' Records 1931-1940); Pilgrim Trust, *Men without Work*, pp. 134-141, passim.


33 Quoted in Whiteside, "Counting the Cost", p. 240.

34 Ibid.; "Unemployment and Health", passim.

35 B. and S. Webb, English Poor Law Policy, pp. 47-48, 148, 253-255, 265; PRO CAB 87/80/64 (NCSRS, Memorandum No. 1: National Health Insurance, 5 June 1942, pp. 27, 29); CAB 87/80/83 (NCSRS, Memorandum No. 5: Public Assistance, 19 June 1942, p. 12); and see ch. 7.


38 PRO CAB 58/146 (Min. Lab., Report on ... Persons Insured, 1927, pp. 36ff; Report on Claimants to Unemployment Benefit, 1928, pp. 4-5; "Analysis of the Unemployment Record ...", Ministry of Labour Gazette, Jan. 1930, 6-8); AST 7/221 (Min. Lab., Applicants for Unemployment Assistance ..., 1935; T.W. Neward, UAB Applicants ..., 1937, 4 Feb. 1938; Table: Duration of Unemployment ..., 25 Nov. 1940); Riddle, "Age, Obsolescence and Unemployment", p. 519; Ford, Incomes, Means Tests and Personal Responsibility, p. 73.


40 Riddle, "Age, Obsolescence and Unemployment", p. 523; PEP, The Exit from Industry, London, 1935, p. 5; and see below.


43 PRO AST 7/487 (Durham/Middlesborough District Officer to Headquarters, 3 May 1944 and 30 Oct. 1944); AST 7/221 (Table: Duration of Unemployment 25 Nov. 1940); AST 7/442 (Min. Lab., Analysis of Long-Term Unemployed, 1 Jan. 1940); Ford, Incomes, Means Tests and Personal Responsibility, p. 73; A.G. Rose, The Older Unemployed Man in Hull, Hull, 1953, p. 36; J. Wolveridge, Ain't it Grand.


45 Quoted in full in Stedman Jones, Outcast London, pp. 74-75; he also reproduces Booth's figures in more detail; see also Liverpool Joint Research Committee, How the Casual Labourer Lives, pp. 20ff.


48 Brackets in original; H.J. Bennett, I was a Walworth Boy, London, 1980, p. 11.


54 Ryland Adkins Cttee, BPP 1919 XXVII, p. 128 [Stuart]; and see below.


56 Booth, Aged Poor, pp. 348-351; Pauperism and Endowment, p. 159; Spender, State and Pensions, pp. 4, 8; Aberdare Commn, BPP 1895 XIV, p. 129 [J.H. Allen].


60 Booth, Aged Poor, p. 322; and see ch. 6.

61 See n. 90; PRO PIN 4/115 (Old Age Pension Appeals: Uneconomic Wage Case Histories, 1924).

LXXI, 449-457; Local Government Board, Return ... Deaths from Starvation or accelerated by Privation (England and Wales), 1914, London, 1916, pp. 2ff.


65 Stead, How Old Age Pensions began to be, pp. 5-6; PRO AST 7/596 (D. Ibberson, Enquiry into Pensioners' Circumstances, 7 Aug. 1942); Hunt, British Labour History, p. 8.


67 BLPES, Booth Collection B164, p. 842; B71, p. 72; B162, p. 157; Katharine Buildings, pp. 104, 120, 52, 130; PRO AST 7/589 (D. Ibberson, Sample Enquiry, Mar. 1942: Attachment - Tooting Case Paper); AST 7/592 (Special District Enquiries: District Officer, Edinburgh 2, 1942).

68 BLPES, Booth Collection B67, p. 144; B71, p. 37; B73, p. 164; B74, pp. 270, 114, 152, 263.


71 Southgate, That's the Way it was, pp. 47, 81, 83; G. Haw, A Lad of London and Some of his Neighbours, London, 1910, pp. 135-137; Ezard, Battersea Boy, pp. 29-30; BLPES, Booth Collection B71 p. 72; B74 pp. 122, 142; B162 p. 432; G. Orwell, Down and Out in Paris and London, pp. 145, 150-154ff; Cuttle, Legacy of the Rural

72 J.H. Tebbutt, The B.B.B., or Every Briton's Blue Book on Old Age Pensions Et Cetera, London, 1905, pp. 50-52; Acorn, One of the Multitude, pp. 104-105; Southgate, That's the Way it was, p. 60.


74 J. Metcalfe, The Case for Universal Old Age Pensions, London, 1905, pp. 50-52; Stead, How Old Age Pensions began to be, p. 5; see also nn. 85-87.

75 Barnes, Coronation Cups and Jam Jars, p. 79; C.H. Rolph, London Particulars, Oxford, 1980, p. 76; F. Thompson, Lark Rise to Candleford, Penguin ed., p. 68; R. Roberts, A Ragged Schooling, Fontana ed., 1978, p. 81; Southgate, That's the Way it was, p. 48; Samuel [Harding], East End Underworld, p. 45; et.al.

76 Spelling as in original; quoted in Nash, "The Old Age Pension Movement", p. 497.


79 Booth, Aged Poor, pp. 108, 110, 116, passim; see nn. 88, 97.


83 Thomas and Osborne, Older People and their Employment, p. 19; Thompson, Lark Rise to Candleford, p. 97; R. Roberts, Classic Slum, p. 84; Williams (Thane), "Development ...", pp. 249-251; P. Horn, Labouring Life in the Victorian Countryside, Dublin, 1976, p. 217; Llewellyn Smith (ed.), New Survey of London, vol. 3, p. 461; PRO AST 7/596 (D. Ibberson, Enquiry into the Previous History of Supplementary Pensioners, 7 Aug. 1942, p. 5); AST 7/589 (D. Ibberson, Special Investigation, 10 Apr. 1942, pp. 4-6).

84 Hannah, Inventing Retirement, p. 128; Johnson, "Employment and Retirement of Older Men"; PRO AST 7/596 (Ibberson, Enquiry into Previous History, 7 Aug. 1942, p. 3); AST 7/589/13496/3 (D. Ibberson, Special Investigation into the Condition of Supplementary Pensioners, 10 Apr. 1942, p. 4); CAB 87/80 Item 81 (NCSRS Memorandum 2: Pensions, 19 June 1942, p. 7); CAB 87/79 Item 31 (P.Y. Blunden, Retirement Pensions, 17 Apr. 1942, p. 6); BLPES, New Survey of London 2/1 (Memorandum on Old Age Pensioners, 29 July 1931, p. 4).

85 Ryland Adkins Ctee, BPP 1919 XXVII, pp. 127, 129 [Stuart].


88 See ch. 3.

73


91 PRO CAB 87/80/81 (NCSRS, Memorandum: Pensions, 19 June 1942, pp. 7-13); Ryland Adkins Ctte, BPP 1919 XXVII, pp. 117, 152 [G. Dew, O. Jones]; BLPES, New Survey of London 2/1 (Memorandum on Old Age Pensioners, 29 July 1931, p. 4); PRO CAB 27/391 (Government Actuary, Further Memorandum, 1929); AST 7/418 (British Employers' Federation, Old Age Pensions, 5 Jan. 1940, p. 6); AST 7/574 (Ibberson, Report of an Enquiry, Aug. 1944, pp. 30-33); AST 7/605 (Herford, Report on Old Age Pensioners ..., Dec. 1941, p. 4); Beveridge, Unemployment (1909), pp. 121-122.


93 GLRO La B G 177 (Aged Poor Home West Norwood: Admission and Discharge Register, 1918-1930); London County Council Minutes, 1943-45, pp. 994, 1198-1199; PRO AST 15/82 (Effects of Wartime Earnings on Old Age Pensions, 1915-16); AST 15/87 (W.T. Jerred (LGB) to Meiklejohn, 15 Mar. 1916); AST 7/585 (Grand Summary of Special Enquiry, 16 Jan. 1942); AST 7/605 (Herford, Report on Old Age Pensioners, Dec. 1941, p. 4); Nuffield Foundation, Old People, pp. 87, 93.


95 This coefficient was obtained by comparing the percentage of men aged sixty or over in the workforce with the percentage of women aged 15-59 in the workforce: Thomas, Employment of Older Persons, p. 9.


97 Thomas, Employment of Older Persons, pp. 16ff; Nuffield Foundation, Old People, p. 88; and see ibid.

98 Thomas, Employment, p. 10; PEP, Exit from Industry, pp. 6, 11; Caradog Jones, Social Survey of Merseyside, vol. 1, pp. 160-180; PRO AST 15/82 (Effect of Wartime Earnings ..., : case notes); quoted in Wright Bakke, Unemployed Man, p. 73.


103 Nuffield Foundation, *Old People*, pp. 82-93; Thomas and Osborne, *Older People*, p. 45; NAC ... Older Men and Women, *First Report*, p. 16; Sir Halley Stewart Trust ..., *Over Seventy*, p. 32; Ryland Adkins Cttee, BPP 1919 XXVII, pp. 154, 162 [O.H. Jones, H. Lesser].

104 See ch. 1, nn. 8, 16, 37.
CHAPTER THREE

"TOO OLD TO GRUMBLE":1

THE LIVING STANDARDS OF THE ELDERLY AT HOME

"Still, one doesn't need much food, you see, when one's old."

- Old London woman, explaining how she proposed to manage on a five shilling pension, 1907.2

"... A postmistress told me on Friday that [pensioners] came in every week and said they could hardly wait until the money was due, and asked did she know when it would be more, as it was such a terrible struggle now. That I got to know from the Thornaby postmistress last week. She said she suffered very much on the pension pay day."

- Mrs S.A. Close, Stockton-on-Tees Guardian, Ryland Adkins Committee, 1919.3

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Poverty and Progress

There is a general impression reasonably grounded on census returns and on official Death-rates and Life Tables that ... fewer people now live to old age, although more arrive at maturity and middle age than in former years.4

Thus wrote the Registrar General in his report on the 1901 Census, and no study of the lives and health of the elderly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries can escape this salient fact. People over sixty-five not only failed to share in the substantial improvement in adult life expectancy in the second half of the nineteenth century, but in fact, their life expectancy declined slightly in these years, and increased by only two years in the five decades thereafter. Improvements in the life expectancy of the elderly since, and the even higher life expectancies achieved by old people in countries such as Japan, show that this was not a question of human lives having reached their elastic limit. The explanation may be that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, old people were not receiving
their share of improvements in standards of living and health: this issue is examined in this Chapter and in the following interconnected Chapters on old people in institutions and the health of the elderly.\textsuperscript{5}

Contemporary estimates of the numbers living in poverty give a very rough indication at least of the improvement over this period in working class living standards. For instance, in 1889, Charles Booth calculated that just over 30 per cent of the London population was living below his stringent poverty line, or over 60 per cent in some poorer working-class districts. In 1899 in York, in an "unusually prosperous year", Rowntree calculated that 28 per cent of the working-class population was living in poverty. Using the same poverty line, A.L. Bowley and A.R. Burnett-Hurst surveyed five industrial towns in 1913 and 1914 and found that the percentage of working-class households in poverty varied from 6 per cent in Stanley to over 23 per cent in Reading. By 1924, the proportion of working-class households in poverty in all these towns - Northampton, Warrington, Bolton, Reading and Stanley - had nearly halved.\textsuperscript{6}

By this time, however, Rowntree's 1899 poverty scale was coming to seem hopelessly inadequate, not least from the stand-point of nutrition, and subsequent studies used somewhat less stringent poverty lines. The New Survey of London, in 1929, estimated that nearly 11 per cent of the population, and the same proportion of families, was in poverty in the survey week, while Ford's survey of Southampton in 1931 found 21 per cent of his sample of working-class families below a standard which itself was only marginally above the level of Public Assistance. A more generous poverty line, Rowntree's new "human needs level", was used by Caradog Jones in his 1934 survey of Liverpool, producing an estimate of 30 per cent of working-class families in poverty. In York in 1936, 31 per cent of the working-class population was below Rowntree's new poverty line: using his old poverty standard, however, the percentage of families in poverty had more than halved. By the time Rowntree conducted his third York poverty enquiry in 1950, the proportion below his 1936 "human needs level" had dropped to 4.6 per cent.\textsuperscript{7}

Contemporary poverty studies, however, should be regarded as providing only a bare lowest order estimate of the extent of poverty. They are vulnerable to many serious criticisms, some made by the authors themselves. Before the 1920s, surveys calculated income on the assumption that a full week's work was done, disregarding short time, unemployment or illness.\textsuperscript{8}

Moreover, they took the whole income of the household head as available for expenditure on family needs, whereas there is abundant evidence that in most working-class families, a
flat amount was handed over weekly for housekeeping and rent, and the remainder, generally a quarter to a third of wages, kept back by the wage-earner for incidentals and perquisites, such as tools and other work-related expenses, clothing, club and union dues, some types of insurance, extra food purchased during the day, drink, tobacco, and all amusements. To quote Bowley and M.H. Hogg, writing in 1925 of workplace deductions or "off-takes",

some men in middle age and least able to afford so much do pay away up to 6s. per week in these necessary and customary expenses.9

A shilling or more even of Poor Law and Public Assistance or social service payments, such as pensions, seems usually to have been considered in this light, as "dignity money" for the male head of household. And of course, where drink or gambling was a problem it was not unusual for other family members to see nothing of their putative income at all. Although some later surveys made allowance for some income to be "kept back", the authors recognised that this was not completely adequate.10

Similarly, all investigations up to Rowntree's 1936 survey, Poverty and Progress, treated as household income the entire wages of supplementary earners. However, as Rowntree and others noted,

It is the general custom for older children to pay to their parents such portion of their wages as they would have to pay for board and lodgings if not living at home.11

Even old age pensioners and other social welfare recipients living in the households of relatives sometimes kept back a shilling or two of "pocket money": dignity, and the maintenance of status with one's peers, could be seen as more important than a full stomach. On the other hand, as discussed below and in subsequent Chapters, old people living with relatives frequently did not share the standard of living of their household, and tried to live within their own small incomes so as not to be a burden. Not only did the surveys fail to account for this, but some of them even treated unrelated lodgers as members of the household, sharing equally in its resources.12

Moreover, the portion of family income which actually reached the housewife was not always laid out to the best advantage of all family members, and often a household consisted in reality of some members who were adequately provided for, and others who were truly in poverty: this issue is discussed below in the context of nutrition. Nonetheless,
the housewife's acquiescence in these arrangements must sometimes have held families together, even at some material cost to the more vulnerable.\textsuperscript{13}

Yet even without taking these distorting factors into consideration, the calculations of minimum income per head were seriously deficient in all poverty surveys before the Second World War, with no studies prior to Rowntree's 1936 investigation allowing for vitamin and mineral requirements. Even Rowntree's dietary tables were described by medical authorities and some senior Government officials, including the Secretary of the Assistance Board, G.T. Reid, as grossly inadequate. They had the further drawback of unrealistic pricing: for instance, they assumed that all bread was home-baked and all milk condensed. Furthermore, no allowance was made for the extra dietary needs of pregnant and nursing mothers. Those attempting to subsist on these minimum diets could not rely upon escaping serious deficiency-related conditions such as scurvy, and, amongst children, rickets.\textsuperscript{14}

Alarmingly, Rowntree's and some other surveys expected old women to need only two-thirds of the food of their male counterparts. This expectation bore little relation to old women's dietary needs, although no doubt it reflected contemporary practice. To quote an exchange from the 1901-02 Poor Law Conferences,

\begin{quote}
[Bernard Bosanquet]: It seemed very strange to most of those present that anyone could exist on such a sum [3s.4d.], but he supposed old women could do on very little (Loud laughter). He did not know quite why they were laughing (Renewed laughter, and a Voice: "What about the old men?". Laughter.). He had intended to include the old men in his remark, although they perhaps wanted a little more as they probably did more work (A Lady, "Oh", and laughter).\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

This distinction between old men's and old women's needs was reflected in some Government payments into the 1940s, and in 1941, G.T. Reid wrote candidly to Mary Hamilton, M.P., that he "[would] not attempt to justify" the higher rate of supplementary pension received by male non-householders.\textsuperscript{16}

Poverty survey estimates of the income needs of old people were substantially more inadequate than for any other group. The minimum income estimated for old people was two-thirds or less of that for other adults in all surveys. For instance, in 1924, Bowley and Hogg fondly imagined that a person aged over seventy could live on 5s. 10d. weekly for food, clothing and lighting, while the New Survey of London noted in 1929 that their
"possible dietary of 4s.4d" for old people not at work included no vegetables except potatoes, no fruit, and only tinned skim milk: by comparison, they allowed 7s.1d. for an adult male in moderate work.\textsuperscript{17}

This arbitrary reduction completely ignored old people's far higher average expenditure per head on rent and their larger heating expenses entailed by poor health and a more sedentary and solitary existence. Also ignored was their greater need for more expensive and easily digestible calcium-rich foods such as milk and eggs, which had been recognised by some Poor Law Medical Officers in the nineteenth century, and in consideration of which most Public Assistance Committees, and later the Assistance Board, allowed their older clients an extra one or two shillings per week. Indeed, far from being cheaper to maintain than their younger contemporaries, the elderly cost substantially more, as is consistently shown by Poor Law and Public Assistance institutions per capita expenses throughout the period.\textsuperscript{18}

Thus, surveys from Charles Booth's onwards represented a considerable underestimate of the extent of poverty, particularly amongst the elderly and of young children, and women of all ages. And, when Rowntree claimed that in 1936, over half the working class could expect to pass through periods of poverty both in childhood and old age, he was only beginning to grasp the immensity of the problem. As the Toynbee Hall investigators observed, on the question of the impact of high unemployment rates on health in East London in 1922, "the standard of living ... is normally low, and conditions are normally miserable".\textsuperscript{19}

For the reasons outlined above, contemporary survey estimates of the percentage of old people in poverty so seriously understate the poverty of this group that comparisons with other age groups can produce paradoxical results. For instance, Rowntree's first York enquiry, at the height of popular agitation for old age pensions in 1899, found that old people were marginally less likely to be in poverty than the rest of the population. By 1945, Rowntree clearly found this result embarrassing, and attempted to attribute it to a local labour shortage during which "old men would be kept on at work ... to an abnormal extent".\textsuperscript{20}

Most published survey estimates are even less useful, however, as they only provide estimates of poverty "caused" by old age: that is, of the number of cases where the household was judged to be in poverty mainly because its head was too old to work. One difficulty with this definition was the question of headship: in households with married children, the adult son was usually classed as head. Another, more important issue was that
the "problem" of old age rarely appeared in isolation from other social problems. Thus in most surveys, an equal or greater number of elderly people were classified as in poverty "caused" by widowhood or illness, or by the unemployment, low earnings, large family, illness or widowhood of the household head. As Rowntree noted, the great majority of widows living below his minimum standard were elderly, while in 1936, more than half of those in poverty through illness were over fifty.21

Nonetheless, the figures on "poverty due to old age" are not totally without value, for they enable us to chart the growth in the relative poverty of the elderly during this period. Thus in York in 1899, a mere 5.11 per cent of poor families were classified as being in poverty due to the illness or old age of the head. In 1913-14, in four of Bowley's five industrial towns - inadequate sample size precludes calculations for Stanley - the proportion varied from 1 per cent in Warrington to 17 per cent in Reading. By 1924, the percentage was around double the original figure in all four towns, varying from 3 per cent in Warrington to 34 per cent in Reading. In Southampton in 1921, 10 per cent of poor families were so classified, while in London in 1929, the proportion was 16.5 per cent. By 1936 in York, the proportion was 14.7 per cent; and by 1950, it had reached 68.1 per cent.22

Both the New Survey of London and the 1936 York enquiry provided further information on old age poverty. The New Survey calculated that in 1929, even with its distorted needs scale, poverty amongst non-earners aged over sixty-five was more than double that in the total population, at 25 per cent. Figures for earners over sixty-five were 19 per cent for women and 10 per cent for men, which was a little under the estimate for the sample as a whole. The editor, Hubert Llewellyn Smith, remarked that old people were now more likely to be in poverty than children, and old women living alone had the dubious honour of making "the greatest contribution to poverty".23

In his 1936 York Enquiry, Poverty and Progress, Rowntree calculated that families in poverty "due to old age" faced a weekly income deficiency, or poverty gap, larger than that of any other group: in his own words, their poverty was "more acute than poverty due to any other cause". Overall, he noted in 1936 that 47.5 per cent of those over sixty-five, and 50 per cent of old age pensioners, were living below the poverty line: this compared to 31 per cent of the total population. Moreover, as he so eloquently put it,

poverty means something different to those who sink below the line in their old age. They know that they will spend the rest of their days below it - pinching, scraping, often cold, often ailing - just waiting for the end ... they are the poorest people in the city. Of course, they do get an occasional ounce
of tobacco, or a glass of beer, but only by suffering a little more from cold
or undernourishment. A poor, drab ending to life!24

By 1945, Geoffrey Thomas's random sample survey for the Central Office of Information
of over 12,000 households in England and Wales, found that 58 per cent of persons over
sixty fell into his two lowest economic groups, defined by income: this compared to 41 per
cent of the population of all ages. 34 per cent of those over sixty were in the lowest
economic group, with incomes of under three pounds a week: by contrast, only 15 per cent
of the total population fell into this group.25

The reasons for the increasing relative poverty of the aged are complex, and are further
discussed in Chapter Six. On the economic level, old people were the chief among a
number of social groups affected by the widening gap between the so-called "regular
standard earner" and the remainder of the working class. Few old people were "regular
standard earners": as we have seen in Chapters One and Two, they had always clung
precariously to the margins of the labour force, and by the late nineteenth century were
becoming more likely to leave it altogether. They had thus missed out on the full benefits
of the dramatic rise in real wages in the mid-to late nineteenth century: between 1880 and
1896 alone, it is widely agreed that real wages increased by 45 per cent, and recent work by
Charles Feinstein suggests that there was slow improvement—even in the period of apparent
stagnation from 1896 to 1914. Real wages rose sharply during the First World War,
declined in the early 1920s - although not to their pre-War level - and then rose by about 20
per cent up to the Second World War, when they once again spurted ahead. To quote
Edward Royle,

in 1914, the average working-class family spent three-quarters of its income
on food and housing; in 1938, this had fallen to under half.26

This rise in real wages, along with declining family size, meant that most working families
with children, hitherto making up the bulk of households or persons in poverty in most
surveys, climbed above the poverty line. However, the system of state income support
payments was tiered according to contributory status and hence to participation in the
(insured) workforce. Moreover, the level of state income support, including pensions and
Public Assistance, did not keep pace with real wages, and access to such support continued
to be restricted: issues which are discussed in Chapter Six. These developments meant that
many of those outside or on the margins of the workforce were left behind, still under the
poverty line. By the 1920s and '30s, the main groups in poverty in most surveys were the
unemployed, the elderly and a rag-bag of assorted households without a male earner: for
convenience, the latter was given the portmanteau title of "broken families" by Bowley and Hogg. From the outbreak of war, the re-absorption of most unemployed people into the workforce left the elderly unrivalled for first place in the poverty stakes, and prompted the rash of surveys and investigations of the 1940s and 1950s.27

This new-found interest in the problem of poverty in old age must have been greeted somewhat wryly by the elderly survey participants themselves. For many of them would have been materially far better off than in their youth and, in poorer areas, in their adult years as well. This was the consensus of opinion amongst the Assistance Board's District Officers on the very basic standard adopted for the Board's 1942 Exceptional Needs Enquiry, discussed in Chapter Seven. This standard comprised one dress or pair of trousers, one overcoat, one pair of shoes, one pair of sheets, one nightgown or pair of pyjamas, two blankets, two sets of underclothing and two shirts for old men: none of these had necessarily to be in good condition. Typical in his comments was the District Officer of Newcastle-on-Tyne, whose staff

felt that the standard was high compared with the "stocks" of the average pensioner ... indeed, because of low wages some years ago (particularly in urban areas), the standard may well be higher than that maintained when the pensioner was in work.28

Indeed, the concept of "poverty due to old age" bore little relevance to the very large proportion of old people who had never enjoyed a much higher per capita income than they received in old age. In 1919, J.E. Tomley told the Ryland Adkins Committee that agricultural labourers

... even in their married lives, have had to exist on 12s. and 13s. a week with their families, and 5s. or 6s. a week meant, up to recent years, practically what they had proportionately in their early days.29

More than two decades later, the Assistance Board's Nottingham Regional Officer declared that "the incomes of country pensioners have in most cases probably never been much higher than now". And in their study of old people in Glasgow in 1945, Dr Curran and his colleagues concluded that

had these poor people in their earlier years been accustomed to a higher standard of living, they would not now consider their present surroundings tolerable.30
In 1941, the Assistance Board, alarmed by the increasing number of special needs applications from supplementary pensioners, introduced new regulations authorising an extra milk allowance only for certain complaints "not including malnutrition due to insufficient food". Similarly, in 1944, the Board's Appeals Tribunal dismissed appeals from two old women certified by their doctors as suffering from chronic bronchitis and debility: the women in these cases were denied Special Needs Allowances for milk and eggs, on the grounds that they could purchase these instead of "normal foods" [sic], and that no special need existed, as "it was not unusual to find elderly people suffering from debility and bronchitis".31

In the early 1950s, the registers of two large general hospitals showed that around 3 per cent of patients over sixty were victims of "simple" malnutrition: those whose cases were complicated by other ailments, even if directly caused by poor nutrition, were excluded from this estimate. A follow-up investigation showed that lack of money and unsuitable living conditions were to blame in three-quarters of the cases examined, and the doctors remarked that the main difference between these patients and the many elderly malnutrition sufferers they had treated in the 1940s and before, was that by 1951, the availability of a wide range of antibiotics meant that far fewer of those in "an advanced state of starvation" succumbed to intercurrent infection, usually pneumonia.32

Malnutrition amongst the elderly was "not uncommon in general and hospital practice",33 and its wide extent was confirmed by a 1947 survey of the diets of working-class old people in London. Even though nearly half of those studied were residents in institutions, with their food provided, and another third were living under some supervision in almshouses, their dietary intake over a sample week was in almost all cases deficient in several vitamins, and very seriously lacking in vitamins A and C. The amount of protein eaten was "undesirably low", especially in the case of women, some of whom were also consuming insufficient quantities of iron. Two deficiencies affecting most of the sample were of particular concern: inadequate intake of vitamin B complex was known to be related to senile dementia and digestive incompetence, while lack of vitamin D was thought likely to exacerbate the breakdown of calcium metabolism, producing the chalky and easily broken bones so common amongst the elderly. "Symptoms commonly attributed to old age", concluded the investigators mildly, "may in some cases be due to nutritional deficiency".34
Hence the Assistance Board's term, "ordinary debility", takes on a rather sinister undertone. There was nothing unusual about old people ill from undernourishment, as reports, surveys and interviews of the aged throughout the period attest. Comments that elderly residents were "often without food", with "very little to eat" and "almost starving" recur with dismal regularity in Charles Booth's street surveys of London in the late 1880s.

Similarly, his comprehensive study of The Aged Poor in England and Wales abounds with remarks by his local respondents on the inadequate diet of the aged, who in some Unions were said to have "little to eat or drink", with some cases of "starvation". The consensus was, as the Hull informant summarised, "chief food, bread and tea": although in Wokingham, the usual Poor Law loaf was supplemented by "a little tea, sugar and bacon from charitable gifts". "With meat they have not much to do" confirmed the Witney respondent, although he noted that they now demanded wheaten bread, while previously they had been content with barley. In fact, several respondents stressed that old people were better fed than formerly, due mainly to falling food prices and hence the improved purchasing power of their outdoor relief. And in a few rural areas, allotments were becoming available, although these were of little use to the great majority who now lived in towns.

In 1907, Will Crooks referred to evidence that 30 per cent of those in Poor Law infirmaries, most of them elderly, were "suffering ailments of some kind or other due to want of proper nourishment". Both the old age pensioners interviewed by the Ryland Adkins Committee in 1919 felt that their health was suffering through lack of food. Mrs Lorton told the Committee that could not afford as much as the doctor said she needed, while Mrs Thompson said she never had enough money for meat, and sometimes ate so little that she could "scarcely walk about"; she felt that many other pensioners suffered likewise.

The budgets collected for the Committee by the Industrial Women's Organisations confirmed this view. Of the 7 budgets of those trying to live on the pension alone, only 3 had purchased meat: eightpence worth of fresh meat - that is, about three ounces - in two cases, and a shilling's worth of bacon in the other. One pensioner substituted fourpence worth of fish, another sixpence of eggs, and a third 1s.9d of milk: the remaining pensioner appeared to subsist exclusively on potatoes, tea, sugar and margarine. These, with bread and, in some cases, a little milk in their tea, were the only other items of food listed by the other pensioners. 7 other budgets of working class old people were listed for comparison: two pensioners with other resources, and 5 working-class non-pensioners. These were
similar: not surprisingly, as all but one were managing on under 14s. a week. A little butcher's meat or bacon was bought, but the menu was, literally, more of the same. Only 3 purchased any vegetables other than potatoes - sixpence worth in each case - and none listed fruit, although the one comparatively affluent old person, on 11.4s.1d., enjoyed the unbridled indulgence of tenpence worth of jam.38

These diets are typical of those given in other contemporary budgetary records of poorer old people.39 Indeed, they seem to have been typical of the poorer working class as a whole: for instance, in their surveys of malnutrition in depressed areas in 1934, Drs Glover, Hughes-Gibb, Pearse and Wade found that bread and potatoes were the staple, with other vegetables eaten for Sunday dinner only; meat was eaten in small quantities at the weekend; milk was little used, and was the skimmed, condensed variety. The only other item in the usual diet, apart from tea, was an occasional fish and chip or egg supper, with a cooked dinner on average three days a week. In Lancashire, diet was a little better, and fresh milk was used.40 Also in the 1930s, Margery Spring Rice examined detailed budgets of a number of working-class families and found that

it seems that a tablespoonful of stew, and of vegetables (even of potatoes) and two slices of bread and butter are the usual amounts of these foods eaten by [the woman] at the appropriate meal. That the quantity cannot ever be much larger than this is borne out by the budgets and menus ... it is unlikely that the mother is getting a sufficient amount of food.41

Forty years after Booth's first London survey, the New Survey of London found many old people still underfed in 1929. Less than half of the 79 old people interviewed had a hot meal every day, several complained of not getting enough to eat, and once again, very few of those for whom dietary records were kept consumed any fruit or vegetables except potatoes. One elderly woman who managed on very little food explained that she "had to be careful not to do too much", while another "had to go to bed early so that she did not need any supper".42 Even in the 1940s, Assistance Board investigators frequently came across old people who were "undernourished", "not getting enough to eat", or who "went short of food" to meet expenses such as shoe repair or laundry costs, and the large scale survey by the Nuffield Foundation in 1945-47 found that "a large number of those visited were living on their meat ration, bread and margarine or butter, tea and jam".43

This was not surprising. Although the nutritional standard he adopted was lower than that recommended by the League of Nations, John Boyd Orr found in his survey of 2,640 household budgets collected in the ten years up to 1935, that
This conclusion was amply borne out by other contemporary studies. Boyd Orr's investigations showed that the diet of the poorest ten per cent, in which a large proportion of elderly people found themselves, was lacking in every nutrient examined, including proteins and calories. Nevertheless, he noted such a substantial improvement, particularly in protein levels, on figures obtained from dietary studies before 1925, that there could be no doubt that "the national dietary [has] been steadily improving".

Sound testimony to this is found in previously published nutritional investigations: for example, although using the very low dietary standard set by Benjamin Seebohm Rowntree in his Poverty: a Study of Town Life, an analysis of the food eaten by a sample of unskilled labourers' families in York in 1899, during a period of economic prosperity, found that on average, calorie intake was 23 per cent, and protein, 29 per cent, below estimated requirements for "moderate labour". In 1913, the households of a group of agricultural labourers in various parts of England and Wales were shown to consume inadequate amounts of protein and calories in all cases, with deficiencies of up to 49 per cent of Rowntree's estimate, while another enquiry, into the diets of the unemployed in 1910, found that some families were having to exist on less than a third of this minimum nutritional level. No allowance was made for vitamin and mineral needs in any of these studies, and it should be noted that the families selected to keep budgets were those of "careful" housewives whose husbands spent nothing on drink and who, in the case of the rural sample, grew up to one quarter of their food at home.

As mentioned earlier, dietary and other survey studies suffered from a serious methodological flaw which greatly undermined their accuracy in respect of women, children and non-earners in the household. They assumed that food purchases were divided amongst household members according to nutritional need. However, there is abundant evidence that the lion's share of the food went to the male earners: as one York woman put it, "I never let Smith [her husband] suffer - 'e 'as to go to work, and must be kept up, yer know". Often, particularly before the First World War, male earners were found to consume the household's entire purchases of meat, bacon, fish and other "relishes", and sometimes even all the eggs and cheese as well. Even in families whose diet was usually adequate, this problem could arise when there were extra expenses to be met: to quote another of Rowntree's York subjects
If there's anythink extra to buy, such as a pair of boots ... me and the children goes without dinner - or mebbe only 'as a cup of tea and a bit o' bread, but Jim [her husband] ollers takes 'is dinner to work, and I give it 'im as usual; 'e never knows we go without, and I never tells 'im.48

This practice was said to be dying out by the 1920s, and only a few generations later, in these days of almost exaggerated reverence for the dietary requirements of children, we may find it hard to believe. Yet many working-class autobiographers attest to the keen competition amongst children for "choice" leftovers from their father's plate, such as fish-heads or a little gravy. "They are looking at me as though I have robbed them", one author remembers her father complaining as his hungry children watched him finish his meal; but in many cases, as Maud Pember Reeves explained in 1913, even the economically expedient sacrifice of wives and children could still leave male wage-earners insufficiently fed.49

Old people living in an extended family household tended, in the words of the Nuffield Foundation Report in 1947, to be "anxious not to be a nuisance", and to display "ready acquiescence in an inadequate ... diet". Where there was not enough food to go round, they were likely to place themselves - and be placed by others - at the bottom of what was literally a pecking order. This was not an isolated phenomenon: observers had frequently remarked upon it from at least the 1890s. And, as Michael Anderson has pointed out, anthropological research shows that this ranking order is well established in communities living at subsistence level.50

Yet overall, nutrition was steadily improving, and even in areas which experienced high unemployment during the 1920s and 1930s, the general view was that ill-health due to poor nutrition never approached its pre-1914 level.51 The level and rate of improvement is amply confirmed by the rapid improvement in adult life expectancy in the late nineteenth century, and in life expectancy of all ages in the decades that followed; as well, there is the well-known evidence of the steady increase in the height and weight of schoolchildren. Thus at least by the twentieth century, each cohort of old people enjoyed better nutrition than the last; but each cohort also comprised the survivors of earlier, more impoverished and malnourished generations, and their present health remained marred by poor nutrition and living conditions in previous years.52
Living Conditions: Old People at Home

Improvements in living conditions probably lagged substantially behind those in nutrition for many working-class old people. To quote one of the more sanguine local informants to Charles Booth's survey in 1894, "in some cases, the homes are not desirable". Other respondents were more explicit, and complained that "hundreds of old couples live in one room ...[and] houses become yearly more insanitary", and that old people, particularly those evicted from tied colliery and farm cottages, were living in places "unfit for habitation". Booth's Teesdale informant betrayed the usual Victorian obsession with propriety when he wrote that the elderly

suffer from bad sanitary conditions, due partly to very old property, and want of firmness inseparable from local authorities [sic]. Cottages are defective as to dryness, ventilation and aspect. Separation of sexes [is] often impossible.53

Thus as early as the late nineteenth century, there is evidence that the housing conditions of the elderly lagged behind those of the general population. In fact, it may be that old people's housing had always been somewhat below the average. Their greater poverty, lower geographical mobility, and their tendency to remain in the family home after their children had grown and left, probably meant that they always had more than their share of the older, poorer housing stock. Pamela Horn has observed that in Oxfordshire, old people were often allowed to live on in badly deteriorated cottages because they could not afford to rent elsewhere, and it was not uncommon for such homes to be pulled down on their occupants' death.54

Inadequate housing was not, of course, peculiar to old people, and even in 1945, Thomas's large scale survey for the Central Office of Information found that the average household of two or more persons was living in only four rooms. Less than half of all households had a bathroom and one in ten lacked even the use of a kitchen. However, Thomas found that old people were significantly more likely to be living in houses built before 1914, and, as a group, were less likely to have access to a private or shared kitchen, bathroom or garden. Old people living alone, who then comprised 11 per cent of those aged over sixty, were on average 20 per cent less likely to enjoy these amenities than the rest of the population. 68 per cent of lone old people had no access to bathroom facilities, while 26 per cent did not have the use of a kitchen. The majority had no garden and were sharing a dwelling with other households, and nearly one in five still lived in one room.55
Similarly, the Nuffield Foundation Report in 1947 was reluctant to commit itself on the subject of housing standards, stating that

the Committee is of the opinion that, in spite of some evidence to the contrary, it would on the whole be wrong to assume that old people are worse housed than the average of their class.\textsuperscript{56}

In view of their findings, reported below, this is indeed an horrific thought. However, the explanation partly rests in the use of the word "class". Old people, because of their relative poverty, were greatly over-represented in the poorer working class, and housing standards for this part of the population were still very low: in the 1930s, for instance, Margery Spring Rice found the two room tenement, consisting of kitchen and bedroom/sitting room, to be quite "usual" for poorer urban families with children.\textsuperscript{57}

Housing standards for the whole population were slowly rising, as ever greater numbers left urban slums and tenements, and damp old cottages with no facilities, for newer accommodation on council and privately-built estates and in redeveloped areas. Because of their growing relative poverty and their reluctance to move from houses and neighbourhoods in which they had spent all their lives, old people tended to be left behind in their old houses and their old neighbourhoods. In 1943, the Assistance Board's Wellington Area Officer, Miss Tonge, wrote of the common case of "the pensioner whose home means so much to her that she is not willing to leave it except feet first", while another Board Memorandum declared that

... With their increasing frailty, [pensioners'] objection to being moved from familiar surroundings increases at least proportionately.\textsuperscript{58}

In his survey of old people in Wolverhampton in 1945-47, Dr J.H. Sheldon found that nearly 40 per cent had difficulty with stairs, often causing severe problems with housework and daily living: nonetheless, less than half these old people were prepared to consider moving.\textsuperscript{59}

Illustrating the problem, a survey of Liverpool supplementary pensioners in 1942 found that many were living in slum clearance areas. Some, like Horn's old people in rural Oxfordshire in the 1890s, had been allowed to remain in houses which were scheduled for demolition, paying a "nominal" rent of 1s.6d. a room for houses declared unfit for human habitation. Others living in the same areas, whose housing was in many cases not much better, were paying rents of up to 23s. a week, although the Assistant District Officer noted
that "considerably higher" rents were common. No figures are available on the proportion of residents of English slum clearance areas who were elderly, although in Aberdeen, Greenock and Hamilton in 1938, around 20 per cent of those occupying condemned houses were "aged persons". Overall, the Scottish Housing Advisory Committee considered that between 10 and 20 per cent of households occupying insanitary properties consisted of lone old people and old couples.60

Yet unfortunately, as contemporaries were beginning to realise, even those old people who would have been happy to move were often unable to find suitable housing. Then as now, Local Authorities and private developers alike were failing dismally to provide a suitable proportion of small, cheap bungalows and apartments along with the ubiquitous two-or three-bedroomed dwellings. Housing specifically built for old people in the interwar period was, Miss Ibberson complained, not only scarce, but often unsuitable, badly equipped and poorly designed. One bungalow development required old people to share a bedroom with a stranger; another had only coal ovens for cooking; while others demanded that old people move out on their spouse's death. Even in the 1940s, houses for old people were being built without bathrooms, on the assumption that "old people don't bath". Miss Ibberson felt that older purpose-built housing was often more satisfactory.61

If true, this was certainly a sad commentary on interwar housing: in its survey of 1945 to 1947, the Nuffield Foundation found that of over 12,000 individual almshouse dwellings in England, half were built before 1840, and most had one or two rooms, no kitchen or bathroom, and no piped water, electricity or mains drainage. Indeed, the survey's Cambridgeshire informant described them as representing the "housing conditions of one or two centuries ago rendered infinitely worse by the lapse of time". Over 11,000 old people were still living in almshouses, but in some areas applications were declining, and a detailed survey of almshouses in York revealed that 4 of 20 groups of dwellings were in need of demolition. The Nuffield survey observed that "arrangements are often unsatisfactory in regard to the infirm or temporarily ill", and in 1942, Miss Ibberson also commented that some almshouses were quite unsuitable for sick and aged people ... the general impression that almshouse cases are well looked after is evidently unsafe.62

Those who did make the move to new housing estates often found themselves paying higher rents, and facing transport problems which further reduced their already limited mobility and access to employment, to public amenities and to cheaper shops and markets, as well as their contact with relatives and friends. In 1929, a former Romford Guardian,
R.M Noordin, spoke of the frequently disastrous effect of these clearances: men sometimes lost their jobs as a result or were removed while unemployed, and then, as new residents of the Union, were not entitled to the full scale of relief. He complained of

the absurdity of removing unemployed men into houses with rents that men in full-time employment would have had a difficulty to pay.

The rents charged were often also out of reach of pensioners, and in one case Noordin had dealt with, an old woman was left with a princely 6s.6d. a week to live on after deducting her 8s.6d. rent for a single room from her combined pension and Public Assistance.63 Not surprisingly, there is evidence that, because of these difficulties, old people transferred to council housing sometimes experienced higher mortality rates than their slum-dwelling counterparts, as did those in other age groups. In the words of a woman interviewed for Margery Spring Rice's enquiry who had recently made the move, "there is now 3s. less to spend on food because my rent is 8s. instead of 5s.".64

For the majority, such dearly bought alternatives were not available. In 1919, Jane Stuart, a Pension Officer, told the Ryland Adkins Committee that "practically all" women pensioners living alone in London had only one room, although "married couples sometimes have two rooms". Even in the 1940s, there were still an estimated 85,000 people of all ages living alone in single rooms in London: as one pensioner observed to the New Survey of London in 1929, "she liked living in one room because she could keep it much warmer than she could keep two". In 1944, 32 Assistance Board Area Officers complained of the poor housing and insanitary conditions in which many pensioners were living, and a further 58 felt that changes were needed to facilitate intervention by Local Authorities in such cases.65

As late as 1953, of 100 Londoners over seventy not living with married children, 29 were housed in "entirely unsuitable" dwellings needing extensive repairs, with a further 34 in houses requiring some repairs or renovations; 80 had no access to a bathroom, while the majority were sharing a lavatory with other households and had no kitchen. One is reminded of the remark by Political and Economic Planning (PEP), quoted in Chapter Two, that "wherever the elderly worker exists, there is an actual or potential depressed area". This was increasingly true, in the social as well as the industrial sense, of old people as a whole.66

Most comprehensive of the housing surveys was that conducted by the Nuffield Foundation investigators from 1945 to 1947, involving 2,302 randomly selected people of pensionable
age in a representative mix of areas in England and Wales. The vast majority were said to be without a bathroom and with no separate kitchen or laundry facilities. Most dwellings had outside water or earth closets, often shared by several households, although communal indoor lavatories were common in tenements.67

Some disabled old people faced epic journeys each time they used the lavatory, negotiating several flights of stairs and sometimes having to go out via the front door, taking their keys. In Oldham, one old woman, "so crippled with rheumatoid arthritis that she [could] only go up and down stairs by sitting on each step and raising or lowering herself on her hands", nonetheless had to go downstairs, into the roadway and around the house to reach her lavatory. However, special mention for the most inconvenient convenience goes to another Oldham woman with heart disease who, to quote the Foundation's Report,

\[
goes \text{ into the street, passes two houses, crosses a road, goes behind a public house and across a piece of waste land to reach her closet, shared with several other households.}^{68}
\]

A shared or outside tap, or no running water at all, was said to be the norm in many areas, while a large proportion of old people, perhaps the majority, still cooked and heated water over an open fire, although some used a gas cooking ring for all their fuel needs. Washing was done by hand, and often had to be dried indoors, leaving living quarters almost permanently festooned with wet clothes and bedding. In several areas, most of the houses were damp, dark and dilapidated, which cannot have improved matters in the one or two rooms in which most elderly people lived, cooked, washed, and frequently slept as well. One elderly widow, "living in a back-to-back house with the plaster coming off the walls, the window frames rotten, the roof leaking and damp rising from the stone floor", summarised the position neatly: "when you come to a place like this", she said, "it fair daunts you".69

Keeping house in these conditions was a strain on the sturdiest young woman; for the elderly it was sometimes a losing battle against squalor. As G.M. Herford wrote of old men living alone in East London in 1941,

\[
\text{if an able-bodied woman lives in a home like this, she does sometimes manage to get abreast and clean it in spite of filthy surroundings, but an old man does not know where to start, and the dirt and debris of years pile up.}^{70}
\]
In the same year, Mr Hallsworth of the Assistance board reported on pensioners in rural Cambridgeshire, finding that many lone old men were well cared for by daughters or daughters-in-law living nearby, but others

were living in ... filthy conditions. Two ... seemed conscious of the fact ... but the others had evidently become accustomed to their mode of life and had ceased to worry about it.71

Some old people were indeed living in squalor, accepting "gradually worsening conditions". To quote Diane Ibberson, speaking of one old couple,

they probably do not fully realise the filthy condition of the place - they have got beyond it.72

Yet this was not the overall picture, and survey investigators were repeatedly amazed at old people's ability to maintain homes as neat as a pin in the most appalling slums. A New Survey of London investigator wrote in 1929 that "rooms were often extremely clean, being almost the only occupation the old women had"; in 1941, J.J. Mallon noted that some of the old men he visited in East London were "exemplary" with "a mania for cleanliness". More perceptively, Violet Markham remarked of Yorkshire-and Derbyshire pensioners in 1943 that

When a lonely person has sufficient determination to keep a home going, it becomes a point of honour to do it well.73

Prevailing standards of respectability and cleanliness could demand daily floor scrubbing, with dusting, grate and step blackening, stair and window cleaning, and so on, becoming an almost constant round, especially in filthy industrial and urban areas. The hardship this produced must have been enormous: one author remembers the Whitechapel of her childhood, in which all household linen, including curtains, required at least fortnightly washing, and windows were cleaned every week by housewives standing on spiked iron railings. Neglect of these chores could mean not only loss of status in the neighbourhood, but refusal of Poor Law relief, Public Assistance and of course, charity.74

Surveys in the 1940s showed that most women of pensionable age were doing all their own housework, while many of the others had only weekly or occasional help with the washing, shopping or heavy scrubbing from daughters, daughters-in-law and sometimes neighbours, or help from husbands with heavier tasks. In 1945, the large Central Office of Information
survey found that 80 per cent of women over sixty were "active housewives". In his survey starting the same year, Sheldon remarked on the "obvious efforts of old women to maintain control of housework": the proportion taking full responsibility for all housework did not fall off until after age seventy-five, which he also described as the "crucial age" for undertaking household shopping and other tasks which involved queueing: few people over this age were able to stand in queues for any length of time.75

Confirming this, the Assistance Board found that after the age of seventy-five, few pensioners could manage without domestic assistance, and the Birmingham informant of the Nuffield College Social Reconstruction Survey argued that after this age, men in particular could not cope at home and usually needed nursing care. This was probably an improvement on the earlier part of the century, when Edith Sellers felt that sixty-five or seventy were the highest ages at which old people could be expected to manage alone. In 1945, Sheldon found that 7 per cent of the women in his sample were trying to do work of which he judged them physically incapable, and wrote that

the misery endured by many of the women who were still running their houses made a great impression on my mind.76

Shopping was not an issue much mentioned before the 1940s; although complaints of long waits at relief stations and the distances which rural old people often had to walk to obtain their parish shilling and loaf were perhaps an earlier equivalent. For instance, in Billericay Union in Essex in 1909, a grand total of 254 outdoor relief recipients depended on others to collect their relief, in some cases paying for this service, while in Oxfordshire in 1875, a National Agricultural Labourers' Union representative protested that

the poor tottering old people bent with age were compelled to tramp to and frow for three hours in the Villege Green all wethers till the Releving Officer ... came to pay them their Paltry allowance.77

Because of their poverty, working-class people generally bought and consumed food in very small quantities from small local shops, so that fetching and carrying of food purchases was not a great problem at least for mobile old people in the towns.78 However, old people's problems with shopping attracted attention during the Second World War due to the special difficulties of long queues and rationing. In 1945, Sheldon found that, of the 159 old people in his sample who were entirely responsible for household shopping, 88 could not stand in queues at all, and a further 25 did so only with great difficulty; moreover, many were said to be doing without food because they were unable to cook or
digest the ingredients dictated by rationing and low incomes. It was no wonder that some were said to have "few ideas beyond bread and cheese". 79

Clothing was yet another problem, as most pensioners were said to buy second-hand clothes only or to wear cast-offs. These needed to be made over and existing clothes and bedding also required repair. For instance, Mrs Lorton told the Ryland Adkins Committee in 1919 that she bought all her clothes second-hand and then had to "turn them about and make them suit me": she was obviously proud of her ability to buy boots second-hand on lay-by and repair them using her own last. This was not unusual, although boot repairing operations were generally a male preserve: even in the 1940s, some Assistance Board officials seem to have felt that an excuse was needed when pensioners had to pay for their boot repairs. In 1942, many of the informants of the Nuffield College Social Reconstruction Survey reported pensioners' difficulties with clothes, and one London witness said that

Clothes are the principal trouble ... [one old woman] is naturally never able to buy anything. She told me that she had only three pairs of stockings in three years, and she informed me with pride that she had just "reverenated" her bombed hat. 80

Making over clothes, bedding and footwear which had already seen better days was not the most rewarding of occupations, and, also in 1942, the Assistance Board's Stockport Area Officer wrote that

women applicants and the wives in every case spent considerable time and trouble in endeavouring to renovate clothing and actually making clothing from old garments. In one or two instances, I saw this actually in progress, and the feat not only seemed an impossible one, but in my view the garments being used were entirely unsuitable for the use for which they were intended. 81

Sheldon's survey found that over 35 per cent of old men were doing some housework, which runs counter to the frequent assertions of contemporaries that working-class men never assisted with domestic chores, even if unemployed, and that to do so was to risk becoming a "Mary Ann". Perhaps things were beginning to change by the 1940s; perhaps the social position of old men was so anomalous, and the most disadvantaged of them had lost so much caste already, that the usual rules about sex roles were not considered to apply; but on the whole a more plausible explanation is that there were some tasks, such as
mending and cleaning boots, fetching coal or setting fires, which had always been acceptable for males. Sometimes old men indeed assumed full responsibility for the housework, although rarely the washing, if left widowed or with a bedridden wife and no female relatives living nearby: Sheldon described one old man, in full-time employment, who had for four years without a break done all the housework except shopping and provided all nursing care for his bedridden wife. In such circumstances, however, they were much more likely than old women to move into lodgings or even to an institution.\(^{82}\)

In the primitive housing conditions in which many lived, domestic accidents were very common, and a disproportionate number of old people were among the victims. For instance, figures obtained in 1937 by the Political and Economic Planning Report, \textit{Britain's Health}, showed that mortality from accidents increased with age, while in the 1940s, Richard Titmuss reported that the number of men and women aged over sixty-five admitted to hospital with injuries was almost twice that of women aged 15-64. Both these studies looked at the effect of accidents, rather than their number, although the evidence suggested that old people were more likely to have domestic accidents as well as to be seriously injured by them.\(^{83}\)

Very frail old people were sometimes unable to pick themselves up after a fall, even if not badly injured, and those living alone sometimes died from exposure on their own floors. Accidents with lamps, candles and gas rings were common, while tending and cooking over an open fire took a particularly ghastly toll throughout the period, with many old women, and some old men, hospitalised or burnt to death each year from falling into the grate. Edith Sellers remarked that she knew of "many old women who periodically fell into the fire", while in the six rural Essex Poor Law Unions studied by George Cuttle, at least 12 old people were burnt to death in their homes between the late 1890s and the early 1930s, mostly from falling in the fire or setting their bedding alight.\(^{84}\)

"When you are old, you are cold", one elderly woman sadly told Violet Markham in 1943, and with such standards of housing, it is not surprising that warmth proved a forlorn hope for many of the aged.\(^{85}\) In Britain today, hypothermia is responsible for large numbers of hospital admissions and deaths among the elderly, and its extent can hardly have been less in the decades of poorer housing and greater poverty before the condition first began to be widely recognised and correctly diagnosed in the 1950s.\(^{86}\)

F.B. Smith has shown that "cold snaps" produced considerable excess mortality in the elderly, with the death rate of those over sixty rising by 2,000 during the severe winter of 1875. Cold was often mentioned as a contributory factor in inquests into old people's
deaths, and not just of those who were "sleeping rough". For instance, the Local Government Board's Deaths from Starvation Returns in 1914 reported the case of an old antique dealer who was found dying "in a room which had no fireplace ... the weather was cold at the time". A brushmaker in his seventies was judged to have died from "pulmonary tuberculosis, want of food and warmth at home", and in a third case, a landlord had tried to encourage a sick old woman to go to the workhouse infirmary by removing her windows and door.87

Certainly, the greater sensitivity of old people to the cold was widely recognised in the community, and their greater need for warmer clothes and heavier domestic heating expenses were commonly acknowledged: as one old woman wrote to the Assistance Board in thanks for a special needs grant in 1942:

my husband is old and cannot stand the cold weather and so now I shall be able to get him some warm underclothing and then the garments that I need.88

However, their poverty often made adequate allowance for fuel needs impossible, and investigators visiting old people in the colder months were frequently appalled to find them sitting without a fire or huddling in bed to keep warm. Often their rooms were so dark and damp as to require artificial light all day and a fire throughout the summer, and the problem was aggravated during the Second World War by landlords who thoughtfully installed permanent blackout on the windows of houses in poorer urban areas.89

Assistance Board officials estimated that 2cwts. coal a week in winter, and 1cwt. a week in summer, was a "modest standard" for pensioners, "having regard to the type of house in which [they] live". By comparison, in Stanley, where coal was provided free to colliery workers, most households consumed 4-5 cwts. weekly all year round. Even 2cwts. was more than most old people could afford, and budgets often show that less than 1cwt. was purchased even in the coldest weather. Carting and storage of coal was a frequent difficulty, and several officials complained that coal porters refused to deliver without a tip or landladies to provide storage space, forcing their clients to rely on purchases of very small quantities at greater expense.90

Particularly hard pressed to afford their heating bills were the increasing number of old people affected by the problem of "undercrowding", or "overhousing" as it was also called. As housing standards began to rise, a growing proportion of elderly widows or couples were living on alone in two or three bedroom houses with rents they could ill afford, and
which they often could not manage to heat or to keep clean. As noted above in the discussion of slum clearance areas, such dwellings were sometimes as much in need of repair, or demolition, as the worst tenements.91

Throughout the period, there was widespread concern that old people who were "utterly unfit to live alone" were nonetheless doing so, and in 1903, Edith Sellers firmly told the Select Committee on the Aged Pensioners' Bill that people over seventy were too old to live alone: by 1908, she had revised this opinion, declaring that

in the working classes men and women alike are as a rule too infirm to live alone after sixty-five, and even if they were not, living alone on 5s. a week spells semi-starvation.92

Similarly, in their surveys of industrial towns in 1913-14, Bowley and Burnett-Hurst found a large - they thought "unusual" - number of "elderly women with quite inadequate means ... living by themselves or taking in lodgers", while in 1943, the Old People's Welfare Committee considered that, of a sample of 452 old people living alone in Liverpool, 61 required institutional care.93 Sellers mentioned one old woman receiving out-relief who was "blind, deaf and totally paralysed ... a friend comes in sometimes to give her a 'shake-up' and bring her some food". Cuttle reported a case in 1900 in which an old paralysed out-relief recipient living alone was left "tied in a chair" by her son but still managed to fall into the fender; and in the 1940s, the Assistance Board came across more than one case where sick old people were kept locked in their rooms by relatives or landladies for days at a time "with a little food set out as for an animal".94 Such cases were not usually the result of deliberate cruelty; where old people insisted on living alone, relatives, landladies and neighbours had little choice: this issue is further discussed in Chapters Six and Seven.

Ironically, the older and poorer an old person was, the more likely he or she was to live alone, and from 1940 to 1943, over two-thirds of all supplementary pensioners were living by themselves or with one other old person. As Violet Markham observed in 1943, old couples living by themselves were often as much in need as solitary pensioners of outside assistance: she described a case in Chesterfield where a disabled old man fell on the stairs while going to fetch help for his sick wife; by the time they were found, he was in a serious condition and the woman was dead.95

Overcrowding, however, continued to be a serious problem. During this period, old people with large or later families might still have several children at home in their sixties and seventies, although this was becoming less common as the twentieth century progressed.
Households which contained an adult child who had returned home between jobs, or following a domestic crisis such as widowhood or illness were also common, and grandchildren were also often in residence. Many old people lived with married children, especially in the industrial North and in Wales: household structure is further discussed in Chapter Six.

Most likely to be suffering from overcrowding, however, were those in their late forties and their fifties, with adult children often still at home: for these families, the comforts of a larger and more expensive dwelling had always to be weighed anxiously against the problems of unemployment and illness and the probability that young earners would soon marry or leave home for lodgings elsewhere. For instance, in the 1930s, Margery Spring Rice quoted two elderly women facing this dilemma: one Birmingham woman explained, "I don't dare to look for a dearer house although it would make me so much happier because I never know how much money is coming in", while another from Preston said

I have been offered a better house but the rent was double this one and as the family is in and out of work I feel I don't know what to do.96

Similarly, in Katharine Buildings in the 1880s, Beatrice Webb and Ella Pycroft, as lady rent-collectors, helpfully ejected the employed adult son of one elderly couple due to "overcrowding"; shortly after, the old man, who was an engineer, was injured and could not work, and the couple was left to depend on the help of a married daughter living nearby. Having discovered the potential of the charge of "overcrowding" as a tool for social engineering, Mrs Webb and Miss Pycroft went on to force a young man to give up one of the rooms he shared with his parents so that the elderly father, an army pensioner whom they considered mentally imbalanced, would have to go to the workhouse; they then ejected an elderly woman who was too ill to work because of the "suspicions of misbehaviour" by an adult daughter temporarily staying with her, and "threw out" another widow "because she took in her married daughter". Not surprisingly, another tenant was said to have an adult son living with her "secretly".97

Once children had left home, old people were often obliged to take in lodgers to make ends meet, and in the late nineteenth century this was frequently the sole or main source of income especially of retired artisans and their widows. As Lenore Davidoff has noted, lodgers, although extremely common, tended to lower a household's status in the eyes of neighbours. Writing of his Salford childhood in the 1900s, Robert Roberts recalls that there was much prejudice against them: as he explains,
the presence in a house of anyone other than parents and [legitimate
children] always pushed a family off centre.98

Moreover, lodgers were certainly no easy answer to old people's income needs. Booth's
1889 London street survey abounds with poor old people who numbered lodgers among
their various precarious sources of income: some were even sharing their single room with
them. Entries include old women who "used to have lodgers but could not get rents from
them", who "[tried] to let furnished apartments [but] ... people leave her in debt", and
whose "lodgers left owing nine pounds". Similarly, in Bromley Workhouse in the same
year, one unfortunate man, a former greengrocer, had seen two shops fail, one leaving him
sixty pounds in debt, and had been "cheated of" twelve pounds by lodgers; a fellow inmate,
in her eighties, had been unable to make her living charring and taking lodgers, as the
income was too uncertain. Nearby in the Sick Asylum were two elderly disabled brothers,
one of whom who had been living in common lodging houses since their aged mother died
from an assault by a lodger. Other contemporary reports contain many similar stories.99

Probably mainly because of concerns about respectability and overcrowding, landlords,
especially in the new model dwellings, sometimes forbade subletting. For instance, in the
1880s, Beatrice Webb and Ella Pycroft characteristically prevented a disabled shoeblack
resident in Katharine Buildings from having a lodger: as they explained, the Charity
Organisation Society had "decided he would be better off in the workhouse". It was,
however, difficult for landlords and various officials to know where to draw the line, as
unrelated lodgers shaded through various degrees of propinquity into coresident friends,
distantly related kin and close relatives: even old people living with adult children were
often listed in the Census and other documents as "lodgers". Like Webb and Pycroft and
Robert Roberts' Salford neighbours, most seem to have regarded with suspicion anyone
outside the marital unit, including in some cases even adult children.100

Certainly, the relationship between lodger and landlady was frequently far more than a cash
nexus. This was partly a result of the interdependence of neighbours and other people
living in each other's pockets which was a feature of poorer working-class communities. It
was also partly because the type of people who lived in lodgings invited the care of a
substitute family: indeed, lodgers were sometimes said to call their landladies "mother".
Most lodgers were young single people without families nearby, but a growing proportion
were, like their landladies, older men and women. "Going into lodgings" was a definite
step down in the social scale, and elderly lodgers were often forced into the move by
poverty or inability to manage on their own: often they were also without families living
near. For instance, in Liverpool in 1932, Caradog Jones found that 11 per cent of lodgers
whose ages were known were over sixty-five: most of these depended solely on the old age pension. 101

Old people living in lodgings were often treated with great generosity by their landladies, who, as we have seen, were sometimes no less old and poor than their subtenants; sometimes, indeed, the kindness was reversed and old landladies were tenderly nursed or assisted by lodgers: as one New Survey of London investigator summarised, "they seem to manage between them". In his survey of East London supplementary pensioners in 1941, J.J. Mallon found the landladies he met anxious to promote the pensioner's comfort and well-being. For example, one landlady accompanied me to the room of the pensioner because though she, the landlady, was hard of hearing, the pensioner was deaf and could not understand a stranger. Another made the bed of a pensioner to whom bedmaking had become laborious. A third was in the habit of guiding her shaky subtenant when the latter took the air ... 102

Such assistance could put considerable financial and physical strain on landladies, and often the Assistance Board or other authorities were contacted because they were no longer able or willing to cope. To quote Mrs Lowe of the Industrial Womens' Organisations in 1919, pensioners have very kind landladies ... I know a number of them who could not exist but for the kindness of the women in whose houses they happen to be. That of course is always a doubtful element and may change at any time. 103

In both her welfare surveys for the Assistance Board, Violet Markham found that the "worst cases" were living as lodgers. She found one old man "in a squalid comfortless room ... in a deplorable state of dirt and neglect", and was surprised to find that his landlady was "the local rate collector ... a pleasant superior woman who received me quite civilly". Her fellow investigator, G.M. Herford, agreed that landladies could not always be relied upon. Moreover, old lodgers were themselves usually reluctant to "intrude" or to become a burden: in 1942, Diane Ibberson reported that one pensioner was lodging in a respectable house where he is allowed to use the kitchen and the living room. He feels intrusive, however, and says that he would like to go to an institution rather than walk the streets all day with only a couple of shillings in his pocket. 104
From the 1900s, as incomes rose and housing conditions improved, shared lodgings became both less prevalent and less socially acceptable, and by 1945, Geoffrey Thomas's survey for the Central Office of Information found that old people in the lowest income group were those most likely to derive income from boarders or lodgers. For this group, both taking in lodgers and going into lodgings was still very common. In 1942, a 5 per cent random sample analysis of supplementary pensioners found that about 7 per cent of those with additional resources derived income from boarders or lodgers: the total number was 30,500, compared to 47,410 with income from employment.105

Some private homes provided board or lodgings for a number of subtenants, such as the "cheap lodging house over a tripe shop" colourfully described by George Orwell in 1937, where two old age pensioners shared a room with other lodgers. Because of their low incomes, their age and likely frailty, pensioners were not the most desirable lodgers, and the landlady in this case had attempted to compensate by taking out life insurance on her subtenants. To quote Orwell,

I doubt whether they were really losing money on the old age pensioners, though certainly the profit on 10s. a week must have been very small. But in their eyes the two old men were a kind of dreadful parasite ... . Old Jack they could just tolerate, because he kept out of doors most of the day, but they really hated the bedridden one ... . [They] were quite openly pining for him to die.106

Similarly, Caradog Jones in 1932 reported one old Liverpool woman who managed to live on her pension by subletting her house to five other families and living in the parlour. Such establishments shaded imperceptibly into the smaller and meaner common lodging houses and unlicensed private nursing homes, which are discussed below. Retired artisans and their widows, as well as lower-middle-class old people, often also obtained an income from letting out property which they had managed to purchase with their savings. Needless to say, it was sometimes not in very good condition: in fact, contemporaries claimed that some of the worst "slum landlords" were poor, slum-dwelling old people themselves.107.
NOTES

1 BLPES, New Survey of London 2/2 (Old Age Pensioners: Interviews, 1929 [Mr and Mrs Ayres]): abridged - "These two seemed too old to have anything to grumble about".


3 Ryland Adkins Committee, BPP 1919 XXVII, p. 178.

4 Registrar General, 1901 Census: quoted in Quadagno, Ageing in Early Industrial Society, p. 29.


12 See ch. 7; PRO AST 7/632 (letter from daughter of pensioner, Birkenhead Area, n.d.(1942); letter from son-in-law of pensioner, Woodford Green Area, 7 Dec. 1942); Pilgrim Trust, *Men without Work*, pp. 147-8; Caradog Jones, *Social Survey of Merseyside*, vol. 1, p. 198.

13 Ibid.


16 PRO AST 7/551 (Reid to Mary Hamilton, 18 Dec. 1941).


18 PRO AST 7/551 (Reid, Memorandum, Feb. 1924); CAB 87/81/100 (Beveridge, Draft Report, 22 Sep. 1942, p. 16); AST 7/479 (Ibberson, Welfare of Supplementary Pensioners, 8 May 1941); PRO AST 7/487 (DO, Durham/Middlesbrough, to HQ, 30 Oct. 1944); AST 7/557 (Ibberson, Note on Cost of Maintenance in L.C.C. Institutions, 9 Aug. 1941) E.Samson, *Old Age in the New World*, London, 1945, p. 52.


23 Llewellyn Smith (ed.), *New Survey of London*, vol. 3, pp. 82, 84; vol. 5, p. 114.
Emphasis in original; Rowntree, Poverty and Progress, pp. 43, 66, 71, 99 [quotation], 114, 160.

Thomas, Employment of Older Persons, Table 9, p. 36.


Bowley and Hogg, Has Poverty Diminished?, pp. 19-20; Caradog Jones, Social Survey of Merseyside, vol. 3, pp. 226-227, 323; Ford, Work and Wealth, p. 129; Llewellyn Smith (ed.); New Survey of London, vol 5, p. 105; Rowntree, Poverty and Progress, pp. 41, 46 [in York in 1936, inadequate wages still had a slight lead over unemployment as a "cause" of poverty]; the surveys of the 1940s and 1950s are discussed below.

PRO AST 7/589 (D. Ibberson, Sample Enquiry into Need for Clothing, Footwear and Bedding, Mar. 1942, p. 3); AST 7/592 (Supplementary Pensioners: Special Enquiry into Exceptional Needs: District Officers' Reports, Apr. 1942: DO, Newcastle-on-Tyne; DO, Manchester 2; DO, Glasgow 2; DO, Dundee; DO, Manchester 1; DO, Liverpool; DO. London 3; Summary [notes 10 comments to this effect]; AST 7/599 (Liverpool Area Officers' Conference, 15 May 1942); further details in ch. 7.

Ryland Adkins Cttee, BPP 1919 XXVII, p. 278 [Tomley].


PRO AST 7/487 (extract from South Wales Echo, 28 Nov. 1941; DO, Carlisle, to Headquarters (HQ), 5 Sep. 1940).


For "ordinary debility", see e.g. PRO AST 7/487 (DO, Sheffield, Minute, 29 June 1942); BLPES, Booth Collection, B68, p. 185; B71, p. 73; B72, p. 216; B74, pp. 188, 209, passim; Booth (ed.), Labour and Life, vol. 2, pp. 66, 67, 69 passim.


Ibid., pp. 221, 224-225 [Lorton, Lowe].


Spring Rice, *Working-Class Wives*, pp. 169ff; Lady Bell, *At the Works*, ch. 3; Pember Reeves, *Round about*, ch. 9.

Llewellyn Smith (ed.), *New Survey of London*, Vol. 3, p. 208; BLPES, New Survey of London, 2/1, p. 3; 2/2, Original Interviews: Miss Roscoe, Mr Stanley, Mrs Wheeler, Mr & Mrs Turner, Mrs Pincher; for dietary records, see rough notebook.

PRO AST 7/574 (Ibberson, Report of an Enquiry, Aug. 1944, pp. 41,57); AST7/589 (Ibberson, Special Enquiries, Mar. 1942: Attachments: Borough 2 Special Circumstances Cases; Tooting Special Circumstances Cases; Nuffield Foundation, *Old People*, p. 50.


Boyd Orr, *Food*, pp. 6, 55, 77 et al.


See ch. 6; Nuffield Foundation, *Old People*, p. 50; PRO AST 7/608 (Regional Officer, Cardiff, Cardiff Region Notes, Nov. 1942: Attachment - District Officer (DO), Newport, Newport District Report (quotation from Area Officer); Anderson, "Impact on the Family", pp.56ff.


Spring Rice, *Working-Class Wives*, ch. 5; p. 165.


Sheldon, *Social Medicine*, pp. 36-42.


62 Nuffield Foundation, Report of a Survey of Charitable Trusts in Great Britain, London, 1947, pp. 19-20, 37-38 [quotation], Tables A, B and 8; Nuffield Foundation, Old People, Appendix 13, pp. 43, 179-190; PRO AST 7/589 (Special Inquiries, Mar. 1942: Attachments: Luton 2 Case 8; Report: Was the Condition of Supplementary Pensioners better than before they came to the Board?).


65 Ryland Adkins Ctee, BPP 1919 XXVII, p. 128 [Stuart]; BLGES, New Survey of London 2/2 (Old Age Pensioners: Interviews, Mrs C); PRO AST 7/627 (Olive Matthews, Housing for Old and Single People [extract]); AST 7/663 (Summary Table: Welfare Reports... submitted by Area Officers (AOs), GS 11A/44, 1944).

66 Sir Halley Stewart Trust/NOPWC, Over Seventy, pp.18-19; PEP, Exit from Industry, p. 5.

67 Nuffield Foundation, Old People, pp. 31-7; see also PRO AST 7/574 (Ibberson, Report of an Enquiry, Aug. 1944, pp. 63-7); AST 7/605 (Herford, Report on Old Age Pensioners, Dec. 1941, p. 3; Markham, AB Memorandum No. 362, 5 Sep. 1943, p. 2); AST 7/627 (Housing of the Aged, 1942-47: various letters and memoranda); Samson, Old Age, p. 25.

68 Ibid. [quotations p. 33].

69 Ibid. [quotation, p. 33].


71 PRO AST 7/479 (Hallsworth, AB Memorandum No. 354, 9 July 1941).

72 PRO AST 7/599 (Case Papers, Liverpool District Office, dispatched to HQ, 26 June 1942); AST 7/574 (Ibberson, Report of an Enquiry, Aug. 1944, p. 57).


74 Ibid.; Foakes, My Part of the River, p. 54; Pember Reeves, Round about, pp. 19-20; Spring Rice, Working-Class Wives, pp. 92, 145-6, passim; AST 7/605 (Herford, Report, Dec. 1941, p. 2; p. 1).


76 Sheldon, Social Medicine, p. 71; Select Committee on the Aged Pensioners' Bill, BPP 1903 V, p. 66 [Sellers]; E.Sellers, "Old Age Pensions and the Belongingless Poor: A Workhouse Census", Contemporary Review, 93, Jan. - June 1908, 147-157, p. 147 [and see below]; PRO AST 7/737 (NCSRS, Draft Memorandum, May 1944, pp. 44, 58); Cab 87/80/81 (NCSRS, Memorandum No. 2: Pensions, 19 June 1942, p. 12).


81 PRO AST 7/592 (DO, Manchester, Special District Enquiries, Apr. 1942: Attachment - AO, Stockport, Comments); AST 7/608 (RO, London, London Region Report, Nov. 1944, p. 2); AST 7/589 (Ibberson, Special Enquiry, Mar. 1942: Appendices, Tooting Case 9, Luton 1 Case 6, Luton 2 Case 1).

82 Sheldon, Social Medicine, p. 141 and see case histories pp. 19ff [quotation p. 25]; Haw, From Workhouse to Westminster, p. 62; R. Roberts, Classic Slum, p. 54;
Pember Reeves, *Round about*, p. 171; Orwell, *Road to Wigan Pier*, p. 81; and see ch. 6.


85 PRO AST 7/605 (Markham, AB Memorandum No. 362, pp. 3-5).


87 F.B. Smith, *People's Health*, p. 323; Local Government Board, *Return ... Deaths from Starvation ... 1914*, pp. 11, 13, 18; see also *Return of ... Deaths from Starvation ... 1886*, BPP 1887 LXXI, pp. 449-457 [blacksmith, 70, and others].


92 Booth, *Aged Poor*, pp. 122, 164 [quotation]; Select Committee on the Aged Pensioners' Bill, BPP 1903 V, p. 66 [Sellers]; Sellers, "Old Age Pensions and the Belongingless Poor", pp. 147, 155.


PRO AST 7/605 (PA Memorandum 12835 - Hope Wallace, Welfare of Old People, Aug. 1943; Markham, AB Memorandum No. 362, 5 Sep. 1943, p. 5); AST 7/479 (Ibberson, Welfare of Supplementary Pensioners, 8 May 1941); and see ch. 3.


BLPES, Webb and Pycroft, Katharine Buildings, pp. 84, 121, 133, 137, 188, 274, 223 [Kelly, Bullock, Nagle, Debard, Slade].


BLPES, Booth Collection, B68, pp. 147, 150 [quotations]; B72, pp. 219, 221, 223; B74, pp. 152, 196, 233 [quotation]; B162, pp. 328, 334 [Isaacs, Jarvis]; B163, pp. 530-531 [Conlan]; see also Economic Club, *Family Budgets*, pp. 30, 36; Pember Reeves, *Round about*, p. 38; National Council of Social Service, *Report on some Effects of Widowhood in Wage-Earning Families*, London, 1920, p. 31; and see discussion of lodgers in ch. 4.


103 Ibid.; PRO AST 7/589 (Ibberson, Special Enquiry, Mar. 1942: Appendices, Special Circumstances Cases, Tooting, Case 10; Luton 1, Case 1; Luton 2, Case 4); Ryland Adkins Cttee, BPP 1895 XXVII, p. 232 [Lowe].

104 Ibid.; PRO AST 7/605 (Markham, AB Memorandum No. 362, 5 Sep. 1943, p. 6; Herford, Report on Old Age Pensioners living alone in Stepney, Dec. 1941, p. 4); AST 7/479 (Markham, AB Memorandum No. 365, 9 Oct. 1941, p. 3); AST 7/589 (Ibberson, Special Enquiries, Mar. 1942, Appendix: Tooting Case No. 4 [quotation]).

105 PRO AST 7/484 (Analysis of Cases with Gross Resources: Numbers of Applicants in Receipt of Supplementary Pensions and Dependent members of their Households, 1942).

106 G. Orwell, The Road to Wigan Pier, pp. 13-14; Samson, Old Age in the New World, p. 23.

107 Caradog Jones, Social Survey of Merseyside, vol 1, p. 122; see also cases from Booth Collection, above; Southgate, That's the Way it Was, pp. 16, 20; Orwell, Road to Wigan Pier, p. 57; Davies, Autobiography of a Super Tramp, pp. 176-178.
CHAPTER FOUR

"JUST LIKE DEATH":

OLDER PEOPLE IN INSTITUTIONS AND OTHERS

"[Sir Ryland Adkins]: Would they be able to live outside [the workhouse] on 10s.?

[Mrs S.A. Close]: They would have freedom, and they would not have that in the workhouse. They would go short of many things to have freedom."

- Ryland Adkins Committee, 1919.¹

"I have known them come in, with the feeling that it is just like death."

- Mary Clifford, Barton Regis Guardian, on old people entering the workhouse, Royal Commission on the Aged Poor, 1895.²

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Living Conditions outside the Home: Common Lodging Houses and Casual Wards

It was, ironically, the introduction of old age pensions which enabled the huge growth in the numbers of men over sixty-five in common lodging houses, hostels and shelters. Charles Booth's compilations of the ages of common lodging house and shelter inmates in 1889 confirm the contemporary view that elderly men tended to be forced permanently into the workhouse as their health declined and their earnings decreased. Meanwhile, the "kip house wallahs", as older residents of such places were called, generally led a peripatetic existence, going from lodging house to shelter to "sleeping rough" to workhouse casual ward and infirmary as their finances, health and the weather permitted. For instance, Nicholas Herbert, as one of the Metropolitan Poor Law Inspectors, reported that nearly 700 persons were given infirmary orders during 1893 at the City of London Casual Wards; when such cases no longer require infirmary treatment they are transferred to the Workhouse where they frequently remain.³

By 1926, the London County Council's Chief Inspector of Lodging Houses, Mr Shapley, reported that an increasing number of residents were old age pensioners, and that the
lodging house population was much less mobile than in his early days as an Inspector. Many pensioners listed no occupation, and it is likely that their pensions and perhaps occasional small earnings bought them only the cheapest type of lodging house accommodation. However, old men often could not manage to keep house elsewhere, or to afford more "respectable" lodgings. In 1936, the Pilgrim Trust described the life of a typical elderly resident:

who divides his time between the sleeping room, which he shares with 10 or 20 others, the common room - where he keeps his bread and bacon wrapped in newspaper on the floor beneath his seat and takes it with him to the "Labour" [Exchange] because otherwise it will be gone when he gets back - and the doorstep; for the most exciting incidents in his life, probably, are a band in the street or a street squabble ....

Even the best run and most benevolently managed lodging houses and working men's hostels were likely to be depressing places: as J.B. Priestley wrote in 1934,

such places ... seem peculiarly pitiful because they are so largely occupied by elderly men. Young men have always hopes of a better job ... but elderly men ... are on the wrong side of the hill ....

He described the occupants of one such hostel as "all quiet, tamed, broken in, nearly broken down". Similarly, in 1932, George Orwell found the Salvation Army lodging houses "though clean ... far drearier than the worst of the common lodging houses", with "semimilitary discipline ... too like the workhouse for my taste"; his account differs little from that of W.H. Davies in 1908. These hostels, although run by charities, were self-supporting and sometimes used to cross-subsidise other undertakings.

Most accommodation provided by charities, however, catered for those one step further down the economic scale than the common lodging houses, and was often either free or heavily subsidised. Many such shelters were large: in the 1890s, Medland Hall in East London provided 300 beds and sometimes accommodated up to 500 men. Some shelters, like Medland Hall, indeed provided free shelter; others, like the Salvation Army Shelters in the 1880s or Ham Yard Hospice, run in association with the Charity Organisation Society, were more akin to the workhouse casual ward, demanding payment in the form of money, work, attendance at religious services, or an "investigation" or compulsory interview. Residents of these shelters had to run the gauntlet of hostility from local workers, who,
with Will Crooks and J.C. O'Connor, complained that they distorted the labour market, being

a great curse of working men, especially for the eagerness of employers to take [residents] on for a few hours' work or work at lower wages.6

Small numbers of elderly women also turned to the common lodging house as poverty overtook them. As the London County Council's Medical Officer of Health, F.N. Kay Menzies, reported in 1927, cheaper common lodging houses were often the only resort of "women who are really too old and infirm to be capable of looking after themselves, but shun the Poor Law": residents of such places and of the charitable shelters were frequently "ill, very old or verminous - indeed often all three". Other residents were simply unable to afford other accommodation on their pensions alone, or were elderly unemployed women: domestic servants and dressmakers were common. To quote Kay Menzies,

all alike [are] marked by a plucky determination to keep their independence, to avoid the Poor Law and to earn what little they can as long as they can.7

Similarly, in 1945, the Nuffield Foundation survey observed that "a substantial proportion" of residents were "old people who preferred the discomfort and bleakness of most common lodging houses to the regulated life of the Public Assistance institution"; they added that the London County Council was organising tours of local Institutions to encourage elderly residents to make the move. By this time, wartime prosperity and full employment had drawn many people away from common lodging houses, and, in their survey of such establishments in Liverpool, also in 1945, Ellinor Black and Doris Read found that over half of all women residents were old age pensioners, compared to just over a quarter of males: the actual numbers of pensioners were 66 and 213 respectively. Very few were employed, and the authors wrote:

In one lodging house we visited, the old women were sitting completely idle in a basement room on bare benches ... . They do not willingly help ... as they consider that service is included in their weekly payment ... they read only when they can afford to buy a magazine.8

Common lodging houses were not the cosiest of places: in fact, some inquests into deaths of elderly or sick residents mentioned cold as a major cause. Many were filthy and verminous, with no washing facilities, so that some old men, and a very few women, were said to resort to the casual wards of the workhouse or Public Assistance Institution for
periodic fumigation, and often medical treatment as well. Usually such visits became more frequent, and the medical aspect more prominent, as the old men's frailty increased.

A typical history [wrote Dr Mabel Mitchell for the Nuffield Enquiry in 1947] was that of repeated admission to hospital ... the interval between the admissions ... becoming progressively shorter and the stays correspondingly longer. The patient was unable to maintain recovery on account of the bad social conditions to which he returned.9

In fact, single old men and widowers not living with relatives were particularly likely to subsist in appalling conditions: every rural Assistance Board Area Office had on its files a number of cases of old men housed in farm outbuildings such as stables and sheds: one old man even slept with the local hounds to keep warm, while another, although offered a room in the vicarage, preferred to sleep outside so he could smoke his pipe. In the towns, a few old men tried to make their homes in communal facilities such as air raid shelters and public lavatories.10

"Sleeping rough" was common throughout the period, and among those who did so, an increasing proportion was said to be elderly: in 1926, an anonymous investigator reported that many were old men between sixty and seventy who had insufficient stamps to qualify for their contributory pensions. Not surprisingly, verdicts of death from exposure while sleeping out appear frequently in Coroner's records: for instance, of 62 deaths listed in the 1914 Deaths from Starvation Return, at least 23 were of homeless people aged over fifty who were found dying in the streets or in open country; several more were in their late forties. Typical of such cases was a fifty-two-year-old Westmorland general labourer who "often tramped in search of work". He had been in the workhouse briefly, and was found several weeks later lying in a wood ten miles away, where he had lain for three days without food; the verdict was "inflammation of the stomach and bowels brought about and accelerated by cold and exposure".11

As noted earlier, many of those "sleeping rough" and the poorer inmates of lodging houses and shelters had frequent recourse to workhouse casual wards. In the 1890s, one of the Metropolitan Poor Law Inspectors, Nicholas Herbert, often complained that such people came to the casual ward when ill, acting as vectors both of contagious disease and vermin, while the New Survey of London found that this was still a serious problem in 1932.12

It is extremely difficult to obtain reliable information about casual ward inmates, especially before the First World War, as many Guardians and officials regarded them not so much
with indifference as with outright hostility, as having no claim on the local rates and as vicious parasites of the "criminal class". Thus in 1894, the same group of vagrants was classified by different Workhouse Masters variously as "professional", "both professional and otherwise", "about equal numbers" and "not many professional".¹³

Even in 1929, 24 of 33 Medical Officers insisted that vagrants as a group were healthy and fit, some even going so far as to say that they were "very well nourished" or "in an even better state of nutrition than the average local worker". Other Medical Officers found almost all vagrants to be under twenty-five or over fifty, with many needing hospital treatment or bed-rest; 15 per cent, mostly aged over sixty, were said to be suffering from malnutrition, 25 per cent were "senile" - that is, too old and frail to work - and several old men had heart disease and were "unsuited to the life of a vagrant". One Medical Officer noted that 40 per cent were over fifty, and described them as "old, badly clothed, feet generally in bad condition and mostly unfit to be wandering about".¹⁴

By the 1920s, statistics were becoming available which confirmed the advanced age of most casual ward inmates. For instance, in 1929, the Departmental Committee on the Relief of the Casual Poor found that more than half the men were over forty and 15 per cent over sixty, while in London, 42 per cent of admissions were of men over fifty, and on average, the older inmates were admitted more frequently than others. In 1928, Messrs. Hilton and Reeder toured London and country casual wards for the New Survey of London and found 44.4 per cent of male inmates over fifty and 19.5 per cent over sixty: they observed that "at all the wards there was a preponderance of older men". Most inmates were of "low employability", although treasuring their often stampless insurance books as "a proof of respectability and economic status". The little evidence that exists on the ages of female casuals suggests that they too were disproportionately elderly. Some Poor Law officials recognised the need for a special scheme for old vagrants, such as the trial scheme introduced in Yorkshire in 1920.¹⁵

Both the Departmental Committee and Hilton and Reeder were surprised to find numbers of "genuine working men" - that is, men without a history of casual ward admission - on tramp and mistakenly regarded this as a "new phenomenon". In fact, as we have seen in Chapter One, workhouse casual and ordinary wards had long benefited from the labour of artisans and others on tramp, and in many rural areas a regular pattern was observable as labourers moved from place to place following seasonal employment. Moreover, there is substantial evidence dating from the 1890s on the influx of normally employed people into the casual wards following trade slumps and local economic crises.¹⁶
Evidence was also accumulating on the poor health of many vagrants. For instance, the New Survey of London doctor investigating the health of the mostly elderly male and female casualties in Southwark Poor Law Institution in 1932 found the same number of serious medical problems as there were inmates: presumably some poor souls had more than one condition. The most common problems were mental or psychiatric conditions, together totalling 24 cases, 14 cases of "chronic alcoholism", 17 with eye diseases or serious eye defects, 9 with "deformities" and 5 with malnutrition. As Margaret Crowther has observed, the high incidence of mental and psychiatric conditions is confirmed by the evidence of the Royal Commission on the Feeble-Minded in 1908 and the Departmental Committee on the Relief of the Casual Poor in 1929.17

Also in 1932, over 90 per cent of 482 men over fifty admitted to the Lambeth Casual Ward were found to have serious medical conditions, a number required first aid on admission and more than 35 per cent were recommended for transfer to the hospital or to other institutions. Nonetheless, about half were listed as fit for employment, including some later transferred to hospital or other institutions, and including several with multiple health problems such as "hernia, syphilis [age 64]", "very deaf, cataracts [age 68]", "dilated heart and rupture [age 75]" and "cardiac, constipation, cataract, lumbago [age 74]". On the other hand, some of those whose health was listed as "normal" were nonetheless declared unfit for work, usually because of advanced age: more than 30 of those admitted were aged over seventy.18

Records of admissions to this Casual Ward for the years up to 1939 show very similar figures, as well as an equally elastic definition of fitness for work. The latter is also illustrated by the Medical Examinations Book for the Paddington Casual Ward during the 1930s, which with breezy nonchalance classified almost all inmates as "fit for employment" regardless of illness or injury. For instance, all tuberculosis cases were so classified, as were some victims of malnutrition; most inmates were recorded as suffering from some complaint.19

In 1942, L.N. Ure of the Assistance Board found that, despite the wartime employment boom, there had been 480 admissions to Guildford Casual Ward in the previous two months; touring the Ward, he saw "a poor lot of all ages", only one of whom he "should have dared to send round to the [Labour Exchange]". Yet both World Wars saw the successful absorption of thousands of vagrants into the labour force; for, as shown above and in Chapters One and Two, employability and fitness for work are relative concepts, depending more on social expectations than on physiology. In fact, the clearest picture of the average vagrant's condition, in the light of contemporary standards of health, was
probably painted by the Poor Law Inspector, W.D. Bushell, in 1920 with his description of men who were

for the most part ... elderly semi-competent, semi-incompetent men, midway between able-bodiedness and infirmity.20

"If you want to be thoroughly depressed, the best way to arrive at that mental condition is to survey the interior of a casual ward", wrote former Romford Guardian R.M. Noordin in 1929, and this prescription seems to have been much followed in the 1920s and '30s amongst the intellectual left. A number of educated men and women wrote accounts of their stays in various casual wards throughout England, and these are dismaying in their uniformity. Most casual wards had not changed significantly since the 1890s: indeed, as Crowther has noted, the accounts of Jack London in the 1900s and George Orwell in the 1930s are perfectly interchangeable. Solitary locked cells with a grid for broken stones to be passed through were still in use in some wards; sometimes inmates were placed two to a cell, and even those with communal wards generally locked inmates in at night, leaving them with no way of summoning assistance. Some wards had no heating and most were verminous; bathwater and towels were shared, bucket latrines were often used, and both male and female vagrants were commonly expected to sleep on the bare floor: mattresses being, as Susan Lawrence, M.P., remarked in 1931, "a new strange idea".21

Even in the 1920s and '30s, many wards still compulsorily detained inmates for two nights. When released, they were usually obliged to trudge ten to twelve miles to another casual ward, as more than two applications a month to the same ward, or to any of the London wards, led to detention for two days or more. This was too much for some frailer casuals, and a few collapsed and died on the road; others were reduced to stealing, like the woman arrested in Chelmsford with stolen boots, who explained:

I came out of the Casual Ward wet, hungry and tired. I have been out of work two months .... But for the Police, I should have gone hungry many a time.22

The Casual Poor (Relief) Order of 1925 featured those old Poor Law stand-bys, stone-breaking, corn-grinding and oakum-picking. While in the 1890s, critics had often complained that the level of task was greater than that required in prisons, comparisons were more difficult to draw in the 1930s, as most prisons had long abandoned these tasks as both too expensive and degrading.23 The diet, which usually consisted of bread, gruel and a very small amount of cheese - the prescribed dietary contained 2oz. per day for males
and 1.5oz. for women - was cheerfully admitted to be inadequate by Poor Law Inspectors; they believed, with no evidence, that it was "probably supplemented from other sources". It was no wonder that a few casuals deliberately committed crimes to secure the better amenities provided in gaol. Conditions were well summarised by a sad piece of graffiti spotted by Miss Lawrence in 1931 in Wisbech Casual Ward: "THIS IS A PRISON FOR UNFORTUNATES". And yet casual wards had frequently to turn away large numbers of applicants, and the women's wards in London were said to be always full. Casuals had little choice: to quote George Lansbury in 1896, "behind their vagrancy and their crime lies the appalling fact that society has no room for them".  

In 1929, the Chairman of the London County Council Public Assistance Committee, Herbert Morris, described the typical older vagrant as "the man who by reason of age or infirmity is quite unlikely to get employment, but who clings to what he regards as the liberty of casual ward life". Many older casuals resisted the apparently inevitable move to the workhouse proper: even in 1899, there were 462 vagrants aged over sixty-five - 368 males and 94 females - in casual wards on one night in July. Interestingly, numbers had dropped to 283 aged casuals - 67 of them over seventy - on 1 January the next year: probably many had gone into the workhouse proper for the winter, contributing to the rise of nearly 9,000 in the numbers of aged workhouse inmates between the two counts. 

In 1929, one of the Metropolitan Inspectors, Charles Roundell, noted smugly that the numbers of older casuals had dropped off sharply following the introduction of compulsory transfer to suitable institutions. This scheme was not consistently enforced, however, and as we have seen, significant numbers of very old men were still entering casual wards in the 1930s: including, in 1939, two old men in Lambeth Casual Ward still holding out against institutionalisation in their eighties. Even in 1946, the Nuffield Foundation reported that there had been 1,085 individual appearances of vagrants aged over sixty in English and Welsh casual wards in the three months from January to March, only 50 being of women: there is no information on how many actual people this represents.
Living Conditions outside the Home: Residential Institutions

In Manchester in the 1890s, a survey of workhouse admissions showed that 57 per cent of old people entering the workhouse did so from common lodging houses, casual wards or gaol. This proportion would have been considerably lower outside the North, and in rural areas and smaller towns; but nonetheless, many "able-bodied" elderly inmates probably did come from lodging houses and casual wards. Former casuals and other relatively able-bodied old people entering the workhouse sometimes did not face the warmest of welcomes, being regarded as potential trouble-makers: indeed, the Clerk to the Shoreditch Guardians, Robert Clay, described his charges in 1898 as "superannuated old reprobates who seem utterly hopeless".27

The Shoreditch Board had tried without success to obtain Local Government Board permission to feed aged permanent inmates the casual ward diet; this was an attempted variant of the usual practice of classifying difficult aged inmates, whatever their health, as "able-bodied" and putting them on hard labour and the more restricted able-bodied diet. In some cases, old people were transferred to institutions supposedly for the work-shy or intransigent able-bodied, such as the Poplar Able-Bodied Test Workhouse, which, as Metropolitan Inspector Herbert Longley reported in 1878, "receive[d] the able-bodied (or more strictly speaking, 'troublesome') of 15 Metropolitan Unions". In 1880, 235 of 1,284 men admitted to Poplar were aged over sixty, as were 75 of 810 women. By 1876, the Medical Officer of Poplar was complaining that many of those transferred were unfit for work, and magistrates were refusing to convict some frailer inmates for failure to perform their tasks. Later Test Workhouses at Paddington, Birmingham, Manchester and Sheffield also had their share of problems with sick and aged inmates.28

In other cases, the more able-bodied elderly were eagerly received into workhouses by Masters desperately in need of paupers fit enough to assist with daily maintenance and care and supervision of inmates, and "useful" paupers were customarily offered dietary and other privileges as an inducement to stay on. As discussed in Chapter One, many Boards of Guardians tried to get workhouse maintenance done cheaply using pauper tradesmen: as one Guardian ingenuously remarked, "when inmates felt they were doing something to relieve the rates, they were evidently happiest". Henry Longley, as Metropolitan Poor Law Inspector in 1873, complained that

a Master who can induce inmates to paint and decorate (often with much taste and skill) the Board Room, to make furniture, to grow flowers, or even to make coffin-plates out of Australian meat-tins, is looked upon by
Guardians as having attained the highest pitch of perfection in the discharge of duties.29

In fact, this was a constant source of friction between Guardians and the Local Government Board, which sought to prevent both unfair competition in the labour market and any rewards to paupers for their labour. Board policies in this area led to much waste and unhappiness: for instance, Lincoln Union employed its paupers pumping water from one hole to another and then back again, while in Forehoe, gardening had to be abandoned as a task for old men as they were forbidden to eat their produce. Some Unions had to drop the Brabazon craftwork scheme, not just because most old inmates were too frail and arthritic to manage it, but because those that were not objected to being left in their skimp workhouse garb while the shawls and other woollens that they knitted were taken from them. Perhaps because of this, but more probably from sheer whimsy, most Brabazon scheme volunteers seem to have favoured less functional crafts, and the sight of agricultural labourers in their eighties struggling to create "Japanese birds", bead baskets and embroidered bedspreads gave a sense of accomplishment to several lady visitors. Many Unions continued to provide unproductive and degrading tasks such as oakum-picking long after even the Local Government Board advised their abandonment for permanent inmates.30

Most Unions, however, had so few able-bodied that they were generally obliged to reserve their abler aged inmates for useful tasks. For instance, in October 1878, the Poplar Test Workhouse had 45 able-bodied males, of whom only 3 were classed as fit for stone-breaking, and the Master said that the maximum number ever so classed was 30: "these however would represent the able-bodied of 16 Metropolitan Unions". In the same year, the 10 able-bodied male inmates of two London Workhouses, the Strand and St Saviours, included 3 men in their fifties, who were, respectively, suffering from "heart disease and debility", "badly ruptured", and with a wooden leg; the 7 younger able-bodied were all severely physically disabled but one, who was feeble-minded. As the Inspector, Longley, remarked, "it is hardly too much to say that those whose affliction is permanent, are classed as able-bodied". These people were the reality behind the myth of the able-bodied idler: in the words of a little poem handed to the "strict administrator", W.A. Bailward, by a workhouse inmate,

I'm the able-bodied Fee-Foh-Fum
From the warm Workhouse ward I come;
And whether they can or cannot pay
I swallow rate-payers every day.31
Yet the definition of "able-bodied" was even more complex and fluid than this, and in 1895, Sir Hugh Owen, Permanent Secretary of the Local Government Board, told the Aberdare Commission that

A man for the purpose of the return may be deemed able-bodied, although as a matter of fact at the time he is in receipt of relief he may be too ill to work. A man is classed according to what he ordinarily is, not what he is at the particular time that the relief is given.

Owen went on to report that of 13,500 able-bodied adult male outdoor relief recipients at 1 July 1892, 7,200 were relieved "on account of their own sickness, accident or infirmity". The same strange logic applied to women, and indeed it is a wonder that anyone under sixty was classed as non-able-bodied; although, as both Longley and Owen affirmed, the usual practice was for those over this age to be so classified. In Essex in the 1890s, a fifty-three-year-old man left the workhouse and drowned himself because, although classed as able-bodied, he was "not up to" the work; Cuttle describes this as "an ideal commentary on Whitehall classification".

A survey by the North-Western Poor Law Inspector, T.L. Murray Browne, of 10 Unions in 1891 found 512 able-bodied males, mostly "weakly or elderly men"; only 111 were judged by the Master as "really fit to do a fair day's work", and all but 28 of these were only in the workhouse briefly, leaving "less than 3 really able-bodied men per Workhouse ... for the most part doing very useful work". In the same year, one of the Metropolitan Inspectors, Robert Hedley, observed that

Of able-bodied male pauperism the quantity is quite inappreciable; there will be found in the workhouses some men, who, though not altogether disabled from work, are past their prime and who have had to surrender their places in the labour market to younger men.

In 1905, a sample survey showed that one quarter of able-bodied male inmates were over fifty-five, even though those over sixty were generally classed as aged and infirm. As we have seen above, and as Crowther has shown, most of those who were younger were either severely physically disabled, mentally disabled or only temporarily in the workhouse, leaving the core of work to be done by a few men in their fifties and the aged and infirm; women rarely entered the workhouse except when ill or very infirm. In Huddersfield Workhouse in 1895, 62 of 67 men over sixty and 29 of 32 old women were employed at
workhouse maintenance, farm work, woodchopping and corn-grinding. Miss Pease informed the Poor Law Conference in 1899 that in Whitechapel Workhouse only 14 of 755 inmates were able-bodied, yet the Union made over two hundred pounds from woodchopping and all maintenance was done by the aged and infirm. She added that in her own Workhouse, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, half the old men "do light work around the House, a little woodchopping and similar things ..."; the definition of "light work" appears to have changed somewhat in intervening years.34

Many old men and women were only too glad to be given useful employment: Alfred Jolley reported that in Hull Workhouse in 1899, a separate class existed for those who "can and do work willingly, being inmates through inability to procure a livelihood". In the 1880s, Beatrice Webb and Ella Pycroft recorded a sad little case history which must have been repeated in endless variations in thousands of working-class homes, though rarely with such a happy ending. This particular old couple lived in Katharine Buildings; the man was a former bookbinder, then a watchman and subsequently made his living doing odd jobs and waking men in common lodging houses; the wife "char[red] sometimes"; five grown children lived away. They had 10s. a week from the man's Trade Club for 12 weeks a year, and occasional gifts. Gradually, they sold all their furniture and had to go to the workhouse, but came out after three months, saying that they "would prefer to die of starvation than go there again". Soon they were ejected for arrears; the man later returned to say that they were back in the workhouse, now sharing a room; "he was working at his old trade and very happy". To quote Margaret Crowther,

in nearly every workhouse could be found aged inmates who worked without compulsion: to act as nurse, wardsman, night porter, or even voluntary cleaner, was to salvage a fragment of identity and self-respect.35

Crowther notes that the reliance on the labour of the aged produced problems from the 1830s onwards; by the 1890s, public concern was growing especially at the practice of leaving aged paupers in charge of children, lying-in wards and other nursing. Old people in the workhouse frequently worked very long hours at very heavy work; for instance, the Essex Unions studied by Cuttle employed a succession of disabled men in their seventies as stokers, working up to 15 hours a day; one of them later hanged himself. In Chelmsford Workhouse in 1902, four of the infirmary scrubbers were women in their mid-seventies. In fact, because of the more severe shortage of able-bodied women, old women were often more put upon, with many in their late sixties and seventies passing their days in what one Master called "wholesome cleaning and scrubbing".36 This problem grew increasingly acute as the number of able-bodied inmates continued to fall. After the introduction of old
age pensions in 1908, the small numbers of aged able to do household work dwindled almost to insignificance, and some Unions were obliged to hire extra staff. Nonetheless, even in the 1930s, a sprinkling of old men remained who were able to help and glad to do so, and the practice of rewarding them with perquisites such as extra tobacco still continued.37

In the year ending 1 July 1892, 114,144 people aged over sixty-five received indoor relief, excluding those in lunatic asylums and vagrants, for whom whole year figures are not available. This number comprised just over 68,000 men and 46,000 women, so that more than 8 per cent of those over sixty-five were in Poor Law institutions in the course of the year, or over 11 per cent of men and 6 per cent of women. These figures are around double those obtained by the day counts conducted twice yearly in January and June and for the decennial Census, showing a large proportion of old people still using the workhouse and infirmary for short-term hospital-type care during illness, or as a temporary expedient to tide over winter or domestic crises.38

This in turn suggests that the proportion of working-class old people who would enter the workhouse at some time during old age was higher than is often thought. Working people were commonly accused by contemporaries of an exaggerated fear or "morbid sentimentality" about ending their days in the workhouse, but the workhouse in old age was a very real threat. However, as David Thomson has shown the proportion of old people using the workhouse for short-term care had decreased since the 1840s, at least in rural areas, and old people entering the workhouse were increasingly likely to die there; this was certainly true of the period after 1891.39

Thomson's figures suggest that the proportion of old people in Poor Law institutions had risen by about 2 percentage points since 1851, although this is perhaps partly explained by the decrease in "ins and outs": once in the workhouse, old people were probably more likely to stay, and thus to be captured by a day count such as the Census. By comparison, the proportion of total population in such institutions had decreased slightly, although remaining fairly stable since 1871. Figures compiled by Margaret Crowther for the period from 1891 to 1921 show that, as would be expected, the proportion of indoor relief recipients who were aged over fifty-five exceeded the proportion of this age group in the total population; for men, the disproportion began from age forty-five.40

Both Crowther and Thomson show that the percentage of women aged over sixty-five who were receiving indoor relief peaked in the 1900s before the introduction of Old Age Pensions, and then fell rapidly to 1931; as the Chelmsford Guardians observed in 1913,
"only helpless old people come now". Meanwhile, despite increasing numbers of old women in other institutions, including hospitals, the overall percentage of women over sixty-five in institutions continued to fall up to 1951. Because of a substantial rise in the numbers of all adult male indoor relief recipients in the 1900s, a decrease in the percentage of old men receiving indoor relief was observable only in the highest age group (over seventy-five) in the 1911 Census, but thereafter the percentage of old men both in Poor Law and other institutions also decreased up to 1951, while the proportion of men aged 45-64 in institutions showed an even more rapid fall.41

Certainly, most workhouses contained on any given day a majority of aged inmates who were "permanent" and only likely to leave feet first. In Holborn Union on 1 January 1867, over 56 per cent of indoor relief recipients aged sixty or over had been in the Workhouse for over a year; in Brighton Union on 14 March 1893, 75 per cent of Workhouse inmates aged over sixty had been there over a year and 37 per cent over five years. Booth's figures for both Bromley Aged and Infirm Workhouse, Stepney, on 4 April 1889 and St Pancras Workhouse on 21 December 1889 show that the majority of all inmates had been there over a year, and in Bromley, 32 of 394 inmates over sixty had been in the Workhouse for over 13 years. In rural and provincial workhouses, the percentages were considerably higher: for instance, in Maldon Workhouse, Essex, in 1898-99, the 52 male inmates over 55 who had been admitted due to "age and debility" had spent an average of about 6 years in the Workhouse, while the 20 female "age and debility" cases in this age group had been in the House an average of over three years.42

Many of these permanent inmates undoubtedly required professional nursing care of the type now provided in nursing homes and hospitals. For instance, in 1894, the South-Eastern Poor Law Inspector, James Stuart Davy, obtained information from 10 country Workhouses in his district as to the numbers of indoor relief recipients who could leave if they were given 5s. a week. Most returns contained no information as to age, although insisting that the majority of inmates were too old and infirm to leave. In Tonbridge Workhouse, out of a total of 363 inmates of all ages, 29 inmates aged over sixty were reported to be able to look after themselves, and a further 30 to be able to manage with the help of friends, but 188 were said to be unable to leave due to "age and infirmity": unfortunately, the Master also saw fit to disqualify 67 inmates of all ages from consideration due to "character".43

More concretely, a Local Government Board Return of 1903 reported that of the total of 95,684 indoor paupers aged over sixty, excluding lunatics and vagrants, 60.6 per cent were "incapable of taking care of themselves". In 1907, Edith Sellers made enquiries in 2
metropolitan workhouses, 2 in provincial towns and 8 small rural workhouses, and found that, of 2,200 inmates over sixty-five, 1,000 required "professional care" and a further 400 required more or less full-time nursing care, so that they could not have been properly looked after by relatives with other family or work commitments. Other surveys in the same decade produced similar results, although all should be treated with some caution, as they were intended as ammunition in the fight against the extension of out-relief and the introduction of Old Age Pensions.\(^4^4\) Crowther has pointed out that officials were inclined to make excuses, such as alcoholism, for the presence in the institution of "useful" inmates; moreover, modern research shows that staff in residential institutions may be inclined to underestimate the capacities of residents, and it is now well established that self-care abilities tend to atrophy with lack of use.\(^4^5\)

Clearly, while many old people were in the workhouse because they needed nursing and help with self-care, at least a third did not, at least by contemporary standards, and were thus in the workhouse because of poverty and homelessness. To quote an Oxfordshire Trade Union leader in the 1870s,

... as long as Poor Old Darby and Jone are alive they will manage to keep an Old Roof over their head on their outdoor half crown and a loaf of stale Bread but if Either of the two is laid to Rest in the Parish Churchyard there is no prospect for the [survivor] but to end the long life of toil among Strangers [in the workhouse] ...\(^4^6\)

Many even of the frailer old inmates might have managed outside with income support and adequate home help and District Nursing services; before the 1940s, these were simply not available to more than a tiny group of old people. In the words of another working-class writer, this time on the first decades of this century,

When people got old and infirm and there were no children to care for them, the only place was the workhouse infirmary ... . We referred to such a sad ending as "going into the Lump" - an allusion to burial in a pauper's grave.\(^4^7\)

Similarly, with characteristic gallows humour, the workhouse was commonly referred to in London as "the Land of Promise".\(^4^8\) Even in 1931, David Caradog Jones found that of 2,402 residents of Public Assistance Institutions in Liverpool who were aged over sixty-five, more than a third were classed as "healthy". Of course, the same qualifications apply to the term "healthy" as to "able-bodied", and few of these people were likely to be really
fit or in good health, even by prevailing standards: as Abel-Smith and Pinker remarked in 1960, "the attempt to classify frail old people as sick or well seems to us unrealistic". Nonetheless, "healthy" inmates surely did not require residential nursing care. From the 1940s to the present, such inappropriate nursing-home style care remained the only option for many old people, especially men, whose real problem was homelessness or lack of basic home help services. Even today, it is not simply the medical needs of many frail old people that keep them in residential institutions, but their relative poverty and inability to secure their non-medical needs at home.\(^5\)

No doubt some abler old people found their niche as unpaid labour in institutions, but, as Miss Sellers, Mr Davy and the Local Government Board all found in their surveys, most old people were there because they had no choice, and were eager to seize any opportunity to leave. Sellers, with an insensitivity which might have been called singular, had it not also been displayed by Davy and the Local Government Board, made enquiries of the old people themselves as to whether they could manage outside if offered 5s. Many even of the most frail were soon eagerly hatching plans to leave and live on this totally inadequate sum: "I could manage quite nicely on 5s. a week", said one dying old woman.\(^5\)

Indeed, when the pauper disqualification for Old Age Pension was finally lifted in 1911, a total of 5,077 people over seventy left the workhouse in just 4 weeks. Some of them were certainly not capable of taking care of themselves, leading to many re-admissions and a marked rise in 1911-1912 both in the number of starvation inquests relating to the elderly and in the death rate of pensioners. But then, as we have seen, many other old people who were struggling on in their own homes were equally unable to manage alone. The steady fall from the 1900s in the proportions of the elderly in institutions left no doubt that large numbers preferred privation in their homes or in lodging houses to the doubtful benisons of the Poor Law or Public Assistance Institution: this issue is further discussed in subsequent chapters.\(^5\)

Conditions in Poor Law and Public Assistance Institutions have been well described by many authors, most notably by Margaret Crowther in her comprehensive work on The Workhouse System. The most striking feature of all these accounts, as Crowther herself has remarked, is their similarity, so that descriptions of workhouse scenes by, for instance, Charles Dickens or Louisa Twining in the mid-nineteenth century correspond uncannily with those of H. Rider Haggard, Edith Sellers and others in the 1900s, or even with those of the Nuffield Foundation and other authors in the 1940s. Thus a Marylebone Guardian, Virginia Crawford, wrote in 1899 of
rows of old men and old women sitting in a gloomy silence on the long
benches, on their faces for the most part an expression of sullen
indifference. ... the real standing grievance is that they should be there at all.
They feel degraded in the eyes of the world... .52

Similarly, Kathleen Woodward describes a visit as a child in the 1900s to a former
neighbour in Bermondsey Workhouse:

a room of bewildering space ... presently I picked out little black objects
huddled together at regular intervals about the walls ... . [The old woman]
spoke of the monotony so sustained that it defied the times of the day ... she
could not tell, she said, whether it was Monday or Thursday.53

The representative of the Association of Municipal Corporations, W.E. Hincks, expressed
to the Ryland Adkins Committee in 1919 the view, very common in official circles, that
workhouse inmates were almost invariably happy, and that those who left to live on the
pension did so because they disliked "a higher type of life with discipline". There followed
this exchange:

[Jennie Baker]: I heard an old woman say that in a workhouse you sit all day
with your head against the wall thinking of nothing.

[Mr Hincks]: She might have been an unusually vacant-minded woman.54

In 1943, a correspondent to the Manchester Guardian saw "lines of old women, sitting like
figures on a mantelpiece, waiting without occupation for death". She complained of the
petty regulation: some old women, forbidden to move their chairs from their beds or to lie
down, had "crashed forwards, face downwards, and were asleep". Visiting the Birmingham
Institutions for the Aged in 1945, Violet Markham complained that old people were given
lockers, but no keys, as "keys would be lost and difficulties made". In these Homes, which
were "of their kind on the highest level", she reported that

the majority [of old women]... gave the impression that they had sat in the
same position since the last meal, and this went on, day after day ... . Clearly
the large majority were unfit for heavy scrubbing, but I remained
unconvinced that a little light work would not have added interest ... no
effort seemed to be made to provide any occupation ... . There was ...
[nothing] personal to be seen in the dormitories - not a photograph on the
bedside locker or any sign of the china dog from Margate or other cherished possession ... . No system that obliterates in a human life every vestige of its past times and experience can, as I see it, be considered satisfactory.55

Similar problems are, of course, found in nursing homes today, and there is no doubt that material conditions were slowly improving. A few Unions had built model Homes for their elderly as early as the 1880s and 1890s, but as Will Crooks wisely remarked, "the people who make so much of model institutions ... will never have to live in them".56 Most had not, and even in the 1940s, most aged residents were still accommodated in old workhouse buildings: for instance, in 1939, Emily Samson found that the great majority of old people in London Public Assistance institutions were still housed in old general purpose workhouse buildings, accommodating between 600 and 1,500 beds. To quote Miss Sellers in 1903, "it is a sheer waste of time to try to make old people happy in places such as these".57

Most Poor Law institutions were cold, bleak places, always damp from scrubbing. Inmates were rarely allowed personal possessions and gifts of food or money were generally confiscated; there was no provision for pocket money until 1938. Even enlightened Boards such as in Poplar in 1895 refused to allow inmates to make their own tea, and in Billericay Union in 1904, the old people's own cups and teapots "were taken from them and smashed, as these were kept in 'unwholesome places'". From 1908, pensioners who entered Poor Law institutions, except for very short-term infirmary treatment, faced the loss of their pension, and this remained the case into the 1940s.58

The few who dared to complain, for instance to the Local Government Board, simply had their communications referred back to the Master: to quote from the case notes of one old man, a general labourer and shipkeeper in Stepney Sick Asylum in 1889, "the man is not quite right, a cunning madness. Wrote to the Local Government Board complaining of treatment". As Emily Samson observed in 1945, residents could not afford to incur the animosity of the staff: a point which was clearly grasped by Thomas Walker, a sixty-five-year old hatter who had been in Marylebone and Wandsworth Workhouses, and who explained to the Aberdare Commission in 1895 that it did "no good" to complain, as the officials

were all under one control, even the doctor and everybody was the same ....
There was general discontent, but unspoken to the officials, because [inmates] considered it useless.59
Up to the 1950s, the clothing supplied was often both insufficiently warm and distinctively different from ordinary working-class attire. Before the First World War, the type and style of workhouse uniform provided was such as might have been acceptable a century earlier, but no longer accorded with the standards of the respectable working class. The odd appearance of the clothing, the use of footless stockings and the absence of items such as nightclothes, handkerchiefs and underwear was bitterly resented: the latter in particular seems to have been a source of horrified gossip amongst working-class people.60

Food, which was undoubtedly the one point of interest in the lives of many old inmates, was usually superior in type and quantity to that of the poor in their homes. This did not mean, however, that workhouse inmates were properly fed, and even in 1937, a Ministry of Health found that only 12 of 38 Public Assistance Institutions studied provided nutritionally adequate diets. Food was often of poor quality, badly prepared and contaminated: responding to complaints, the Medical Superintendent of the Poplar and Stepney Sick Asylum in 1896 replied comfortinglly that only four of the pauper kitchen hands had suppurating wounds. In Poplar Workhouse in the 1880s, George Lansbury and Will Crooks found rat droppings in the porridge, and Crooks saw old women with "bowls of greasy water" in front of them, crying because they "had to go out and wash blankets on that". Fresh vegetables and fruit were rarely given before the 1900s, and the prescribed three meat meals a week were often inedible by the majority of old inmates, who had no teeth.61

It was a diet which might have been specially chosen for its unsuitability for old people, being both indigestible and unpalatable, and even the most compliant old inmates sometimes joined forces to stage small rebellions against the overwhelming dominance of gruel, soup and suet pudding. "The English poor do not like pea soup", declared Mary Clifford authoritatively in 1895, while Lansbury agreed that the old inmates neither could nor would eat it. From at least 1895 to 1899, the aged Billericay Workhouse inmates consistently refused to eat suet pudding, made of suet, flour and water and served "in splendid isolation", until the exasperated Inspector told the Guardians that "whether the pudding was suitable or not was irrelevant if nobody would eat it"; another successful revolt followed on the issue of three meals a week of soup made from rotting turnips. Even in the 1920s, some institutions still provided no fresh vegetables, and people used to the very poorest of working-class diets were sometimes quite unable to eat the food; in 1942, a witness to the Nuffield College Social Reconstruction Survey reported that the old residents' diet consisted of "bread, margarine and potatoes".62
In the 1890s, the limited, cheap and unappetising diet was still considered by many Poor Law officials and Guardians to be excessive: for instance, W.A. Bailward argued in 1898-99 that two Unions which offered, respectively, four meat meals a week and a cup of tea for supper were "sinful", and that elderly workhouse inmates were dying from over-indulgence: the deaths he mentions were in fact due to the effects of acute indigestion on inmates with heart disease. Bailward echoed the view of many contemporary Poor Law officials that conditions in the workhouse must be kept "moderately but sufficiently disagreeable", even for the aged, and that most aged workhouse inmates were "undeserving" and "degraded": in 1901, the Eastern District Poor Law Inspector "wished to impress upon the [Braintree] Board the depravity that is common amongst old inmates of a workhouse".63

Such views undoubtedly did more to poison the lives of elderly institutional inmates than any of their material conditions. Officials who believed, like the Clerk to the Stepney Guardians, John Jones, that paupers were a "hereditary class" with "no self-respect", or like the Chairman of the Brighton Board, James Hamblin, that they were of the "pauper breed", which must be "exterminated", were clearly incapable of overseeing an environment where old people could be anything but miserable. For that matter, the same was true of those who thought that their charges were "low types", "not our class", or "though they worked very well, ... very rough sort of people". Yet these were the attitudes of most even of the more enlightened and compassionate officials, Guardians and workhouse visitors up to the 1930s; and even in the 1950s, Peter Townsend reported a strong degree of moralism in the treatment of old people by institutional staff. To quote the Chippenham Guardian, Mrs Fuller, in 1899,

... in most workhouses, you find a few cases of old men and women most attractive in their cleanliness, patience and orderly conduct, but on inquiry you would probably be told that, though they behave well in the House, they are lacking in moral energy and self-control ... 64

One significant change during this period was that, by the mid-twentieth century, fewer institutions had the mixed ordinary wards described by George Lansbury as "like Dante's Inferno". Mixed institutions, however, were still common, especially in rural areas, and in 1942, a Nuffield College survey informant toured a model institution at Peterhead accommodating

the old, the infirm, the mental defective and even children in the same establishment ... the sick were huddled together irrespective of their
complaint ... if this is a model institution, God help the people who are in ordinary institutions.65

Similarly, in 1945, the Nuffield Foundation survey found old-style workhouse buildings filled with "a motley assembly of the destitute: the great majority are aged, but there are also children, epileptics and feeble-minded young, the blind and the sick": in one Institution, the old people could not have personal possessions "as the mentally deficient girls who shared the accommodation would steal their things". Many of those in the ordinary wards required considerable nursing care and other assistance, but as the North-Eastern Poor Law Inspector, L.G. Kennedy, remarked in 1895, "the aged and infirm have for the most part to depend on the help of pauper wardsmen or to look after themselves". The result was a classic case of the blind leading the blind, as frail inmates took the more helpless under their wing: in 1902, the Clerk to the Chelmsford Guardians observed that "many of the old inmates took a fancy to the feeble-minded, and looked after them very well".66

Visiting a small mixed rural workhouse in 1903, Edith Sellers said that "it struck [her] as being a private lunatic asylum more than anything else"; in another such workhouse, an old woman complained to her of "never hear[ing] a word of sense, day in and day out". Mixed wards and workhouses were prone to incidents of violence by the more able-bodied, and association with the mental and psychiatric cases and the unrespectable was often bitterly resented by the elderly inmates; more importantly, such places were anathema to modern ideas about the appropriate treatment for the different needs of these groups.67

Increasingly, those with special needs, including many old people, were moved to separate wards or institutions: most frequently, to the infirmary. Up to the 1900s, a staff ratio in the infirmary of 1 nurse to 60 patients was comparatively good, and 1 to 80 or 90 was common; even in 1925, a ratio of over 1 to 30 was said to be common. Night and relief nurses were often not employed, their duties being done by a pauper attendant, and some smaller Unions did not employ a trained nurse at all: indeed, Crowther has described pauper nurses as being "the core of the nursing service" before the turn of the century. Typical was Lancaster Workhouse, which in 1878 employed two "efficient" but untrained nurses with pauper assistants. One of the nurses was aged sixty, and had fifty-one cases at the present time. She has also to attend to all sick tramps and any urgent case that may be admitted before it is seen by the Medical Officer.68
The nursing was heavy and unpleasant and often ill-paid; moreover, nurses had to contend with Guardians who often still believed in less eligibility for sick paupers, and who regarded requests for more adequate staffing or other improvements as the nurses' own "whims and fancies". In 1879, nurses in the Central Sick Asylum told Dr Bridges that the nursing was distinctly harder than ... in the hospital ... for sixty patients, one death per week would be average ... [and] there would four or five hanging on doubtfully for days and weeks between life and death ... . But in addition ... there are the cases of senile paralysis and decay - they want frequent lifting in bed: they want, very many of them, frequent changes of linen ... . Lastly, there is no large workhouse infirmary without a large number of sick children. Sometimes they are dangerously ill ... .

In 1871, the death rate in workhouse infirmaries with more than 300 inmates was 19 per cent; smaller workhouses were said to have higher rates due to the greater proportion of the aged: for instance, in the fairly small infirmary ward at Braintree in 1907, there were 37 inmates aged over eighty. Moreover, the large number of helpless cases, in combination with pitifully inadequate staffing, meant that, as Louisa Twining objected in the 1860s, "the old and infirm were put to bed and kept there ... the bedsore's were frequent". In Braintree in the 1900s, there were at least two cases of sick old men being injured by pauper attendants: one attendant said that he "had to be rough to keep [the old man] in bed". In 1912, a Chelmsford Guardian said she had seen old patients "lifted out of the filth in which they had been lying overnight"; and even in the 1940s, many patients were reported to be "permanently bedridden because it was more convenient to keep them in bed than to help them on their feet". As we have seen, the typical smaller infirmary did not segregate its patients, and in 1946, an article in the Lancet complained that

in the same ward were to be found senile dments, restless and noisy patients who required cot beds, incontinent patients, senile bedridden patients, elderly sick patients who were treatable, patients up and about all day, and unmarried mothers and infants.

Old people were sent not only to infirmaries and the small but growing number of special Poor Law institutions for the aged, but to other public institutions as well. Most notably, Thomson has shown that the number of aged people in lunatic asylums more than doubled between 1871 and 1901. The 1891 Census listed 11,821 certified lunatics aged over sixty-five, mostly in public asylums. In 1906, the average age of death in Essex County Asylum
was seventy-eight, suggesting that some asylums were already beginning to face the modern problem of disproportionate numbers of the aged, probably consisting mostly of senile cases and elderly mentally disabled people who had outlived their families. This was a difficult issue. Guardians were often reluctant to move old people who were becoming senile to such institutions, even when the conditions and treatment they offered began to improve. The main reasons for this reluctance were probably the extra expense and the hostility of the Local Government Board or later the Ministry of Health, but there was also a feeling that the old people would be happier in familiar surroundings. In 1907, an Essex Alderman declared that

it was not absolutely necessary that every old person who shrieked a little at night, tore a blanket, or was not quite cleanly in his habits, should go into a Lunatic Asylum. A few nights' nursing would often get such a person right.71

On the other hand, as the Medical Superintendent of Wakefield Mental Hospital complained in 1925, old people with senile dementia could not receive the nursing care they required in ordinary institutions, and senile wandering cases could certainly not be properly looked after. The workhouses in Cuttle's six Essex Unions accommodated several such old people, one of whom had a canvas coat with his address printed on it; another was found dead in a field, having apparently fallen and drowned in the mud.72

By the 1920s, the proportion of relief recipients in ordinary workhouse wards was falling markedly; Crowther calculates a drop from 50 per cent in 1915 to 37 per cent in 1929. Excluding lunatic asylums, separate institutions and infirmary wards were generally more socially acceptable than the workhouse: it was for this reason that some Boards of Guardians up to the late 1920s had insisted on such petty humiliations as refusing to deliver mail to infirmary patients unless addressed to the workhouse, or forcing infirmary patients to be admitted from the workhouse; workhouses had often been built with a single entrance for precisely this purpose.73

In 1944, 28 Area Officers complained that old people needing care refused to enter Public Assistance Institutions, while in 1941, Violet Markham wrote that pensioners regarded removal to a Public Assistance Institution as a "major calamity". Most old people were said to refuse to consider any sort of institution, whether Poor Law or not, "so long as they can walk". Typical was the old arthritic woman described by the Chelsea informant of the Nuffield College Social Reconstruction Survey in 1942, who "says, when pressed to go into a home, 'I shall lose my freedom', although she has not been out of her room for four
years". Those who recognised their need for care often held out for admission to charitable
institutions such as Blind Homes, and one "near helpless" old couple told Miss Ibberson
that they "would gladly have gone into an institution, as long as it was not Cowley Road
[the local PAI]". As Miss Markham wrote in 1941,

maintenance in a Public Assistance Institution rouses so much feeling that
its theoretical provision is of little use ... the development of Homes ...
offers probably the best solution.74

This was precisely what was happening. As in other areas of welfare provision, a parallel
system was growing up alongside Public Assistance, with private provision in nursing
homes run by charity or for profit and Government assistance for old people living in
homes and hostels operating outside the aegis of the Public Assistance Committees.75 By
the 1940s, an increasing proportion of old people was also accommodated in hospitals,
although the numbers were still very small compared to the present: hospitals are further
discussed below.

Crowther has calculated that while in 1915, there were twice as many inmates of Poor Law
institutions as of other institutions, by 1929, numbers were almost equal. In 1945-47, the
Nuffield Foundation reported that nearly 9,000 old people were living in voluntary Homes,
with average fees of 25s. to 28s. weekly for pensioners: not all of these were nursing homes
in the current sense. From the 1870s, a small but slowly increasing number of old people
were maintained in such Homes and specialised institutions by the Guardians; and during
the Second World War, the lack of publicly acceptable institutional accommodation for old
people meant that the Government was obliged to organise and subsidise their
accommodation in special wartime hostels run by the Friends' Relief Service. In 1944, Miss
Ibberson visited several Homes and described the older ones as "no better than
workhouses"; one was "simply an adjunct to the local infirmary". She felt that those
established in the interwar period were much more satisfactory, although some of these had
been evacuated during the War to unsuitable accommodation.76

Growing numbers of old people were also living in private nursing homes run for profit: in
the 1940s, fees in such homes ranged from 26s. for a few unlicensed homes to nearly triple
that for many licensed homes. Only the cheapest private homes were usually within reach
of working-class old people and their families. Some unlicensed homes were little more
than lodging houses, probably managed to the best of their owners' abilities; accounts
survive mainly of those which attracted scandal or criticism, such as the Home visited by
Miss Ibberson whose proprietress was later charged on three counts including stealing from
her patients, or those toured by the Nuffield Foundation investigators where residents were found "naked in bed and often crying", "frightened and unhappy", "tied into bed" or with "suppurating gangrenous feet and hands". Such homes, declared the Nuffield Foundation Report with disgust,

can only exist because of the traditional dread of the Public Assistance Institution ... an unscrupulous owner can play on the aged person's dread ... by threatening to "send for the Relieving Officer" every time that he or she resists ill treatment or protests against neglect.77
NOTES

1 Ryland Adkins Committee, BPP 1919 XXVII, p. 178 [Close].
2 Aberdare Commission, BPP 1895 XIV, p. 338 [Clifford]; see also p. 931 [Crompton].
8 Nuffield Foundation, Old People, p. 44; E. Black and D.B. Read, Old People's Welfare on Merseyside, Liverpool, 1947, pp. 30-33; PRO AST 7/479 (Markham, AB Memorandum No. 365, 9 Oct. 1941, p. 4).
9 Local Government Board, Return ..., Deaths from Starvation ..., 1914, p. 18; Return ... Deaths from Starvation ... 1886, BPP 1887 LXXI, 449-457 [blacksmith, 70]; Ryland Adkins Cttee, BPP 1919 XXVII, p. 106 [Peter Phythian]; Orwell, Down and Out in Paris and London, pp. 116, 119- 122ff; Nuffield Foundation, Old People, p. 44 and Note by Medical Sub-Committee, 107-113, p. 112.
10 PRO AST 7/574 (Ibberson, Report of an Enquiry, Aug. 1944, pp. 24, 49-56); AST 7605 (Welfare of Old Age Pensioners: Special Needs Cases: London 1 District, 29 Apr. 1943, [case 8]); AST 7737 (NCSRS, Draft Memorandum, May 1944, pp. 41-43); and see below.

12 PRO MH 32/93/126084/95 (Herbert, Unions in the Metropolis, Oct. 1895, p. 10); MH 32/101/42710/92 (Herbert, Vagrancy in the Metropolis, 1892); MH 32/10971/98 (Herbert, Visits to Casual Wards, 12 Jan. 1898); BLPES, New Survey of London 2/3 (Chief Public Assistance Officer, LCC, (E.C. Bligh), Table of Particulars regarding Men admitted to Casual Wards, 6 May 1932; Secretary, COS, London (Rev. J.G. Pringle), letter to Homeless Poor Committee, 1932).


14 PRO MH 57/97D (Maslin, Reports by 33 Medical Officers on the Physical Condition of Vagrants, North-Western District, 1929; Turton, Medical Officers' Reports, Condition of Vagrants, North Midlands, 1929); Crowther, as above.


16 BLPES, New Survey of London (Hilton and Reeder, as above; Minutes of Evidence to Departmental Committee on the Relief of the Casual Poor, 1929 [extracts]; memorandum of a Visit by Sir H.L. Smith and Mr Ruck to the Hackney Casual Ward, 19 Apr. 1932); Cox, "Tasks and Employments" in Poor Law Conferences, *Reports*, 1899-1900, p. 630; Crowther, *The Workhouse System*, pp. 248, 252, 259; PRO MH 32/46/8511/87 (Hedley, Pauperism and Distress in the Metropolis, 1887); MH 57/6 (S. Lawrence, M.P., Public Assistance Institutions and Casual Wards: Report of Tour of Inspection, 1931).


18 GLRO We/Cw/La 42 (Lambeth Casual Ward: Medical Officer's Record of Examination of Casuals, 1931-1940).

20 PRO AST 7/634 (L.N. Ure, Memorandum: Unannounced Visits to London County Council Homes, Aug. 1942); Crowther, Workhouse System, pp. 256 [quotation], 259; PRO CAB 87/80/83 (NCSRS, Memorandum No. 6, Institutional Relief, 19 June 1942, p. 35).

21 Noordin, Through a Workhouse Window, pp. 184-190; Orwell, Down and Out in Paris and London, pp. 124ff; London, The People of the Abyss, pp. 63, 77ff; Cox, "Tasks and Employments", in Poor Law Conferences, Reports, 1899-1900, p. 629; Crowther, Workhouse System, pp. 249 - 265; PRO MH 32/46/162801/90 (Henley, Plank Beds for Casuals in Workhouses); MH 57/16 (Lawrence, Tour of Inspection, 1931); MH 57/62 (A.H. Wagstaff to Chamberlain, 24 May 1923; Casual Ward Survey, circulated 12 Nov. 1923; Miss Cooper, "Visits as a Tramp to Casual Wards", The Labour Woman, Jan. - Mar. 1924; Edith Welch, Experience as a Tramp in Female Vagrant Wards, 192-; Casual Wards Survey: Summary of Sep. quarter 1923); MH 57/66 (J.T. Gibbons, Report on Seven Days' Tramp ..., 1934; Vagrancy Reform Society Annual Report, 1933-34); BLPES, New Survey of London 2/3 (Memorandum of a Visit by H.L. Smith ..., 19 Apr. 1932).


23 Ibid.; PRO MH 32/46/31653/88 (Henley, Oakum-Picking in the Casual Wards of Workhouses and Prisons, 1888); MH 57/62 (Metropolitan Asylums Board, Dietary and Task, 1923; Hon. Secretary, National Association of Masters and Matrons of Poor Law Institutions, to Ministry of Health, 14 July 1923; Secretary, Magistrates' Association, to Min. Health, 22 Sep. 1923; Clipping: 'Casuals' Diet worse than Prisoners', Poor Law Officers' Journal, 28 Sep. 1923); Roberts, Classic Slum, pp. 65-66.

24 Ibid.; PRO MH 57/16 (Lawrence, Tour of Inspection, 1931); MH 57/97D (R.H. Duff, Report on Medical Inspection of Vagrants, 1929 [Cornwall, Devonshire]); MH 32/101/42710/92 (Herbert, Vagrancy in the Metropolis, 1892); MH 32/101/99811/92, also 99812/92, 140279/9510971/98 (Herbert, Reports on London Casual Wards, various, 1892-1898); Greenwood, The Seven Curses of London, pp. 438-442; Crowther, Workhouse System, pp. 211, 260-261; Lansbury, "Principles of the English Poor Law", in Poor Law Conferences, Reports, 1896, p. 683; Cuttle, Legacy, p. 284.

25 GLRO, LCC Public Assistance Committee (Memorandum of Evidence ..., Metropolitan Asylums Board, Dec. 1929, p. 14); Select Committee on the Aged Pensioners' Bill, BPP 1903 V, Appendix 1.
26 We/Cw/La 42 (Lambeth Casual Ward: Medical Officers' Reports, 1931-1940); Nuffield Foundation, Old People, p. 71; PRO MH 57/97D (C. Roundell, Metropolitan District Report, 11 Apr. 1929).

27 C. Percy, "Old Age Pensions", in Poor Law Conferences, Reports, 1893, 45-55, p. 50; Poor Law Conferences, Reports, 1895, p. 423 [Clay]; W.A. Bailward, "Are Workhouses unduly attractive?", in Poor Law Conferences, 1898-99, 508-413, p. 515 and discussion, pp. 531-533 [Lawson etc].


29 Quoted in Crowther, Workhouse System, pp. 196, 199; Poor Law Conferences, Reports, 1898-99, p. 531 [quotation, Brooks]; PRO MH 51/91/05(F)18408; 44304/407; Cuttle, Legacy, pp. 97, 179-183.

30 Poor Law Conferences, Reports, 1895, p. 224 [Ellison]; Reports, 1898-99, pp. 530-532 [discussion]; Mrs Fuller, "The Aged Poor in Rural Workhouses", in Poor Law Conferences, Reports, 1899-1900, 576-586, p. 585; F. Askew, "Tasks and Employments in Workhouses", in ibid., 508-543, passim; Rev. C. Cox, "Tasks and Employments in Country Workhouses", in ibid., 616-631, passim and discussion; Miss Pease, "The Employment of Old Men and Women in Workhouses", in ibid., 103-116, passim; and discussion of all these papers [Walker, Rhodes, etc]; Miss Kelaart, "The Brabazon Employment Scheme", in Poor Law Conferences, Reports, 1901-1902, London, 1903, 62-73, passim; Digby, Pauper Palaces, p. 173; Aberdare Commission, BPP 1895 XIV, pp. 98, 762 [Davy, Lansbury].

31 PRO MH 32/93/56896/78 (H. Longley (?), Classification of Inmates, 7 Aug. 1878); quoted in W.A. Bailward, "Are Workhouses unduly attractive?", in Poor Law Conferences, Reports, 1898-1899, 508-543, p. 519; and see below.

32 Ibid.; Aberdare Commission, Bpp 1895 XIV, p. 3 [Owen]; J. T. Dodd, Better Treatment of such Aged Poor as are in Workhouses, Poor Law Reform Paper No. 5, London, 189-, p. 7; Cuttle, Legacy, Appendix 10.


34 See ch. 4; Crowther, Workhouse System, pp. 100, 228; Poor Law Conferences, Reports, 1895, pp. 376, 495 [Merry, Kenworthy]; Reports, 1898-99, p. 531 [Brown]; Pease, "Employment of Old Men and Women", as above, pp. 104-105; Royal Commission on the Poor Laws, Appendix vol. II, BPP 1909 XL (Cd. 4684), p. 144 [T. Cutter].


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Crowther, The Workhouse System, p. 89; Samson, Old Age, p. 46; PRO MH 15/70 (Poor Law Indexes, 1893-99: 98/75064, 98/93591, 98/1195, 98/14993, 98/38221, 98/1268 passim); MH 15/103 (Poor Law Indexes, 1910-1920: 10/142592/281, 12/31935/429, 14/5905/81, 15/91779/270 passim); MH 57/97D (Inspectors' Reports 1928-29, Bushell, East Anglia); Aberdare Commission, BPP 1895 XIV, pp. 102, 141 [J.S. Davy; S.D. Fuller].

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CHAPTER FIVE

"THE LEAST VALUABLE LIVES":

OLD PEOPLE'S HEALTH AND MEDICAL TREATMENT

"[Sir Henry Robinson]: I suppose that every person at the age of seventy has something the matter with him?...

[Mrs Jennie Baker]: If they have tried to live on 7s.6d. a week, I should think they certainly have."

- Departmental Committee on Old Age Pensions (Ryland Adkins Committee), 1919.

Medical Treatment

From the 1950s, it was fashionable to refer to the increased life expectancy of the elderly as "medicated survival". Yet as we have seen in Chapter Three, a more accurate name for this phenomenon would have been "better fed and housed survival". Indeed, medical treatment had very little to do with the improvements in the health and lives of the elderly before the 1950s, for the simple reason that the elderly had very little to do with medical treatment.

There is little evidence as to the proportion of old people who were receiving medical treatment before the 1940s, but contemporaries were agreed that few working-class people received proper medical care. For instance, in the first eighteen months of the Peckham Pioneer Health Centre project in the early 1930s, Drs. Scott-Williamson and Pearce medically examined 1,530 working-class men, women and children, mainly from artisan families, and found that 83 per cent had medical conditions which were not receiving treatment. Similarly, in her sample survey of the health of working-class women, begun in 1933, Margery Spring Rice looked at the seven most common medical conditions requiring treatment, which were anaemia, frequent or severe headaches, constipation and haemorrhoids, obvious or painful dental decay, rheumatism, gynaecological disorders and severe cases of "bad legs". She found that, of a total of 1,837 occurrences - in a sample of 1,250 women, most of them in their thirties - 881, or 48 per cent, had received no
professional treatment: 582 of these had had no treatment whatsoever, and 299 had been treated with home remedies only. As one of her informants, a District Nurse, remarked, a woman "will not start a doctor's bill for herself if she can possibly stand on her feet".4

In 1942, the National Council of Social Service reported that "it is felt generally that many pensioners go without medical assistance or do not ask for it soon enough ... ". Even in 1945, Dr J.H. Sheldon's survey for the Nuffield Foundation of a random sample of nearly six hundred people over pensionable age revealed that only 29 per cent were receiving medical attention, while 26.8 per cent had not sought treatment for more than three years. This was despite the fact that many of the old men in this sample were contributory pensioners, and had thus carried with them in to retirement their entitlement to free treatment by the panel doctor: as Assistance Board and medical investigators found, there was widespread ignorance of this provision.5

Old people not entitled under the contributory pension scheme were nonetheless able to apply for free income-tested medical treatment from their local Public Assistance Committee, but only a small minority did so. In 1944, Diane Ibberson reported that many of the old people she interviewed could not afford a private doctor when ill, but flatly refused to have the "Poor Law" doctor: sometimes they were even seeing this same doctor as private patients, paying about 3s. a visit, and a few were paying into doctor's clubs at 3d. a week. In the same year, 23 Assistance Board Area Officers complained that pensioners would not apply for Public Assistance medical relief, while a further 11 mentioned reluctance to apply for aids and appliances or to enter the Local Authority hospital and another 7 raised the issue of the "parish relief" stigma attached to medical relief: as Miss Ibberson said in this context, "the Poor Law has left a scar which has not yet healed". Illustrating the scale of the problem, the majority of pensioners in the Woodford Area who had arranged to be put on the Board's Permanent Medical Relief List in 1942 withdrew on learning that they would be visited by the Public Assistance Relieving Officer and Medical Officer. As Violet Markham observed of Public Assistance medical relief in 1941, "in practice the help available in theory proves largely to be an illusion".6

Thus even in the 1940s, continuing poverty and "Poor Law" stigma left many of the elderly in the situation described by the son of an old Oxford man dying without medical treatment in 1906:

his son said, "the reason no doctor was fetched was because they had no means, and they never thought of sending for the parish doctor".7
Operations and other institutional treatment were avoided, not just from fear of the procedures or the institutions, but often in the knowledge that accounts would be sent to the old people themselves or to relatives such as married children. In 1929, R.M. Noordin complained that "to suggest that a person can enter a Poor Law hospital and pay both the local rates and a full contribution towards his maintenance is clearly an absurdity". Unfortunately, however, such lambent analysis made no impression on the local authorities.\(^8\)

For instance, the Islington Board of Guardians Arrears Committee records from 1901 to 1929 contain quite literally thousands of such cases. Comparison with the Poor Law Indexes shows that their records are probably not atypical: they were only one of many Boards rapped on the knuckles by the Ministry of Health for offences such as trying to intercept patients' National Insurance benefits or refusing to admit them until they signed an agreement to pay. This was the Islington Board's usual practice: in 1906, the Arrears Committee passed a special resolution to allow an elderly man into the infirmary "provided his wife and son pay 8s. weekly"; the couple's total income was 16s.6d. a week including 1s. given by the married son, who had two young children.\(^9\)

Usually, the only testimony to the attitude of the patients and their relatives to these charges is a record of summons for failure to pay. However, occasional letters exist, usually from the more middle class patients. In 1923, a police pensioner in Islington Infirmary protested that, without his knowledge, the Guardians had arranged to have 25s. a week deducted in advance from his pension. As he wrote:

> I am astonished at the discourteous method in which the claim has been made ... I am not here as a pauper .... Am I compelled to remain as long as the Board of Guardians can bleed me financially? ... I have been a ratepayer in the Parish of Islington for the last thirteen years .... \(^{10}\)

Similarly, in 1924, an eighty-three-year-old woman, whose income was about 26s. a week, complained of

> the enormous amount of money which I was charged at St. Mary's Infirmary, viz. 17 days at 7s. p.d.. Seeing I lay at St. John's Institution at 18s.6d. per week, why the difference in rate? ... I only lay in bed in both places.\(^{11}\)
Instead, many old people resolutely ignored their medical problems: as Margery Spring Rice wrote of her survey subjects in 1939,

... bad health almost certainly exists in many dozens of these women who either are not aware of it or do not know from what disease they suffer. Many others deliberately ignore it because they realise that the cure is for them impracticable or involves chimerical changes in the social system, for which they do not dare even to hope; in self-protection therefore it is better to cheat themselves into a stubborn assertion of well-being than to add one more torment to their manifold troubles and responsibilities.12

Others resorted to self-treatment. Costly patent medicines were said to be the first charge on many old age pensions, while some old people preferred home remedies. Spring Rice gives accounts of two old women using home remedies: one sixty-nine-year-old Scarborough woman who was taking "herbal treatment" for rheumatoid arthritis, nerve inflammation, constipation and an inoperable tumour which caused bladder trouble; and in Derby, an elderly woman whose husband was an unemployed labourer, and who

suffers from bad neuralgia, for which the doctor advised the extraction of all her teeth; the remedy she takes is strong tea! She has bad rheumatism for which she merely rubs herself; mental depression for which she says there is no remedy, and headaches which [are] caused by bad eyesight for which she wears spectacles from Woolworth's because the doctor advised spectacles. She has had nine children of whom only one is living, and two miscarriages.13

Similarly, one eighty-four-year-old man boasted to the Toynbee Hall Friendly Visitor in 1943 that he "[kept] in wonderful health by drinking Taylor Walker's Ale"; and in 1944, Diane Ibberson found countless pensioners spending several shillings a week on patent medicines and invalid foods, especially in the south. Included in her notes are "3s. per week on Benger's Food", "in arrears of rent because of asthma 'cure'", "1s.3d. every week for a bottle of patent stomach mixture", "prefers to take patent medicines" for severe rheumatism and arthritis, and "kindly landlady sees he does not go short of food, otherwise he would not be able to ... spend 2s.3d. weekly on various 'cures'" for lumbago. One old woman told her that she was treating her bronchitis and "patch on the lung" with Sanatogen and six bottles of Guinness a week, and she looked on in amazement as the Visiting Officer advised a pensioner to try a patent asthma 'cure' for her grandson, and
noted on the report that, as he was in a "lucky" year - he was seven years old - he should grow out of it.\textsuperscript{14}

During this period some people still had recourse to patent medicines containing laudanum, and these, as well as gin, were favoured by some old people as old-fashioned analgesics, particularly used for ague in the Fens; in some poorer areas, the more modern problem of the internal application of methylated spirits was occasionally noted.\textsuperscript{15}

Unfortunately, old people's reluctance to seek medical treatment was mirrored up to the 1930s by the reluctance of the medical profession to treat them. As Brian Livesley has remarked, until the 1930s, the distinction between normal and pathological conditions in old age was so blurred in the minds of medical writers and practitioners that "the care of the chronic aged sick was barely respectable". Like the portmanteau "aged and infirm" classification of the nineteenth century Poor Law, old age and illness seemed to belong in the same breath. Sickness was thought of as "old age infirmity" or "natural decay", a miserable inevitability of advancing years, with little or no interest being taken its nature or remediability. For instance, in the early nineteenth century, the President of the Royal College of Physicians, Sir Henry Halford, declared that ageing \textit{per se} was a disease, and eminent physicians such as Sir Humphrey Rollison were still arguing this view in the 1920s. Each year, tens of thousands of deaths were officially recorded as "death from old age", and it was not until the 1920s that a trend to more accurate diagnosis was observable.\textsuperscript{16}

Hence, like midwifery before this century, disease in old age was often still considered unworthy of serious attention and study by the qualified medical practitioner and the surgeon in particular. Even nurses were reluctant to undertake geriatric care, and in 1895, were said to be "naturally desirous of improving themselves", and to avoid "the uninteresting duty of watching and keeping clean worn out old men and women"; in the 1940s, R.M. Titmuss explained that they found the care of the aged "not only uninteresting but often unpleasant".\textsuperscript{17}

Hospitals throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries often refused to admit the aged as patients, both because of their policy of not treating "chronic cases" and because, more generally, old people's ill-health was considered natural and their diseases untreatable.\textsuperscript{18} As Margaret Crowther has noted, one of the more unfortunate consequences of this was the resulting absence of all institutional medical treatment for those working-class and lower middle-class people with "uninteresting" or chronic ailments who could neither afford private treatment nor face the shame of entering a Poor Law infirmary. Often the stigma remained after 1929, even if an infirmary had been rechristened as the
"municipal hospital". For others, the need for medical treatment jockeyed for position with what the Nuffield Foundation Report called in 1947 "all the accumulated hatred of the Poor Law", so that treatment was often put off altogether or left until too late. To quote a shoemaker's son from Hackney on the first decades of the century,

Hospitals were looked upon as places to go to die. They were usually an extension of the council workhouse, none too clean [!] and ill-equipped ... always the idea of the hospital was out of the question.19

When voluntary hospitals did admit elderly people, they generally speedily transferred them to Poor Law infirmaries or to municipal hospitals when their condition was judged to be "chronic". These in their turn often shunted them off to ordinary workhouse or Public Assistance wards: as one informant of the Nuffield College Social Reconstruction Survey put it in 1942, the aged and chronic ill were "pushed to the wall to inferior institutions". In 1937, an old man was killed while resisting forcible removal from St Mary's Hospital to Islington Public Assistance Institution, and his fear was not surprising: as Titmuss observed in 1950, the practice

meant for many old people ... a sentence of death. The municipal hospital or institution often became known as a receiver of incurables, and those that entered its doors felt that they were being put away.20

Similarly, the Bradford Hospital Management Committee reported in 1949 that since the abolition of the Poor Law in 1929, local hospitals had been disposing of their "undesirable chronic sick" to Public Assistance Institutions, and complained that many sick old people were confined to bed in the ambulant wards after being sent away "to make room for admissions to the hospital section". More graphically, two hospital surveys in the 1930s in Wales and the Eastern District respectively spoke of "many ... bedfast for lack of attendants" and "the masses of undiagnosed and untreated cases ... which litter our public assistance institutions".21

This situation was exacerbated during both World Wars, when the mortality particularly of old people in institutions rose as a consequence of general wartime disruption, staff shortages and requisitioning of the better and more centrally located institutional accommodation for what the Ministry of Health frankly called "potential effectives". For instance, when war was declared in 1939, 140,000 patients, mostly the aged and chronic sick, were discharged from hospitals in just two days. Those who were transferred to Public Assistance institutions often then faced a second move to premises outside the
larger towns. Others who needed hospital treatment were simply knocked off waiting lists, as hospitals refused to admit those with certain types of illness. Even senior Ministry officials admitted that many old people in institutions were at risk, due on the one hand to lack of hospital treatment and on the other to "indiscriminate" confinement to bed and the lack of hostel accommodation. In 1942, the National Council of Social Service complained that

   chronic cases ... become weaker and more helpless because no-one has time to get them out of bed or because there is no place for them to sit if they do get up.22

In 1944, 6 Assistance Board Area officers complained of inability to secure hospital or institutional beds for pensioners requiring treatment, while in 1946, the National Association of Local Government Social Welfare Officers protested that the aged were being "deprived of the necessary care and attention", and the National Old People's Welfare Committee passed a resolution "that old people requiring nursing care are often unable to obtain admission to hospital". By 1947, the Nuffield Foundation reported that failure by Local Authorities to place those in need of institutional care was causing some old people to die "in circumstances of great squalor and loneliness": this, however, is a complex issue and is further discussed in Chapter Seven.23

Thus in both Wars, thousands of displaced old people were shunted off to grim provincial workhouse buildings far from their homes, often losing contact with families and friends for months or even years: for instance, 21 old people transferred from Bermondsey in October 1940 were still "missing" in May 1941. More seriously, one old Islington man came out of hospital in 1940 to find his wife missing; after three years, the Charity Organisation Society tracked her down to Cannock Public Assistance Institution, but by this time she was dead. Speaking of the First World War, a Ministry of Health report observed that

   it was one of the minor tragedies of the war that so many of the sick, old and dying poor had to be provided for ... in some unfamiliar institution many miles away from all their friends.24

For the old and sick people concerned, there was nothing "minor" about the tragedy of dying alone, without adequate medical attention in badly equipped and understaffed institutions: yet, as we have seen, such conditions were common not only during the war.
Throughout the period, old people were not receiving adequate medical treatment. In 1910, Lord George Hamilton gave the Royal Statistical Society the following information:

**TABLE 2**

PERCENTAGE OF RELIEF RECIPIENTS AGED OVER FIFTY RECEIVING MEDICAL TREATMENT, 1907

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of Relief Recipients</th>
<th>Men - London Unions</th>
<th>Men - Other Unions</th>
<th>Women - London Unions</th>
<th>Women - Other Unions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indoor</td>
<td>31.87</td>
<td>18.37</td>
<td>26.17</td>
<td>11.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outdoor</td>
<td>5.67</td>
<td>12.77</td>
<td>12.09</td>
<td>17.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td>31.14</td>
<td>38.26</td>
<td>29.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Hence, despite the high average age of both indoor and outdoor relief recipients in this age group - the great majority were over sixty-five - only about one in five was receiving medical treatment indoors, and perhaps one in eight outdoors. In addition, although Hamilton's figures show that at this time 40 per cent of relief recipients were aged over sixty-five, only 4 per cent of all recipients were receiving indoor medical treatment for bronchitis or pneumonia, 2 per cent for rheumatism or gout and a little over 1 per cent for heart disease and ulcerated legs respectively: unfortunately, the figures are not available by age or for outdoor medical relief. Thus the experience of Govan Poorhouse, near Glasgow, was representative: of 89 old men over sixty-five in the "ordinary" wards in August 1903, 7 were bedridden, and, as the local Poor Law Inspector remarked, "in the winter, a good number who are at present able to move about, are confined to bed": yet none of them was thought to require infirmary treatment.25

Equally, old people were often unable to obtain medical aids and appliances. Second-hand or Woolworth's spectacles were popular, and teeth frequently a luxury item, as pensioners
encountered what Violet Markham called "the deadlock about medical aid and spectacles". Applicants were systematically refused appliances by a number of Public Assistance Committees: one Committee tactfully asked old people to provide evidence of life expectancy before deciding whether to provide spectacles. Even contributory pensioners found themselves facing what one social worker described as "all the horrors of begging" in order to obtain even the most basic items from their approved societies: "when you want a wooden leg", commented a Glasgow worker wryly, "it's the year for teeth".

It was only in the 1930s, with the work of Dr Marjorie Warren and others, that professional interest began to be taken in the medical treatment of the elderly, and progress in this field received a serious setback during the War. Hence, as experts such as Sheldon acknowledged, geriatric medicine remained in its infancy until the 1950s.

The Assessment of Health

While the Chief Registrar of Friendly Societies, Sir Edward Brabrook, complained that people were starting to treat old age as a sickness, it was in fact only in this period that the opposite attitude began to be overcome. An indication of this change can be found in Poor Law and Public Assistance records. In the 1880s, "strict" Poor Law Unions such as Stepney began to adopt the case notes system so beloved of the Charity Organisation Society, so that for the first time detailed information on the histories and treatment of Poor Law relief recipients became available. Previously, little or no record had been kept of the health even of infirmary patients, with occasional accounts for medical relief expenses providing the only testimony to the existence of their illnesses and often, of the patients themselves. Yet the Stepney case notes, although they frequently run to several pages, are little better in this regard.

For example, although indoor relief recipients were medically examined on entry to the workhouse or infirmary, the records of those over seventy who were inmates of Bromley Workhouse or Sick Asylum, or who were sent from Stepney to Poplar Workhouse, in 1889, provide information on physical illness in only 36 of 228 cases. In addition, 12 inmates were noted as senile or insane, and 21 to have been injured in accidents. Unspecified illness, medical relief or admission to the Sick Asylum was recorded in a further 52 cases. Only 12 different medical conditions were mentioned: in order of frequency of appearance, rheumatism, ulcerated or poisoned limbs, blindness or failing sight, disablement of limbs, paralysis, bronchitis, epilepsy or fits, and, with one entry each, heart disease, diabetes, varicose veins, fistula and a mysterious "internal ailment".
However, lest it be thought that these 228 over-seventy-year-olds were peculiarly robust, the records also show that 187 of them were suffering from "old age": a condition sometimes expanded upon in Poor Law case notes as "physical infirmity due to old age".30

Although no equivalent case histories are available for Stepney in the 1920s, the records of old age pensioners (all, at this time, over seventy) admitted to similar institutions in another large London Union, Camberwell, in 1922, provide a useful basis for comparison. Of 340 pensioners admitted from 29 January 1922, when notes on health began to be recorded in the admissions book, 188 were said to have specific physical illnesses, with another 24 recuperating from their injuries after accidents. Also noted were 46 cases of senility or senile dementia, and 6 of certified insanity. 4 old people were described as suffering from debility, and 67 simply from "old age". At least 60 distinct medical conditions, not including injuries from accidents, were listed, with cardiovascular ailments, which had featured only once amongst the 1889 entries, here taking second place only to bronchitis and other pulmonary diseases.31

We have already seen in Chapter Four that in the 1920s, different Poor Law Medical Officers could confidently declare the same population of vagrants to be variously "well developed and in a good state of nutrition", "quite unfit for work" and "mostly old ... and badly nourished". Of course, a medical degree does not confer objectivity, and its holders are as prone to differences of opinion as the rest of us: to quote Noel Whiteside, "doctors will argue over the definition of good health in much the same way as mediaeval clerics debated the state of grace".32

However, the problem went deeper than mere subjectivity. In the 1930s, the compulsory medical examination of vagrants was so cursory at the various Casual Wards used by George Orwell that he believed that "it was designed merely to detect smallpox, and took no notice of our general condition". Of course, some Medical Officers were conscientious men, but their approach rarely found favour with Guardians who wished to keep medical costs down and have enough inmates classed as "able-bodied" to do the necessary work; most however were overworked, with their own private practices to attend to.33

This was probably true of most doctors on Government contracts: for instance, in the 1940s, the Nuffield College Social Reconstruction Survey reported that the workloads of panel doctors were quite unrealistic, and that many used assistants. Some workers were reduced to paying as private patients for their own panel doctor, to ensure better treatment. In London, one doctor was reported to deal with thirty to forty cases an hour, and another
with sixty: a third doctor revealed that he spent two hours in surgery, the first dealing with 25 panel patients, the second with 6 private cases. With such fleeting medical examinations, it is no wonder that a great deal of working-class ill-health went undetected.34

Thus even in the 1940s, official records of old people's health could be frankly misleading. For instance, in 1944, Diane Ibberson accompanied a number of Assistance Board Visiting Officers on their rounds of pensioners' homes, and found that

the attitude of many Visiting Officers is that people are well who are not obviously ill. Indeed, one Officer was seen to write "yes" in the health section of the [form] without questioning the pensioner ... .

In at least three cases, the Visiting Officer failed to realise that the pensioner was incontinent; in many other cases, obvious problems were not noted on the report or referred for action.35

Of 724 pensioners visited during this survey, excluding those in Scotland, 279 were or about 39 per cent were rated as in "good" health, another 284 or 39 per cent as "fair" and 161 or 22 per cent as "poor". These figures include a very small number of widows aged under sixty; and, as supplementary pensioners were amongst the poorer half of the aged population and few were in employment, their health could be expected to be somewhat below the national average. Miss Ibberson observed that those listed as in "good" health included "several who were blind in one eye or slightly deaf, one with one leg, two suffering from delusions, and several with some temporary illness".36 In an appendix, she listed a number of cases which, she believed, had been wrongly marked "yes" for "reasonably good health", but which nonetheless appear among the "good" group, above. The health details in this appendix are worth quoting in full: where the pensioners are widows under sixty, this is stated, and some domestic details are omitted.

"Good Health" Cases: Diane Ibberson's Appendix, 1944

1. Rheumatoid arthritis and is almost helpless.
2. Suffers from spinal trouble and brainstorms.
3. Applicant had a stroke 6 years ago and another 18 months back. She is very frail.
4. Receiving medical attention for nerves.
5. Owing to septic foot has been forced to give up work. Daughter and hospital cannot do anything for him.
6. Has bronchial catarrh, silicosis and euphredaemia.
8. Widow (50) had to give up work on the doctor's orders owing to illhealth.
9. Has fractured his knee and is on a diet for diabetes.
10. He did farm work but is now not fit for it. Heart trouble.
11. No note but [pensioner's] statement "I have been unable to work for over a year due to dermatitis in hands and arms".
12. Suffering from bronchitis and asthma.
13. Is attended by the doctor for heart trouble.
14. Had to give up work owing to bronchitis and myocardial degeneration.
15. [Pensioner] has heart weakness and [his] wife has weak stomach.
16. Is much crippled by rheumatism (hospital treatment).
17. Is frail and very deaf.
18. [Pensioner] has neuritis and malaria. Wife bronchitis.
19. Gave up work owing to illness: kidney trouble (medical treatment).
20. [Pensioner] has acute bronchitis and [is] under medical treatment. Wife rheumatism.
22. Widow (33): On special welfare list on account of bad health.
23. Ill for several years with gastric trouble. Is on special welfare list on account of ill-health but is entered on front of 0.6M as being in good health.
24. Suffers from internal trouble, several operations.
25. Has had a nervous breakdown and is under medical treatment.
26. Suffers from asthma and bronchitis. Daughter required at home at nights because of her mother's health and age.
27. Very frail and in delicate health.
28. Suffers from bronchial trouble and heart trouble ... Wife is rather feeble. Min. Food permit for extra milk.
29. ... Wife heart trouble, bedridden. Has permit for extra coal; (both) extra milk. Applicant has not worked for 8 years and savings swallowed up for illness and chest trouble.
30. Retired. Suffering from a weak heart and bronchitis. [Applicant] is a sick man.
31. [Applicant] had to give up his work as he was suffering from stomach trouble. Suspected ulcers. Wife bronchitis.
32. ... under medical attention, unable to do any heavy work.
33. Health not good ... diabetes, priority for milk, ... eggs [and] fish. ... [Visiting Officer] has marked health as "good" on form although aware of diabetes and special rations.
34. Suffers from internal trouble. Several operations.
35. Ill for several years with gastric trouble and is on special welfare list on account of ill-health.
36. Sight is failing rapidly - double cataract and operation is impossible owing to his age - 80.
37. In bed suffering from pains in the head. Doctor in attendance. Still bedridden four months later.
38. Suffering from anaemia and a cancer growth.


Of course, this was a large survey, involving over 900 pensioners in the United Kingdom; nonetheless, this level of misclassification is disturbing.

Those classed as in "fair" health in the Assistance Board survey included pensioners with a specific chronic disability or very frail, but ambulant, while "poor" cases were bedridden or with serious heart trouble, rheumatoid arthritis, diabetes, bronchial asthma, dropsy or similar severe conditions. Some of the "poor" cases, such as gangrene, would now be considered to require hospitalisation, and others to need nursing home care; on the other hand, comparing this categorisation with the ailments of "able-bodied" workhouse inmates discussed in Chapter Four, it is clear that official standards were improving.

So, it seems, were those of old people themselves. Michael Anderson has pointed out that the proportions of people aged 65-69 classing themselves, or being classed, as "healthy" were roughly similar in Booth's village survey of 1894 and a 1962 survey by Ethel Shanas and others, at 48 per cent and 58 per cent respectively. Both samples were socially mixed, but the vast majority of Booth's subjects were semi-retired and retired agricultural labourers and their wives or widows, whose incomes could buy neither good living conditions nor an adequate diet: one would thus expect them to be in poorer health than Shanas's old people.

With advancing age, the proportions in each survey diverged, and only 28 per cent of Booth's 881 over-eighty-year-olds were described as "healthy", compared with 55 per cent of Shanas's group: this despite the higher rate of institutionalisation of old people in the 1890s, which would have removed some of the frailer aged from the villages to workhouses. When assessed by others, only 27 per cent of Shanas's over-eighties were judged to have no major incapacity for self-care, which provides both an interesting parallel with Booth's 28 per cent figure, and is in itself a striking illustration of the difficulty of assessing the health of the very old.
There is a question mark over the classification in Booth's survey: responses were sent in by local informants, usually clergymen. However, the information for the special village survey was quite detailed, for instance as to amount and sources of income, and it is likely that the old people themselves were consulted; their self-rating as to health would probably not differ much from that recorded by Booth. However, a proper examination by a contemporary doctor would probably have made short work of many of the claims of "good" or "fair" health, and one dreads to consider the results, had Booth's old people been exposed to the more exacting standards and eagle-eyed scrutiny of Miss Ibberson or Dr Sheldon in the 1940s, let alone Shanas's assessors in 1962. As Drs. Pearce and Scott-Williamson remarked of their 1,530 patients in the 1930s,

the majority are unaware that they are less than perfectly healthy ... the recognition of well-being as a cloak covering every sort of disorder is of primary importance.40

Weight is lent to this assertion by Margery Spring Rice's survey of 1,250 working-class women in the 1930s. Interviewees in this survey were assigned health ratings by self-assessment, with the qualification that their answer to the question, "Do you usually feel fit and well?" was checked against the list of ailments to which they admitted. Overall, 31 per cent were then ranked as in "good" health. 22 per cent were classed as "indifferent"; this group included

a large majority of women who in spite of recording one or more chronic ailments, some of them serious, assert that they usually feel fit and well ... but all the evidence given shows clearly that by even a moderate standard, they are in poor health.41

In the third, or "poor", health group were 15 per cent of the sample, who were "undoubtedly in very bad health", although their answer to the "fit and well" question was a qualified "yes", for instance "fair" or "sometimes": as one woman revealingly said, she usually felt fit and well "in the sense that one is not laid up, and is able to carry on with the work cheerfully". The 31 per cent in the "very bad health" group were avowedly unwell and produced a list of ailments to prove it. In a number of cases, the "good health" assessment seemed to be vitiated by living conditions alone: for instance, one younger woman was living in three rooms with her husband and eight children under fourteen on an average income of about 35s. weekly, ate only two meals a day of bread and margarine and boiled potatoes respectively, but said she was "perfectly well". As Spring Rice
observed, these women had "a conception of fitness far inferior to that of the more favored and prosperous sections of the community".42

For the 72 women in Spring Rice's sample who were aged over fifty, the proportions in each class of health were 13 per cent "good", 19 per cent "indifferent", 14 per cent "poor" and 54 per cent "very bad". This result, while confirming the very poor health of older working-class women, nonetheless meant that somewhat over 40 per cent had given an unreserved, or qualified, "yes" in answer to the question, "Do you usually feel fit and well?".43

Assessment of health was clearly a slippery issue, and so it has remained up to today. In 1951, the Liverpool Personal Service Society undertook a random survey of 500 people of pensionable age (sixty for women, sixty-five for men). They found that, while 24 per cent listed "major physical handicaps", only 9 per cent reported "minor handicaps" and a tiny 3 per cent complained of being "unwell": this left 64 per cent with "no complaint". Yet, as suggested by comparison with the contemporary medical examination surveys discussed below, "no complaint" was probably precisely what many of them did have: unless their health was so bad that it kept them off their feet, they were most unlikely to complain about it.44

Thus statistics and other evidence about old people's health during this period are seriously flawed by the problem of assessment and by changes in official and community standards. Data from the 1890s are not comparable with data from the 1940s, and even they are not entirely compatible with modern medical and social expectations.

A further serious problem, which has been viewed from a different angle in Chapters One and Two, is the use of Friendly Society and Trade Union sick pay, and later National Insurance sickness benefit and disablement benefit, as de facto unemployment or retirement allowances. This meant that the numbers drawing such payments had less to do with the amount of ill-health they were experiencing, than with the economic cycle and the availability of work for the older and less fit, as well as with the accessibility of other forms of support such as unemployment pay.

It was not that claimants were malingering: working-class health standards were so low that, as discussed in Chapter Two, many workers of all ages, and a very large number of the elderly, had poor enough health to qualify them for sickness or even disability benefits, should they choose to claim them. As Lady Bell wrote of the comparatively well paid ironworkers of Middlesbrough in 1907,
... many of the workmen are more or less ailing in different ways ... [and] spent by the time they are fifty. To say that this happens to half of them is probably a favourable estimate.45

After a few months of struggle without wages or on unemployment pay, still more would fall into the large grey class of the marginally employable.

Moreover, there is plentiful evidence that people in employment kept working through illness and disability whenever possible, thus making no appearance in the statistics whatsoever. Indeed, there was little else they could do, as their health was hardly likely to improve on the diet and in the conditions which could be purchased on Friendly Society sick pay, poor relief or sickness and disability benefit: and then there was the family to think of. In 1894, Spender's enquiry reported one old man, now a roadworker, who was "not fit to work, but is obliged to do so, though lame and almost blind", to supplement his 3s. poor relief; in the same village, the blacksmith "lost his sight gradually, through working too hard", but continued to work until quite blind "and did much horse-shoeing when he could not see the nail". To quote Lady Bell once more, the worker

goes out, therefore, as usual, no matter what the weather or how he is feeling, in order not to lose a day's pay, and when he comes home it is not surprising if he is worse.46

Similarly, a fifty-two-year-old Newcastle canvas weaver, widowed and with one child still dependent, explained to the Women's Industrial Council Enquiry in 1910 that

she felt the bad effects of [cotton] fluff on her chest, but she had never been off through sickness, she "couldn't afford to stay off"; she would gladly stay at home, as she felt worn out, but she saw no prospect of doing so .... 47

In 1942, the Nuffield College Survey reported "universal agreement" that low benefits forced people back into work while still ill. A hospital almoner complained of frequent cases of men with illnesses such as rheumatism who "struggle to remain at work, when they should certainly not do so", while a London doctor observed that

people go to work before they are fit, resulting not only in an increase of immediate ill-health, but in chronic disability in future years.48
However, for those who were already unemployed or had lost work through illness, the position was different. Thus, as discussed in Chapter One, the percentage of aged members of the larger Friendly Societies who were receiving permanent sick pay rose dramatically from the 1840s. Similarly, the rate of sickness and disability claims under the National Insurance scheme were more an index of the nation's economic health than the physical health of claimants: for instance, during the national coal stoppage of 1926, miners' sickness benefit claims rose by over 60 per cent. These effects were complicated by the official shenanigans mentioned in Chapter Two and detailed by Noel Whiteside: basically, the period from 1911 saw an open war between the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Labour, each strategically deploying regulations in order to foist the largest possible number of the marginally employable onto the other.49

Whiteside has elegantly tracked the shadowing of unemployment benefit numbers and payments by those of sickness and disability benefit from 1911 through the 1930s. This phenomenon, which is analogous to unemployment lag, is annoying for the health statistician; for the claimants themselves, it was tragic. To quote the Government Actuary in 1936,

... the harsh conditions of Unemployment Insurance are responsible for a considerable part of the disablement benefits we are paying, and, what is worse, for the destruction of the will to work which is producing so many human derelicts.50

As Whiteside indicates, "disability lag" was even more disabling for its victims than long-term unemployment: this is shown particularly by the sluggish response of disability pension figures to economic recovery in the 1930s. Once tipped out of the unemployment statistics onto sickness benefit, the more inadequate rate of pay and the stigma of illness combined to push a claimant further into unemployability; once pushed down one step further onto the pitifully low disability pension, the effects of poverty and ill-health were multiplied by loss of confidence and rejection by employers until disability was truly permanent, and the only way out for most was the old age pension or death.51

This phenomenon has been observable in the social security statistics of a number of countries in recent years, but England in the 1920s and '30s provides perhaps the clearest illustration. Thus Whiteside has found that in 1935-36, at a time when employment was picking up, 40 per cent of approved society expenditure went to "chronic" cases. For those "declaring off" disablement benefit, average duration was 5.5 years, or longer for women;
in 1924, the Government Actuary found that 65 per cent of terminating claimants were back on benefit within 2 years.52

The promiscuous transfer of unemployed people with health problems between different sets of statistics means that Government figures for sickness and disablement benefit are of little use as indices of the health of the elderly workforce, even though, as discussed in Chapter One, older workers were heavily over-represented in them.

One point which must certainly be raised, however, is the disproportionate representation of insured women of all ages in the sickness and disability statistics. In 1914, female claims were about 25 per cent above the male rate; by 1928-1930, they were nearly double, and those of younger married women were three times as great.53

A large part of this was due, as we have seen in Chapter Two, to the effect of regulations governing unemployment insurance. Household means tests excluded many women from uncovenanted unemployment pay, while the Anomalies Order of 1931 and earlier restrictive provisions barred most married women even from unemployment benefit; moreover, women were over-represented in industries not covered by unemployment insurance. All these factors meant that a sick unemployed woman was more likely to be receiving sickness and disability benefits than a sick unemployed man: thus this particular battle in the war of the Ministries was a resounding victory for the Ministry of Labour.

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**Disablement**

Yet there was also evidence that female morbidity was higher, as indeed it is today. This was certainly true of older women, and even in 1894 Charles Booth's village survey found that

at every age from sixty upwards the proportion of men in good health is greater than that of women. With "fair health" and with actually "bad health" the sexes were more nearly equal, but "indifferent" health is a description particularly applicable to women.

Booth's tables show 42 per cent of men over sixty-five in "good" health and 33 per cent of women, with 24 per cent of men and 31 per cent of women in "indifferent" health. 12 per
cent of each were classed as "bad" and around 23 per cent as "fair": reservations concerning these tables have been outlined above.54

Similar differences were found by Diane Ibberson in her 1944 Assistance Board survey, by J.H. Sheldon in his medical survey of Wolverhampton old people in 1945 and by Ethel Shanas and her colleagues in 1962. In 1945, Dr Sheldon wrote,

the women tend on the whole to be in poorer health than the men, but nevertheless continue to live, whereas the men are either in abundant health or very ill.55

That this was not simply a difference in propensity to "succumb" to illness was shown by Sheldon's finding that women were less likely to be confined to bed by minor ailments. Although more prone to chronic illness, and more likely to be housebound or otherwise restricted in mobility due to rheumatism, bladder and feet problems, old women had, Sheldon felt, a "more tenacious hold on life".56

It is unlikely that Britain even in medieval times had experienced the so-called "traditional" mortality pattern, in which female deaths exceed those of males at most ages, and in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the "modern" phenomenon of higher female survival rates in every age group was strongly asserting itself, producing a steadily increasing majority of women amongst the elderly.57

On the basis of women's greater life expectancy, Peter Stearns has argued for the existence of "a gap between their social and biological ageing" in the nineteenth century and after, with women being seen as "old" by society long before they reached physiological old age.58 Yet for most working-class women in Britain at this time, the "gap" was reversed. "Why does a woman look older sooner than a man?", asked the label on the "Sunlight" soap packet in the 1900s: and contemporary sources frequently commented on the ravaged appearance of working-class women in their twenties, thirties and forties. For instance, in 1907, Lady Bell described the typical Middlesbrough woman in her mid-twenties as "already appearing dulled, discouraged, her form almost shapeless, her looks gone"; while in 1936, the Pilgrim Trust investigator observed that "in so many instances in Liverpool our record notes that the wife 'looks years older than she is'". More graphically, Robert Roberts describes his Salford neighbours in the 1900s as

women aged with childbearing well before their own youth was done ... the spoiled complexions, the mouths full of rotten teeth, the varicose veins, the
ignorance of simple hygiene, the intelligence stifled by the endless battle merely to keep clean.  

One working-class author remembers pondering for hours over the "Sunlight" soap question, but unfortunately, the answer was straightforward. As Roberts realised, it lay in women's poorer nutrition and even more "cramped and cheerless" lives, confined almost permanently within their own four walls, or struggling under the double load of paid employment and housework. Undernourishment and poor living conditions combined to leave many quite unequal to the burden of hard work, the strain of frequent pregnancies, and the losing battle to raise healthy children on insufficient food in unsuitable surroundings.

In 1944-45, the Central Office of Information Survey of Sickness found that although the highest rate of illness occurred amongst "part-time workers, retired or unoccupied [persons]", housewives followed close behind: 84.16 per cent and 81.44 per cent of these respective groups reported illness within the last three months. "Maternal disablement" was the crying scandal of the 1930s, with maternal mortality rising by 22 per cent between 1922 and 1933. Apart from poor living conditions, undernutrition was the main culprit, and in their large scale studies of the depressed areas in 1934, Drs. Glover, Hughes-Gibb and their colleagues found that "a not inconsiderable proportion of women manifest anaemia or debility". Specialised studies reported an incidence of anaemia of over 50 per cent amongst working-class Aberdeen women in 1933, and of 70 per cent of a sample of others from low income groups in London in 1939. Sir George Newman of the Ministry of Health privately conceded that ill-health amongst young mothers was "a wandering fire which knew no bounds", and calculated that it added 250,000 women to the list of permanently disabled every five years.

Thus it was little wonder that most older women were disabled by chronic illness, quite apart from any effects of current poverty. On the basis of his 1945-47 survey, Sheldon declared that much disablement of older women was directly attributable to affected joints being "chronically overworked by housework", and indeed, doctors had long been aware of the linkage of the high incidence of rheumatism, bronchitis, varicose veins and ulcerated limbs, back troubles, and the very common gynaecological problems such as uterine and rectal prolapse, with the years of heavy washing and scrubbing, large families, lack of medical care and life in damp, dark rooms, which were the lot of most working-class women.
In her survey of working-class women's health from 1933, Margery Spring Rice observed that for most of her older subjects, the "easing up" of poverty and pressure of work which they had keenly anticipated when their children grew up had either come too late, or because of unemployment and ill-health, not at all. For instance, a Health Visitor told her that one very sick fifty-eight-year-old Devon woman now had very good housing conditions and a daughter to nurse her, but had brought up ten children on a low income and in very poor conditions, while also working outside the home: "she got in a very run down condition ... and I fear she will now never regain her strength".

The Women's Industrial Council Enquiry of 1909-1910 encountered many similar cases, such as, in Reading, an elderly rag-sorter, two old charwomen and a fifty-one-year-old washerwoman who had each supported their families for many years: the washerwoman "has had to work too hard to be in good health, having been for years the sole support of her children". Also for this Enquiry, Barbara Hutchins interviewed a sixty-year-old Huddersfield weaver, who had worked since age seven, supporting two husbands in succession; 2 of her 4 children had died, and she and her invalid husband were now being evicted for arrears of rent: she had "never known what it was to be free of poverty". Another interviewee was a sixty-nine-year-old rag-picker, formerly a weaver, who had worked all her life from age four, supporting her husband through 5 years' illness and raising 15 children, 8 of whom had died. Hutchins noted that this old lady, having been ill, was fearful that she would not live long enough to draw her old age pension. Perhaps many a great soldier's pension has been less hardly earned.

To quote a working-class autobiographer, Arthur Newton, on the same theme in the 1920s,

I remember my mother's remark when she was sixty. "Only another five years and we shall get our pension!" Another five years! The old age pension at the time was 10s. each. It meant so much to them, that pound. Another five years! In another five years, she did not even know she was getting it. Her health had gone to pieces in "another five years".

As we have seen in Chapters One and Two, this was also true, to a large extent, for working-class men. In fact, as visitors from the United States were said to exclaim when they disembarked in Liverpool in the 1930s, "the only healthy-looking people in the streets are the policemen". To quote the Ministry of National Service Report upon the Physical Examination of Men of Military Age, published in 1920,
of every nine men of military age in Great Britain, on the average three were perfectly fit and healthy; two were upon a definitely infirm plane of health and strength; three ... could almost ... be described with justice as physical wrecks, and the remaining man was a chronic invalid with a precarious hold on life.67

Some industries, such as mining as discussed in Chapter One and metal industries mentioned earlier, were notoriously disabling of their workers. In 1934, Dr Glover and his colleagues reported that most retired miners had serious respiratory conditions of one sort or another, while Dr Enid Williams found that 6 of a sample of 100 "healthy" retired miners had active tuberculosis. In fact, dust diseases affected a very large range of trades, including some which employed many women, such as textile trades as noted above, and a number of specialised trades such as bakers, furriers and corn porters.68

In 1894, the Seamen's and Firemen's Union claimed that the average age of death of members was thirty, while trades in which lead was used, such as printing, painting, plumbing, grinding and metalwork and of course earthenware manufacture, had very high rates of mortality and disablement: in earthenwares in the 1890s, 51 per cent of workers died between 45 and 65, compared to 18 per cent of agricultural labourers. Even in the healthier callings such as agriculture, the combination of hard work and poverty was eventually crippling: to return to a quotation from one of Booth's rural informants in Chapter Two, "the majority are utterly incapacitated by working to extreme old age for small wages".69

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Ill-Health in Old Age: the 1940s

Although attitudes to illness in old age were slowly changing, it was not until the mid-1940s that public and professional interest in the health of the aged began to produce the spate of surveys, and articles in medical and other journals, which provide the first reasonably reliable statistical information on the health of the aged population as a whole. As they found, and as Diane Ibberson observed in 1944, "the picture is one in which ill-health plays a very big part".70
Among the first of these surveys was Dr J.H. Sheldon's random sample medical survey of 583 people of pensionable age in the Black Country town of Wolverhampton. It was the most detailed investigation yet made of old people's health, and, despite the exclusion from the sample of those in hospitals - about 2 per cent of those in the sample were in Public Assistance Institutions - the level of illness revealed was alarming.\(^1\)

2.5 per cent of those interviewed were bedridden, 8.5 per cent housebound, and a further 22.5 per cent "capable of only limited movement in their immediate district". More than a third had difficulty with stairs and were liable to falls, while about half suffered from vertigo and tended to lose their way in the dark. The mobility of 30 per cent of the sample was restricted by "bitterly resented" bladder problems, ranging from frequency of urination to complete incontinence. 55.4 per cent suffered from rheumatism, 40 per cent from pain in the feet, and the same proportion from bronchitis. 30 per cent of the old men had hernias; the majority of them were without adequate trusses. Only 6.3 per cent of the sample could read a newspaper with the naked eye, and, although Wolverhampton possessed a "large and excellent" eye hospital, a third had unsuitable spectacles. 31 per cent could not carry on a normal conversation because of deafness, and 38 per cent had teeth or dentures which were inadequate for chewing ordinary food: in fact, 10 per cent of the sample ate using their gums only. About one in five was judged to show symptoms of mental deterioration, and, even though no information was obtained on dietary habits, 3 per cent were said to be definitely malnourished, with another 5 per cent having various deficiency-related conditions such as anaemia. In addition to the other medical problems which afflicted many of those interviewed, nearly half felt that a previous illness had adversely affected their present health. Nonetheless, Sheldon wrote that

The great impression ... is one of admiration for the mental vigour and "guts" of the old people; and one cannot avoid the suggestion that the facts of living in the environment they are used to, of having something to do and of being able to feel necessary to the world are important factors in producing this state of affairs, and may help to explain why the mental level of old people living in their homes appears to be so much better than that of those living in institutions.\(^2\)

Sheldon's figures seem fairly representative of old people in England as a whole: for instance, Geoffrey Thomas's Central Office of Information survey of the same year, involving twelve thousand randomly selected households in England and Wales, found that 2 per cent of all those over sixty and living at home were bed-ridden, and 7 per cent housebound.\(^3\)
Assistance Board special investigators consistently reported that most supplementary pensioners suffered from rheumatism or related ailments, while a very large proportion complained of bronchitis and heart conditions, and - although this was probably due to better diagnosis - officials believed that the incidence of cancer was increasing amongst the elderly. Of a sample of 600 special needs forms submitted in 1942, 16 per cent related to heart trouble or blood pressure, 14 per cent to rheumatism, 11.5 to bronchitis, and another 35 per cent to nine other "prevalent" medical conditions, each with between 14 cases (cancer, gallstones) and 38 cases (diabetes). Of course, these were the conditions most likely to entail extra expense, such as special food, extra fuel, home help and nursing care; but a comparison with the most common cases listed in Miss Ibberson's 1944 enquiry reveals a roughly similar incidence: though in her enquiry, sight and hearing problems, stomach trouble, accidents and senility also figure prominently.

In some poorer working-class areas, health problems seem to have been even more prevalent, and five doctors who examined 1,001 people of pensionable age living in Glasgow tenements in 1946, could find only 29 with no ailments whatsoever. Nearly half of the sample had more than one illness, 295 had cardiovascular, and 181, pulmonary diseases, and only 408 were thought to be fit enough to care for themselves.

Yet as we have seen above, this low standard of health was probably an improvement on what had gone before. By the 1940s, full employment, the introduction of Supplementary Pensions and the small but growing proportion of working-class old people receiving public and private sector superannuation, meant that the average real income of the elderly was probably higher than it had ever been; certainly, it was higher than at any time since the 1880s. Poverty surveys confirmed that while the economic status of the aged was declining relative to the rest of the community, progressively fewer old people were living below the absolute subsistence minimum.

The life expectancy of the aged was slowly and belatedly following that of the general population on its upward course, and medical treatment was beginning to reach more of those who needed it. Although still very low by current standards, the proportion of old people receiving hospital treatment was growing rapidly in the postwar period. With the introduction of penicillin in 1942, there was at last a medical development that would significantly affect old people's life expectancy, by starting to make inroads on the large numbers dying from pneumonia each winter: this, perhaps, was a small beginning to "medicated survival".
Poverty and Health

By the 1940s, some writers on the elderly were beginning to see illness as their major problem, and one which could, and should, be dealt with: as the Assistance Board's Sheffield District Officer, E. Williamson, had remarked in 1942, "acute or chronic sickness and disease are responsible for most difficulties amongst pensioners and their households".78

Yet here the District Officer, and some of the medical writers, had stumbled upon that confusion of cause and effect which was at the root of the long delay in the growth of interest in the subject. For much sickness and disability in old age was caused by past and present poverty. It was unavoidable that old people should ultimately become frail and, given the current state of medical knowledge, it was probably also inevitable that many should eventually become ill; but much of the illness was preventable or at least remediable, and much of the frailty was the legacy of prematurely disabled lives.

It was far too easy for officials, and the public in general, to see the aged as helpless, and their misery as inevitable. An example of this was the plethora of workhouse surveys in the 1890s and 1900s, discussed in Chapter Four, which purported to show that most old people were in the workhouse because they were too frail to cope at home. Yet most old people in the workhouse were not in need of hospital treatment or full-time professional nursing care; most were not even bedridden. Many old people with equivalent disabilities looked after themselves, or were cared for, in the community; and as Old Age Pensions and then Contributory and Supplementary Pensions were introduced, the proportions able to remain in their own homes grew. Essentially, most old workhouse inmates, and later Public Assistance Institution residents, were there because their own poverty, and that of their families, first caused or exacerbated illness and frailty, then left its victims without the resources to cope with them. Additionally, institutionalisation remained the only option for many simply because the support services for those at home, such as District Nursing and home help services, were completely inadequate.

Fuld and Robinson's 1951 survey of old people admitted to a Liverpool Hospital with simple malnutrition, mentioned in Chapter Three, provides support for this claim. A follow-up survey found that in most cases, it was not their illness or inability to manage, but lack of money and poor living conditions without adequate cooking facilities which were mainly to blame for their condition. 15 of 31 patients whose incomes were known
were trying to manage on Old Age Pension alone; the remainder also had other pensions including Supplementary Pension. All but 3 of the 39 patients were anaemic due to lack of protein in their diet, 19 had scurvy, in all but 2 cases because they could not afford vegetables and fruit, and 1 had false dementia due to vitamin B deficiency. A number had false incontinence which cleared up after about a week on adequate food. Some were so severely malnourished that they had to be tube-fed, and a very few not included in the survey were suffering from "extreme starvation" and died within a few days. The authors commented that

The relentlessly depressing effect of poverty, dirt and cold - but particularly of loneliness - over a period of years is in itself sufficient to cause personality changes; but it seemed to us that the profound state of apathy was a direct effect of malnutrition. Some seriously ill patients in an advanced state of semi-starvation presented a typical appearance, identical with that seen among the prisoners at the Belsen camp. They lay curled up on their sides and were entirely unconcerned about activities in the ward ...

Subsequently, Fuld and Robinson were frustrated to find that half of these patients returned home to the same unsatisfactory diets and living-conditions which had caused their original admission, with no improvements in their financial position, and no attempt by the authorities to provide home help, nursing care or nutritional advice, or apparently even to refer them to the Assistance Board.

Similarly, an investigation by Drs. McMillan and Inglis of elderly scurvy sufferers admitted to an Edinburgh hospital between 1937 and 1944, more than two-thirds of them supplementary pensioners, found that the problem was not confined to "typical 'batchelor' scurvy": indeed, 3 of 53 victims had been living with relatives. While ignorance and apathy were factors, the authors wrote, poverty made it "impossible to buy an adequate diet, or live anywhere but in the worst type of lodgings, with poor cooking facilities". Half the patients "had not sufficient to buy a diet adequate in proteins, fats, calories and vitamins", while "many complained of lack of cooking facilities in their lodgings". In response to their article, a London doctor wrote that while scurvy was by no means common, he had observed an increase in the disease amongst old age pensioners in 1943 due to "difficulties in shopping and worry over the fate of relations", leading to "self-neglect". He had personally examined 7 such cases in one London hospital in 1943, and 9 between January and September 1944.
Even in starvation inquests, it is notable how often a simple want of money seems to have been the major problem, and, indeed, in many of the cases occurring before Old Age Pensions were introduced in 1908, the elderly victims were living with adult children who had provided them with all household and nursing care. For instance, this was the case for the Oxford family discussed at the beginning of this Chapter, and for a 1905 case also cited by Theodore Dodd concerning a bedridden London woman in her seventies, living with her porter son, who "had not had proper food for a long time", but would not go into the workhouse. In a 1904 inquest mentioned by Raphael Samuel, the dead old woman's daughter had been trying to feed herself, two children and her mother on the princely sum of 2s. after rent.82

Lack of home help and nursing services was another cause of disability, and medical practitioners frequently encountered old people who had become bedridden and apparently senile simply because nobody was available to help them to get up and dressed. In 1952, Dr Exton-Smith reported that a number of old people in his St Pancras survey "had become unnecessarily bedridden ... false incontinence developed in some owing to the difficulty of lifting a heavy patient out of bed". As we have seen in Chapter Four, this was a problem which old people did not necessarily escape by entering an institution.83

Emphasis on old people's frailty, and even their particular health problems, tended to disguise their actual contributions to the community. Yet as we have seen, most old women and some old men continued, despite considerable difficulties, to look after themselves and their households, determined to maintain their independence. Many old men, and some old women, kept on in employment and maintained their productive role in the wider community in the face of ill health and physical strain. Very many old women and a few old men pulled far more than their social weight, with heavy responsibilities for housekeeping and the care and nursing of others. To quote Dr Sheldon,

up to the age of seventy-five at least, women give the community more than they take in the matter of domestic responsibility.84

Moreover, the concentration on ill-health in old age relegated its major cause, present and past poverty, to the background, rather like some more recent surveys of the problems of the aged which cheerfully exclude the ill, the poor, and those from minority groups.85 It was of course a vicious circle, but it is significant that old people were so often seen as being poorly fed and housed and clothed because they were frail and ill and unable to cope, and not vice versa.
Certainly, to quote G.M. Herford of the Assistance Board, many old people were "almost past the stage where they could manage their own lives, even apart from illness". Yet perversely, contemporaries frequently laid the blame on the elderly themselves for their condition. In 1899, Charles Booth attacked the common middle-class opinion that many old people actually liked living in squalor and for this reason refused the workhouse. For instance, in 1900, the Rev. Wickham Tozer confidently told the Poor Law Conference that only 20 of 320 aged inmates of Ipswich Workhouse were "deserving", and that "the average inmate hated fresh air and cleanliness and order and privacy, never having been used to it". In 1898, the Clerk to the Gateshead Guardians, George Craighill, gave the following example to illustrate the unworthiness of aged out-relief recipients:

An old man and his wife, respectively eighty-five and seventy-three, lived in one room. They had living with them a son of forty who was of weak intellect. ... The only articles of furniture in the room occupied by the old people and their son were a chair, a box, a small table and a bed. The room was in a dirty condition and the stench was very great ... Out-relief was ... discontinued, a Workhouse order was offered, and refused. Since then the old man and his wife have been maintained [in the same room] by the daughters who were previously unable to keep their parents.

As we have seen in Chapter Four, this view persisted for decades, and even in the 1940s, Assistance Board officers were apt to dismiss "dirty" cases as unworthy of attention.

But perhaps the most striking illustration of this tendency is found in starvation inquests, in which Coroners frequently returned a verdict of death due to "self-neglect". For instance, from the 1914 Deaths from Starvation returns:

**Some Verdicts of Death from "Self-Neglect", 1914**

- painter, sixty-three, "a drunkard".
- cabinet-maker, seventy-eight, "discharged self" from infirmary.
- charwoman, sixty, told Guardians "she was able to manage on her income".
- hawker, sixty-seven, "she led a life of exposure".
- carpet sewer, fifty-one, "want of sufficient food due to self-neglect ... [she] declined help from neighbours".
- former cook, seventy-seven, death "accelerated by want of sufficient food and medical aid and from self-neglect ... friends had advised her to go to the infirmary but she declined".
- tailor, sixty-two, cancer "accelerated by self-neglect".
- pensioner, seventy-four, "want and self-neglect".
- shoeblack, sixty-four, "pneumonia and self-neglect".
- man, fifty-five, occupation unknown, "pancreatitis and self-neglect".
- widow, sixty-four, "lack of food and exposure due to her own neglect".
- antique dealer, sixty-three, death "accelerated by ... self-neglect".
- unknown man, fifty, "... self-neglect ... resisted all efforts to feed him".
- crossing-sweeper, sixty-eight, death "accelerated by self-neglect".
- former cook, eighty-four, "death accelerated by self-neglect ... refused to enter infirmary".
- labourer, sixty, "friends had advised him to go to the infirmary, but [he] refused".
- bricksetter, sixty-one, death "due to want of proper food and attention, the result of his own neglect".
- woman, sixty-seven, "dropsy, heart disease ... had refused workhouse ... turned out of home ... no blame or neglect on the part of anyone".
- dressmaker, sixty-four, "declined both out-relief and admission".
- single woman, sixty-five, "self-neglect ... although this person had no food in the house, yet she had in her possession some valuable pekinese dogs which she could have realised ... refused to enter infirmary".
- widow, seventy-three, "lived in a dirty condition".
- man, fifty-five [?], occupation unknown, "refused to stay" in workhouse.
- basket-maker, fifty-eight, "refused workhouse".
- sailor, sixty-four, "preferred vagrancy and drink".
- dressmaker, sixty-two, "apparently drank ... refused medical treatment".
- pensioner and pedlar, seventy-four, "refused attention ... drank".


Similarly, where the old person had relatives living with in the same house or nearby, Coroners often formally censured them for failure to apply for relief; this and the questioning of Poor Law officials greatly contributed to the blame-casting observed above. Indeed, in a number of cases involving young children where no application had been made to the Guardians, parents were prosecuted for manslaughter.89

Such verdicts conveniently restricted the focus to the victims' inability to cope and failure to seek help, ignoring the social and economic causes of their incapacity. Yet they were by no means restricted to the Coroner's Court. In 1893, the Rev. J. Frome Wilkinson roundly condemned as irresponsible the common claim that old people who starved to death rather than enter the workhouse "had only themselves to blame". As Jack London wrote in 1903 on a newspaper report of an inquest,
That an old woman of seventy-seven years of age should die of self neglect is the most optimistic way possible of looking at it. It was the old dead woman's fault that she died, and having located responsibility, society goes contentedly on about its own affairs.90

Similarly, having "located responsibility" for old people's problems on "old age" or ill-health or even on the individuals themselves, many people in this period preferred to believe that the community was absolved of responsibility for them. By offering out-relief or the workhouse, or Old Age or Supplementary Pensions or any other inadequate palliative, society had done its duty and given old people their share.

Yet this was far from being the case, as is shown by a return to the issue of standards of health. As we have seen, there is evidence that old people's health was improving in this period, but also that it was not improving fast enough. Indeed, there seems little doubt that their health, like their income, was declining relative to that of the general population. From the 1870s onwards, rising real wages had steadily widened the gap between those in full-time work and those, like the elderly, who were outside or on the margins of the workforce. Rising standards of living meant that each current generation of old people were survivors of poorer and sicklier age cohorts; their health was thus prejudiced by both past and present poverty. As Helen Bosanquet wrote of the aged of the late nineteenth century, they "grew up weakly and inefficient, and incapable of providing for their own old age."91

Health statistics relating to old people during this period are a morass of slippery figures from which firm data for longitudinal comparison seem unlikely to emerge. We know that ill-health increased steadily with age; but we cannot be sure how this increase changed over time. More concrete information such as the height and weight figures collected for schoolchildren are not available for old people, so we are left to fall back on the bald facts of life expectancy.

Yet as noted in Chapter Three, the evidence of life expectancy is damning. The fall in old people's life expectancy in the late nineteenth century, and its sluggish progress in subsequent decades - when that of all other age groups was rising rapidly - can only mean that the relative health of the aged was indeed declining. Old people were not equal participants in contemporary improvements in standards of living and in health; income support and social services had failed to supply them with their share in the growth of prosperity.92
Moreover, the slow rise in old people's life expectancy from 1900 was marred by two periods when their death rates actually rose. The first of these was during the First World War, and was probably due to social dislocation and the effect on pensions of wartime inflation, exacerbated by deteriorating treatment of old people in institutions. The second occurred in the first two years of the Second World War and, according to Richard Titmuss, was mainly due to social dislocation, manifest particularly in higher rates of accidental death for old people at home and rising death rates in institutions, as discussed in Chapter Four. And, although increased mortality in times of war may seem unsurprising, it is important to note, with J.M. Winter, that in England and Wales, civilian mortality in all other age groups declined dramatically in both World Wars.93

Old people were increasingly prominent amongst the disadvantaged. Not only were they a rapidly growing sub-group amongst "the poor"; in a sense they were the new "poor". Much more than other groups in poverty, such as low wage earners, large and single-parent families and the unemployed, their position was seen as helpless and their problems as amenable only to palliatives, not to cures. Expenditure on their needs was often seen as useless, even extravagant, in the face of other social problems which were more obviously remediable: in William Beveridge's famous words in 1908, old age pensions were "money which is urgently needed elsewhere"; and in 1942,

> It is dangerous to be in any way lavish to old age until adequate provision has been assured for all other vital needs such as the prevention of disease and the adequate nutrition of the young.94

In the 1890s, old people had been singled out by campaigners for old age pensions, and by public opinion, as a distinct "deserving" and "helpless" group within the working class, and, by the 1940s, they had largely inherited the role of the nineteenth century "poor" in general as a suitable object of scientific study, paternalistic administration and charitable endeavour.

Their growing poverty and frailty relative to the rest of the population imposed an added burden in the way they were popularly perceived: just as it had once been too easy to say that "the poor will always be with us", it became convenient to dismiss the aged as a social and economic dead weight, lingering on in inevitable misery: in the 1940s, even the National Old People's Welfare Committee called them "the least valuable lives".95 With attention firmly focused on their problems, one could readily ignore the social and economic contribution which they, like the nineteenth century "poor", were managing to
make in spite of them, and forget the role of their lifelong and present poverty in producing their disabilities.
NOTES

1 Old People's Welfare Committee, undated press release, 194- [full sentence: "It may be said - and rightly - that the claims of children must come first and that the aged are the least valuable lives"]; quoted in Means and Smith, "From Public Assistance Institutions to Sunshine Hotels", p. 176.

2 BPP 1919 XXVII (Cd 410), p. 268.

3 Abel-Smith and Pinker, 'Changes in the Use of Institutions', p. 2.


6 Nuffield Foundation, Old People, pp. 168-171; PRO AST 7/574 (Ibberson, Report of an Enquiry, Aug. 1944, pp. 13-18); AST 7/596 (McAlmont, Attraction, Aug. 1942, pp. 1-2); AST 7/479 (Markham, AB Memorandum No. 362, 9 Oct. 1941); AST 7/605 (Markham, AB Memorandum No. 362, 5 Sep. 1943, pp. 3-4); AST 7/663 (Area Officers' Reports: Summary, 1944).

7 Royal Commission on the Poor Laws, Appendix 2, BPP 1909 XL, p. 523 [Marsh's case: Dodd].

8 Noordin, Through a Workhouse Window, p. 41; Aberdare Commission, BPP 1895 XIV, p. 210 [J. Cox]; Ryland Adkins Committee, BPP 1919 XXVII, p. 91 [Fenby]; PRO AST 7/574 (Ibberson, Report of an Enquiry, Aug. 1944, p. 66); AST 7/589 (Ibberson, Special Enquiries, Mar. 1942: Special Circumstances: Borough 2 [cases 6, 16]; AST 7/663 (Welfare Reports by Area Officers, 1944 [6 complaints]).

9 GLRO Is B G 68-71 (Islington Board of Guardians, Arrears Committee Records, 1901-1930 [4 vols]; see Is B G 70, 10 Nov. 1925, copy of letter from Min. Health, Is B G 68, 15 Mar. 1906); PRO MH 15/104 (Poor Law Indexes, 1910-1920, see e.g. 15/37944/139, 12/161785, and other NI cases).


11 GLRO IS B G 70 (Arrears Committee Minutes, 26 Feb. 1924, copy of letter); see also Is B G 69 (Arrears Committee Minutes, 19 March 1920: copy of letter from Rev. C.W. Fuller); and see ch. 6.
Spring Rice, *Working-Class Wives*, p. 29; and see below.


PRO CAB 87/80/83 (NCSRS, Memorandum No. 5: Pensions, 19 June 1942, p. 44); GLRO, LCC Public Assistance Committee, Presented Papers 1937-1948, vol. 4 (Private Enquiry, Case ... St Pancras Coroner's Court, Jan. 1937); Titmuss, *Problems of Social Policy*, p. 68.


23 PRO AST 7/663 (Welfare Reports submitted by Area Officers, GS 11A, 1944); quotations from Means and Smith, "From Public Assistance Institutions", p. 170; Nuffield Foundation, Old People, p. 63.


26 AST 7/479 (Markham, AB Memorandum No. 365, 9 Oct. 1941, p. 5); AST 7/574 (Ibberson, Report of an Enquiry, Aug. 1944, pp. 16-18); AST 7/605 (Markham, AB Memorandum No. 362, 5 Spec. 1943, pp. 3-4); AST 7/737 (Pacifist Services Unit, Excerpts from Case Records, 1944 [Case 6]); CAB 87/80/83 (NCSRS, Memorandum No. 5: Public Assistance, 19 June 1942, pp. 37-38).

27 PRO CAB 87/80/64 (NCSRS, Memorandum No. 1: National Health Insurance, 5 June 1942, pp. 33-7).


30 British Library of Political and Economic Sciences (BLPES), Booth Collection, B162 - B167 (Case Notes compiled by the Clerk to the Poor Law Guardians, Stepney Union, 1889); Booth, Pauperism and Endowment, pp. 252-314.

31 Constance Road Institution and Infirmary, Camberwell: Greater London Records Office (GLRO) Ca B G 191/2 (Camberwell Board of Guardians, Old Age Pensioners admitted to Institutions (1915-1922), vol. 2).

32 For further evidence of problems caused by subjectivity in Medical Officers' assessments in the 1930s, see C. Webster, "Healthy or Hungry Thirties?", pp. 118ff; PRO MH 57/97D (North-West District, Reports by 33 Medical Officers, 1929;
Turton, District 10 Report, 1929); Whiteside, "Unemployment and Health", pp. 182-183.


34 PRO CAB 87/80/64 (NCSRS, Memorandum No. 1: National Health Insurance, 5 June 1942, pp. 4-8).


36 Ibid., pp. 11ff; and see ch. 5.

37 Ibid.


39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.; quoted in Spring Rice, Working-Class Wives, p. 30; and see discussion of Sheldon's Wolverhampton survey, below.

41 Spring Rice, Working-Class Wives, chs. 3 and 4 [quotation p. 35].

42 Ibid., pp. 72, 162, 29 passim; Appendix 2.

43 Ibid., Appendix 2.

44 Liverpool Personal Service Society / Department of Social Science, University of Liverpool, Social Contacts in Old Age, Liverpool, 1953, pp. 14-16.

45 Lady Bell, At the Works, p. 90; and see chs. 1 and 2.

46 Lady Bell, At the Works, pp. 85-89 [quotation p. 86]; Rowntree, Poverty [1901], p. 35; Spender, State and Pensions, p. 17; R. Barnes, Coronation Cups and Jam Jars, p. 203; and others.


48 PRO CAB 87/80/64 (NCSRS, Memorandum No. 1: NHI, 5 June 1942, pp. 26-29).

49 Whiteside, "Counting the Cost", pp 241ff.

50 Quoted in Whiteside, "Counting the Cost", p. 237.
51 Whiteside, "Counting the Cost", passim.

52 Ibid.; Whiteside, "Unemployment and Health", pp. 177-184.

53 Whiteside, "Counting the Cost", p. 132.

54 Booth, Aged Poor, p. 356.

55 Sheldon, Social Medicine, pp. 13-23, 47, 164.


58 Quoted in Foakes, My Part of the River, p. 15, see also pp. 52-53; Pilgrim Trust, Men without Work, pp. 130-141; R. Roberts, Classic Slum, p. 41; Samuel [Harding], East End Underworld, p. 21; Pember Reeves, Round about, p. 9, 64, 168 passim; Spring Rice, Working-Class Wives pp. 32-37, 212 passim; Lady Bell, At the Works, pp. 184-5, 201, 229, 232, 238-9; Willmott, Growing up in a London Village, p. 72.

59 ibid.; quotation from Lady Bell, At the Works, p. 170; Foakes, My Part of the River, p. 15.

60 Slater, Survey of Sickness, pp. 17-21.

61 PRO MH 79/332 (J.A. Glover, A.P. Hughes-Gibb and J. Pearce, Malnutrition among the Unemployed: Tyneside 1934, Apr. 1934, p. 14); MH 79/333 (authors as above, Malnutrition among the Unemployed: Country Durham 1934, June 1934); MH 79/335 (authors as above, Malnutrition among the Unemployed: Lancashire 1934, July 1934); MH 79/336 (authors as above and T.W. Wade, Malnutrition among the Unemployed: South Wales 1934, July 1934); Boyd Orr, Food, p. 50; Webster, "Healthy or Hungry Thirties?", pp. 117, 122ff.


63 Ibid., pp. 79ff, 144, 164.


69 Ibid.; A.F. Vuilliamy, "Old Age Pensions and the Poor Law", in Poor Law Conferences, Reports, 1898-1899, 643-660, p. 645; Booth, Aged Poor, p. 244.


71 Sheldon, Social Medicine, passim.

72 Sheldon, Social Medicine, pp. 12, 19, 13, 96, 92, 93, 47, 58, 48, 76-86, 87, 46, 86, 87, 46, 108, 19, 49; quotation p. 108.

73 Thomas, Employment of Older Persons, p. 39.

74 PRO AST 7/605 (Herford, Report on Old Age Pensioners Living Alone in Stepney, Dec. 1941, p. 1: Markham, Assistance Board (AB) Memorandum No. 362, 5 Sep. 1943, p. 3); AST 7/608 (District Officer (DO), Cambridge 1, Report, 27 Oct. 1942, p.5); AST 7/487 (DO, Sheffield, Minute to all Area Officers, 29 June 1942); AST 7/574 (Ibberson, Report of an Enquiry, Aug. 1944, p. 10).


76 See chs. 3 and 7.


78 PRO AST 7/487 (DO, Sheffield, Minute, 29 June 1942).

79 Fuld and Robinson, "Malnutrition", pp. 860, 863.


Sheldon, *Social Medicine*, p. 141; and see ch. 3.


See ch. 7.


See ch. 3, n. 4.


95 See n. 1.
CHAPTER SIX

"TAXING THE FOOD OF CHILDREN":

OLD PEOPLE AND THE COMMUNITY

"The man supported his own and his wife’s mother in old age, but does not seem to have saved."

- John Jones, Clerk to the Stepney Poor Law Guardians, 1889.1

"Why tax the food of children to provide an inadequate dole for their grandparents?"

- Harold Cox, M.P., House of Commons Debate on old age pensions, 15 June 1908.2

The Background to "Strict Administration"

As we have seen in previous Chapters, old people had missed out on their full share of nineteenth and twentieth century improvements in income, health, life expectancy and in standards of living in general. The economic trends which were partly responsible for this relative decline have been more fully explored in Chapters One and Two. Broadly, nineteenth century England had undergone a rapid transformation from a primarily agrarian economy, providing some employment for the more able elderly - albeit seasonal or at reduced wages - to a primarily industrial economy with few employment opportunities for those past their prime. With modernisation, homework was drying up, as were seasonal and casual jobs, and the spread of large firms and of public sector employment further widened the gulf between those who were in full-time employment, with rising real wages, and those who were not. As survivors of poorer, more sickly generations, many old people bore the legacy of early lives of malnutrition and disease. In an increasingly healthy and better fed community, their relative health status was falling, in turn affecting their employability and their current standards of living, in a grim arabesque of the sort all too familiar to students of socioeconomic disadvantage.3
Certainly, as discussed in Chapter One, the problem of old age dependency was not new. Indeed, fluctuating population growth had, in the past, produced periods where the proportion of elderly people in the total population was higher: in the early eighteenth century, for instance, the ratio of those aged 25-59 to those aged sixty and over was as low as 4:1, compared to 5.5:1 in the mid-nineteenth century. However, the different position of the elderly in the pre-industrial economy means that bald statements of dependency ratios are of little value. By the late nineteenth century, the aged population was undoubtedly larger in absolute terms than ever before. In addition, as discussed in Chapter One, the shift from agricultural to industrial employment probably meant that relatively fewer old people were able to retain regular employment into their mid-sixties.

Canon Blackley, Charles Booth and others who, in the late nineteenth century, had "discovered" the problem of old age, had thus stumbled on a half-truth. The problem was not new, but both its magnitude and its manifestation were changing. The old pattern of marginal and sporadic employment for the more able elderly was shading into the modern one of complete withdrawal from the labour market at predetermined ages. Simultaneously, falling birth rates and rising life expectancies were transforming the comparatively young population of the early to mid-nineteenth century into the relatively old population of the mid-twentieth. With our longer historical perspective, we can see the sweep of demographic trends and trade cycles and shifting employment patterns across the century; but for old people in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it must sometimes have seemed as if the world had turned upside down. They were perhaps the group left most vulnerable by England's rapid transformation. Yet they were the chief target of the campaign launched in the late nineteenth century by the Local Government Board and other "strict administrators" in the Charity Organisation Society and in local Poor Law administration, to withdraw such community support as already existed.

The reasons for this campaign were complex, and have been most ably discussed by other authors, notably by contemporaries Sidney and Beatrice Webb in their great work on English local government. Basically, the mid-nineteenth century had seen the "success" of the Poor Law reformer's efforts to remove the great bulk of the able-bodied from the scope of Poor Law assistance. In fact, this had far more to do with economics than with Poor Law policies: the early nineteenth century, like the late Elizabethan period which had given rise to the "Old" Poor Law, was one of those periods in history when hard times threw large numbers of employable adults and their families onto the mercies of community support. In the early nineteenth century, this crisis had combined the traditional manifestation of underemployment and below subsistence wages in rural areas with the more modern phenomenon of trade-cycle - linked mass unemployment in the towns: both costly to the
community and, like the "sturdy beggars" of Elizabeth's times, pregnant with the danger of crime, unrest and revolt. The rural "Captain Swing" riots of 1830-31 were only one manifestation of the trouble that contemporaries felt brewing, and which later erupted into anti-Poor Law agitation and Chartism. Not surprisingly, then, Government and public attention were focused on able-bodied relief recipients almost to the exclusion of the "impotent" poor, who, except in times of economic crisis, comprised the great bulk of recipients, but who offered little threat to public order. This focus gave the 1834 Poor Law Report and some other contemporary documents their peculiar air of myopia, or failure to see what stood in front of them; it also served to distort Poor Law policy and administration with preoccupations which were totally inappropriate to the Poor Law's primary client group.7

By the mid-century, outdoor relief rolls were again shrinking, as rising real wages and the development of alternative sources of support for those unemployed or temporarily off work - such as Trade Union and Friendly Society funds, and public relief works - kept more and more working people away from the Poor Law. Even the great agricultural depression of the 1870s and 1880s failed to curb the strong downward trend of relief to the 16-64 age group. Unemployed men and those with short term illnesses, increasingly able to keep away from the Poor Law, kept their wives and children away as well, and the great host of children previously swelling relief rolls also began to ebb away.8

Yet, for Government officials and many middle-class contemporaries, this apparent triumph of the New Poor Law was marred. In England and Wales in the mid-nineteenth century, the aged and infirm and their dependents had probably comprised about one third of all paupers; by the early 1870s, they were nearly 45 per cent, not including children. By 1892, those aged over sixty-five alone comprised over 36 per cent of paupers at the 1 January day count, and by 1906, they were 39 per cent at the 31 March day count. None of these figures, nor those given subsequently, include lunatics and vagrants. The ebbing tide of able-bodied recipients had left exposed a vast standing pool of the aged and infirm, widows and their children and others unable to provide for themselves however buoyant the economy: these were, after all, the "true poor" of Elizabethan times, and the biblical poor who are always with us. As C.S. Loch observed in 1892,

   formerly in the throng of paupers, you did not notice the old. Now, the throng is less ... naturally the chief group is the aged. This is the group that catches the eye in England now.9
The prominence of the aged was emphasised by their highly visible and disproportionate presence in workhouses. From its very inception, the workhouse test had been patently impracticable as a means of dealing with the urban unemployed, and it had thus rarely been enforced against this group. The main potential source of able-bodied workhouse inmates was thus largely redirected to Poor Law Labour Yards and, later, public relief works and Distress Committees. Thus, in England and Wales from the 1870s until 1905, only between 13 and 18 per cent of indoor relief recipients were able-bodied. As discussed in Chapter Four, these able-bodied inmates were overwhelmingly elderly or permanently disabled. Workhouses remained, as Dr Edward Smith wrote in 1868, "asylums and infirmaries", accommodating "almost solely ... the aged and infirm, the destitute sick and children". In the late nineteenth century, there was a growing trend, especially in urban areas, to remove children to schools and the mentally disabled to lunatic asylums and special institutions. Workhouse infirmary wards had always functioned as hospitals, especially in rural areas and for chronic and "uninteresting" patients in the towns; from the 1860s, many of the urban workhouse infirmaries grew into separate hospital-type institutions, drawing off a large proportion of sick paupers from the workhouse proper. Together, these developments left many mixed workhouse wards as vast empty spaces with a motley crew of inmates rattling around in them: and these consisted largely of more or less ambulant old people.¹⁰

As we have seen in Chapter Four, more than 8 per cent of the population over sixty-five were in Poor Law institutions in England and Wales during the year 1892. Charles Booth calculated that, over the year, they comprised 25 per cent of inmates; day counts in 1890 and 1892 give a figure of around 30 per cent, with a further 8 per cent aged 60-65. In general workhouses, especially in rural areas, the proportions were usually much higher. It was no wonder that, as David Thomson has said, contemporaries had an impression of "the mass institutionalisation of the elderly".¹¹

By 1895, the Rev. T. Bridge could declare that workhouses were "rapidly changing their character and becoming hospitals for the sick and refuges for the infirm aged instead of workhouses for the able-bodied". He complained that 81 per cent of Macclesfield Workhouse inmates were aged over sixty and that there were not enough able-bodied to do the work: indeed, the question of how to get workhouse maintenance done by the aged and infirm became a topic of consuming interest to the Poor Law Conferences of the 1890s. In 1898, W.A. Bailward had a swift answer for those who wished to give preferential treatment to aged inmates: as the "vast majority" of inmates were aged, he declared smugly, this was clearly impossible.¹²
The non-able-bodied, with the aged and sick most prominent among them, had not been untouched by the New Poor Law: sporadic outbreaks of workhouse-testing and other forms of administrative cruelty had undoubtedly caused much suffering for elderly people in various Unions between the 1830s and the 1870s. However, most of the hardship occasioned probably had more to do with the often niggardly and mean spirit of local administration than with the central authority or the tenets of the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. As Ursula Henriques observes, the harshness of local administration was often quite independent of central policies, and "in methods of administration ... the main feature of the new Poor Law was continuity with the old".\textsuperscript{13} Because the attention of the Poor Law Reformers had been focused on the able-bodied, there had been no systematic or consistent efforts to drive the aged into the workhouse or away from the Poor Law altogether. While there was some increase in the proportions of old people in Poor Law institutions, at least from 1851, this was probably mainly due to the greater numbers receiving infirmary treatment. Indeed, the evidence suggests that the relative numbers of old people receiving outdoor relief remained fairly stable until the 1870s.\textsuperscript{14}

This was the background to the decision of G.J. Goschen, President of the then Poor Law Board in 1869, to begin a campaign to tighten Poor Law administration: this had been foreshadowed at the local level by conferences of metropolitan Guardians earlier that year. It is worth discussing the nature of this campaign in some detail, as it was central to the events which marked the so-called "birth of the welfare state"; and because, as David Thomson has complained, many welfare histories tend to gloss over or ignore it altogether.\textsuperscript{15}

Spurred on by high unemployment in the late 1860s and what Anne Digby calls the consequent "temporary collapse" of the Poor Law in Lancashire and London, the campaign gained momentum until, in its Circular of 2 December 1871, the Local Government Board enjoined the enforcement of workhouse-testing for the able-bodied and the general "strict administration" of relief. This Circular contained what the Webbs described as "quite a new stress ... on getting contributions from relatives", and an implication that the offer of the workhouse might be used to encourage relatives to keep the aged and infirm off the rates. The 1871 Circular was interpreted by the Inspectors as a licence to enforce the workhouse test against the non-able-bodied and to restrict outdoor relief for all, and although they did so without the explicit backing of the Board, its tacit consent enabled this policy to remain in force until 1895.\textsuperscript{16}

The results were immediate, with a reduction of 194,000 or 18.5 per cent in the number of relief recipients from 1870 to 1873 alone. Between 1872 and 1892, the mean numbers
receiving relief in England and Wales, rounded to the nearest thousand, fell from 977,000 to 744,000, or from 4.3 per cent of population to 2.6 per cent: outdoor relief fell from 828,000 to 558,000, although indoor relief rose by 37,000. At first, the new austerity hit hardest against the unemployed and the outdoor sick. To quote F.B. Smith,

It is not surprising, although contemporaries seem not to have noticed it, that this savage reduction in Poor Law relief coincided with the new pressure on the out-patient wards at hospitals, new pressure on private charities and the rise of monitoring bodies such as the Charity Organisation Society.17

Within the next twenty years, private charity came to provide unofficial relief on an enormous scale particularly to unemployed and underemployed urban workers, for instance through the Salvation Army and other charitable enterprises such as Medland Hall. Huge sums were disbursed through the Mansion House Fund in London and other semi-official collections, and organised charity descended on some poorer urban districts in the form of the Charity Organisation Society, the University Settlements and an army of more or less "scientific" almsgivers: sometimes, as with the Charity Organisation Society and the lady rent-collectors such as Beatrice Webb and Octavia Hill, the "science" was a good deal more in evidence than the alms. To quote one lady, on witnessing the touching deathbed scene of an old man she was visiting, "These little incidents make 'slumming' a real pleasure. One can give so much happiness with so little trouble."18

However, despite the fond fancies of the Charity Organisation Society, private charity was simply not a viable means of dealing with mass unemployment. This was soon proved by the next great cyclical depression of 1884-87. Great distress and rioting, along with the gaping inadequacy of existing Poor Law and charitable provision, prompted the new President of the Local Government Board, Joseph Chamberlain, to take decisive action. In his famous Circular of 15 March 1886, he launched the policy of provision of public relief works for the unemployed outside the Poor Law, which was to lead to the Unemployed Workmen Act of 1905, the Distress Committees and ultimately to Unemployment Insurance. The previous year, in 1885, the Medical Relief Act had removed the pauper disqualification from those receiving such relief only: a very humble beginning to the public acknowledgement that national efficiency required a health service in which deterrence, and hence the Poor Law, played no part. Thus began the dismantling of the Poor Law, less than two decades after "strict administration" commenced. Of course, as we have seen in Chapter Two, poor relief remained the last or only resort for many unemployed people, especially the elderly and long-term unemployed. Nonetheless, the
raison d'être of a deterrent poor law, the masses of truly able-bodied, were slipping from its grasp.19

Thus a vast and cumbersome administration, based firmly on the principle of less eligibility, was left to deal with a population which became progressively older and sicker and more helpless. Apart from the shifting numbers of residual unemployed, recipients comprised mainly a small group of the elderly and disabled - who, though often technically "able-bodied", were not so much unemployed as outside the workforce - a few thousand vagrants, and large numbers of widows and children, the sick and the aged. This development might have been a major embarrassment to the officials of the Local Government Board, had its implications then been realised. They were, however, sustained by the belief, then apparently general amongst the middle and upper classes at least in London, that the genuine unemployed workman was a temporary aberration, quite distinct from the "pauper classes": as Chamberlain stated in his Circular, "it is not desirable that the working classes should be familiarised with Poor Law Relief".20

The immediate result of this important development was that the brunt of a generation of "strict administration" and the deterrent principles of 1834 was borne by the large majority of paupers who had hitherto absorbed comparatively little of the central authority's time and attention. From 1 January 1872 to 1 January 1892, the number of non-able-bodied adult paupers in England and Wales dropped from 434,400 to 350,838: a fall of almost 20 per cent.21

The impact of "strict administration" varied sharply for different groups of recipients. Poor Law and Local Government Board officials had long accepted that the necessity of adequate medical treatment for the indoor sick precluded the application of less eligibility to this group; and most now also accepted that the principle was inapplicable to workhouse children, if they were to be trained to lives of independence from the Poor Law.22

This left three main groups for the imaginative exercise of deterrence. "Able-bodied" widows, as the last large group of able-bodied left within the Poor Law, were for the first time to be subjected to a policy of workhouse-testing and/or separation from their children: as the Chairman of the St Pancras Guardians, J.H. Allen, explained in 1895, this provided "just that measure of inconvenience and sorrow sufficient to give strength to providential considerations ...".23 Relief to the outdoor sick was to be restricted to short term cases where possible: to quote a Board Memorandum in 1892, "the sick poor can usually be better tended and nursed by skilled nurses in well-equipped sick wards than in their own
homes". While neither of these policies was consistently applied, each undoubtedly caused much hardship.24

Thus there remained, at last, the largest and most intractable group of the non-able-bodied, the aged. However, before discussing in detail the effects of "strict administration" on this group, it is necessary to summarise the provision for old age which existed at this time. For, as the Rev. J. Frome Wilkinson complained in 1893, "it is astonishing how many people deceive themselves over this matter". Without some knowledge of the means by which old people then lived, the historian may be as vulnerable to such self-deception as were the "strict administrators".25

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Provision for Old Age

There has recently been some debate in historical circles as to the extent and amount of Poor Law Relief to old people in England before the 1870s. David Thomson, from a perspective anchored in the rural South, has claimed the existence of a virtual pension system providing the great majority of old people with an allowance approaching the per capita income of the average farm labourer and his family. From the prospect of the industrial and urban North, E.H. Hunt has argued that Thomson's southern farm labourers were atypical; that, because of their poverty, they were disproportionately likely to draw poor law relief in old age; and that such relief had of necessity to approach the bare subsistence incomes of local wage-earners in order to prevent its recipients from rapidly and publicly starving to death.26

As is usual in such debates, there is a substantial share of truth on either side. Before the 1870s, the central authority did not collect figures on the proportions of aged and infirm poor relief recipients, probably not from any desire for obfuscation but rather because the issue did not interest them. Nor are the numbers of old outdoor paupers available from the Census, both because paupers frequently failed to classify themselves as such, and because they were in any case not separately enumerated.27

Hence we must fall back on local studies such as Thomson's for an indication of the proportions of old people receiving relief before the 1870s, and, as noted in Chapter One, such studies have generally shown these proportions to be very high, comprising a large proportion and sometimes the majority of working-class people in their sixties and above.
As E.H. Hunt concedes, "we now know that poor-law support for the elderly was more extensive in places like Ampthill than had been generally supposed".28

Further evidence of the very high proportions of old people likely to have been receiving relief before the 1870s comes indirectly from our knowledge of the large percentage relieved in the subsequent decades, when some national figures become available. On 1 January 1872, when "strict administration" was just gathering steam, the number of non-able-bodied adult paupers in England and Wales was 434,400; at this time, the population over sixty-five was approaching 1.1 million. If the ratio of paupers aged over sixty-five to all aged and infirm paupers was the same in 1872 as in 1892 - that is, 77 per cent - then about 330,000, or more than 30 per cent, of people over sixty-five were receiving poor relief on that one day. If the proportion of those aged over sixty-five relieved during the year 1872 bears the same relationship to the proportion relieved on 1 January 1872 as existed in 1892 -that is, 150 per cent - then the number of those relieved during the year was about 500,000, or over 45 per cent of those over sixty-five. Thus the majority of working-class people aged over sixty-five probably received relief during the year 1872. Going one step further, a majority of all those reaching age sixty-five in the late 1860s would probably have received poor relief at some time before death, and the majority of working-class old people would almost certainly have done so.29

In 1892, we move to more certain ground. At this time, "strict administration" was at its zenith and the numbers of old people receiving relief were undoubtedly at their historical low point. Yet, of a population over sixty-five of 1,372,602 in the 1891 Census, 268,397, or nearly 20 per cent, received relief on 1 January 1892 and 401,904, or nearly 30 per cent, during the year.30 Interestingly, in the light of the current controversy, the percentages were not very different across the country, falling to 23 per cent in the North and rising to 37.5 per cent in the Metropolis, with all other regions concentrated within 2 percentage points of 30. Only suburban and mining districts were much lower than the 30 per cent average. Purely agricultural Unions in fact provided the mean at exactly 30 per cent. Indeed, Charles Booth observed that 30 per cent was a figure which constantly recurred in calculations of the proportions of old people receiving relief during these years; he believed that, even under the strictest administration, this figure was the irreducible minimum of aged pauperism. For a few years, he argued, exceptionally able and visionary administrators, such as John Jones in Stepney, Bland Garland in Bradfield and Canon Bury in Brixworth, might be able to keep the percentage down, but public pressure would shortly produce a reaction: this assertion proved to be correct in all of the Unions which attempted to abolish out-relief in this period. In Booth's words,
The average rate in all the other groups is about 30 per cent. There is about this a persistence of reiteration hard to gainsay, and it may fairly be said that, apart from exceptional conditions or very exceptional administration, pauperism of some kind is the probable fate of 30 per cent of our old people. 31

This was a considerable understatement: while the proportion receiving poor relief in any one year was about 30 per cent, both Booth and Canon Blackley, using different techniques, estimated that over forty per cent of those reaching age sixty-five would receive relief before they died. Hence, even at the height of "strict administration", following twenty years in which the proportion of pauperism to total population had decreased by 40 per cent and in which the absolute numbers of aged and infirm recipients had fallen by one in five, the majority of the working-class elderly could still expect to receive relief at some time in old age. As Canon Blackley remarked, "I suppose there are no more candid statistics in the world than those of Mr Charles Booth". 32

The statistics of the 1890s show that rural southern labourers were not in fact atypical in respect of proportions in receipt of poor relief in old age; probably their comparative poverty was balanced by better opportunities for work in old age. As well as lending weight to Thomson's case, this is convenient for longitudinal analysis of trends in poor relief: if rural labourers were not atypical in respect of relief in old age, then, in the absence of major policy changes such as "strict administration", we would expect the proportions of old people receiving relief to remain fairly constant throughout the century despite the shift way from agriculture. 33

Returning to Thomson's argument, poor relief was clearly a normal part of working-class old age throughout the nineteenth century. There is plentiful evidence that outdoor relief was commonly referred to as a "pension" - in fact, "strict administrators" often objected to this - and also that there was widespread community acceptance both in rural and urban areas of the inevitability of pauperism for most old people who were beyond work. As Thomas Mackay complained in 1893, old people "fled naturally to the Poor Law"; or in the words of another "gentleman", "they had already put a pension scheme into operation, and therefore did not want one now". 34

On the other hand, as we have seen in Chapters One and Two, there is no evidence that old people demanded their "pension" as a right at a given age, nor indeed that relief was given freely and without question, nor that it was set at a level as generous as Thomson has recently claimed. Instead there is abundant evidence that throughout the century, Poor Law
administration was commonly grudging, mean-minded, and an object of bitter resentment to working people, and that outdoor relief meant slow starvation for many and actual starvation for some.\textsuperscript{35} On the issue of adequacy, although the value of relief compared to wages may have declined during the century, its real value undoubtedly increased despite reductions in some Unions in the 1870s. The substantial fall in the cost of living meant that, even if the 2s.6d. cited in Thomson's thesis was the average in the 1840s - and it is rather high compared to other estimates - it was worth less to its recipients than the amounts of between 2s. and 2s.6d. which were the median in the 1890s. After all, what mattered most to those on subsistence incomes was how much they had to eat, not what their neighbours were eating.\textsuperscript{36}

Equally plentiful is the evidence that old people preferred to go on working until they dropped before facing what one worker called the "cap in hand indignities" of the Poor Law. As an old farm labourer wrote in the 1900s, after working hard all his life, raising four children on 1s.6d. a day, and doing "the best I could to help my poorer neighbours ... it seems hard to have parish pay hanging over you." Indeed, throughout the century, many thousands even of the worst paid were prepared to scrape and scrimp from their near-subsistence incomes to pay Friendly Society and slate club dues in an attempt to keep out of Poor Law clutches for as long as possible.\textsuperscript{37} Surveys often show that families were going hungry to pay for Friendly Society membership, and in 1908, the wife of a sick old farm labourer trying to live on a 4s. club pension told Gwendolyn Harlock that "she and her children had many times gone without food to eat in order to save the money to pay the club contributions". Unfortunately things had not changed, and they were both ill and still in grinding poverty; the old woman lay in bed and "cries and worries about how the doctor's bill is to be paid".\textsuperscript{38}

Thus most old people received poor relief at some time in old age even during the decades of "strict administration", but they received it only when other means of support had failed them. In the words of one autobiographer from a comparatively well-off family of shoemakers,

everybody, at some time or another, was in need of assistance. They had nothing; they had no reserves ... . The dread of the workhouse, also, in those days, was very real, and despite their poverty and privation, the spirit of freedom and independence prevailed, even though the battle would inevitably be lost.\textsuperscript{39}

Another, whose father was a railway worker, observed that
never far away could be the thought that ill-fortune or adverse circumstances might render in jeopardy their slender subsistence margin, while in the background stalked the Board of Guardians and the end of their so prized respectability.40

As we have seen in Chapters One and Two, only a very small minority could expect to support themselves wholly by their earnings past their mid-sixties. At this time there was very little formal provision for those past work outside the Poor Law. Such provision has been most ably discussed by other authors, notably by Leslie Hannah and Paul Johnson, and need only be touched on here. Leslie Hannah has shown that occupational pensions provided for a comparatively small proportion of manual workers before the Second World War: confirming this claim, Caradog Jones in his 1934 Liverpool survey found only 60 private and public sector superannuitants in a sample of 2,287 working-class people over fifty-five. Pension schemes were mainly restricted to a minority of larger, more bureaucratic firms: for example, in 1908, railway companies paid pensions to 5,675 former manual employees.41

Public sector schemes at this time provided for few working-class old people, except of course for army and navy pensioners, of whom there were 103,452 of all ranks in 1905-06. At this time, pensions for ordinary ranks were set at between 6d. and 2s.6d. daily, depending on disability and length of service. Most army pensioners were middle-aged and elderly rather than old, and, because they often lacked a home, were disproportionately represented in workhouses and casual wards. In 1892, one Guardian reported that 37 per cent of a group of vagrants were old soldiers, another reported 22 per cent: similarly, in 1920, estimates varied between 20 and 35 per cent, mostly aged over forty. Because of their pensions and frequent usefulness in the workhouse, one contemporary author called army pensioners "the mandarins of pauperism".42

In addition, workers who had stayed for many years with the one employer sometimes received ad hoc pensions or modest gratuities when too old or sick to work. For instance, of the over 250 male inmates of Bromley Workhouse in 1889, at least 16 had received some form of payment after ceasing work, although in about half these cases the money was given as informal compensation for a crippling accident. The pensions listed varied from a 1s. a week "tobacco allowance" to 14s., but in several cases were given for a limited time only; the largest gratuity was for fifty pounds. By contrast, at least thirty were stated to have been disabled at work, or dismissed after several decades' service, without receiving such payments. As these men were in the Workhouse, they are not typical:
however, their records show that this type of provision was not uncommon, though neither was it always enough to stave off poverty.43

Trade Union superannuation and Friendly Society sick pay supported some old men. Most Unions, however, did not have superannuation, and others limited it to a few members: for instance, 6,783 English and Welsh Trade Unionists received superannuation in 1893, of 1,280,789 members for whom returns exist. Many older Trade Unionists thus relied on unemployment or sickness pay, which was often limited to a certain number of weeks per year. Similarly, very few Friendly Society members were insured for superannuation: only 500 members of the 627,000-strong Manchester Unity were so insured in 1893. Instead, most of those past work relied on the actuaries' nightmare, extended sick pay. In the words of the prize - winning essayist in a Friendly Society competition in 1877,

the great majority of members had taxed themselves to what they believe is the extent of their ability to pay in order to provide for the immediate necessities caused by ever present liability to sickness and death.44

In 1899, the Hamilton Committee estimated that a total of 58,000 people aged over sixty-five were receiving allowances from these sources, although their test census suggests that this was an overstatement. Such payments were generally inadequate, with Trade Union superannuation averaging about 5 - 6s. a week and Friendly Society extended sick pay usually only about 2-3s. a week. As mentioned in Chapter Five, many recipients of extended sick pay - or, as the Webbs called them, the "decayed members of Friendly Societies" - were receiving outdoor relief, or were, like the two old men mentioned by J.H. Allen in St Pancras, in the workhouse because they "could not do" on allowances of 3s.6d. and 6s.6d respectively.45 In any case, the large registered Friendly Societies were the bastions of a favoured few, and did not admit women, unskilled workers, those in a large range of "dangerous" trades, or the already elderly or disabled. Even with such restrictions, the rate of lapse was high, running at over half of new members in the 1890s.46

Hence, in the words of Bentley Gilbert, "the grey, faceless lower third of the British working population" was left to the actuarially unsound smaller Societies and the slate and village clubs, whose usual method of handling the problem of old age was to break before their members reached it. In 1881, there were 11,304 former Friendly Society members (not including wives) in the workhouses of England and Wales; in 1891, the number was 14,808. In Barton Regis Workhouse in 1893, Mary Clifford found
11 old men who were members of country clubs which broke; and their histories are very sad, because some of them have tried three or four times to get back into those clubs ... one of those men was 40 years in a club when it broke; another man for 43 years ... .

Similarly, in 1898, the Chairman of the Brixworth Guardians, Rev. Charles Cox, reported that

A fortnight ago at the Brixworth Board we had two applicants for outdoor relief, one of who had paid into a village club for over 40 years and the other for 30, and both had broke. In my own village I have an aged labourer over fourscore years of age who paid into a local club for 53 years, and then it went to pieces. These piteous village tragedies are of common occurrence.

Other popular methods of saving were also precarious: in the words of J.A. Spender in 1894,

no-one who studies them can fail to be struck by the immense difficulty which the aged poor experience in turning small savings to good account. They live on their little capital until it is exhausted, or they invest it in some worthless security, or lend it to some designing relative, or perhaps start a little shop, which comes to grief. In other cases they have diminished their own store by assisting ... relatives ...

As Paul Johnson has observed, one of the safest and most popular forms of saving was the accumulation of goods such as furniture, clothes and knick-knacks, which bolstered social status when in use and family finances when pawned or sold. This was well understood by Poor Law officials and later by Pensions Officers, who often refused relief to households with proper furniture or decent clothes. "You cannot possibly eat the furniture", complained Stockton-on-Tees Guardian Mrs Close in 1919; but in a sense, you could. Booth's street surveys show a number of old people living by selling their belongings: for example, one former coachman and his wife had "sold a table and looking glass the other day for 12s.6d. to get food and pay rent", while another old couple "have been fairly off but are parting with their things now". Before the 1920s, cash savings were by old age usually non-existent or very small: even after years of wartime prosperity in 1919, a London Pensions Officer, Jane Stuart, told the Ryland Adkins Committee that "when I investigate
[new pension applicants], I find that they very rarely have more than twenty pounds”; other witnesses agreed.50

Contemporaries greatly exaggerated the importance of formal charity in the lives of old people. Even in 1945, when many dole charities had been converted to pensions and about half of all charitable provision was earmarked for old people, the Nuffield Foundation Survey estimated that a total of five million pounds was spent annually on the aged of England and Wales: this was about a pound a head for those of pension age.51

In 1895, Charles Stewart Loch declared indignantly that endowed dole charities were "claimed as a right", as indeed they were. Dole charities were extensive in many older parishes, and, along with other "indiscriminate" charity, they provided an occasional valuable boost to the incomes of poorer people of all ages: to quote Sidney Ward, "it is a great blessing to the people at winter time to get a bit of extra coal, or something like that". They were treasured by working-class people for the same reasons that charity reformers and officials loathed them: everyone received something, and there was little scope for favouritism or discretion. As Elizabeth Roberts observes of her Lancashire informants, "charity was accepted and acceptable if it was offered in a dignified way, and if it involved no investigation of the recipients' means".52 Generally only the very poorest and most unfortunate were prepared to face the indignities of the charity circuit and "professional" begging, like the old Salford women of the 1900s whom Robert Roberts described as

mere living bundles of rags who existed mainly on local charity and who stood draped in a creeping subservience that only years of beggary could confer ... they came shuffling into the shop ... pleading for the day's scraps ... the economic lowest of the low.53

Churches often had significant funds to administer, which sometimes led to what Dame Henrietta Barnett described as the "business transaction" approach to religion: to quote one casual labourer, "them that wanted something, went for what they could get. Mostly grub and old clothes. Or perhaps a day's work". When the Barnettts started at St Jude's, Whitechapel, services were attended only by "six or seven old women, all expecting doles for attending", and some old women were said to make a precarious living as "professional church creepers". One example was given by Thomas Gage Gardiner of the Charity Organisation Society:

An old woman applied for out-door relief ... we asked her what her means of living were. She said she could not tell ... she picked up a shilling here
and a shilling there. ... I found her in a little room with a floor covered with newspapers in place of carpet ... she belonged to five different religious organisations. She said it was very hard work, that she had to attend meetings on four or five nights in the week ... she said she got on average a shilling from each of them.54

In 1907 a Government report calculated that there were about 25,000 pensioners of pension and almshouse charities in England and Wales, with an average pension of 5s.10d. a week. By 1945, there were over 75,000, including pensioners of trade and professional benevolent funds. Pension and almshouse charities were often limited to "decayed tradesmen" and others not of the working class: as Joseph Cox remarked in 1893, they were "a favourite method of disposing of [tradesmen's] widows". Pensions were often set below subsistence level, and in some cases recipients had outdoor relief as well, as did many almshouse residents before the 1890s. Even the much vaunted and carefully monitored "adequacy" of the Charity Organisation Society's pensions left the recipients in want: as one pensioner sadly remarked in 1894, she "would like a little more food".55

The famous helping hand extended to the "deserving aged" by the Charity Organisation Society provided pensions to a total of 30 old people in a population of 170,000 East Londoners in 1879. Pensions were reserved for those "the best among our old people", who were "superior to the class for whom Poor Law relief is primarily intended", with "special points of merit": in practice, they were usually for widows from the upper working class. In fact, before 1900, pension numbers never rose above 150 for any of the large urban areas served by the Society's Committees, and expenditure on charity absorbed less than one-twenty-third of the Society's income in 1897. Members were nevertheless confident that the problem of the aged poor was "easily solved", thanks to their agency. Not surprisingly, the Society was in "no fear of being overwhelmed by the number of applications".56 Nonetheless, its case notes are a valuable source of information on how applicants actually lived, and the case of one fairly typical "refusal" is worth quoting almost in full:

This widow [aged sixty-nine] has made no less than 19 applications to the C.O.S. since January 1881, Usually she asks for help until she can get work or for boots or for loans of small amounts, which she does not fail to repay. She used to go out nursing but this source of income has been gradually drying up. Every summer, she goes to Cambridgeshire fruitpicking, or into Kent, hopping. Her son is not able to help, as his earnings are small - he is very steady [he has 5 children]. Her [married] daughters give her 6d. or 9d. a week but they are poor. [One] has 7 children. ... Latterly she has only a
little needlework to depend on during the winter and fruiting in the summer. Committee helped her several times but have got tired during the past three months ... 2s. was granted for 26 weeks and then it was decided "not a pension case". She is a woman who will do anything to earn a living.\(^{57}\)

As Booth observed in 1899, the "painful struggle and pinched life" on inadequate charity, help from relatives and oddments of earnings was

no different in character ... from that which is observed as cruel in connection with the inadequacy of out-relief ... . In both cases the poor person drags up all possible resources in an effort to maintain a life of freedom outside the workhouse.\(^{58}\)

Thus the common theme of working-class old age, whether on intermittent earnings, poor relief, pensions, sick pay, charity or more commonly a combination thereof, was that of "toiling and moiling and patching and contriving", trying to cobble together a living from odd shillings here and there. Thus in 1894, Booth's survey of 9,125 rural old people of all classes found that of those over sixty-five, 23 per cent were supported wholly by their own means or those of their spouse, and 24 per cent wholly by their personal or spousal earnings. Of the remainder, 5 per cent were supported by poor relief only, another 5 per cent by relatives only, and the remainder by a mixed bag of two or more resources. Altogether, 46 per cent had some earnings (personal or spousal), 35 per cent had some means (ditto), 25 per cent some help from relatives, 22 per cent some poor relief, and 18 per cent some charity. A total of 45 per cent had help from relatives, poor relief or charity. More men had earnings; this was balanced by the greater number of women receiving outside assistance.\(^{59}\)

Also in 1894, a report on (male) workers in the iron and steel and affiliated trades estimated that from age sixty,

10 per cent live on their previous savings, 50 per cent are dependent upon their relatives, unions, clubs and miscellaneous labour, and the remaining 40 per cent help out their resources by parish relief.\(^{60}\)

In 1899, the Hamilton Committee found in its random sample survey of nearly 13,000 people over sixty-five living at home in England and Wales found that 41 per cent of men and 48 per cent of women had incomes of less than 10s. a week, with a further 5 per cent of men and 26 per cent of women being wholly supported by relatives or friends. Incomes
were not stated for 6 per cent of men and 11 per cent of women, and the reporting of women's incomes in particular may not be consistent, as the enumerators' instructions about the meaning of help from relatives and attribution of earned income are unclear. 15 per cent of men and 26 per cent of women reported that they were receiving poor relief or had done so in the past: the Committee felt that this was a substantial underestimate. Sources of income are not available for the whole sample. However, of those with incomes under 10s. who were not past or present paupers, 59 per cent of men and 26 per cent of women had earnings (or a pension from an employer: the number of these would probably have been insignificant); 16 per cent of men and 2 per cent of women received payments from Benefit, Trade or Friendly Societies; 13 per cent of men and 10 per cent of women reported means; and 28 per cent of men and 70 per cent of women received assistance from relatives or friends: a further 7 per cent of each sex had incomes from miscellaneous sources. 61

Both Booth's survey and the Hamilton Committee Report show that as age and ill-health advanced, sources of income tended to fall away, leaving most working-class old people half-starving on inadequate poor relief or forced into the workhouse or their children's homes by poverty and illness. In J.A. Spender's words,

the insecurity of it and the doubt of what the income will be from week to week is a constant, if concealed, anxiety, which embitters the last years and hastens the end.62

The Effects of "Strict Administration"

Such were the lives into which, in the 1870s, the Local Government Board and its allies brought their policy of "strict administration". Outdoor relief was to be restricted across the board: to quote the Webbs, "... the outstanding feature of the policy of the Central Authority was the steady pressure exercised through the inspectors with the object of reducing outdoor relief". For the first time, the Poor Law Inspectors sanctioned, and indeed encouraged, the application of the workhouse test to the aged and infirm: in the words of the most influential of the "strict administrators", the Metropolitan Poor Law Inspector, Henry Longley, in 1875, the use of the workhouse test for this group was "the keystone of an efficient system of Indoor Relief". Relief was to be given on loan where possible; contributions were to be sought from relatives, and the "offer of indoor relief" employed particularly, as Longley said, "to put pressure upon them to rescue themselves, if not [the applicants], from the discredit incident to the residence of the latter in the workhouse".63
Policy on the treatment of old people already inside the workhouse was not so uniform, although Longley himself was a dedicated and commanding advocate of the extension of less eligibility to this group: as he explained, a "distinction may be properly be established between the condition of the aged inmate of a workhouse, and that of a labourer maintained in his old age, either on his own savings, or by his family".64

In the words of Thomas Mackay in 1893, "it was the business of the central authority to make the guardians push the people back further and further onto their own resources". Like other "strict administrators", Mackay acknowledged that their policies represented a distinct departure from the practices of the Poor Law Reformers earlier in the century; also like the others, he argued that this was simply because these earlier reformers had not got around to dealing with the non-able-bodied: and perhaps he was right. As he summarised, "Implicitly, if not explicitly, the Poor Law Commissioners intended that there should be a gradual but continuous policy of restriction of the facilities for all kinds of pauperism"; following in their footsteps, the "strict administrators" displayed "the very rare courage to face the unpopularity and misrepresentation involved in carrying out the recommendations of the Commissioners to their logical conclusions". Octavia Hill, as always, was more forthright: the opinions of the working class on this subject were "not very far-sighted", she told the Aberdare Commission "... I think we really ought to think for them very much"; "... we have to do the unpopular things for them". In short, as she had declared in 1875, there was "much of rebuke and repression needed".65

Longley's Reports were published by the Local Government Board and copies circulated to Boards of Guardians; but apart from the 1871 Circular, the Board made no specific pronouncement on this issue. In fact, it rejected the concerted campaign of the Central Poor Law Conference in 1877 for a new, extended out-relief Prohibitory Order, and firmly squashed attempts by individual "strict" Boards to make their policies binding on their successors. On the other hand, as the Webbs pointed out, it took to sending out to Guardians "comparative tables showing their relative position in order of merit according to the smallness of their out-relief", as well as distributing copies of the relief regulations of "strict" Unions.66

Throughout the period, the Poor Law Indexes provide a clue to the Board's ambivalent stand in this matter. While consistently refusing to allow local Guardians to give out-relief to old people with earning relatives, and frequently surcharging them for doing so, the Board, and later the Ministry of Health, were equally firm in their reprimands to Guardians issuing blanket demands for contributions. Revealingly, one Board was given instructions "as to altering form so as to make it less likely to suggest a demand for payment".
Apparently, the Government was keen to reap the financial benefits of "strict administration"; it was not, however, so anxious to bear the political costs.67

The core of "strict administrators" amongst the Poor Law Inspectors, the local Guardians and officials and the Charity Organisation Society were indeed, as the Rev. Dr Charles Cox complained in 1899, "a handful of faddists". In the words of the Rev. Frome Wilkinson in 1893, "'good administration' - or what is euphemistically termed so - runs so contrary to popular opinion that it has gained ground in only about 5 per cent of Unions". In fact, the complete or virtual abolition or of outdoor relief was achieved in just five or six Unions, and then usually only until the next Board election. The Secretary of the Local Government Board, Sir Hugh Owen, explained in 1893 that

Usually it has been found that those results have been mainly secured by the action of one man ... who is very strongly impressed by the necessity of maintaining as far as possible the independence of the poor ... . He regards the saving of expenditure as a very minor consideration.68

In fact, the model Unions usually had far higher overall costs than their neighbours, due to the their employment of additional clerks, field officers hired to pursue relatives, and lawyers to conduct prosecutions. Usually working with the Charity Organisation Society or other unelected people, the Boards worked to gain control of local charities: these were then administered as pensions for the benefit of the tiny number of "superior" Poor Law applicants. The policy did not work well in practice. Pensions were offered only to a tiny number; they were often not forthcoming; they were given, in Dr Cox's words, "fitfully or irregularly", or, as Sidney Ward said "one week, and they miss two or three, and it is a miserable existence". Often pensions were withdrawn suddenly and without explanation; they were, at least in Brixworth, even lower than out-relief given elsewhere in the district.69

To quote Sidney Ward, "they seem as if they gloried in getting the figures right - it does not matter about the people". In the face of the evidence, the "strict administrators" insisted that the old people affected by their policies were happy: in the workhouse, after "the very real agony of going in", as Sophia Lonsdale put it, "they settle down and are happy and comfortable, for all anxiety as to their future is at an end". This was in any case not an important issue, for most "strict administrators", like the Rev. L.R. Phelps of Oxford, held that "... no person who would popularly be called 'deserving' is ever an inmate of the workhouse." Those who remained outside the workhouse were either ipso facto undeserving, because they obviously preferred squalor and privation, or, if supported by
charity or relatives, were "independent". In 1906, Helen Bosanquet declared that "it is beyond doubt that the majority of the aged have their independence assured by membership of a family group"; and, as an instance of the proud spirit of self-reliance of the rural aged, a paper in the Charity Organisation Review in 1893 invoked the Gloucestershire parish of Harwicke, where 7 of 9 old people were supported by their children.

These fine distinctions were, however, lost on the old people themselves, and when out-relief became available in Brixworth in 1895, every one of the pensioners immediately gave up their allowances; needless to say, those being supported by relatives also applied. Dr Cox explained that "they [felt] there was less real taint of pauperism in seeking something from a common social fund ... rather than have to go to some private fund"; or, as Sidney Ward declared, "I think that if a man is worthy of having relief he might have it direct, without having to bow to different people for it". Indeed, the greater reluctance of the poor to seek charity, rather than poor relief, was acknowledged by the Charity Organisation Society, and Thomas Mackay called it "the secret of our success".

Indoor relief numbers rose significantly in all these Unions; but most of those offered the Workhouse still stubbornly refused it. To the "strict administrators", this was simply a vindication of their policy: as Cox wrote,

> a very curious error into which the Charity Organisation Society folk are constantly falling, is the idea that because the poor refuse a workhouse order, therefore they are humbugs ... [but] some will literally die, and many more suffer the greatest privation, rather than be uprooted from their old homes.

While always ready to bemoan the inadequacy of out-relief and cite instances of old people starving to death on it, the "strict administrators" remained curiously blind to the identical, if not indeed more rapid, effects of struggling by on other resources: perhaps, in the comforting words of Canon Barnett, "the damage to the body of the applicant is less real ... than the damage to his spirit". Sidney Ward believed that several old people in Brixworth had their deaths hastened by the refusal of relief. Meanwhile, Whitechapel Union in London, the star in the crown of "strict administration", with a regime lasting over fifteen years, consistently held top billing in the Deaths from Starvation Returns, with 98 deaths between 1891 and 1905 and 10 in the winter of 1905-06 alone, mostly of old people.73

Whitechapel was a very poor Union, and had over 5,000 out-relief recipients in the winter of 1869-70, compared to 2 in 1893. The ruling attitude of its Board can be summarised in
Albert Pell's claim that "we are failing in our own duty if we permit those poor people on the very verge of pauperism to think of applying for one moment". St George's in the East, Poplar and Stepney, three other "strict" London Unions, also featured prominently in the Starvation Returns, although this was probably not what Pell had in mind when he boasted that "the aged poor have a chance of a wholesome termination of their lives in St George-in-the-East".  

The courageous obstinacy of the aged poor was probably one of the main reasons for the downfall of "strict administration" in all these Unions. They remained in their homes, in what one of the dissenting Whitechapel Guardians called "conditions of intolerable harshness"; scandals were frequent. Neighbours, mostly from sympathy but also from a desire to foil the Board, made heroic efforts to aid them: to quote Sidney Ward, on helping an old couple who lived nearby in Brixworth:  

God knows I have not got much to spare, but I cannot see people pine and die for want; ... she [said] "Mr Gaylor has been, and left a paper for us to go into the [work]house, but ... I hope God will take me; ... why am I lying here today, I believe, it is nothing only bought on through my being in want last winter time".  

Similarly, in Whitechapel, George Lansbury remembered:  

My mother was always doing little things for the poor ... every Sunday a couple of dinners for an old couple living in a slum went from our dinner table. ... we came up against the malignant work of Mr Vallance and his Board of Guardians. On at least two occasions these wretched experts in rate saving actually had the impudence to write and request us not to help certain people, as our assistance prevented the Guardians from sending them to the workhouse. 

In another part of Whitechapel, his wife's mother was also feeding her old neighbours, "as did thousands throughout the country". The "festering discontent and animosity" caused by the policy for once disproved Professor Marshall's pronouncement that "what the working-classes do is grumble but not vote at present". For example, in Poplar, George Lansbury and Will Crooks were amongst the first working-men Guardians, voted in on the reduced property qualification in 1894 with a platform of Poor Law "pensions" and the abolition of "strict administration". 
Yet while working-class opposition to "strict administration" would no doubt have defeated it eventually, it was the hostility of most of the old governing classes that nipped its more extreme manifestations in the bud. There was opposition on the "strict" Boards almost from the outset, and Canon Bury as Chairman at Brixworth resorted to having all applicants referred first to him, discussing their cases in private with the Almoner (his wife), and then telling the Board that they had been provided for. When he recommended the workhouse, he was sometimes obliged to prevent applications being put to the vote. Fine examples of his style of muck-raking and distortion are found in Albert Pell's questions to Sidney Ward before the Aberdare Commission in 1894, as well as in the Appendix Bury submitted to this Report: the Brixworth Board of Guardians later offered to provide affidavits to substantiate Ward's version. Significantly, the Guardians who overthrew the "strict" regimes were, apart from Lansbury and Crooks, middle-class people.

We have noted the spread of "indiscriminate charity" in the wake of the restriction in outdoor relief: this included the establishment of Medland Hall, defiantly placed directly opposite the Workhouse in Stepney, and of a number of large refuges in Whitechapel, one of them Lord Shaftesbury's Evangelical Mission, which seemed to wage open war with the Guardians. In 1877, the Charity Organisation Society complained that in the Tower Hamlets Committee area alone there were over a hundred different individuals and groups engaged as "gift-giving rivals". Henrietta Barnett wrote that at this time, "old-fashioned people" would take care to slip money to applicants refused by the Charity Organisation Society. Such behaviour was the despair of "strict administrators": as one anonymous reformer declared in 1891:

So long as the aged and infirm men and women, with families quite able to support and take care of them, are allowed to wander about the streets and become objects of public and private charity, so long will there be an apparent neglect of the poor before us.

Cynics might attribute this charitable behaviour solely to the desire to quell what Professor Marshall called "political dangers", and this was undoubtedly a factor. However, this was never such an important motive with regard to the aged poor as with the vast looming mass of the unemployed. In addition, many of those who, like Marshall, Booth and the Webbs, promoted a deterrent Poor Law for the able-bodied residuum, understood that it could never be effectively used in this way while the workhouses retained a majority of the old and sick, and while working-class opinion remained that the system was unjust and cruel. But there was a third element.
Most middle-class people in this period, and many working people too, were no doubt more interested in relief to the rates than to the poor, and were certainly ready enough to condemn the unemployed and the casual and vagrant fringe as unworthy of assistance except on the harshest terms. But few were able to stomach the same policy in its application to the old, the sick and the other classes of the traditional "true poor": as Booth observed, "out-relief has a strong hold on public opinion". Professor Marshall probably came closest to the core of public feeling on this matter when he explained that common opinion considered the workhouse test "a barbarous test adapted to the urgent necessities of the time in which it was invented, and inappropriate as a universal test to the present". Many people, he added, believed that

the present tendencies are going rather too far ... [and] think that there are still many hardships, which cause more pain than they are worth for the purposes of education.\textsuperscript{81}

This feeling was at the root of the movement for old age pensions, which was, as Helen Bosanquet complained, "entirely a middle-class movement in its origin", and was not embraced with fervour by the Trade Unions and other working-class groups until the mid-1890s.\textsuperscript{82} It was also the reason for the failure of "strict administration" to gain a hold in most Unions, despite steady pressure from the Local Government Board and the Inspectors. George Cuttle in his work on the Essex Guardians provides many glimpses into the gulf which separated the Poor Law Inspectors from the Guardians. One example is this exchange between an Inspector and the Billericay Board:

the Chairman in February, 1898, said the Local Government Board was inconsistent: "On the one hand they were constantly urging them to make their Workhouses like palaces, and on the other hand they were saying with regard to Outrelief, 'You are too liberal'. He would like to ask anyone whether a pauper could exist on 2s. a week and two loaves? ...". The Inspector replied that "the general view of the Local Government Board was that if workhouses were made more comfortable ... it would do away with the dislike ... among the Outdoor Poor against entering ... .It was better for them to be in the Workhouse ... than in the hovels in which many of them now lived. By the present system of Outrelief the Guardians were subsidising people who lowered the wages of independent labourers ...". At this point the Guardians laughed ... \textsuperscript{83}
The typical Guardian was not, perhaps, a large-minded, generous or imaginative person, but he had a shrewder assessment than the "strict administrators" of the ultimate prospects of a policy of pushing old people "further and further back upon their own resources". He aimed to be returned at the next election, and was anxious to avoid local scandals and the newspapers which, in Frederick Rogers' words, "make considerable copy out of any particularly bad starvation incident": also, he wished to rest easy with his own conscience. Moreover, he was as vulnerable as any other middle-class Victorian to the mixture of censoriousness and sentimentality which condemned or ignored the poverty of working-class adulthood, while remaining alive to the pathos of impoverished old age: or, as the author and rural Guardian, H. Rider Haggard, called it, "the poignant example of the sad end of life and all its toilings".84

Yet despite its failure to gain control of more than a handful of Unions, "strict administration" was more than a depressing cul-de-sac in history. Several of the large urban Unions, as mentioned earlier, severely curtailed their out-relief numbers, and numbers in other Unions were reduced by the constant pressure of the Local Government Board. As we have seen, between 1872 and 1892, the numbers of aged and infirm relief recipients on 1 January decreased from 434,400 to 350,838, during two decades which saw a considerable increase both in the aged population and the proportion of old people who classified themselves as retired. The percentage of old people receiving relief during the year dropped from a rough estimate of 45 per cent to a certain figure of 30 per cent.85

This undoubtedly caused great suffering, keeping alive the bitter legacy of the New Poor Law at a time when a liberal administration might have laid it to rest. As George Acorn wrote of the 1880s, the general working-class impression of officialdom was that its "one object was to get us all into the workhouse". To quote Thomas Mackay, "the people always expect that when the guardians offer the house that the guardians will change their mind, and they go on until they are sometimes too weak to go and accept what is offered them." Whether or not they expected the Guardians to change their mind, old people had little choice but to struggle along until they could no longer manage: as one old woman wrote in the 1900s,

I am a poor widow of sixty-eight years old and have reared four children. I am here alone. The Guardians will not allow me relief, and tell me I am able to work ... I fear I shall be driven to the workhouse. I have worked since I was eight years old and I cannot keep on much longer.86
Most working people at this time could probably recall scenes such as that recounted by Flora Thompson when an old neighbour was carried from his home into the workhouse wagon: "he ... collapsed and cried like a child. He was beaten ... ". Others remembered calling on old neighbours like the old charwoman Jerry White found "lying in bed with old coats over her ... . It was so pathetic ... I can just remember the inside - the little grate with nothing in the grate ... ". Still others, like Will Crooks, had the unpleasant experience of tripping over "bundles of rags", who were old women sleeping in the streets.87

Almost everyone was familiar with the sight of old people in workhouse uniform; almost everyone had read in the newspapers or heard on the grapevine of starvation inquests or suicides to avoid the workhouse. In 1903, one newspaper even trounced its rivals with a photograph of an old starvation victim lying dead in the workhouse mortuary. Pathetic tales abounded, such as that of the old Grimsby woman who, perhaps taking inspiration from the common saying that one "would rather die in a ditch" than go to the workhouse, took a bottle of laudanum with her to a ditch and promptly did so.88

Such Dickensian incidents touched the lives of even the most respectable as a shameful legacy of another era, evidence of a public policy, in George Barnes's words, "as stupid as it was callous": to quote from the 1899 Poor Law Conferences:

Mr Little (Chairman, Peterborough): ... his advice was, "Act first, leave the Local Government Board to act afterwards" (Laughter) "... They were always accused of being too liberal with their outrelief at Peterborough, but if the aged poor had been helped to enable them to remain in their own homes, there would have been no outcry for old age pensions." (Hear, hear).89

The consistent pressure of the Local Government Board on the amount of out-relief helped to ensure that it not only failed to keep pace with wages, but actually decreased or remained stationary during this period. Inadequate out-relief was not a new problem, and those without any other resources may always have died of slow starvation and intercurrent illness; but with rising living standards, this was becoming increasingly obvious. In 1906, the Local Government Board Inquiry accused the Poplar Guardians of "giving allowances which are in fact, old age pensions" to their out-relief recipients. Poplar gave old couples 6s. a week, which was generous even by London standards: however, it was impossible for a single person to live on this amount, let alone two people. For instance, the Charity Organisation Society held that 3s.6d. per person excluding rent was the minimum in London: rent was usually at least 2s.6d. for a single room. In fact, Will Crooks pointed out,
the Poplar Guardians already had old people in the workhouse who had tried to live on such sums and failed. One old man on a 6s. private pension had "struggled on outside in his one room, selling and pawning his few things bit by bit until he hadn't a stick left". It was, Crooks said,

[a] system of scientific starvation ... they toil and struggle and pine outside on an amount which barely keeps body and soul together. They reach the workhouse at last, as a rule, through the infirmary. This means they break down and have to get medical orders for admission.90

Booth's survey on the Aged Poor shows that many Guardians consoled themselves with the thought that, thanks to falling food prices, the real value of out-relief had increased. But, as we have noted elsewhere, the long downwards trend of the relative incomes of the elderly had begun. Instead of seeking to curb this trend and to protect their clients, Local Government Board officials were pursuing a course which exacerbated and entrenched the problem. Moreover, this course was ultimately fatal to the interests of "strict administration". As a Government planning report stated in 1935, the quest for a national minimum was not new since

in a rudimentary form it has existed for more than three centuries in the shape of the Poor Law, which with all its cruelties and humiliation was an attempt to see that no-one in this country would starve.91

From the 1870s, it was clear that the Poor Law was not doing its job. Already, it had shown itself unable to deal efficiently with the unemployed; now, it was apparent that it could not keep from starvation even the "true poor", the impotent and "deserving". It was not only cruel and humiliating, but ineffective. From 1896, various Local Government Board Circulars, such as the Chaplin Circular of 11 July, attempted in a piecemeal and half-hearted way, and without the support of most of the Inspectors, to improve the adequacy and availability of out-relief to the aged and lessen the aspect of deterrence. But it was too late: the Old Age Pension Act of 1908 was by then inevitable, and the next step in the dismantling of the Poor Law had begun. "Strict administration" had indeed proved to be, as Professor Marshall had predicted, "a landmark in English history", although perhaps not in the sense that he intended.92
"Strict Administration" and Filial Duty

Yet the effects of "strict administration" on English social policy lay not just in the questions of adequacy and availability, but in the whole attitude of social administrators to the question of the family and the community. In order to trace this legacy, we must return once again to their original policies.

In the Local Government Board's 1871 Circular on the restriction of out-relief there was, as mentioned previously "quite a new stress on ... laid on getting contributions from relatives". There was also an implication that the workhouse test could be applied to the non-able-bodied, as one Poor Law Inspector, Mr Culley, put it, "in order to put pressure on relatives who are not legally liable". Two of the most exceptional "strict administrators", Mr Bland Garland, of Bradfield, and Mr Goodlake, of Farringdon, declared that the two great principles of sound administration were refusal of medical relief and insistence on support of parents by their adult children, as well as of adult children by parents.93

Three excellent and illuminating articles have appeared on this issue in recent years by Michael Anderson, Margaret Crowther and David Thomson; yet much still remains unknown.94 More work, particularly, is needed on the period before 1834 and on the first decades of the New Poor Law. At the present time, the evidence suggests that contributions to the support of working-class old people were rarely enforced before the 1870s.

The legal liability to support the non-able-bodied poor was imposed on a limited range of relatives by the famous 1601 Poor Law in the face of a pressing economic crisis. This is confirmed by the fact that the list is longer than that in the statute it replaced, the 1597 Poor Law Act, which mentions only parents and children. The responsibility to maintain was not enforceable by the poor people themselves, but only through magistrates, and evidence suggests that payments were customarily collected by the parish to offset poor relief, rather than being given directly. The Act required the relative to be "of sufficient ability" to pay, and imposed a fine of one pound for refusal. As this was five times an Elizabethan labourer's weekly wage, the Lord Chief Justice in R. v. Moore ex parte Saunby in 1902 held in obiter dicta that this provision could not be taken to apply to an ordinary labourer; this was also the opinion of Stone's Justice's Manual in 1881.95

David Thomson has found no evidence that contributions for parents were enforced in Ampthill Union before the 1830s. In their first wave of New Poor Law fervour in the 1830s, the Guardians began to prosecute a small number of working men for the support of their parents, but such prosecutions had all but ceased by 1845. Even in the period from
1835 to 1845, he notes that "despite powers and self-interest, prosecutions ... were infrequent, faltering and seldom conclusive". This was probably also the experience in other Unions, although the initial vigour was probably not so marked: Ampthill Union was rather a showpiece for the Poor Law Commissioners.96 Some working men were pursued for contributions in other Unions: for instance, in Warwickshire in 1862, Joseph Arch, supporting a wife and children on a farm labourer's wage, was refused out-relief for his dying father and told he could contribute 1s.6d. to keeping him in the workhouse. Arch's father owned the cottage in which they were living, which may have been a factor. Such cases were rarely mentioned before the 1870s, and the respondents to Booth's 1894 survey regarded contributions as a new departure.97

Certainly, the "strict administrators" were delighted with the reductions in relief rolls which could be effected simply by offering old people the workhouse. As we have seen, however, this often did not have the effect of forcing old people to depend on their relatives. As the Rev. F. French of Hoxne Union complained in 1900, "if there was one thing the aged poor would not do, it was to seek help from their relatives, and consequently the aged poor were often half-starved." Similarly, Mr Wilson of Mitford Union said that "the aged poor were themselves most anxious not to disclose the names of their relatives - in fact, not even the threat of 'the [work]House' was sufficient to drag the names from them". In 1888, the Rev. J.C. Jones of Spalding Union objected to the Poor Law Conference that the policy resulted in "starvation and in some cases death"; in 1898, Solomon Sharp of Leicester Union "knew of cases where out-relief having been refused, the applicant had simply sat down and starved".98

From the outset the policy of "offering the House" met with opposition by many Boards of Guardians, and was applied ruthlessly in only a few. The Poor Law Indexes attest to long battles between the Board and various Unions particularly with regard to giving out-relief to those living with earning children. In 1909, the Eastern District Inspector complained that "there is no doubt that out-relief is freely given to old people living with single sons who are well able to maintain them; generally speaking, the Guardians who give this Relief are the farmers who employ the labourers". Workhouse-testing of the aged was always a controversial issue at the Poor Law Conferences: even in 1888, five Guardians attacked such methods as inhumane and impractical.99

Some Unions applied the workhouse test to the old when relatives would not sign a voluntary agreement. For example, the Rev. B. Alford of St Marylebone explained in 1897 that
our practice is to see all that are liable, and reason with them ... . Failing a reasonable settlement, we admit the applicant to the House, and summons all the children liable before the magistrate.

In most cases, the "offer of the House" seems mostly to have been used against those already living with relatives, and to compel support from married daughters and others not legally liable: as the Rev. Alford added, "we should rarely, if ever, grant out-relief if [non-liable relatives] stood aside and contributed nothing". Here was the hated Household Means Test of the interwar years in embryo. In the words of Mr Collins of St. Olave's in 1897,

there were gentlemen in favour of firm administration; they had got polite names for very objectionable things, and the latest development was a scheme for making relatives who had no legal liability pay for the maintenance of their relations.100

The second flank of the attack, contributions, proved far more popular with the Guardians. The difference in enthusiasm with which some Guardians embraced this second policy can be seen in a comment from Mr Merry of Brighton, who told the Poor Law Conference in 1895 that it was unjust to force old people into the workhouse, and "shameful to ask which is the cheaper method": he casually added that his Union obtained £11,000 a year in contributions mainly from the children of these same old people. Many seem genuinely to have believed that men supporting families on unskilled wages were able to pay one or two shillings a week to support their parents: for example, in the 1890s, the Barton Regis Union allowed 2s. per week per head before extracting contributions, so that a farm labourer on 12s. had to pay unless he had at least four dependent children.101 Others thought that children were already doing enough: to quote Charles Jones, "I have seen Guardians induced even to sympathise with them". Mr King of St Faith's declared at the 1900 Poor Law Conference that "there was ample scope for children to help their parents on top of inadequate relief"; and the Rev. J. Hocking of Stamford added that

the Poor Law ... was an institution to keep people from dying of destitution, and therefore, they gave only small doles, saying and believing, "Thank God, that's not all the old people are going to get" (Cheers). In his Union they never made a maintenance order on a married labourer.102

Contributions were indeed, as Joseph Arch said, "a burning question", and absorbed much of the Poor Law Conferences' attention especially in the 1900s. Practice was extremely variable, as shown for instance by the respondents to Booth's Aged Poor survey and from a
scrutiny of the Poor Law Conferences themselves. As Thomson has shown with reference to Cambridge, enforcement could vary dramatically even within the one Union in the course of a few years. Some Unions, such as Carnarvon, Warminster and Cuttle's six Essex Unions, seem to have enforced contributions only "when in that frame of mind", as the Carnarvon Clerk put it. Others, to the consternation of the Local Government Board, sent out blanket demands threatening prosecution to all liable and non-liable relatives and friends, dispatched information on earnings forms to all the relatives' employers, or automatically summoned all liable relatives to appear before the magistrates regardless of ability to pay.

The courts were no more uniform in approach. Some magistrates cheerfully sent unskilled labourers to prison for arrears, such as in Holywell where a Guardian believed that "such cases should be advertised by way of example", or in Lincolnshire where between 20 and 30 people were imprisoned for this reason between 1887 and 1904. In England and Wales in the 1880s, there were around 7,000 convictions annually for failure to maintain, but these were mostly of deserting husbands and fathers. Other magistrates were a continual thorn in the side of the Local Government Board, like the Islington magistrate who in 1901 said that he did not think the legislature ever intended the Act to apply to such people, and unless it could be proved that defendants ... were earning on average 26s. or 27s. weekly he should make no order.

Some Unions raised only a few hundred pounds annually: Barton Regis obtained £441 from relatives for in-maintenance in 1893, while in 1893, Norwich and Ashby obtained total sums of £393 and £174 respectively. In 1905, the Welsh Unions of Bangor and Holywell obtained £553 and £334 each. Others raised thousands, like Brighton with its £11,000 in 1894, St Marylebone with £2,328 in 1896 and Islington with £5,500 in 1904. In England and Wales in 1890-91, total recoveries from relatives and the property of paupers amounted to £232,338: recoveries from paupers themselves were at this time a very small component. Throughout the 1890s, such recoveries rose slowly but steadily to £336,055 in 1903. During these years they amounted to between 4 and 5 per cent of the expenditure for in-maintenance, out-relief and lunatics combined. Not all of this maintenance was in respect of old people. However, the records of the London Unions of Islington and Shoreditch and the figures obtained by David Thomson for Ipswich indicate that probably from one-third to one-half of all orders were for the elderly. Because old people were more likely to be receiving long term assistance, their share of recovery expenditure would have been substantially higher.
It is not possible to determine how many old people and their families were affected by contributions in this period due to the incomplete information in Union records. In some rural Unions, about 70 orders for adult sons were said to be in force at one time in the early 1900s, and in Ipswich in 1913, Thomson has found 96 orders against children or children-in-law and 5 for siblings: 12 of these orders were against non-liable relatives. In Shoreditch in 1881, 8 summonses or special voluntary orders were made for support of old people, mostly against sons, and the number climbed steadily thereafter, reaching 20 cases in 1898 and then declining slightly.¹⁰⁸

What is certain, however, is that it was an issue which, in Arch's words, "touched scores of labourers on the raw". In 1894, an Ashby check weigher, James Burton, told the Aberdare Commission that the two main working-class grievances with the Poor Law were being forced to enter the workhouse in old age and to make contributions for aged parents. Indeed, although the working-class witnesses to the Aberdare Commission were all artisans, Trade Union and Friendly Society officials and men who had acquired small property, all but one of them took the opportunity to air their view that men with families should not be compelled to contribute to parents' relief unless on very high wages. Several insisted that such payment was unjust in any circumstances. Attempts by Albert Pell to equate the duty to support parents with that towards minor children were firmly rejected."The children must come first", these witnesses repeated, and George Edwards spoke for all of them when he explained that "you do not bring your father into the world, but you do your child".¹⁰⁹

In the words of the Rev. Frome Wilkinson in 1893, contributions were "bad economics and bad ethics". The usual recipients of such orders were described by Mr Wilson of Mitford Union in ironic but probably accurate terms as invariably having "tremendous families and terribly delicate wives"; they were in and out of employment and sickness themselves, and Union arrears records are a dismal saga of poverty and ill-health. Blanket pursual of all relatives produced many pathetic and absurd little entries in the relief books: to give just one example, the Islington Clerk in 1905 recorded that "John Nicholls, eighty-two, son of Patience Nicholls, one-hundred-and-one, in the Infirmary, is not able to contribute". In the 1860s, Arch fell £10 in debt from having to care for his father without poor relief; in 1905, the Sleaford Guardian W.B. Harris reported one case in which an elderly permanently disabled former farm labourer was left without any income after paying a total of £50 for his father in the workhouse in just over six years; while in Horncastle, another farm labourer calculated that he had paid nearly £70 for his mother's relief in twenty years. In the words of a Yorkshire Guardian, Mrs Roebuck, in 1895:
One great cause which tells on men and women alike, and prevents them from providing for old age (and since I became a Guardian it has made a deep impression on my mind and I feel compelled to say: "IS IT TO GO ON AND ALWAYS BE SO?") is the duty of helping to support aged and invalid relatives.\textsuperscript{110}

Yet the brunt of this policy was undoubtedly borne by the elderly themselves, and it was they who resented it most deeply. Essentially, old people felt it was morally wrong as well as degrading to have to depend on their children, and from the 1890s consistently spoke of their hatred of "starving their grandchildren" and of forcing sons to "rob their own families". As one old woman wrote in the 1900s, "it pains me very much to rely on them for support as they are all poor, and I am receiving what ought to go to bring up their children". Like their children, they believed that a life of hard work and payment of the rates entitled them to turn to community support when they could manage no longer, and as we have seen previously, the weight of custom and contemporary practice underpinned this view. In the words of a disapproving Guardian, "an impression seemed to be abroad that by a father having paid rates all his life, the son should be allowed to go scot free".\textsuperscript{111}

Thus most old people tried despite privation to struggle along in their own homes, and no doubt this was largely because they did not wish to burden their children. However, like the eighty-year-old widow interviewed by the Economic Club in 1896, who had tried to live with her married children but had "'pined' and returned to her own cottage", they also felt happier in homes of their own. There is abundant testimony in contemporary sources to the fact that, as the St Columb Major respondent to Booth's 1894 parish survey declared, "old people are as a rule averse to living with their children and it seldom answers". In 1929, most of the old pensioners interviewed for the New Survey of London stressed their resistance to living with married children, and those who were doing so generally ate separately to preserve some semblance of independence: "Mrs A", for instance, said that "it was very nice to live with them as long as she could live independently. She would not like to have her meals with them"; another old woman was "proud of her children but preferred to live alone". "Mr O" liked living with his single daughter and "relations were not at all strained as she was not forced to keep him", while another old man "spent his time trying to make himself thoroughly useful to his daughter", in whose house he lived.\textsuperscript{112}

In Lady Bell's words in 1907, "a joint household is not an easy thing, given the customs and habits of this country ...": for the work of the Cambridge Group has shown that coresidence with married children was never the norm in pre-industrial England. Thus, Robert Roberts observed in the 1900s that the presence of anyone outside the nuclear
family threw a household "off centre" and lowered its social standing. Survey and Census evidence from the nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries also indicates that, except in some Northern industrial towns and in the mining areas of Wales, old people living with married children barely outnumbered those living with collateral relatives such as siblings, young grandchildren and similar miscellaneous groupings. In the 1930s, Percy Ford reported that unemployed families were significantly more likely to be living in multi-generation households. Thus three generation households continued to be what they probably always had been: a makeshift response to poverty, ill-health and lack of housing. Confirming this, coresidence was falling as living standards rose. Indeed, some investigators blamed old age pensions for the interwar housing shortage, noting that they had enabled more old people to remain in their own homes.

Booth's survey on the Aged Poor, as well as the surveys discussed earlier in this Chapter, show that small amounts of assistance in kind or in money were fairly general at this time, and later surveys such as the New Survey of London confirm that such "kindness" from their children was accepted by poorer and more helpless old people with some reluctance but with resignation. However, long term or enforced dependence, as advocated as right and proper by the "strict administrators", was rarely acceptable to either party. Indeed, in their more lucid moments even "strict administrators" such as Helen Bosanquet conceded that, without the element of mutual help, relationships could not long remain viable. Thus, while the mutual interdependence of the extended family, and indeed of neighbours and friends, was vital in the day to day survival of people whose incomes hovered precariously around the subsistence margin, long term dependence was neither socially acceptable nor economically sustainable.

Blinded by their dreams of a Golden Age of filial duty and of working-class family relationships which bore no resemblance to historical or contemporary reality, the "strict administrators" had blundered into the delicate support networks of the elderly, and the results were disastrous. As one of Booth's respondents remarked, much assistance was already given voluntarily, but "compulsion makes such aid very bitter". Many of Booth's informants stressed that relatives were taxed to their limit to enable old people to eke out parish relief: indeed, sometimes they were "in more straitened circumstances" than the old people, and the assistance was "the other way". One respondent observed that "children will not supplement outdoor relief if made to pay towards it": and this was the root of the problem. As Booth summarised, the investigations of the 1890s showed that nearly half of all old people relied on small amounts of help from relatives and local charity:
the amount [of charity] given may be small, as is the help from children, but combined with the usual measure of parochial relief, these gifts suffice to raise the standard of living just above starvation point.\textsuperscript{116}

If outdoor relief could not be obtained without contributions, then one of two things must inevitably happen. Old people with no other income could break up their homes and enter the workhouse or the homes of their children; or they could starve, either slowly on inadequate and unsupplemented out-relief, or more quickly without it. The statistics, both of poor relief and life expectancy, suggest that most preferred the latter course.\textsuperscript{117}

Opposing Old Age Pensions in 1908, Harold Cox called them a tax on the food of children. Yet for nearly forty years before 1908, England had imposed a tax on the food of its poorest children for relief to their grandparents. Moreover, it had "taxed" the food of the most vulnerable of the aged to fund a few hundred thousand pounds of savings to the ratepayers. In David Lloyd George's famous words on pension applicants in 1908,

\ldots this Pensions Act has disclosed the presence among us of over 600,000 people, the vast majority of whom were living in circumstances of great poverty, yet disclaimed the charity of the public. It has revealed the heroic struggle between pride and privation which has gone on in thousands of little rooms and hovels in this country \ldots .\textsuperscript{118}

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**The Legacy of "Strict Administration"**

The Old Age Pensions Act of 1908 should have been the end of the legacy of "strict administration", but it was not. In Pat Thane's summary,

It granted a below subsistence pension to a minority of the very aged, who did not yet require institutional care, and who conformed to a rigid definition of respectability which had reigned for almost a century. ... The aged now had a greater incentive to avoid the Poor Law, but it might lead to an unequal struggle with starvation before [age] seventy, and not necessarily bring greater comfort after.\textsuperscript{119}

The five shilling pension imported from out-relief the now entrenched notion of income support for the aged set below subsistence level. Indeed, the low expectations of the
working class on this point are illustrated by the support even of the Labour Party and the National Committee of Organised Labour on Old Age Pensions for pensions at this level. A near subsistence pension was not in fact achieved until October 1946, and the next decades saw its value eroded by inflation.\textsuperscript{120}

Moreover, the principle of below-subsistence benefits was extended via the National Insurance Act of 1911 and its subsequent extensions, to include the sick and disabled, the unemployed without covenanted benefit, and the contributory old age pensioner. The social insurance system of these decades was a particularly regressive form of direct taxation in insurance guise; contributions were punishing to the poorer worker, and, adding insult to injury, they were often so inadequate that recourse must still be had to the Poor Law or later Public Assistance or the Assistance Board. The system was acceptable to working-class people because they received something, however inadequate. Because they had (notionally) paid for their benefit, nobody could make them break stones or pick oakum for it, or withhold it on the grounds that they were not deserving; or insist that it would be more uplifting for them to beg for private charity, or that the best place for them was in the workhouse. It was the century-old argument that those who pay the rates are entitled to relief from the rates, dressed up in actuarial calculations. As Derek Fraser wrote in 1973, social insurance

survives as a legal fiction because for the state it represents a hidden form of direct taxation and for the individual it preserves the notion of legitimately earned entitlement to benefit. \textemdash insurance is, as Beveridge said, what the people desire, for even actuarially unsound insurance benefits carry no social stigma.\textsuperscript{121}

As Fraser adds, the Poor Law "has a lot to answer for". Indeed, there is another legacy of the Poor Law which is not so often recognised, because it was a legacy of 1871 rather than 1834: and that is the treatment of relatives. Even the Old Age Pensions Act itself bore the stamp of the "strict administrators", with the inclusion in its income test of the notional value of free board and lodgings provided by relatives and of other kinds of assistance, including small gifts of cash or in kind. In 1919, the Ryland Adkins Committee found much resentment of the inquisitorial tactics of Pensions Officers, who were inclined to exclude old people from pension altogether if they thought a son's or daughter's home looked too comfortable: one was even reported to go around children's homes pointing out items of furniture that the old person did not "need".\textsuperscript{122}
Moreover, the low level of pension meant that in 1919, about a third of pensioners were said to be dependent on help from relatives, and others to be struggling on in deep privation in an effort to maintain their independence. Jennie Baker believed that old people living with relatives were sometimes "practically starving themselves because they were dependents"; however, she felt that their position had greatly improved since 1908. In many areas, old people would have been better off on poor relief, but few made the transition. Through the next two decades, the great majority of pensioners continued to patch together a living on their pensions without applying for poor relief: this issue is discussed in Chapter Seven.123

For old people who still had recourse to the Poor Law, contributions and household means testing loomed larger than ever. For, like most reforms which produce savings to the public purse, Poor Law contributions had achieved a momentum which soon overrode the initial opposition by some Guardians. As we have seen, large sums were involved, representing a substantial saving to the rates. Relieving Officers and the special Collectors employed by some large urban Unions received a commission of up to 10 per cent of the amount collected. Increasingly, and especially in the larger Unions, the weight of paperwork and interviewing fell on special committees. Even by the 1880s in some Unions, cases were not routinely discussed by these committees, but were left more and more to the discretion of paid officials. The larger the Union, the smaller the role played by the Guardians; the smaller their role, the more smoothly and efficiently the machine of contributions ran.124

What Oliver Macdonagh has so well described as self-generating administrative momentum was gaining hold, and the interest of the Guardians, the community representatives, was waning. This combination was to produce, by the 1920s, a vast contributions machinery which raised millions of pounds annually, and of which, as R.M. Noordin complained in 1929, large sections of the public were completely unaware. For instance, in 1932, the Leeds Public Assistance Committee received £30,280 in contributions from relief recipients and their relatives. In 1934, the London County Council received a total of £587,775, although only £66,650 of this was for Public Assistance: most contributions went toward hospital and medical treatment, and a larger share was by now paid by the recipients themselves. Between 1930 and 1933, the LCC made 300,000 orders of assessment.125

The scale of operation even of some Poor Law Unions in the 1920s can be seen from a typical meeting of the Hackney Board of Guardians Repayment and Settlement Committee in 1927. This meeting, on 8 November, dealt with 256 recovery cases. 73 of these concerned people over sixty, with a further 23 applicants in their fifties. The great majority
of these were hospital cases, usually involving attachment of pension: as well, the means of relatives were to be investigated or an order made in two-thirds of cases. The orders which are mentioned were for sums of 10s. or less, and almost all refer to sons.\textsuperscript{126} By contrast, Camberwell Union in these years seems to have enforced contributions on a heroic scale. Non-liable relatives such as siblings, sons-in-law and nieces and nephews were frequently ordered to contribute, and the sums demanded were sizable. Some entries include:

- son - accept half reduced sick pay
- nephew - appealing re full [hospital] cost charge - adhere to order
- daughter, stenographer, 10s.
- husband, messenger, old age pension - charge 20s. per week
- man, 62, unemployed, full costs
- woman, 86, one day in hospital before death, 121.15s.3d. from building society
- man, 81, 5s. pension, 20s. and 10s. from sons, 17s.6d from daughter, war widow's pension
- son-in-law, 53s.9d.

In 1940, Oxford City Public Assistance Committee consistently enforced maintenance orders on earning children at the rate of 6s. in the pound of earnings, and moreover, officials "make no secret of the fact that they do not abide by their own rules if they regard the case as a 'try on'": that is, an application by someone whose relatives should support them. Not surprisingly, local pensioners refused to apply for assistance "owing to the general belief that 'they can force your earning children to keep you wherever they are'". Even in 1942, the Nuffield College Survey found many Public Assistance Committees demanding contributions "to the largest possible degree" or "the fullest possible extent". The Report noted that the description of some Public Assistance Committees as "lenient ... meant that they were flexible in assessments, not that they did not extract a contribution of some sort in all cases". The London Public Assistance Committee, obviously following in a fine local tradition, was reported to be "always trying to send exorbitant bills to relatives of those in Institutions".\textsuperscript{128}

A further lucrative source of savings to the public purse was produced during these decades by the household means test, whether administered by the Public Assistance Committees or the Unemployment Assistance Board. By the late 1920s, this had grown from humble beginnings into a complex system of scales which varied in their details between Public Assistance Committees. In 1932, a Ministry of Health report found that, of 1,000 randomly selected applicants transferring to the London Public Assistance Committee from Unemployment Insurance in the first months after the introduction of transitional payments, over 25 per cent were disqualified by the means of co-resident relatives, and only 6 per cent due to personal means. Public Assistance officials in Leeds observed that when transitional payments were first introduced, 24 per cent of applicants were disqualified by
their relatives' means; since then, "there is little doubt our scale of deductions has kept large numbers of persons away". In Birmingham, relief staff believed that, judging from the numbers of applications refused, the removal of liability from coresident children would increase expenditure on unemployment relief by 40 per cent and on ordinary relief by 50 per cent.129

In these years, the household means test was the scourge of poorer families and the elderly unemployed, bearing particularly hard on the overcrowded and depressed industrial areas. Working-class opinion held that it broke up families, causing earning children to leave home in large numbers: many, like George Orwell, felt that it kept people from taking in their parents. Such was the hatred of the means test that any Government official became, in working-class parlance, "the Means Test man". In 1936, the Pilgrim Trust Enquiry reported that the homes of elderly unemployed people affected by the test sometimes appeared to represent two standards, the earning children being often smartly dressed and happy, while the fathers were shabby and suffering from a sense of their dependence. Such men gave the impression that they purposely avoided making any effort to keep up appearances, in case the children might think they were drawing an undue share of the family income ....130

In 1937, Percy Ford observed that the Government policy on liability for relatives was inconsistent and "scarcely in touch with current standards"; it was "a matter of expediency, and is best discussed on that basis". He believed that it survived simply because it affected only "a small fraction of the population"; similarly, a Public Assistance Inspector in 1934 explained that political trouble was unlikely from the means test "as the class dealt with is so relatively uninfluential".131

Thus six decades after its introduction, the high ideals of "strict administration" left as their legacy a system which many even of its administrators considered morally bankrupt, and which was defended only because it squeezed easy budgetary savings out of the pittances of the nation's poorest people. In the words of J.B. Priestley in 1934,
Our merry laughter rang out whenever the Means Test was mentioned, for it was amusing to find Britannia herself, with her Lion and her Unicorn, in our midst, cross-examining old women to discover whether there was any truth in the rumour that their sons had earned a shilling a week ago.132
NOTES

1. BLPES, Booth Collection B166, p. 31; see ch. 1 for discussion of this man's case.
2. Quoted in Wilson and Mackay, Old Age Pensions, p. 41.
3. See chs. 1 and 2.
5. See Chs. 1 and 2.
9. C.S. Loch, "Pauperism and Old Age Pensions", in Poor Law Conferences, Reports, 1892, 84-126, pp. 87-88; Webbs, The Last Hundred Years Part 1, p. 349; Aberdare Commission, BPP 1895 XIV, pp. 3-5 [Owen]; W. Chance, "State-Aided Pensions for Old Age", in Poor Law Conferences, Reports, 1894, 315-345, p. 332; Hamilton, "Statistical Survey", p. 7.
12. Ibid.; Rev. T. Bridge, "Classification in Workhouses, with Special Reference to the Deserving Aged", in Poor Law Conferences, Reports, 1895, 213-225; see also pp. 371, 496 [Merry, Kenworthy]; Bailward, "Are Workhouses unduly attractive?", in Poor Law Conferences, Reports, 1898-1899, p. 528; see also pp. 531-533 [Brown etc.]; Pease, "Employment of Old Men and Women in Workhouses", in Poor Law Conferences, Reports, 1899-1900, pp. 104, 108; passim.
16 Digby, Poor Relief, pp. 23-26; Webbs, The Last Hundred Years Part 1, pp. 351-3, 437ff; English Poor Law Policy, ch. 4; F.B. Smith, People's Health, pp. 383-384.
17 Aberdare Commission, BPP 1895 XIV, p. 4 [Owen]; F.B. Smith, People's Health, pp. 183-184.
19 Webbs, English Poor Law Policy, ch. 4.
20 Quoted in Webbs, English Poor Law Policy, p. 165; ibid.
22 Webbs, English Poor Law Policy, chs. 4 and 5.
23 J.H. Allen, "The Poor Law and Outdoor Relief", in Poor Law Conferences, Reports, 1895, 345-358, p. 358; Webbs, English Poor Law Policy, ch. 4.
24 Quoted in Webbs, English Poor Law Policy, p. 214 and passim.
27 See ch. 1; Webbs, The Last Hundred Years Part 1, p. 349.
28 Hunt, "Paupers and Pensioners", p. 424; see ch. 1.
29 Chance, "State-aided Pensions", in Poor Law Conferences, Reports, 1894, pp. 317, 332; Aberdare Commission, BPP 1895 XIV, p. 5 [Owen].
32 Poor Law Conferences, Reports, 1895, p. 405 [Blackley]; see ch. 1.
33 See ch. 1.
34 Aberdare Commission, BPP 1895 XIV, pp. 69, 318, 370, 381, 501, 522 [Knollys, Frome Wilkinson, Thomas, Mackay, etc - quotations: Mackay p. 522, "gentleman" quoted by Humphreys-Owen, questioning, p. 318]; Thomson, "Provision", p. 27; Poor Law Conferences, Reports, 1892, pp. 369ff [Beckett, Attenborough et al.]; Poor Law Conferences, Reports, 1894, pp. 249 [Hibbert]; Poor Law Conferences, Reports, 1899-1900, p. 414 [Crosfield, Hibbert]; Horn, "Old Age and the Oxfordshire Agricultural Labourer", pp. 375, 377.
36 Thomson, "Provision", p. 77; Webbs, The Last Hundred Years Part 1, p. 350; Hunt, "Paupers and Pensioners", pp. 410-411; Miss B. Walton Evans, "The Aged Deserving Poor", Poor Law Conferences, Reports, 1900-1901, 549-559, p. 558; Booth, Aged Poor, pp. 238, 280, 284ff; and see ch. 3.

37 See ch. 1; quoted in Stead, How Old Age Pensions began to be, p. 189; "cap in hand" quote from Southgate, That's the Way it was, p. 142; Booth, Aged Poor, pp. 353-354; Lady Bell, At the Works, pp. 119-125; Aberdare commission, BPP 1895 XIV, pp. 16, 335, 337, 352, 354, 510, 552, 556, 557 [Owen, Clifford, Edwards, Mackay, Hill etc]; P. Johnson, Saving and Spending, Oxford, 1985, ch. 3; and see below.


39 Newton, Years of Change, pp. 6, 8.

40 Ezard, Battersea Boy, p. 27.


42 Quoted in Crowther, Workhouse System, p. 213; Sutherland, Old Age Pensions in Theory and Practice, p. 113; Poor Law Conferences, Reports, 1892, pp. 442-453; PRO MH 57/68 (Turner, Vagrancy: Historical Survey 1920, p. 31); Cuttle, Legacy, p. 178.

43 Booth, Pauperism and Endowment, Appendix B.

44 Moffrey, quoted in Metcalfe, Case for Universal Pensions, p. 191; Aberdare Commission, BPP 1895 XIV, Report, p. lvi, Appendix VI; Spender, State and Pensions, ch. 3; Turner, Case for State Pensions in Old Age, pp. 5-6; Johnson, Saving and Spending, p. 84, Table 3.1.

45 Sutherland, Old Age Pensions in Theory and Practice, Appendix C; Hamilton Committee BPP 1900 X, Appendix 2, p. 31 and see below; Webbs, English Poor Law Policy, p. 148; Aberdare Commission, BPP 1895 XIV, p. 211 [Allen].

46 Ibid.; IOOF, Manchester Unity / Watson, An Account... of the Sickness and Mortality Experience, p. 11; Poor Law Conferences, Reports, 1895, p. 406 [Blackley]; Select Committee on National Provident Insurance, BPP 1884-85 X, p. 52 [C. Symes]; Aberdare Commission, BPP 1895 XIV, Report, p. lvi; p. 161 [Vallance].


48 J.C. Cox, "Old Age Pensions", in Poor Law Conferences, Reports, 1898-1899, 625-643, p. 634.

49 Spender, State and Pensions, ch. 1 [quotation p. 6]; Johnson, Saving and Spending, ch. 4.

50 Johnson, Saving and Spending, pp. 160ff; Lady Bell, At the Works, pp. 81-84; Aberdare Commission, BPP 1895 XIV, pp. 552, 559, 562 [Hill]; Jasper, A Hoxton Childhood, p. 17; BLPES, Booth Collection, B68, pp. 143-144, B74, p. 178, B80, p. 14, passim; Ryland Adkins Committee, BPP 1919 XXVII, pp. 177-178, 127-28 [Close, Stuart]; see also pp. 91, 98, 139, 210 [Fenby, Peck, Barrie, Craig etc].


Roberts, Classic Slum, pp. 80-81; Samuel, East End Underworld, pp. 24-26; Southgate, That's the Way it was, p. 59; Aberdare Commission, BPP 1895 XIV, p. 764 [Lansbury]; and see ch. 2.


BLPES, Booth Collection, B168 (COS, Stepney: Applications, January and June 1890, p. 28, and see other case notes); see also Spender, State and Pensions, ch. 1.

C. Booth, "Pensions for All in Old Age", (p. 21), in NCOL, Ten Years' Work for Old Age Pensions, 1899-1909.

Arch, Autobiography, p. 37; Booth, Aged Poor, p. 340; see discussion in chs. 1 and 2.

Spender, State and Pensions, p. 27.

Hamilton Committee, BPP 1900 X, Appendix 2, p. 20; Tables D, E and J and passim.

Spender, State and Pensions, p. 38.

Webbs, English Poor Law Policy, pp. 149, 229n [quotations: Longley, Reports 1874-75, 1873-74], and see ch 4.

Quoted in Webbs, The Last Hundred Years Part 1, p. 352 and see pp. 439-441; PRO MH 32/8 (Longley, Minute on ... Pauper Dietaries in the Metropolis, 13 June 1873); Webbs, English Poor Law Policy, ch. 4.


Webbs, English Poor Law Policy, pp. 151, 152, 230; Aberdare Commission, BPP 1895 XIV, p. 35 [Owen, Pell].

PRO MH 15/70 (Poor Law Indexes, 1893-99: entries under "Liability of relations": "Relations: Order of maintenance"; "Relations - Miscellaneous"); MH 15/91 (Poor Law Indexes, 1900-1909: entries under "Relations (Liability of)", "Relations -
Miscellaneous", "Relief" ["blanket authority" cases e.g. 03/1423366; surcharge cases e.g. 08/145727]; MH 15/103 (Poor Law Indexes 1910-1920: entries under "Paupers" [altering form 10/106368/450]); MH 15/104 (Poor Law Indexes, 1910-1920: entries under "Relations - Liability of", "Relations - Order of Maintenance").

68 Cox, "Outrelief", in Poor Law Conferences, Reports, 1899-1900, pp. 193, 195ff; Frome Wilkinson, "The English Poor Law in Old Age", p. 676; Aberdare Commission, BPP 1895 XIV, p. 15.

69 Cox, as above; Poor Law Conferences, Reports, 1898-1899, p. 23; Booth, Aged Poor, ch. 1 and p. 53; Aberdare Commission, BPP 1895 XIV, pp. 841-857 [Ward: quotations pp. 844, 854], Appendix IX; BLPES, Booth Collection B166 (Charity in Stepney); Aberdare Commission, BPP 1895 XIV, pp. 500, 521 [Mackay]; and see above.


71 Poor Law Conferences, Reports, 1898-1899, pp. 22-23 [Cox]; Cox, "Outdoor Relief", in Poor Law Conferences, Reports, 1899-1900, p. 199; Aberdare Commission, BPP 1895 XIV, pp. 847, 500 [Ward, Mackay].

72 Aberdare Commission, BPP 1895 XIV, pp. 144ff, 212ff, 433ff, 499ff [Vallance, Phelps, Mackay, Fuller, etc]; Cox, as above, pp. 199ff; Booth, Aged Poor, pp. 51-53.


74 Poor Law Conferences, Reports, 1895, p. 379 [Pell]; Aberdare Commission BPP 1895 XIV, pp. 91, 521-522 [Hedley, Mackay: Pell examining].

75 Poor Law Conferences, Reports, 1898-1899, p. 663 [rev. J.E. Hand]; Aberdare Commission, BPP 1895 XIV, p. 844 [Ward].

76 Lansbury, My Life, p. 132.


78 Cox, "Outdoor Relief", pp. 199ff, 208; Poor Law Conferences, Reports, 1898-1899, p. 663 [Hand]; Aberdare Commission, BPP 1895 XIV, pp. 847-853 [Ward], Appendix IX.


Aberdare Commission, BPP 1895 XIV, pp. 583, 549, 550 [Booth, Marshall]; for a good sample of opinion from non-COS Poor Law Guardians, see other witnesses to this Commission e.g. pp. 133ff, 197ff, 305ff, 328ff [Fuller, Cox, Frome Wilkinson, Clifford et al.]; Thomson, "I am not my Father's Keeper", p. 275.

Bosanquet, Strength of the People, p. 247; Stead, How Old Age Pensions began to be, p. 65; Williams (Thane), "Development ...", pp. 34ff.

F. Rogers, The Care of the Aged in Other Countries and in England, London, 1903, p. 4; Haggard, quoted in Digby, Pauper Palaces, pp. 81-82; Cuttle, Legacy, pp. 13-14, 54; Crowther, Workhouse System, pp. 239, 64, 68, 73ff.

See above and ch. 1.

Acorn, One of the Multitude, p. 80; Aberdare Commission, BPP 1895 XIV, p. 501 [Mackay]; letter quoted in Stead, How Old Age Pensions began to be, p. 189.

Thompson, Lark Rise to Candleford, p. 90; White, Rothschild Buildings, p. 90; Haw, Workhouse to Westminster [Crooks]; Southgate, That's the Way it was, p. 97; Roberts, Classic Slum, p. 80; Foakes, My Part of the River, p. 103; et al.

Acorn, One of the Multitude, p. 29; Samuel [Harding], East End Underworld, pp. 6, 23, 34; Jasper, Hoxton Childhood, p. 67; London, People of the Abyss, pp. 40, 218, 265; PRO MH 15/88 (Poor Law Indexes, 1900-1910, 03/2803/552 [photograph incident]); Royal Commission on the Poor Laws, Appendix vol. II, BPP 1909 XL, Appendix IIIG, p. 525 [Daily News, 24 July, 1907 [extract], and passim]; and see above and chs. 4 and 5.

G.N. Barnes, From Workshop to War Cabinet, pp. 64, 66; Poor Law Conferences, Reports, 1899-1900, p. 591.


see ch. 3; The Next Five Years, quoted in Fraser, Evolution of the British Welfare State, p. 224.

Aberdare Commission, BPP 1895 XIV, p. 550; Webbs, English Poor Law Policy, pp. 231-235; The Last Hundred Years Part I, pp. 353-355; Fraser, Evolution of the British Welfare State, pp. 139-143; Thomson, "I am not my Father's Keeper", p. 277.

Webbs, English Poor Law Policy, pp. 150, 229n; cited in Aberdare Commission, BPP 1895 XIV [Booth, Henley examining].


Arch, Autobiography, pp. 37, 99; Booth, Aged Poor, pp. 205, 277, 279, 299; Thomson, "I am not my Father's Keeper", pp. 280ff.
G 68-71 (Arrears Committee Minutes, 3 vols, 1901-1930); Sh B G 131/1-3 (Enquiry Books, 3 vols, 1880-1909).

108 GLRO Sh B G 131/1-3 (Enquiry Books, 1880-1905); Thomson, "I am not my Father's Keeper", pp. 280-283; Crowther, "Family Responsibility", pp. 131-133; Poor Law Conferences, Reports, 1905-1906, p. 236 [Thomas].


110 Ibid; Frome Wilkinson, "The English Poor Law and Old Age", p. 674; Poor Law Conferences, Reports, 1900-1901, p. 340 [Wilson]; GLRO Is B G 68 (Arrears Committee Minutes, 1905); Arch, Autobiography, p. 99; Harris, "Contributions", in Poor Law Conferences, Reports, 1904-1905, pp. 495ff; brackets and capitals in original: Mrs Roebuck, "Workhouse Management", in Poor Law Conferences, Reports, 1895, 485-495, p. 487; Booth, Aged Poor, p. 279.

111 Quoted in Stead, How Old Age Pensions began to be, p. 189; Ryland Adkins Committee, BPP 1919 XXVII, pp. 178, 217, 211 [Close, Thompson, Pember Reeves, etc]; BLPPES, New Survey of London 2/2 [Old Age Pensioners: Interviews, case 28 etc]; Poor Law Conferences, Reports, 1906-1907, pp. 234, 236 [Roberts, Jones]; see above and ch. 1.


114 Ibid.; Ford, Incomes, Means Tests and Personal Responsibility, ch. 3; Bowley and Hogg, Has Poverty diminished?, p. 28 and comparative tables; R. Roberts, A Ragged Schooling, p. 81; PRO AST 7/627 (copy of Olive Matthews, Housing the Old, London, 1937; and other items); see "undercrowding" in ch. 3.

115 Booth, Aged Poor, pp. 205, 247, 121, 131, 173, passim; Bosanquet, Strength of the People, p. 122; Anderson, "Impact on the Elderly", pp. 57ff; and see discussion of this issue in chs. 2 and 7.

116 Booth, Aged Poor, pp. 197, 205, 205, 217, 267, 281, 279, passim.; Booth, "Pensions for all" (p. 10), in National Committee of Organised Labour, Ten Years' Work.

117 See above; F. Thompson, Lark Rise to Candleford, pp. 76, 91.

118 Quoted in Williams (Thane), "Development ...", p. 251.

119 Williams (Thane), "Development", pp. 235, 252.

120 ibid., p. 201; Stead, How Old Age Pensions began to be, pp. 65ff; P. Thompson, The Edwardians, p. 233; Fraser, Evolution of the British Welfare State, pp. 213, 227-228.


123 Ryland Adkins Committee, BPP 1919 XXVII, pp. 238, 106, 98, 139 [Pember Reeves, Baker questioning; Phythian, Peck, Barrie, Craig]; Williams (Thane), "Development", pp. 346-352.

124 Harris, "Contributions", in Poor Law Conferences, *Reports*, 1904-1905, p. 498; Cuttle, *Legacy*, pp. 52ff; Thomson, "I am not my Father's Keeper", pp. 281ff; GLRO Is B G 68-71 (Arrears Committee Minutes, 3 vols, 1901-1930, see Is B G 68 1904 and 25 July 1907 for commission); Sh B G 131/1-3 (Enquiry Books, 3 vols, 1880-1909); Ha B G 151-152 (Hackney Board of Guardians: Repayment and Settlement Committee Reports, 1927-1928); Ca B G 164/1-4 (Camberwell Board of Guardians: Orders made of Relatives, 5 vols. 1925-1929).


126 GLRO Ha B G 151-152 (Hackney Board of Guardians: Repayment and Settlement Committee Reports, 1927-1928: 8 November 1927).

127 GLRO, Ca B G 164/1-2 (Camberwell Board of Guardians: Orders made of Relatives, 5 vols, 1925-1929).

128 PRO AST 7/596 (Enquiry into the Previous History of Pensioners ..., 7 Aug. 1942); CAB 87/80/83 (NCSRS Memorandum No. 5: Public Assistance, 19 June 1942, pp. 50-51).

129 PRO MH 79/299 (G.C. Blight to H.W.S. Francis, 1 Dec. 1932; Fieldhouse to Francis, 1 Dec. 1932; C.P. Beech to Francis, 26 Nov. 1932).


CHAPTER SEVEN

"A REMARKABLE DISCOVERY OF SECRET NEED"1;

OLD PEOPLE AND THE ASSISTANCE BOARD IN THE 1940S

"Even in clean and self-respecting homes I had a rather depressing sense of lives which had arrived at a dead end and beyond the small daily tasks had little to interest them."

- Violet Markham, Assistance Board investigation of pensioners in Chesterfield, Sheffield and Barnsley, 1943.2

"It's this living business which gets you."

- London pensioner to Assistance Board investigator, 1947.3

In 1940, the British Old Age and Widows' Pension Act transferred responsibility for the welfare of old age pensioners from the Local Authorities to the former Unemployment Assistance Board, which had been established in 1934 as the first official body empowered to undertake welfare work on a national scale. At a stroke of the pen, three-fifths of the non-institutional clients of the London Public Assistance Committee, and more than three-quarters of those of some rural and provincial Local Authorities, disappeared from the relief lists altogether.4 Even those who had been agitating for the abolition of the Poor Law for the past half-century could not have hoped for such dramatic results.

But as Public Assistance officials joined their former clients in the ranks of the "superannuated", the Assistance Board was only just beginning to grasp the magnitude of the task which they had taken on. The first, somewhat delicate matter to arise was that most Local Authorities in industrial areas had been supplementing Old Age Pensions - which were at this time set at ten shillings, a little over half subsistence level - at a scale considerably higher than that which the Board was prepared to countenance. This problem had occurred in 1934 in respect of unemployed families transferred from these same authorities, and had then been handled by means of a standstill, allowing applicants to claim from either authority until 1937. This messy compromise was avoided in the case of
pensioners by granting what was tactfully referred to as an "Anomalies Allowance" to individuals transferred from these Authorities.\footnote{5}

But this soon proved inadequate. The larger Labour-dominated Scottish Local Authorities, such as Glasgow, Edinburgh and Aberdeen, had been in the habit of giving their old age pensioners an allowance which was not only five or six shillings above the Board's scale, but also included an annual grant of clothing.\footnote{6} When winter loomed, Scottish supplementary pensioners applied as usual for their boots and shirts and underclothing, and, under the hitherto scarcely used welfare provisions of the 1931 and 1940 Acts, they received them. Senior officials in London, many of them old Poor Law men, were aghast. What did Edinburgh mean, they asked, by giving more Exceptional Needs Grants than the whole of England and Wales together? What was Glasgow thinking of? Under their orders, Scottish officers began a concerted effort to stem the flow, and thousands of applications were refused. Not to be deprived of what they clearly felt to be their rightful vests and knickers, however, thousands of Scottish pensioners appealed.\footnote{7} The problem was perplexing. It was indeed the Board's responsibility to make special grants in cases of need, and, even under the most restrictive interpretation of the Acts, these old people obviously came within that definition. Yet it could not be maintained that the creators of the Assistance Board had envisaged as one of its major functions, the keeping of one and a quarter million old people in underclothing.

It was apparently in an effort to ascertain the extent of the problem that in 1942 the Board dispatched one of its ablest officers, Diane Ibberson, to undertake a pilot study into the clothing and household needs of supplementary pensioners. The standards set were scarcely high: to reiterate from Chapter Three, the list comprised one dress or pair of trousers, one overcoat, one pair of shoes and two blankets, and, despite the impossibility for most old people of getting washing done and dry in the same day, only one pair of sheets, one nightgown or pair of pyjamas, two sets of underclothing, and two shirts for old men. A "serviceable" garment was defined in one guideline as one which would not actually fall to pieces in the next three months. Yet, although it later proved that the parts of London on which the pilot study was based were unusually prosperous, Miss Ibberson's report confirmed the Board's worst fears. Half the pensioners visited were found to be in urgent need of a number of these basic articles, with several requiring nearly all of them. A not uncommon case was the old lady who, to quote Miss Ibberson,

\begin{quote}
at first professed to 'manage', then confessed to a serious shortage of clothing and bedclothes, and finally broke down, saying that she 'could not ask'. ... She had only what she stood up in, ... - an old, thin skirt, a torn
cardigan and no blouse - and slept under a single tattered blanket and meagre cotton coverlet.

The cardigan was pinned at the neck to hide the lack of blouse, her apron and "scrupulous personal cleanliness" creating a misleading impression. The interviews also revealed that about a third of the old people had other pressing, although hitherto unreported, welfare needs: unmet medical expenses, fares to the hospital or surgery for treatment, expenses for laundry or domestic assistance where the old person was too frail or ill to manage alone, the cost of special food or heating for those with health problems, and special needs for nursing care, surgical appliances, spectacles, dentures, and so forth. In many cases, old people had been going without food, and accumulating large arrears of rent, in an effort to meet such expenses out of their pensions. As Miss Ibberson's report concluded, a national enquiry was unnecessary to find out whether old age pensioners' needs were being met: "the answer", she wrote, "was clearly negative".

In the circumstances, however, a national enquiry, the somewhat rashly titled Exceptional Needs Enquiry, was inevitable. Despite objections by many District and Area Officers that other groups of old people were just as needy, if not more so, only pensioners living alone or with spouse, and only those with no resources beyond their pensions, were included, giving a total of some half-million old people in England, Wales and Scotland combined. In a number of cases, Visiting Clerks were criticised by their superiors for such superficial investigation that their returns were useless; in others, District Officers seem to have encouraged this approach, several expressing the view that the standards laid down were "excessive", and higher than those which most old people had enjoyed during their working lives. Many officers were so reluctant to supply grants for sheets, warm underwear, nightgowns, and even overcoats to pensioners who, they claimed, had never enjoyed such luxuries, that Board Headquarters finally intervened with instructions that such items were to be provided unless it was clear that the old person would not use them.

Yet even in the face of such pusillanimity, the need disclosed by the enquiry was overwhelming. Over 70 per cent of those visited lacked at least some of the items listed, and many required further grants for basic articles such as saucepans and kettles. The average grant was just over three pounds - almost three times the weekly income of these pensioners - and this did not include the 135,000 blankets which were distributed from special stocks. Existing reports show that visiting officers uncovered other welfare needs in a great number of these cases, while several thousand additional grants were made.
to pensioners not eligible in the original enquiry, who subsequently applied and proved to be just as much in need as their fellows.14

But the reactions of the old people concerned speak louder than all the statistics. Reports of "pathetic gratitude", "cries of delight", and of old people "hugging and stroking" new garments, were widespread; indeed, many pensioners were said to have put their new possessions away safely as "too good" to wear. Several years afterwards, an old lady recalled queueing for her new blankets: after a while, her nerves got into such a state with excitement, she said, that she could not wait her turn, and cried out, "Give me the blankets quick and let me go, or I'll be knocking the place down!".15 One woman Assistant Clerk observed "the pleasure of some pensioners in being able to enjoy again the standard of personal cleanliness implied by two sets of underclothing"; on the other hand, the Darlington District Officer noted of old women that

whereas their need was for underclothing, what they longed for more than anything else was a new dress or a new coat. ... the fact that they must remain slightly shabby is a very great factor in the content or discontent of old people.16

Similarly, old men were said to hanker in vain after a Sunday suit. Several reports noted that the items purchased were the first new clothes - as distinct from those bought second-hand or gifts of cast-offs - which some pensioners had worn in decades. Often clothes "had little of the original material left, but were neat and tidy although a network of patches"; patches were sown on patches and stockings and socks were refooted several times. Some older, frailer pensioners, however, were "a mass of rags", sleeping under their clothes and "old mats".17

In Yorkshire, a Visiting Officer spoke of "the uplift in pensioners' manner and pride" as a result of the enquiry, and elsewhere, some pensioners were said to have been enabled to visit relatives or to go to church, or even to town, for the first time in years. But perhaps most revealingly - or most dispiritingly - of all, the great majority of pensioners were said by the North-Eastern Regional Officer to have regarded this enquiry as "the brightest event in their old age".18

How was it that these people could be living in such wretched conditions, the investigators asked, when the average British household was enjoying a higher real income than ever
before? Yet this was precisely the problem. Many old people, and, as several officers pointed out, most of those in rural areas, had never boasted an income much higher than that which they received as supplementary pensioners. Many thousands of others, especially in Wales, Scotland and the North of England, had been unemployed for long periods before they became entitled to pensions; and generally, the relatives of these very poorest of pensioners were themselves little better off, and rarely in a position to give much material help. Even those who had managed to "put by" a little, had often seen it eaten away in the years before the Supplementary Pensions Scheme was launched, or had found that their small incomes were merely deducted from their allowances, or wholly absorbed in meeting medical needs.

The Assistance Board itself confronted this problem in its efforts to explain to a disgruntled Government why, instead of confining its bounty to the quarter of a million clients transferred from Public Assistance Committees, it had rapidly found itself supplementing the pensions of one million additional old people: the Times referred to this development as "a remarkable discovery of secret need". A hastily mounted survey of new applicants revealed that nearly half had been largely supported by relatives whose own means were so low that the Board was unable to take them into account and reject the application; a little under a quarter had been supplementing their Old Age Pensions by remaining in employment or taking in boarders or lodgers, often, as the ubiquitous Miss Ibberson remarked, long after they should have given up for reasons of health; and nearly another quarter had been living on small savings which had since dwindled into insignificance. Of the pensioners she visited in villages near Oxford, Ibberson said

the administration of Public Assistance is still at its most stringent in some of the country districts, and the old people's memories go back to a still harsher regime ... not only is it a public disgrace to be visited weekly by the Relieving Officer ... but Relief has the visible character of charity from neighbours who are entitled to look down on the recipient. Some of the country people, indeed, said that they would "rather die" than go to the Relieving Officer. Low rents, the kindliness of the church and neighbours, a bit of "odd jobbing" and the occasional help of relatives who could ill afford it, had made it possible ... to scrape along on, perhaps, their primary pension plus a Service Dependent's Pension ... , or even, in rare cases, without any regular addition. No case was found ... living independently on the bare primary pension without any help.
Many, the investigators noted, had been under severe strain, feeling that they could not long continue without application to the dreaded "Poor Law". To quote one Board official, "these people would have applied to the Electricity Commissioners or the B.B.C." for a supplementary pension, just as long as there was no "Poor Law" stigma; the conduct of the Board had "little to do" with the rush of applications.22

Nor did Supplementary Pensions solve the problem of old age poverty. As the Nuffield College Social Reconstruction Survey reported in 1942,

There is practically unanimous agreement that the present amount of Old Age Pension, even with the Supplementary Pensions, is inadequate, and that old age pensioners find it very difficult to live on their pensions, unless they have other sources of income. It is particularly hard for single old people ...

Social workers in London point out that the cost of keeping old age pensioners who have been bombed out in Government Rest Homes is 30s. per week and ask "If this figure is necessary when numbers of old persons are being cared for jointly, how can 19s. a week [Old Age Pension plus basic Supplementary Pension] possibly be regarded as adequate?".24

Supplementary Pensions, as we have seen, were set at a level which did not enable their recipients to meet basic needs such as clothing replacement and medical treatment; in most cases they were not adequate to purchase a nourishing diet suitable for frail old people or enough fuel for the types of conditions in which they lived. Rent and winter fuel allowances were given: nonetheless, a supplement was needed whenever a pensioner suffered from any one of a number of common complaints such as rheumatism, and there was even an extra allowance for "advanced age". Indeed, the low level of the basic Supplementary Pension made a mockery of the concept of discretionary additions for special needs: in some areas, the majority of pensioners were receiving these, mostly as single applicant additions or high rent additions, but also for extra food, fuel and clothing, for home help and a host of other items. H. Fieldhouse complained in 1941 that most householder pensioners were receiving high rent additions; and also in this year, a sample of 30,075 cases throughout Great Britain showed that over 30 per cent were receiving discretionary additions of some sort.25

Moreover, as Assistance Board reports constantly attest, many thousands of pensioners did not apply for such grants or additions, and many thousands of other old people did not apply for Supplementary Pensions. To quote the Nuffield Foundation Survey in 1947,
It must not be thought that the introduction of Supplementary Pensions has solved all the financial problems even of those who are able to receive them. There still appear to be some old age pensioners who are unaware of the [Supplementary Pension] scheme; some who do not apply because they are unwilling to submit to inquiries about their means ... ; and others of a stubborn independence of character who regard Supplementary Pensions as "charity" for which they refuse to ask. Apparently many pensioners are still ignorant of the fact that the Assistance Board has power to make additional allowances ... .

Contemporary statistics on this subject are difficult to pin down, due partly to the absence of a decennial Census in 1941, and more generally to wartime disruption. Basically, most of the poorer half of the aged population was receiving Supplementary Pension, although many thousands of poorer old people were without it; supplementary pensioners were on average older and frailer than the rest of the aged population, and very few were in employment: the highest percentage recorded was under 4 per cent in a five per cent sample survey in January 1942. They were also, of course, poorer, and in 1940, 34 per cent of supplementary pensioners had no resources but their pensions. In keeping with their more advanced age and greater poverty, they were more likely than other old people to be living alone or with another old person, and in fact, two-thirds were doing so throughout the war period.

In 1945, Geoffrey Thomas's survey of over 12,000 households in England and Wales found that 62 per cent of those aged over sixty, or 71 per cent of those of pensionable age (sixty-five for men, sixty for women) were receiving pensions of some sort, 92 per cent of them Old Age or Widow's Pensions. Of all pensioners, only 32 per cent were receiving Supplementary Pensions, although of course only old age and widow's pensioners were entitled to them. This was a slightly lower proportion than found by the Nuffield Survey of 2,302 old people in the same year. 36 per cent of women pensioners were receiving Supplementary Pensions, compared to 27 per cent of men, a difference which is not as large as might be expected given the greater proportion of men in employment and the larger number receiving other types of pension, including superannuation. 20 per cent of those of pensionable age were in employment, or 39 per cent of men: most of them also received pensions. The proportions with income from sources other than pensions decreased sharply with advancing age.

Nonetheless, Thomas found that 13 per cent of old people in his lowest economic group were not receiving any pension income: some of these would not have been entitled to
pension, being men aged 60-65 and people under seventy without contributory pension entitlement: 5 per cent of his sample were receiving Public Assistance and/or National Health Insurance. Some had not applied for either pension or Public Assistance apparently from ignorance or principle: for instance, 2 per cent were living wholly on charity, including that of relatives, and others on small private savings. In 1942, the Huddersfield respondent to the Nuffield College Survey echoed the experience of many when he observed that "the proud hardworking type deny themselves to the limit before they will apply for Supplementary Pensions".30

Old people living in institutions were not included in this survey: they comprised under 2 per cent of those of pensionable age, most of them in Public Assistance Institutions. PAI residents were not at this time entitled to Non-contributory or Supplementary Pensions. Old people in institutions in the 1940s are discussed in Chapters Four and Five; more general information on the aged population in the 1940s can be found in Chapter Three.31

As late as 1951, the Manchester Guardian declared that

thousands of people for one reason or another still make the attempt [to manage without Supplementary Pension] ... this reticence is most common among those with unhappy memories of the means test in the interwar depression.

The Guardian found that in some cases old people were trying to cope without even Old Age Pension, although this was usually through ignorance.32 Even in the early 1960s, when Jeremy Tunstall interviewed 538 randomly selected old people living alone in metropolitan, rural and industrial districts, he found that one in six had income below the National Assistance scales, but was not receiving National Assistance. Indeed, the median income of those not receiving National Assistance was lower by 2s. than that of those who were. In 1966, a Government report estimated that 700,000 pensioners were not receiving the Supplementary Benefits to which they were entitled.33

Nonetheless, Supplementary Pensions provided what the Birmingham respondent to the Nuffield College Survey called in 1942 "the bare bones of living". They had a significant impact on the problem of poverty in old age: to quote the Nuffield Foundation Report, as a result of the ... Act of 1940, there is no longer acute poverty among the aged to anything like the extent that formerly existed, although there is still a measure of austerity.34
The conditions revealed by the 1942 enquiry were thus an improvement on those which had existed only a few years before. However, one new element was present in the 1940s, lending to this and to subsequent Assistance Board enquiries their air of breathtaking revelation of a state of affairs which, for old people and their families, had long been too familiar. For the first time, England was witnessing modern social work at a national level, and on a scale involving more than a million of her neediest inhabitants. For the first time, a significant body of professional social workers, trained outside the confines of the Poor Law and the Charity Organisation Society, and operating without the immediate constraint of relieving the local ratepayers, were able to work on a national scale, undertaking systematic investigations into the everyday problems of their clients, and compiling reports which showed not just how much was spent for how long on whom, but how those on whom it was spent were actually living.

Working from Board Headquarters, investigating officers such as Diane Ibberson and Violet Markham produced reports which, in their thoroughness and perspicacity, rivalled later published surveys. Reports were also obtained from a number of charitable organisations such as the Nuffield Foundation and from individuals such as J.J. Mallon of Toynbee Hall. At the same time, a growing number of District and Area Officers and their staff were prepared to give to the administration of the affairs of their elderly clients, that attention to detail which only the freedom from weekly harassment by committees of local landlords and shopkeepers allows. Here a number of individuals could be mentioned, although their contribution to the Board's records, in the form of reports and surveys, was necessarily limited by the amount of time necessary to pursue the welfare needs of clients in their care. 35

Thus the Assistance Board files give a fascinating insight not only into the lives of Britain's old people, but into the resounding clash of administrative cultures which resulted with the meeting of the new university-educated, social work-trained, and often young and female officials with the old "Poor Law" men, whether in the senior ranks or at the local level. Miss Ibberson and her colleagues peppered their reports with references to Visiting Officers who were "barely literate and quite uninterested in [their] work", who could be "relied upon never to see a welfare point", who were "reluctant to report any need", and who managed to interview clients and classify them as "in good health" or "able-bodied and active", without apparently noticing any number of serious conditions including - in at least two cases - certified blindness, or - in another two cases - the inconvenient absence of a limb. 36 Many junior staff were said to give their best efforts, but with inadequate training, often unsympathetic senior officers and an unrealistic workload - 25 visits a day
was the schedule in one Area, 99 visits a week the average in another - their best was sometimes not good enough. As Violet Markham remarked,

I was left with the impression that the worst material is put on outside work ... .Investigation is often regarded as the Cinderella of the Board and the very mediocre quality of many Board reports bears out this suggestion.37

Other officials were equally impatient with the new style, and complained of "unduly sympathetic" and "welfare-minded" officers: one Visiting Officer bluntly - and no doubt correctly - "pointed out ... that if he asked questions, ... he could not get through his day's work". Other junior officers found their reports consistently ignored and faced running battles with their superiors to have grants authorised or other action taken: one Visiting Officer observed sadly that an exceptional needs grant was "the rarest thing in the world", while Board files contain a number of communications on a 1943 case in which the London I District Officer refused to authorise a discretionary addition for an old man with heart disease as he thought the man's diet was already too generous and that his condition was caused by "overindulgence". Indeed, in 1942 several respondents to the Nuffield College survey complained that insufficient use was made of the Board's discretionary powers, and the Bethnal Green respondent complained that "the tendency of the Board's officials is to be always ready to say that it's against the regulations".38

Thus it was not only junior officers who were hostile to the new style; in a letter to the Exeter District Officer in 1942, L.N. Ure rather sourly quoted from a recent radio broadcast by Alexander Woollcott, in which he referred to "the devastating smile of a welfare worker advancing resolutely on its prey". In another letter, he noted with approval the practice, still in use by some Public Assistance Committees, of "solv[ing] the problem of awkward applications for sudden and urgent relief by offering [Work]House orders". What was needed, Ure added, was a return to the values of the Poor Law era, when "living on the state" was seen as a disgrace.39

Caught in the war of polemic between these two camps were the Board's elderly clients. Somewhat surprisingly, in view of Board investigations into such intimate matters as the state of their underwear, there were few recorded complaints: in fact, said one District Officer, "the absence of grumbles" was a serious problem, with pensioners often failing to alert their Area Office to incorrect assessments; another described them as "very uncomplaining".40 Some Old Age Pensioner Associations voiced protest in their local papers about the invasion of privacy imposed by the 1942 Exceptional Needs Enquiry and agitated for a universal increase in pension instead, while several London pensioners
objected to visits by "nosey women", and one of them declared firmly that "we don't want welfaring". A greater number, however, complained of hurried and superficial visits, often by a different officer each time: "Don't send the grumpy one next time", said one pensioner. Still others spoke fondly of visits from "my lady", and looked forward keenly to a friendly chat: one old woman

wanted to know the name of the [Board] investigator because she felt it would hardly be appropriate to refer to him in her prayers as the "Means Test Officer".42

In 1942, the Nuffield College Social Reconstruction Survey received very mixed reports of the Board's work, with some Area Offices spoken of very highly and others the subject of constant complaints. Predictably, old people were most critical of the "Means Test element" and were intensely hostile to assessment based on the means of coresident relatives. The discretionary aspect of the Supplementary Pension was widely unpopular and one witness remarked that

any form of pension which varies according to needs has an element of charity which is still resented by old people, and one old woman told me that she wasn't going to receive charity from anyone, not even the Assistance Board.43

Generally, however, old people were not in a position, either economically or socially, to stand on their dignity: so, as one survey informant noted succinctly, "the majority accept the position and grumble" - in private. Whether they grumbled about the invasion of their privacy or the failure to take any interest in their needs, or indeed both, probably depended chiefly on individual Visiting Officers.44

The chief weapon in the armoury of the new school of officials was information, and this soon began to accumulate at an alarming rate. Senior Assistance Board and Ministry of Health officials, who had succeeded in consigning to oblivion the few Government enquiries undertaken in the 1930s on such politically embarrassing topics as malnutrition amongst the unemployed, and the effect of Household Means Tests on the break-up of families, soon found themselves beating a slow but steady retreat.45

Officers in London would continue to assert, as did Stuart King in 1943, that "such malnutrition as exists [amongst old age pensioners] is due to a lack of tea". However, such comments began to look rather less witty in the light of the Board's own investigations, and
of surveys published in the *British Medical Journal*, the *Lancet* and by the Nuffield Foundation, on the extent of malnutrition in the aged population. Assistance Board officials were clearly fighting a losing battle when they had to amend their own regulations, as was done in 1941, to provide an extra milk allowance only in cases of sickness "not including malnutrition from lack of food".47

Very slowly, welfare services for supplementary pensioners began to improve. The number of special grants for clothing and household needs, for domestic assistance, laundry, extra nourishment and heating, and so forth, continued to rise. More old people were referred to Public Assistance Committees for their medical needs, and moreover, in a few cases, were actually followed up to ensure that these needs were met. At the same time, the Board began to take an active part in the establishment of Home Help, Meals on Wheels, Friendly Visiting, and other welfare schemes, which in their turn produced more effective support services for sick, frail and isolated old people.48 Yet all this was just melting the tip of the iceberg: even in 1944, Diane Ibberson complained that few pensioners knew of the possibility of special needs grants, and in 1947, a second Exceptional Needs Enquiry produced results which read like a carbon copy of the first.49

Perhaps the impact of the new attitudes was best summed up by one beleaguered Area Officer, who complained that

> caseworkers are always delving into causes, which do not matter; what the Board wants is the present position ... .50

For investigators were beginning to understand how the problems of ill health, bad housing and family poverty interacted with, and exacerbated, those of old age. For many thousands of the Board's clients were, to quote Violet Markham, so ill or frail as to have "passed the stage where they could manage their own lives", and large numbers of others teetered precariously on the boundaries.51

One of the most serious problems was the difficulty which so many old people experienced in dealing with the bureaucracy, and hence in obtaining benefits to which they were entitled. For instance, in 1942, 208 of 1,651 supplementary pensioners in the London 4 District had not applied for clothing coupons, and 59 did not even have food rationing books. Unfortunately, the official attitude to such evidence of inability to cope was often one of uncomprehending irritation: indeed, more than one old person complained of being "shouted at" by exasperated officials. In such cases, Board officials could be less than
helpful: for instance, one Area Officer commented stiffly that an urgent application for special needs "had been made upon the wrong form, so nothing was done".52

In 1942, the Finsbury informant for the Nuffield College Social Reconstruction Survey declared that old people were "terrified of filling in forms. If you put a form in front of them, they look at you in despair". Similarly, in 1941, Violet Markham found many pensioners doing without spectacles as they were clearly daunted by the prospect of a visit to a strange office and possibly a doubtful reception from an unsympathetic clerk. ... Forms invariably have to be filled up and many old people find their jargon terrifying as well as incomprehensible53.

Not surprisingly, pensioners who had grown to adulthood with "strict administration" and the Means Test were apt to regard officialdom as darkly mysterious, monolithic, fickle and wantonly cruel. Many felt, often rightly, that bills would be sent to their relatives if they made their needs known; others nursed various misconceptions about their pensions being cut off, for instance if they went on holiday or notified a change of address; and quite reasonably, few could understand why their affairs had to be reported, and their needs made known, separately to several different Government bodies.54

Old people often became hopelessly caught up in what one London informant of the Nuffield College survey called "the eternal ball playing between the Board and Public Assistance": others referred to "bandying about" and "shuffling between" the two authorities. Some old people were unfortunate enough to become the objects of a three- or four-point ball game between several different Government bodies. For instance, one series of minutes in the Board's files attests to a long battle between the Board, Public Assistance and the Blind Authority over the status of three old women who, although not certifiably blind as yet, very shortly would be: all three authorities seem to have held out in the hope that relatives would continue to finance the old women's care. As usual, this proved to be the case: as a son of one of these women wrote indignantly when asked to provide her with pocket money, "My brothers and myself pay 21s. between us towards the cost of my mother's maintenance ... It is a struggle to pay the 11s.0d. without paying the others".55

Board investigators often commented that clients were "too old and feeble" to fill in forms, and had to be helped to do so; others were illiterate. Special needs, as more than one report attested, tended to emerge mainly from communications by neighbours and relatives or from "stray remarks". Some old people preferred to wait until they "got to know" the
Visiting Officer: others, until a woman officer called. If Board officials’ complaints are reliable, their clients’ usual response to losing forms, National Health Insurance cards or coupons was to do without: one old couple was reported to have accidentally jammed their NHI papers in a drawer, where they at least remained safe, if not very useful.\textsuperscript{56}

Pensioners rarely appealed against official decisions: to quote the Nuffield College Finsbury respondent once again,

they can appeal but usually they do not know this. They feel that, if they make a fuss, they might be penalised somehow.

In fact, those who did appeal usually arrived at the Board’s Tribunal firmly in tow of an irate son or daughter.\textsuperscript{57}

Thus even the relatively able-bodied could prove reluctant or unable to claim the assistance to which they were entitled: as one enquiry concluded in 1944,

the figures bear out the general impression that neither old people themselves or their friends and relatives, nor the general public, can be relied upon to make their needs known ... \textsuperscript{58}

One elderly woman had a succinct explanation for this: "They might take it all away", she said, "if you ask for more"; and the threat of the Public Assistance Institution - the dreaded "workhouse", as old people still called it - hung grimly over those who could not cope alone. Moreover, after lifetimes of struggling with ill health and inadequate incomes in insanitary conditions, many old people were simply beyond such efforts: what the official described as "the terrible inertia of old age" was just as much that of poverty.\textsuperscript{59}

Tragically, even the trained social workers of the Assistance Board dismissed many clients as "low types", unused to anything but squalor and unworthy of help: in some cases, previous poverty and present poor living conditions were used as a pretext to deny them clothing and other Special Needs grants.\textsuperscript{60} In 1944, eight Area Officers enquired as to whether "dirty" old people need be "bothered" as long as they were not a nuisance to anybody else, and such an attitude was not surprising, given that one of the Board’s most senior officers, L.N. Ure, had seen fit to refer, in official communications, to the large number of cases of clients living in neglect and squalor drawn to his attention by the Darlington District Officer, as "Miss Gardner's dirty old pensioners".\textsuperscript{61}
As 47 Area Offices pointed out in 1944, rather than merely bemoaning the inevitability of "dirty cases", practical steps such as the provision of Domestic Assistance were urgently required, preferably before old people were allowed to drift into apathy and helplessness.\textsuperscript{62} Such old people would often improve once frequent visits by sympathetic officials or domestic aids were organised: one old man who "from loneliness and habit, [had] allowed his personal appearance to deteriorate" was said to have "made an attempt to clean his abode and person ... ventilated the rooms", and clearly took "a renewed interest in life", while another "had quite obviously cleaned himself", a Board investigator having excited in him "an interest in himself which he seemed to have lost completely".\textsuperscript{63}

Even some whose condition had so far deteriorated as to demand admission to a psychiatric hospital could respond readily to help: as Drs Lewis and Goldschmidt reported of a sample of 50 elderly patients admitted to Tooting Bec Mental Hospital in 1943, "many of the old people [were] capable of rehabilitation if social support [was] forthcoming"; the "tangle of medical and social threads" leading to their admission included not only health problems, poor nutrition and unmet needs for household assistance and medical care, but the collapse of social integration which was often

\begin{quote}
 an unavoidable consequence of the narrowed circle, the bereavements and the incapacity for forming new habits and associations which often characterise old age.\textsuperscript{64}
\end{quote}

The help needed by some of these old people was quite outside the scope of either the Assistance Board or the local authorities. In fact, it was little wonder that charity had hitherto scarcely touched the surface of the problem. As Area Officers pointed out on the initial failure of the Friendly Visiting Scheme, weekly afternoon teas with a succession of middle-class ladies could do little to help the 3 to 5 per cent of pensioners who were classed by the Board as "difficult" cases.\textsuperscript{65}

The type of action which these people required was shown by a report submitted by one voluntary organisation in 1944. "Mrs R." was at first stated to be dressed in rags and living in filthy conditions. She "appeared to be disheartened and to feel that everyone was against her", and, although in need of hospital treatment, "has in the past had some unfortunate experiences while in hospital and is very suspicious of such institutions". Volunteers from this organisation visited fifteen times, scrubbing and cleaning the room themselves; they persuaded the landlord to repair the communal water closet and bath, and the only tap, which was in a room occupied by other tenants: none of these had been working for some time. They arranged to have the premises fumigated, obtained a clothing grant from the
Assistance Board, and found a woman volunteer prepared to spend regular evenings with
the old lady to keep her company. Initially, "Mrs R." was said to have resisted all efforts to
improve conditions, but after some weeks had "gained confidence" and seemed "to feel that
she now has some friends".66

Results were not always so encouraging, however, and in a similar case, one organisation
warned that an eighty-year-old man they had been visiting for nearly three years "is now in
such a state to warrant removal under the Public Health Act". His knee was probably
dislocated, but he refused medical attention; in addition, he was incontinent and did not eat
proper meals, although the latter, they explained, was "owing to incapacity, not lack of
will". Relatives had been persuaded to take him in, but the arrangement soon collapsed
because of the old man's difficult temperament; and now, other tenants were complaining
that his bedding leaked through the ceiling into the room below. Despite all this, the
Relieving Officer refused to undertake the man's compulsory removal, and, the report
added, "it seems certain that he will never enter an institution of his own free will"; volunteers felt that they could no longer accept any responsibility.67

It was, in fact, very hard for the Board and Local Authorities to know what to do about old
people in such situations, as the only option was usually removal by force and consignment
to the Public Assistance Institution. Here, nineteenth century efforts to instil into the
working-class a "wholesome dread" of the workhouse had borne tragic fruit. In 1944, no
less than 55 Area Officers complained of the failure or inability of Local Authorities to act
in insanitary cases; a further 3 complained of delays in action, and 22 of pensioners
refusing to move into suitable accommodation. In addition, 32 Area Officers brought up
the general problem of bad and insanitary housing, 16 stressed the lack of suitable housing
for old people, and 18 believed that there was a need for an alternative to the Public
Assistance Institution, in the form of hostels for pensioners who needed some help with
daily tasks. As Miss Ibberson summarised,

In one town the magistrates had dismissed two summonses for removal
orders against old people who a year later were living in the same
deplorable conditions. In another ... activity was paralysed owing to a
successful action against the Corporation for unlawful removal several years
before. In a rural area, the Sanitary Inspector held that conditions in which
an old woman's hand was being gnawed by rats as she lay asleep did not
constitute a danger to health. In a northern town the Medical Officer of
Health wrote to the District Officer refusing to take action on the grounds
that the Board's allowances were enabling old people to live in filthy
conditions when otherwise they would be forced into the [Public Assistance] Institution . ... Even if they are removed, ... practically the only provision that exists for them is the salvage dump of the Institution or the chronic sick ward of the Infirmary. While this continues it is certain that public opinion will not tolerate wider powers of removal .68

Such cases were the despair of senior officials who liked to think that the Board's functions ended with the handing over of the pension cheque. These men tended to the traditional view, adopted in the past not only by Poor Law officials but by almost all writers on old age, that any private source of income or any social contacts available to the aged merited their unqualified enthusiasm, and moreover, excused them from taking any further interest in the case. The rosy aura which in the official mind surrounded words such as "employment", "savings", and "lodger" was slow to disperse, even thought reports repeatedly emphasised that the majority of the Board's clients were too frail to manage even their own housework without difficulty,69 and that the very few who had savings not wholly absorbed by their special needs, generally regarded their little nest eggs with such profound reverence that they would suffer any privation rather than draw on them. "I'm saving it for a rainy day", was the invariable remark in such cases, to the exasperation of officials who must often have wondered how much rainier it could get.70

Surveys had long since made it clear that the housing of the Board's poorer clients was quite inadequate for the old people themselves, without inflicting it on lodgers as well. Many thousands of old people were managing in one or two rooms with no facilities except an open fire, while the great majority of the aged population continued to lack the use of a bathroom and, in rural areas, running water. Moreover, there had long been plentiful evidence of the problems created for old people by "difficult" lodgers.71

Yet the Board's policy seems to have been to attempt to coerce pensioners into taking in lodgers whenever it considered that houseroom was available. This was done simply by threatening to refuse to meet the cost of rent in future, as Miss Ibberson said, "whether or not the pensioner had any hope of finding a suitable subtenant": she believed that this policy caused "much unnecessary distress". In 1944, three Area Officers noted that in view of the difficulty experienced by pensioners searching for lodgers, they had commenced local registers; another remarked that pensioners' hostility to subletting was partly caused by the Board's practice of reducing the rent allowance proportionately, leaving the pensioner no better off.72
Other Board officials were beginning to question the suitability of such arrangements for the frail or ill. In 1944, the Bournemouth District Officer commented that pensioners' aversion to lodgers was "understandable ... as subtenants often have an unpleasant habit of leaving, owing two or three weeks' rent". Some pensioners were said to be "not up to boarders any more" or "determined not to sublet and hardly [seem] able to take the responsibility", and instances were reported where all the pensioner's bedding was used by lodgers, or where their food or laundry costs were more than they paid in board. Cases of frail pensioners providing full-time nursing care for bedridden lodgers, or old lodgers doing the same for their landladies, were also sometimes brought to light. As Miss Ibberson remarked of the Luton 1 District in 1942, the area had a high level of "exceptional need", mainly because there were

... 500 high rents not met in full. ... The problem is not simple. I visited several cases of old people occupying a cottage with two bedrooms ... who ought perhaps ... to have let off a room. Several had, however, had unpleasant experiences of subletting, and it was difficult not to feel that they were too old to cope with further difficulties. They ought really to have been rehoused.73

We have seen above and in Chapter Three that officials tended to rely on landladies and neighbours to oversee the welfare of their frailer clients, and that much kindness and help was forthcoming from this quarter. Surveys by Sheldon in Wolverhampton in 1945-47 and by Dr M. Curran and others in Glasgow in 1946, showed that a significant proportion of old people were receiving household and nursing help from neighbours. Sheldon gave examples of neighbours providing substantial household or nursing care, including daily dressing and undressing of frail old people and nursing of bedridden cases: often, the helpers were very old themselves. Curran found that "of the aged poor one in ten depends on the charity and goodwill of neighbours who are on a similar social level", while a similar survey by Dr A.N. Exton-Smith in St Pancras in 1952 found a slightly higher proportion, at 30 out of 215.74

Exton-Smith also found, however, that other old people living in otherwise identical circumstances were not receiving such help: of 14 patients who were "simple" malnutrition and neglect cases, he wrote that in 13 cases, "other tenants knew so little about these patients that it was often difficult to determine how long they had been ill".75 As G.M. Herford observed of his Stepney survey in 1941, "I do not think too much reliance can be placed on neighbours ... [they] are usually kindly, but ... days may pass without [the pensioner] meeting anybody". In 1944, a draft Nuffield College Survey Memorandum on
welfare work among old people found the same problem. Neighbours' help was essentially unpredictable: one grumpy old woman "apparently has half the street mobilised in her service"; another was left locked in her room for days between visits by a daughter living ten miles away; a third, "an old incapable man of eighty-three, wandered around the village half-dressed and was treated as a joke; only the Assistance Board officer troubled to arrange coal and food for his discharge from hospital".76

Yet the real sticking point between the Board and its clients was undoubtedly the question of relatives. The problem is perhaps best illustrated by returning once again to the 1942 Exceptional Needs Enquiry. Senior officials had decided to exclude old people living with non-dependent relatives, such as adult children, from this Enquiry on the grounds that these old people, cared for in the bosoms of their families, would be in a far superior position to the majority of the elderly who lived alone or with their spouses. This view seems initially to have been universal among Board officials of both the old and new schools, and even the welfare-minded Miss Ibberson was among its proponents.77

However, as the months went by and lone old people received their grants of clothing and blankets, first a trickle and then a flood of excluded pensioners began to apply at the Board's local offices. District Officers were at first inclined to dismiss these applicants as "opportunist cases", but further investigation often revealed another story. Even though living in supposed comfort with their extended families, most of these old people needed substantial grants for basic items of clothing, bedding and sometimes household equipment. As the number of "out of scope" cases grew, correspondence with Central Office became increasingly splenetic, and reports were peppered with references to children who "shamefully neglected" their parents or appropriated their clothing coupons for "personal adornment".78

Follow-up enquiries showed the situation to be far more complex. Many of these cases involved old people who were living with disabled adult children and other relatives who were only non-dependent in the sense that they received a small allowance from the local Public Assistance Committee or the woefully inadequate National Insurance disablement or sickness benefits. To quote one District Officer, often these relatives were "more of a domestic liability than an asset to the household". In some instances, they imposed severe financial strain on the old people, as did a number of unemployed adult children, including one with what his mother described as "brownkites and asma", to whom she had given all her bedding after he set his on fire while smoking in bed.79
Sometimes the "non-dependents" had no income at all, as was frequently the case for young grandchildren or adult children who were ineligible for National Insurance. One such "nondependent" case involved an unemployed son with "mental trouble", who was "apparently living on the old couple's pensions": as Miss Ibberson laconically noted, "should judge that they are afraid of him". In addition, several very frail or ill old people were being nursed by daughter-housekeepers who earned little or nothing due to their domestic responsibilities; while most Districts had one or two old men still with young families, with or without teenagers bringing in a few shillings.80

Such families certainly did not conform to the Golden Age image of the old person "in the chimney corner", happily provided for in a son's or daughter's home, although Board records show that in fact they were far from uncommon. More worrying from the Board's point of view, however, were the substantial number of applicants from households with married children which nonetheless also fell short of this cosy ideal. One Area Officer stated that

pensioners living in the same house with married children are more often in need than those living with strangers. They are often there on sufferance or deprive themselves to help the children.81

Board records contain some touching letters from families in which married children were trying to support their own children and their parents on woefully inadequate resources. As one woman wrote of her pensioner mother,

... she is very much in need and is under the doctor but still as got nothing of cause she lives with me but I don't see what different that makes as I have 7 children and my husband is ill with his stomache and only works at times if I could get her anything I would not be asking for anything from anybody but I know the Government is good to the old Pople ... .82

Even in the face of this compelling evidence, the official view apparently remained that pensioners in regular contact with relatives did not require welfare visiting. There was, however, abundant evidence to the contrary. To quote at length from an excellent case report by Violet Markham,

... a Sheffield woman aged seventy-two, living as a lodger in a miserable room with very little and very poor furniture ... [with] neither gas nor water
and no cooking arrangements of any kind except an open fire. Tea, oxo and bread and margarine was apparently the standard diet. She had dizzy fits and was constantly falling down. The pensioner "did not neighbour" with her landlady, of whom she seemed afraid. A son who worked at Vickers lived not far away. He called on his mother once a week and brought her pension. His wife, owing to poor health, was not able to visit - at least, that was the story. ... It will be noted that every condition of communication to which the Board attaches importance was fulfilled in this case.83

In the Poor Law vocabulary, relatives had meant simply money; to the older school of Assistance Board officer, they meant money, unlimited domestic assistance and full-time nursing care. Household Means Tests had been the bane of working-class lives for so long that, as we have seen, even Board officials were popularly referred to as "the Means Test man". Indeed, it was only with the institution of supplementary pensions, and hence the removal of old age pensioners from Public Assistance lists, that what might be called "the contributions industry" ceased to be a major consideration in most old people's lives.84

As mentioned earlier, over a million old people applying for supplementary pensions following the scheme's introduction had not formerly been receiving Public Assistance. These so-called "attraction" cases had been scraping by on-their pensions without Public Assistance, usually with a little help from relatives who, as the Board's special investigator remarked, had no real alternative. Many of these families were very poor, and Miss Ibberson noted "the relief of domestic and financial strain" and "the more independent footing" of those now receiving supplementary pensions, even though, as she added, sometimes only the relatives were better off financially.85

However, pensioners hoping that the Supplementary Pension scheme meant an end to the pursuit of their relatives were often sadly disappointed. In fact, G.T. Reid had argued for the adoption of contributions machinery by the Board, and although this course of action was not taken, the means of coresident relatives were taken strictly into account, resulting in determinations being reduced in about 200,000 cases. Relatives' liability was the Board's most contentious issue: for instance, of 140 nil determinations in Manchester in 1940, 110 were due to relatives' means and only 30 to the pensioners' own resources. The old Poor Law officials' trick of arriving at dinner time to try and catch clients sharing a meal with relatives - and hence able to be treated as part of their household - continued to be employed, while snooping around hoping to spot clothing not belonging to the pensioner remained another favourite.86
The Board estimated that the 1941 Determination of Needs Act, which limited the liability of coresident relatives, had by December 1942 brought it a total of over 200,000 clients previously disqualified by their relatives' means. In addition, existing clients had their allowances increased by up to 10s, with the average supplementary pension rising from 9s. to 9s.6d. A special examination by the Board of applications initially rejected in 1940 owing to the means of relatives

resulted in some 51,000 supplementary pensions being granted to pensioners, who, in spite of the publicity given to the new scheme in the press and over the wireless, had not, for one reason or another, applied.87

Enquiries continued, however, to be made into the means of coresident relatives, and were said to arouse "much resentment". As the London 2 District Officer commented, relatives were apt to show "indications of displeasure" when the Visiting Officer arrived on their doorstep:

it seems that [they] were led to believe that enquiry into their personal affairs ... was abolished when the New Regulations came into operation.88

In 1943, a second Determination of Needs Act gave the Board several thousand more clients and increased the allowances of many others; however, it was not until 1948 that the last vestiges of liability for relatives outside the nuclear family was abolished.89

Meanwhile, relatives continued to be charged in respect of old people who were still receiving Public Assistance relief. Many old people, including supplementary pensioners, also ran up against the contributions machinery when they sought Public Assistance Medical Relief, including aids and appliances, or when they or their relatives required hospital or institutional treatment.90 Assistance Board officials sometimes had to complain on behalf of terrified pensioners confronted with bills for the entire cost of hospital treatment for their spouses or other relations: for instance, to quote the London 2 District Officer in 1941,

A pensioner had just received a telegram from the Local Authority Hospital to say that her husband was to be operated on that day .... She also had a letter from the Almoner asking her what she could pay. She was worried about the financial side and although there were no resources beyond their two pensions and the Supplementary Pension, she said she would be as
careful as possible and try to save something to pay the Hospital. The Investigator was not equal to the situation ... 91

Relatives could be a mixed blessing even for the Assistance Board, as difficulties with cases involving dependent adult children and grandchildren soon proved. In the 1940s, if J.H. Sheldon's figures for Wolverhampton are representative, about one in fifty old women could expect to have responsibility for the upbringing of grandchildren for an extended period of time, and about twice that number, to have the care of a sick or disabled adult child.92 Even when such relatives had their own resources, these tended to be inadequate for their support. Nevertheless, the Assistance Board almost invariably refused to admit dependence in such cases, and frequently the pensioner, in fear of the child's or grandchild's removal to an institution - or in the case of grandchildren, of court action against members of her family - struggled on, supporting two or more people on an allowance insufficient for one. Otherwise, as several Nuffield College Survey informants complained in 1942, the question of chargeability was fought out between the Assistance Board and the Local Authority by what seems usually to have been a process of attrition. Indeed, Board records contain cases where the grandchild had grown up and started work, or the disabled adult child was dead or permanently institutionalised, before the issue was resolved.93

The undesirability of frail or ill old people being left with sole responsibility for such dependants was not at first much commented on, although one investigator describes a case in which most of the personal and household effects of one very old lady were apparently replaced by the Board after a small grandchild contrived to explode her oil stove: it is not clear whether they offered to replace the child as well.94 However, by 1942, the Darlington District Officer had, in her own words, "taken a firm stand" against such arrangements, after she discovered several cases in which old women bedridden with distressing conditions such as gangrene and dropsy were being entirely looked after by very young granddaughters who, in at least two cases, were also sharing beds with them.95

But young children were not the only ones for whom the burden of caring for elderly relatives could be intolerable. Single and married daughters, daughters-in-law, and frequently old people themselves, took on the often full-time job of nursing their housebound or bedridden relations sometimes for years without a break. At the time of his enquiry in 1945-47, Dr Sheldon found that about one in fifteen of the nearly five hundred old people he interviewed was under severe strain in attempting to care for seriously ill relatives, usually husbands; in twice as many cases, their own condition was judged to be
placing a considerable burden on younger relations. In about 2 per cent of cases, a daughter had given up her job to care for the old people. To quote from his report,

There were 192 subjects (40 per cent of the sample) whose happiness and domestic efficiency was dependent on the accessibility of children or relatives. Where there are no family ties, these tend to be replaced by friendships ... . In some cases, great hardship is imposed particularly when it is necessary for a daughter to sacrifice her economic dependence.96

As he observed elsewhere in the report, "the relatives concerned were clearly prepared to put up with almost incredible hardships in order to keep their loved ones at home". The effects of such strain on both nurse and patient were vividly depicted in one case report by a voluntary organisation. The old woman concerned was deaf and totally crippled, and her husband, who was nearly blind,

had to lug her out of bed onto a bucket, having no bedpan. He dressed her in the morning, and dragged her down the passageway by her shoulders ... she was then dropped into a chair where she remained for the day. He said that doing this was the only way of giving the necessary food. In the evening, the dragging process was repeated to get her back to bed. It can be fairly stated that the old people had come to hate each other .... 97

And while in cases such as this, some Area Officers tried to organise domestic and nursing help, and to arrange places in voluntary Homes if the old people agreed, most such care continued to be undertaken, as it always had been, by relatives, friends or neighbours and with no outside help.98

Without unpaid labour such as this, the Assistance Board, and no doubt society itself, could not have continued to function. Indeed, senior Board officials must have kept this point firmly in mind, judging by the vigour with which they resisted attempts by investigators and Area Officers to arrange visits from the District Nurse or to give a few shillings weekly for domestic help in cases in which relatives had young children to care for, or were themselves ill or in full-time employment. And, while such assistance was given rarely and with much reluctance, pensioners who were themselves nursing or giving domestic aid to sick relations frequently had their allowance reduced, on the assumption that, even if they were not being paid, they should have been.99
This attitude was not quite so hypocritical as it now seems, for, like Poor Law officials before them, senior Assistance Board officers tended to misunderstand the nature of their client's relationship with kin, seeing it as purely one of dependence, whereas the reality, as investigators were only just discovering, was far more complex.

The problem had first been encountered during the Exceptional Needs Enquiry, when it emerged that a very great number of pensioners, perhaps the majority, had been in the habit of giving their wartime clothing coupons to children, grandchildren and helpful neighbours, often in gratitude for particular services which they could not otherwise repay. To the despair of Board officials, even food rationing coupons seem sometimes to have been disposed of in this way, whilst pensioners almost invariably insisted on paying several shillings from their meagre allowances, or providing substantial meals, in return for the smallest kindness from friends and relatives. Indeed, the privations which old people would endure rather than feel themselves to be burden on those closest to them were a continual problem even for those officials most anxious to encourage this noble spirit of pride and self-sacrifice in the matter of refusing state funds.

For most of these supplementary pensioners had spent their whole lives in communities in which there prevailed far deeper poverty, and in which there was far less access to public relief, than in the 1940s. Their fear of burdening their relatives was the product of harder times, in which whole families had been dragged down into indigence or the ignominy of pauperism and the workhouse by the dead weight of dependent kin. As young adults, these pensioners had been amongst the first generations to suffer from the Local Government Board's policy of "strict administration", and many had themselves been forced to part with hard-earned income to support their ageing relations.

Many could remember having to see their own small children go without to pay such impositions out of their modest earnings: for instance, one old Oxfordshire shepherd still bitterly recalled having to pay a shilling out of his thirteen shillings' wages for his mother on out-relief, while supporting his wife and three young children. His wife told Miss Ibberson that "they had 'gone to Court' about it, supported by the local Rector 'who declared that he would not leave the Court until the imposition was removed'"; this couple still refused Public Assistance in spite of great need. It was no wonder that old people shrank from making demands on their relatives; as Assistance Board investigators remarked they "sincerely believed" that the youngest generation had priority, and, when the question of assistance arose, the swift response was often: "Oh, the grandchildren must come first."
For this generation, the Local Government Board and the "strict administrators" had performed their self-appointed task too well; many had been deterred not only from applying for Poor Relief, but from seeking any help at all. As discussed in Chapter Five, and to the endless exasperation of Assistance Board officials, most pensioners continued flatly to refuse the free medical treatment and supplies available from Public Assistance Committees, and an increasing number were paying substantial fees in private nursing homes rather than brave the "workhouse". In Violet Markham's summary in 1943, "this tradition of hatred of the old Poor Law still hampers the work of progressive Authorities today".103

Moreover, as we have seen, many thousands of old people were still refusing to claim their Supplementary Pensions. "Typical" of the old people interviewed for the Nuffield Foundation Survey in 1945 who were not receiving Supplementary Pension, were a couple, both aged seventy-four, whose income from their shop was lower than if they drew Supplementary Pension, but who would "die rather than undergo the humiliation" of applying for it; another couple in their seventies managing on a small railway pension and odd jobs - the husband did not want anybody "prying into his affairs"; and a single man aged seventy-six who "despite great poverty maintains that 'a Supplementary Pension is a charity and charity stinks"'. Perhaps the late lamented luminaries of the Charity Organisation Society would not have approved of this old man's phrasing, but they would certainly have applauded the spirit of manly independence which lay behind it: such was the legacy of the Poor Law and "strict administration". Indeed, as late as 1966, a Government survey showed that 30 per cent of married pensioners who failed to apply for Supplementary Benefits did so because of pride or a dislike of charity.104

The cost in misery with which these savings to the public purse were bought scarcely bears dwelling upon; what is far more remarkable is that the accumulated weight of half a century or more of socially destructive policies, from the Local Government Board with its contributions and its workhouse test, to the Ministry of Health with its Household Means Test, and even to some extent the Assistance Board with all its equivocations, seems in most cases to have had so little effect on the closeness of these old people's ties with their relatives. Indeed, the work of sociologists such as Peter Townsend and Wilmott and Young in the 1950s documented relationships between English working-class old people and their adult children which were closer and more genuinely interdependent than those found in almost any other community so far studied. As a National Old People's Welfare Committee study reported of 100 old people interviewed in Hammersmith in 1953,
In all, the impression of family ties was one of unity and strength, not of irresponsibility and weakness. This is in keeping with other inquiries ... .

But like bulls in a china shop of human relationships, officials were not wholly to blame for the havoc they wreaked. The complex interaction of causes which produced the problems of the working-class aged were only just beginning to be grasped. Old people were not interested in conforming to official notions of their dependence; they had voted, as it were, with their clothing coupons. It was not a question of, in Beveridge's famous words, being "in any way lavish to old age", but of ensuring adequate living standards for the whole community, standards which would maintain health and capacity far into old age, and cushion eventual frailty and illness, thus ensuring that many of the problems faced by old people in the 1940s could never arise. Income support or even services which might have nipped problems with health and daily living in the bud, had they been supplied decades ago, were no longer a solution: as one bedridden old woman told Margery Spring Rice in the 1930s, on the subject of nursing care and rest,

Oh my dear, if I could have had a little of it twenty years ago, it would have saved a great deal of this.106

Money was no longer the solution for people whose lives, in the words of the redoubtable Diane Ibberson, "had come to a dead end", and who were, to quote one old man, "just dragging about to save funeral expenses".107 In 1942, a Government Circular neatly summed up the apparent impossibility of finding a satisfactory answer to this problem:

Sleep [it announced] is one of the few luxuries which have failed to attract the attention of the Chancellor of the Exchequer ... . Pensioners who are past work ... can, with the fuel shortage, spend their time to the national advantage in bed ... . There can be little doubt that pensioners will be happier and healthier if they are early to bed and late to rise, than if they spend their time crouching over a fireplace watching the unnecessary consumption of the nation's precious coal ... .108
NOTES

1. The Times, 19 Aug. 1940, on the number of applications following the introduction of the supplementary pension scheme: quoted in Titmuss, Problems of Social Policy, p. 515.

2. PRO AST 7/605 (Markham, AB Memorandum No. 362, 5 Sep. 1943).

3. Quoted in PRO AST 7/925 (Clothing Enquiry at Paddington - St Marylebone Area Office, 12 June 1947).


5. PRO AST 7/441 (Assistance Board (AB) Report: Comparison between Unemployment Assistance and Outdoor Relief Scales in Old Age Pension Cases, 1940, and Appendices; Table, 31 May 1940); AST 7/467 (Note based on 5 per cent Analysis, 23 Sep. 1940; Table of Former Out-Relief Cases, London, Oct. 1940); Fraser, Evolution of the British Welfare State, pp. 182, 196-197.

6. PRO AST 7/637 (Regional Officer (RO), Edinburgh, to Headquarters (HQ), 16 May 1944; Table: Glasgow 2 District, 29 Dec. 1944).

7. Ibid.

8. PRO AST 7/589 (D. Ibberson, Sample Enquiry into need for Clothing, Footwear and Bedding ...: Borough 2, Tooting, Luton and Luton 2 Areas, Mar. 1942, p. 3).

9. Ibid., pp. 4ff; PRO AST 7/589 (D. Ibberson, Special Investigation into the Condition of Supplementary Pensioners, 13496/3, 10 Apr. 1942).

10. PRO AST 7/599 (AB Circular No. 15/42, 1942); AST 7/592 (DOs' Reports on Special Enquiry, various, Apr. 1942; Summary of DOs' Reports, Apr. 1942); AST 7/604 (12 letters of complaint from DOs, June 1942).

11. PRO AST 7/608 (DO, Cambridge 1, Report, 27 Oct. 1942, p. 3; RO, Cardiff, Memorandum, 3 Nov. 1942); AST 7/604 (DO, Bournemouth, to HQ, June 1942; and other items).


13. PRO AST 7/608 (London Region Summary, 10 Nov. 1942: Markham, AB Board Memorandum No. 382, 20 Nov. 1942); AST 7/925 (AB Memorandum No. 472, 30 May 1947: Annexe - Summary of 1942 Enquiry).

14. PRO AST 7/608 (RO, Cardiff, Memorandum, 3 Nov. 1942); AST 7/637 (DO, London 2, to HQ, 16 Jan. 1943; DO, Glasgow 1, to HQ, 3 Feb. 1943; and subsequent correspondence).


21 PRO AST 7/596 (Ibberson, Enquiry into the Previous History of Supplementary Pensioners ..., 7 Aug. 1942, pp. 1-2, Special Cases: Interviews [appendix]).

22 See n. 1 and ibid. (quotes, pp. 3, 5); PRO AST 7/596 (McAlmont, Attraction: Woodford Area Office, Aug. 1942); AST 7/589 (Ibberson, Special Investigation, 10 Apr. 1942).

23 PRO AST 7/596 (McAlmont, ibid., p. 2).


25 PRO AST 7/487 (Survey, 16 Dec. 1941; Fieldhouse to Miss Darlow, 22 Dec. 1941; Table - Breakdown of Survey into Areas; DO, Sheffield, Minute to all Area Officers, 29 June 1942).

26 Nuffield, Old People, p. 15; and see below.
27 PRO AST 7/484 (Analysis of Cases with Gross Resources based on 5 per cent sample, Jan 1942); AST 7/545 (Liverpool: Survey of Supplementary Pension Cases, 1941); PRO AST 7/717 (AB Memorandum, NCSRS Survey, 12 Apr. 1942); CAB 87/80/81 (NCSRS Memorandum No. 2: Pensions, 19 June 1942, pp. 6-8); and below.

28 Ibid.; PRO AST 7/467 (Supplementary Pensioners: Note based on 5 per cent Analysis, 23 Sep. 1940); AST 7/605 (Miss Hope Wallace, PA Memorandum 12835, 15 Aug. 1943); Thomas, Employment, Tables 56 and 57; Nuffield Foundation, Old People, pp. 46ff, Appendix 3; and see chs. 3 and 6.


30 Ibid.; PRO CAB 87/80/81 (NCSRS, Memorandum No. 2, Pensions, 19 June 1942, p.11); Nuffield Foundation, Old People, pp. 14-15; Thomas, Employment, p. 21; and see below.

31 Nuffield Foundation, Old People, pp. 11, 55.


33 Tunstall, Old and Alone, pp. 57, 200-201; Fraser, The Evolution of the British Welfare State, p. 228.


35 For example: PRO AST 7/574 (Ibberson, Report of an Enquiry, Aug. 1944); AST 7/589 (Ibberson, Sample Enquiry, Mar. 1942; Special Investigation, Apr. 1942); AST 7/596 (Ibberson, Enquiry into the Previous History, Aug. 1942); AST 7/479 (Mallon, AB Memorandum No. 358, 30 July 1941; Markham, AB Memorandum No. 365, 9 Oct. 1941); AST 7/605 (Markham, AB Memorandum No. 362, 5 Sep. 1943); for excellent examples of reports by District Officers, see PRO AST 7/605 (especially DO, Darlington (Miss Gardiner), to Fieldhouse, 24 Mar. 1942); AST 7/608 (various, 1942).

37 Ibid.; PRO AST 7/553 (AO, Liverpool 3, to DO, Liverpool, 20 Apr. 1942); AST 7/479 (Markham, Assistance Board Memorandum No. 365, 9 Oct. 1941, p. 4).


39 B.B.C. radio broadcast (1942), quoted in PRO AST 7/627 (L.N. Ure, letter to DO, Exeter, 26 Oct. 1942); AST 7/551 (Ure to Secretary, AB, 6 Oct. 1942).

40 PRO AST 7/589 (Special Enquiries, 1942: Attachment: DO, Borough 2, to Ibberison); AST 7/925 (Clothing Enquiry at Paddington - St Marylebone Area Office, 12 June 1947, p. 1).

41 PRO AST 7/595 (various letters and press clippings, 1942, including 5 articles, 6 private letters and 13 letters from OAP Associations and other bodies criticising Special Enquiry); AST 7/535 (quoted in Investigation Survey - London 4 District, 17 Nov. 1941); AST 7/604 (press clipping, Southport Visitor, 11 July 1942); AST 7/608 (RO, North-Western Region, Report, Nov. 1942; RO, London Region, Report, Nov. 1942, p. 2).

42 Ibid, and n. 26; PRO AST 7/535 (quoted in Investigation Survey, London 4 District, 17 Nov. 1941, Appendix 1); AST 7/553 (quoted in Mather, AB Memorandum by the Chief Regional Officer, 24 Sep. 1941); AST 7/608 (quoted in RO, North-Western Region, Report, p. 2); AST 7/479 (Hallsworth, AB Memorandum No. 354: Welfare Work amongst Old Age Pensioners, 9 July 1941; Mallon, AB Memorandum No. 358, 30 July 1941, p. 2).


44 Ibid.; quotation from PRO CAB 87/80/82 (NCSRS Memorandum No. 4, 19 June 1942, p. 20).


PRO AST 7/487 (extract from South Wales Echo, 28 Nov. 1941).


PRO AST 7/574 (Ibberson, Report of an Enquiry, Aug. 1944, p. 47); AST 7/925 (Supplementary Pensioners without Resources: Exceptional Needs Enquiry, 1947 [various items]).


PRO AST 7/605 (Herford, Report on Old Age Pensioners Living Alone in Stepney, Dec. 1941, p. 1; Markham, AB Memorandum No. 362, 5 Sep. 1943, p. 3).

PRO AST 7/604 (DO, London 4, District Return, SP 15/42, 1942); AST 7/479 (Markham, AB Memorandum No. 365, p. 6); AST 7/574 (Ibberson, Report of an Enquiry, Aug 1944, p. 116); AST 7/596 (Ibberson, Enquiry into the Previous History ..., 7 Aug. 1942: Attachment: Special Cases, Interviews, Cases 1 and 4); AST 7/599 (DO, Bournemouth, to HQ, 21 July 1942); AST 7/737 (NCSRS, Draft Memorandum, p. 44); AST 7/632 (AO, Wimbledon, Enquiry into Complaints by Mrs Anderson, 10 Nov. 1942 [quotation]).

Ibid. [NCSRS Memorandum No. 4], p. 23; PRO AST 7/479 (Markham, AB Memorandum No. 365, 9 Oct. 1941, p. 6).


PRO CAB 87/80/82 (NCSRS, Memorandum No. 4, p. 12 [London, Bethnal Green, Fulham]); AST 7/634 (AO, Bridgewater, to RO, Bristol, 8 Jul. 1946 and subsequent correspondence; AO, Barking/Dagenham to RO, London, 11 July 1946 and

PRO AST 7/574 (Ibberson, Report of an Enquiry, Aug. 1944, pp. 116, 156); AST 7/605 (Welfare of Old Age Pensioners - Special Needs Cases, 1943: Case No. 4, Reading; Case No. 20, Manchester 1; London 1 District Report, 29 Apr. 1943, Case No. 1, West Ham); AST 7/608 (Mallett, Exceptional Needs Enquiry: Women's Cases, 14 Sep. 1942); AST 7/641 (AO, Finchley; AO, Hendon; AO, Wood Green; Reports, 8 Feb. 1943); AST 7/737 (NCSRS, Draft Memorandum, A Welfare Service for Old People, May 1944, p. 40); AST 7/596 (Ibberson, Enquiry into the Previous History, 7 Aug. 1942: Attachment: Special Cases - Interviews, Case 1); AST 7/589 (Ibberson, Special Needs Cases, Mar. 1942: Luton 1 Appendix, Case 7).

PRO CAB 87/80/82 (NCSRS, Memorandum No. 4, p. 12); AST 7/574 (Ibberson, Report of an Enquiry, Aug. 1944, p. 184); AST 7/717 (AB Memorandum to NCSRS, 12 Apr. 1942).

PRO AST 7/737 (NCSRS, Draft Memorandum, May 1944, p. 44).

PRO CAB 87/80/81 (NCSRS, Memorandum No. 2: Pensions, 19 June 1942, p. 23); AST 7/479 (Markham, AB Memorandum No. 365, 9 Oct. 1941, p. 5); AST 7/663 (Welfare Reports submitted by Area Officers: Points Raised, 1944); AST 7/605 (Herford, Report, Dec. 1941, p. 1).


PRO AST 7/663 (Welfare Reports submitted by Area Officers (1944)); AST 7/605 (L.N. Ure, letter, 14 May 1942).

PRO AST 7/663 (Welfare Reports submitted by Area Officers (1944)).


PRO AST 7/737 (NCSRS, Draft Memorandum, May 1944, Appendix, p. 3).
68 PRO AST 7/574 (Ibberson, Report of an Enquiry, Aug. 1944, pp. 50-51ff); AST 7/663 (Reports by Welfare Officers, GS 11A, 1944).

69 PRO AST 7/605 (Herford, Report, Dec. 1941, p. 3; Markham, AB Memorandum No. 362, 5 Sep. 1943, p. 2); AST 7/663 (Area Officers' Reports: Summary, 1944); Sheldon, Social Medicine, p. 71.


71 See ch. 3: also ibid., pp. 103-107: PRO AST 7/605 (Herford, Report, Dec. 1941, p. 3; Markham, AB Memorandum No. 362, 5 Sep. 1943, p. 2); AST 7/627 (Assistant DO, Liverpool, Survey: Housing Conditions of Supplementary Pensioners, Liverpool, 14 July 1942); Nuffield Foundation, Old People, pp. 31-37; Thomas, Employment of Older Persons, pp. 22-27, 62-63.


73 See ch. 3; PRO AST 7/574 (Ibberson, Report of an Enquiry, Aug. 1944, pp. 22, 152, 155, 159, 181); AST 7/589 (Ibberson, Sample Enquiry, Mar. 1942, p. 3 & Luton I Appendix, Cases 1, 6, 8 and quotation); AST 7/627 (DO, Bournemouth, to Hope-Wallace, 3 July 1944); AST 7/737 (Pacifist Services Unit - Excerpts from Case Records, 1946, Cases 2 and 4).

74 Sheldon, Social Medicine, pp. 28-179; Curran et al., "The Care of the Aged", p. 150; Exton-Smith, "An Investigation of the Aged Sick in their own Homes", p. 183; PRO AST 7/479 (Mallon, AB Memorandum No. 358, 30 July 1941, p. 1).

75 Ibid.

76 PRO AST 7/605 (Herford, Report on Old Age Pensioners, Dec. 1941, p. 4); AST 7/737 (NCSRS, Draft Memorandum, May 1944, p. 41).

77 PRO AST 7/446 (Assistance Board (AB) Memorandum No. 332, Public Assistance Committees' Outdoor Relief Scales, 7 Mar. 1940); AST 7/589/13496/3 (Ibberson, Special Investigation ..., 10 Apr. 1942, p. 6); AST 7/592 (District Officer (DO), London 1, Report on Special Enquiry, Apr. 1942, DO 17/42; DO, Durham/Middlesbrough, Report, Apr. 1942; DO, Newcastle, Report, Apr. 1942; DO, Cambridge 2, Report, Apr. 1942).

78 PRO AST 7/592 (DO, Swansea, Report, Apr. 1942); AST 7/592 (Supplementary Pensioners: Special Enquiry into Exceptional Needs (SPs: SEEN): Complaints and Enquiries, June 1942 - Nov. 1942 (various letters)); AST 7/599 (AB Circular 15/42); AST 7/604 (SPs: SEEN: DOs' Enquiries, June 1942 - Jan. 1943 (letters on this topic from 12 DOs)); AST 7/608 (Regional Officer (RO), Bradford, Main Report on Bradford Special Needs Enquiry, Nov. 1942; RO, Nottingham, Note on Special Enquiry ..., 2 Nov. 1942, p. 3; RO, Cardiff, Cardiff Region Notes, Nov. 1942, p. 5;


80 PRO AST 7/608 (J.R. Reddall and DO, Cambridge 1, Exceptional Needs Enquiry, Cambridge 1 District, 27 Oct. 1942, case notes; RO, Nottingham, Note on Special Enquiry, 2 Nov. 1942, p. 2; DO, Swansea, Report, p. 2); AST 7/574 (Ibberson, Report of an Enquiry, Aug. 1944, p. 154); and see below.

81 See n. 5; PRO AST 7/608 (quoted in DO, Newport, Newport District Report, 1942).

82 Spelling as in original; PRO AST 7/632 (letter, Birkenhead Area, n.d.; and other letters); AST 7/595 (various letters, 1942, especially letters from Ardrossan, Beverley, Stockport and Bradford Areas and Nottingham District).

83 PRO AST 7/605 (Markham, AB Memorandum No. 362, 5 Sep. 1943, p. 6).

84 PRO AST 7/608 (RO, Bradford, Exceptional Needs Enquiry, Nov. 1942, p. 3; and other items).


86 PRO AST 7/418 (Note by Mr Reid on Supplementation of Old Age Pensions, 1940); AST 7/484 (Reid to Beveridge, 8 Dec. 1941); AST 7/451 (DO, Manchester 1, to HQ, 29 July 1940); AST 7/535 (DO, London 4, Investigation Survey, London 4 District, 17 Nov. 1941; also Appendix A, Cases 1 and (g)); AST 7/446 (Memorandum: Outdoor Relief Scales and Practice, 1940).


90 Ibid.; PRO MH 79/306 (Country Councils' Association Report, 22 Feb. 1933); CAB 87/80/83 (NCSRS, Memorandum No. 5: Public Assistance, 19 June 1942, pp. 50-54); Southgate, That's the Way it Was, p. 136.


92 Sheldon, Social Medicine, pp. 163, 173.


95 PRO AST 7/605 (DO, Darlington, to H. Fieldhouse, 24 Mar. 1942).

96 Sheldon, Social Medicine, pp. 141, 165-166, 181.

97 Sheldon, Social Medicine, p. 29; PRO AST 7/710 (National Corporation for the Care of Old People, The Care of the Elderly living at Home, 1951, pp. 18-19).

98 Ibid., pp. 8, 23; PRO AST 7/737 (NCSRS, Draft Memorandum, May 1944, p. 14); Sheldon, Social Medicine, pp. 164-184.


100 Ibid., p. 41; PRO AST 7/589 (Ibberson, Sample Enquiry, Mar. 1942: Appendix: Luton 1 Special Needs Cases; DO, Cambridge 1, to HQ, Apr. 1942); AST 7/608 (RO, London, Report, 10 Nov. 1942); AST 7/925 (Clothing Enquiry at Paddington and St Marylebone Area Offices, 12 June 1947, p. 1).

101 PRO MH 15/71, MH 15/91, MH 15/104 (Poor Law Indexes, 1893-9, 1900-9, 1910-20: entries under "Liability of Relatives"); MH 32/52/68757/72 (Inspectors' Correspondence: Lange: Dr Bircham, Additional Notes..., pp. 10-12).

102 PRO AST 7/589 (DO, Cambridge 1 to HQ, Apr. 1942); AST 7/596 (Ibberson, Enquiry into Previous History, 7 Aug. 1942: Appendix: Public Assistance in Oxford, p. 3); AST 7/737 (NCSRS, Draft Memorandum, May 1944, p. 2).

103 PRO AST 7/596 (Ibberson, Enquiry into Previous History, 7 Aug. 1942, p. 5); AST 7/605 (Markham, AB Memorandum No. 362, 5 Sep. 1943, p. 4).
104 Nuffield Foundation, Old People, p. 15; cited in Fraser, Evolution of the British Welfare State, p. 228.


106 Beveridge Report, 1942; quoted e.g. [with approval] in Nuffield Foundation, Old People, p. 24; Spring Rice, Working Class Wives, p. 82.


CONCLUSION

"Our lot's nothing very grand when we're doing well: it means fifty-six hours' work a week, fifty weeks a year, fifty years' work, and then? - the workhouse, or else a sponging sort of existence ...".

- George Acorn, London fitter, 1909.1

"... these folk may be said to have lent a hand in the great processes of civilisation; ... a brief childhood at one end and a few sinking weary years at the other end, and between them these five solid decades of work: that is their record."

- J.B. Priestley, on the workers of Bradford, 1934.2

The period from 1878 to 1948 is seventy years: the biblical three score years and ten, or a life-span. This period was the life-span of some of the old people of the 1940s mentioned in this thesis, and for many of them, it was a time of massive change, of social and economic transformation. These changes and discontinuities are so striking that it is no wonder that they have been the focus of most historical attention on this period. In this thesis, I have tried to acknowledge the effect of these changes on the lives of older people while dwelling chiefly on the common experience of ageing over these decades.

For, when we read about the daily lives of the elderly in this era from the privileged standpoint of the late twentieth century, it is the continuities which stand out. As noted by Margaret Crowther and discussed in Chapter Four, accounts of visits to workhouses and Public Assistance Institutions over the hundred years from the 1850s to the 1940s are uncanny in their similarity. Surveys of older people's living conditions, even accounts of their employment, their health or their encounters with the Poor Law officer or the "Means Test man", trace the common threads of the lives of the elderly throughout the era. The Assistance Board files, the Nuffield Foundation surveys and other sources from the 1940s serve to remind us that, while few old people had been untouched by the great improvements in working-class living standards in the foregoing decades, their straitened lives had often as much in common with those of their grandparents as with old people's lives today.

This is not to deny the importance of change in the lives of these old people, the most striking of these being the changes in their employment patterns. As discussed in Chapters
One and Two, the period indeed saw the rapid growth of formal retirement for the working-class elderly. The change was not, as is often supposed, from full-time employment of old people at standard adult wages until death, but from marginal employment at low or irregular wages, generally punctuated by increasing periods away from work due to unemployment, accidents and illness.

As we have seen in these first Chapters, this was the prevailing pattern in the late nineteenth century; often, this struggle on the fringes of the labour market gave way in its turn to months, years or even decades without employment as the old person became too frail or work too hard to obtain. The concept of formal retirement was still somewhat foreign to the working-class mind: by contrast, an old person beyond work due to ill-health was an accepted part of life. Whatever the labour force status of an old man or woman, the chances were that other sources of income were needed to make up a livelihood; this issue is discussed below.

From at least the 1880s, the pattern of marginal employment for the elderly was slowly giving way to one of formal retirement from the labour force. The shift from agrarian to industrial employment and the modernisation of industry left fewer opportunities for light, self-paced jobs or "pension posts", less seasonal and casual employment, less homework and altogether fewer jobs for the marginal and less efficient worker. At the same time, rising real wages and the growth of private and public provision outside the Poor Law made formal retirement an increasingly attractive alternative to the shrinking pool of residual employments.

There is evidence of a rise during this period in the average age at which urban working men ceased full-time employment in a career occupation. For most, however, this development was of far less significance than the change in "post-career" activity: the substitution of the ignominious decline through lower status jobs and increasing ill-health with the more dignified but less than ideal alternative of formal retirement from the labour force.

This change was most visible and best documented for older men, but for women too there was a steady transformation. Rising real wages for their menfolk and better public provision freed many thousands of women from unskilled casual work in old age. From the 1920s it was clear that men who remained in the workforce after sixty-five were likely to be the relatively privileged who had held onto their lifetime jobs. By contrast, women who stayed in paid employment into their old age were generally among the least well-off, and
it was their experience which had most in common with the pre-twentieth century working-class pattern.

With rising real incomes in the working-class community, the living conditions of the elderly were changing too. Chapters Three to Five chart gradual improvements in all areas of older people's lives, from nutrition and housing to institutional and medical care. Despite the difficulty of assessing and comparing old people's health over a period when health standards and expectations were steadily rising, we can see indications that the health of the elderly was beginning to improve, at least after the 1900s when life expectancy in old age began crawling snail-like upwards.

Yet these Chapters show overwhelming evidence of the continuities in the daily lives of the elderly from the 1870s to the 1940s. It is inevitable that, in a time of rapid change, it is the older members of the community whose ways of life preserve most from the past. However, the growing relative poverty of the aged, the apparent decline in their relative health, the lagging improvements in their housing conditions and their life expectancy, all point to a serious problem. From the late nineteenth century, old people's ways of life seemed closer to those of past generations largely because their living standards were falling increasingly behind those of the community as a whole.

The reasons for this lag were partly economic. Real wages were rising, but at the same time, employment opportunities on the fringes of the labour market were dwindling. Modernisation and the spread of large firms and public sector employment ensured better pay, improved conditions and greater job security for those in full-time work; their families in turn enjoyed rising living standards. Households without a full-time adult wage-earner were left further and further behind. Among these were the elderly, hampered in the competition for employment not only by their age, but by the premature disablement of lives lived in harsher times, in malnutrition and poverty.

As discussed in Chapter Six, old people were perhaps the group left most vulnerable by England's transformation from a predominantly agrarian to an industrial economy. Income redistribution and community support through the Poor Law were urgently needed to bolster them against the disruptions of unemployment and workless old age and to forestall the drop in their relative living standards. Yet instead of providing more community support to tide the elderly over this difficult time, the Local Government Board and its allies made them the chief target of a campaign of "strict administration" designed to force them off Poor Law Relief altogether.
The story of "strict administration", its consequences for the lives of the elderly up to the 1890s and its poisonous legacy to the twentieth century are the subject of Chapter Six. As this Chapter shows, "strict administration" was founded on an entirely false view of society, its obsession with working-class "independence" flying in the face both of the realities of contemporary working-class life and of history. That the full-blown version of this policy triumphed in so few Poor Law Unions, and then so briefly, is a tribute to the common sense of most local voters and Poor Law Guardians, as well as to the courageous resistance of the local working class and the aged poor in particular.

But the pressure from above, combined with the local temptation to save the rates, meant that some of the worst aspects of "strict administration" quickly became entrenched in normal Poor Law, Public Assistance and even Assistance Board practice at least into the mid-twentieth century. Not only was the availability of relief to the elderly severely curtailed, with a fall of 20 per cent in the numbers of non-able-bodied adult relief recipients in the twenty years from 1872; but the Local Government Board succeeded in most areas in effectively capping relief levels so that they fell or remained stationary at a time when real wages were climbing rapidly. The principle of inadequate income support became so firmly established in this period that old age pensions and National Insurance payments were themselves set at below subsistence levels, necessitating the development of a whole machinery of supplementation through the Poor Law, Local Authorities and the Assistance Board.

Perhaps worst of all, "strict administration" succeeded in keeping old people away from the Poor Law in their thousands, and embittering their lives when they did apply, by the simple expedient of threatening or enforcing contributions to relief from their adult children. Contributions, and their counterpart, the Household Means Test, were undoubtedly the most important and the most hated survival of "strict administration", blighting the existence of poorer old people and their families into the 1940s.

In the long term, the main consequence of "strict administration" was the replacement of the Poor Law with the modern Welfare State. The old Poor Law had often been meanly administered; the new Poor Law added to this mean-spiritedness an obsession with policies which were appropriate neither for the able-bodied and their families, nor for the bulk of the "impotent" poor. Accordingly, the nineteenth-century working-class treated the Poor Law as a last resort, to be turned to only when a livelihood could no longer be patched together from other sources. However, their great poverty meant that, for most, the time would come when this last resort was inevitable; throughout the century the evidence
indicates that most working people who lived to old age received poor relief at some time before death.

When, from the 1870s, the "strict administrators" did their best to drive old people from the Poor Law, their failure was ensured by economic and social realities. By carrying on regardless, they left a Poor Law which was unable to fulfil its social function: increasingly, those who needed relief would not apply for it. Unable to deal efficiently with the unemployed or to provide the health services demanded by modern industry, the Poor Law was no longer even an effective safety net for the traditional "deserving poor". Moreover, the "strict administrators" had fanned the embers of working-class hatred left by the New Poor Law into a raging fire: even if the Poor Law had still been functioning effectively, working-class hostility now meant that it was doomed.

Hence, from the 1880s, the machinery of the new welfare state was pieced together: unemployment relief, medical relief, old age pensions, National Insurance, Unemployment Insurance, contributory pensions, supplementary assistance. Each one of these duplicated existing Poor Law functions, and each duplication had its attendant confusions and waste of resources. Each extension of the insurance principle tied income support and the social wage more tightly to participation in the labour force; each such extension widened the division between those in the insured workforce and the residuum. Yet these developments were overwhelmingly supported by the working class, and every one of them undoubtedly brought with it better living standards and happier lives for many thousands of working people.

Along with changing employment patterns, higher real wages and improved private provision, the extension of the welfare state was crucial in transforming the lives of old people in the twentieth century. With each step towards wider accessibility and greater adequacy of public provision, more elderly people were freed from the struggle with marginal employment and the necessity to patch and scrape a living with help from inadequate poor relief, relatives, charity and other sources. As Chapter Seven shows, by the 1940s, many thousands of elderly people were managing to live, with dignity if somewhat shabbily, on their pensions and Assistance Board allowances alone. The "toiling and moiling and patching and contriving" of Joseph Arch's nineteenth century contemporaries was, for some at least, a thing of the past.

However, the effects of accumulating decades of socially destructive policies cannot be so lightly dismissed. For the "problem of old age", which was rediscovered in the 1940s by the Assistance Board investigators and others, was in fact not so much a problem of old age
as of lives prematurely disabled by poverty and inadequate community support, and blighted in their closing years by a system of public provision which failed to distribute a fair share of the national wealth to those who most needed it. Old people's living standards lagged not just because the modern workforce had no place for them, but more importantly because policymakers and administrators, lost in their obsessions, had at first pursued policies which were counterproductive, and then followed them with reforms which gave too little too late.

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Ageing is a process of withdrawal. First, bodily changes lead to the end of childbearing, for women, and to the gradual loss of agility, strength and adaptability which, for most of us who do not die suddenly, leads to a scaling down and eventual cessation of involvement in the wider economic life of our community. For those who live to an advanced age, or who experience serious illness, there follows a process of retirement even from the domestic economy, as the tasks of daily living and self-care are handed over to others. Finally, there are the last days or years of dependence, when an old person draws on the common bank for all economic and social services, with no hope of once again becoming an active member of the community; then, there is death.

No society seems ever to have found a way to accomplish this transition without a degree of pain and sorrow, as accounts from many different times and cultures testify: to quote from Job:

Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble.
He cometh forth like a flower, and is cut down: he fleeth also as a shadow, and continueth not.3

Yet if pain and sorrow are a part of the human condition, so is the urge to fight against them, and this can take a number of forms. Most positive of these is the effort to overcome poverty and illness, which so exacerbate the ordinary difficulties of life, and to provide the necessary support for those with special needs. Less positive, but perhaps more common, is the tendency to look around for something to blame, whether it be "old age", "inevitable" ill-health, or the victims themselves. If this results in a search for palliatives, something useful may be achieved: more usually, as we have seen in Chapters Three, Four and Five, the result is what Professor Marshall called, in reference to "strict administration", "patience in bearing other people's sufferings".4
Yet probably the least helpful of all responses to the existence of pain is the rejection of reality, with dreams instead of a past, or even future, Golden Age, when the human condition was different. The Golden Age is one of the most prevalent myths in human societies: in Byron's words, "all times when old are good". As we have seen in Chapters One and Two, one common twentieth century variant of the Golden Age myth is the belief that, until recently, most old people worked happily and productively in their lifetime jobs and maintained their social and economic position until the day they died. The abundant evidence against this myth is unlikely to have much effect on its currency, especially amongst old people themselves.

Noted in Chapters Six and Seven is an even more pervasive version of the Golden Age myth, and one which seems to have existed in every generation since records began; this is the belief that, until the recent past, old people were nurtured in the bosoms of their families, and lovingly nursed and supported in their dotage by their adult children. Currently, this belief is upheld most passionately by the very same people who, expounding the employment myth mentioned above, might be supposed to believe that dotages were a twentieth century invention. But filial duty, it seems, has always been on the wane, at least since the time of Moses and of Socrates. Indeed, it is not so long ago that Britain's own Prime Minister, then Margaret Thatcher, joined the call for a "return to Victorian values", showing how strong and persistent is the human need to believe that things were better once upon a time.

Our propensity to idealise the past would be touching, if it were not so often destructive of present happiness. We have traced in the previous Chapters the disastrous effects of the campaign in the late nineteenth century for a "return" to Victorian values: thrift, Smilesian self-help, personal charity and above all, the pre-eminence of the (extended) family, rather than the wider community, as the locus for income support and welfare services.

The results of this campaign show clearly what can happen when those with some social and political influence deceive themselves with fantasies about the past, especially when those fantasies provide a moral justification for a tightening of private and public purse strings. History and experience are cast aside in the effort to force both individuals and society itself into this mythical pattern, and to punish those who inevitably fail: in order, in Voltaire's famous summary of English attitudes to punishment in the eighteenth century, "to encourage the others". As Albert Pell unblushingly declared of old people in the workhouse in 1875,
Paying the penalty of their misfortunes or faults, they serve the useful purpose of warning the young and careless of the need of making provision against the possibilities of ill-health and the certainties of old age.\(^7\)

To take this approach, as we have seen, is to multiply the everyday difficulties of economic and social existence, and to poison the lives of those most needing social acceptance and support; and to do all this with an unflinching sense of historical purpose and moral righteousness, in the name of an imaginary past. To quote R.H. Tawney in 1909,

> the student realises, with something like horror, that three generations of men and women have been sacrificed to what, when it is examined critically, turns out to be nothing more or less than a gigantic historical blunder.\(^8\)

Today, in many countries, income support provisions for old people are being tightened, placing more reliance on self-funded superannuation and thus widening the gap between poorer old people and the rest of the community. Some people, like the leisured classes of previous centuries, can afford to retire early; others, as always, are forced out of the workforce by illness, unemployment and compulsory retirement, yet lack the means to buy themselves an acceptable standard of living or the services they will need as they become more frail.

At the same time, we are witnessing cutbacks in residential and public support services for old people and others with special needs, which often occur without an equivalent injection of public funds into family- and community-based support networks. In many communities, services which are needed have not been cut back, simply because they were never introduced. As we have seen, "de-institutionalisation", or community care of very disabled or frail old people, always requires a delicate balance between the competing demands of attachment to home and independence, and the dangers of inability to cope and inadequate community support; too often the burden of care remains on the old people themselves or on a daughter, spouse or neighbour.\(^9\)

Unfortunately, an assessment of the needs of old people and their families must take into account what the community is prepared to pay. There is a tendency, even amongst the most compassionate and well-meaning, especially within the so-called "welfare lobby", to allow this assessment to be clouded by a quite ahistorical belief in the inherent superiority of informal support provided in a mysterious entity called "the community"; this entity is apparently different from the community which pays for pensions, health and other support
services. Informal support is, of course, generally a good deal cheaper than formal, structured, publicly-funded programs, especially when, as is usually the case, "the community" turns out to consist of the old people themselves, one or two family members and perhaps the odd neighbour or friend. Accompanying this belief is an often naive assumption of the value of "independent living", even when this means in practice mainly struggling on in poverty and loneliness without adequate support services, or simply being dependent on carers who are unrecognised and unpaid. To quote Thomas Mackay, boasting of the success of "strict administration" in Bradfield Union in 1893, "Poverty, alas, has not been eradicated, but ... independence has been restored". ¹⁰

Thus old people are, again in Mackay's words, "push[ed] ... further and further back onto their own resources", and the ability of their families and friends to cope is stretched to breaking point.¹¹ If asked to justify this trend, even educated people will, like the Poor Law Reformers and the Charity Organisation Society, conjure up a golden age which did not exist, in a mythical bucolic setting where jolly old villagers worked happily in the fields, going home each night to cosy cottages where their extended family clamoured to greet them, where everybody pitched in together and the poor not only helped the poor, but had the resources to do so.

Perhaps we are on the verge of another of Tawney's "gigantic historical blunders"; but this is unlikely. Old people and their families, and others now requiring publicly-funded income support and services, are no longer the "relatively uninfluential" group they were once alleged to be: indeed, the dismantling and abolition of the Poor Law and the contributions and household Means Test systems within little more than half a century, shows that they were never as powerless as some of their social superiors might have wished.¹²

In this respect at least, a tendency to brood over the present is often quickly cured by a glimpse into the past: as Thomas Macaulay wrote in 1849,

Those who compare the age in which their lot has fallen with a mythical golden age which exists only in imagination, may talk of degeneracy and decay; but no man who is correctly informed as to the past will be disposed to take a morose or desponding view of the present.¹³
NOTES

1. Acorn, One of the Multitude, p. 295.
5. Lord Byron, "The Age of Bronze" [1823], stanza 1.
9. Means and Smith, "From Public Assistance Institution to 'Sunshine Hotel'", p. 159.
11. Aberdare Commission, BPP 1895, XIV, p. 503 [Mackay].
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