

Paupers Behaving Badly: Punishment in the Victorian Workhouse

Samantha Williams 

Abstract The deterrent workhouse, with its strict rules for the behavior of inmates and boundaries of authority of the workhouse officers, was a central expression of the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, known widely as the New Poor Law. This article explores for the first time the day-to-day experience of the power and authority of workhouse masters, matrons, other officers of the workhouse, and its Board of Guardians, and the resistance and agency of resentful inmates. Despite new sets of regulations to guide workhouse officers in the uniform imposition of discipline on residents, there was a high degree of regional diversity not only in the types of offenses committed by paupers but also in welfare policy relating to the punishments inflicted for disorderly and refractory behavior. And while pauper agency was significant, it should not be overstated, given the disparity in power between inmates and workhouse officials.

The workhouse was a central feature of Britain's New Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, and discipline and punishment for transgressions were essential to the workhouse regime. Nassau Senior, a member of the Royal Commission whose report resulted in the act, wanted relief to the poor to be given only within "the strict discipline of well-regulated workhouses."¹ He saw maintaining discipline as an essential part of enforcing deterrence and efficiently administering a workhouse full of resentful inmates; yet discipline was more problematic than in asylums or prisons, as workhouse populations were constantly changing.² Senior wished to introduce the "workhouse test" as a measure of true destitution and the only means whereby paupers could receive poor relief in a workhouse.³ Moreover, workhouses were designed to deter the poor from applying for relief. This was achieved by their prison-like appearance, their location, often on the outskirts of provincial towns, and also by the separation of men, women, and children, the provision of hard work, and a highly regimented daily timetable.⁴

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¹ Royal Commission into the Operation of the Poor Laws, Report from His Majesty's Commissioners for Inquiry into the Administration and Practical Operation of the Poor Laws, 1834, C.44, 129. (Hereafter Poor Law Report).

² M. A. Crowther, *The Workhouse System, 1834–1929: The History of an English Social Institution* (London, 1983), 208; Alan Kidd, *State, Society and the Poor in Nineteenth-Century England* (Basingstoke, 1999), 34–36.

³ Anthony Brundage, *The English Poor Laws, 1700–1930* (Basingstoke, 2002), 66.

⁴ Brundage, *English Poor Laws*, 66.

Discipline was essential because of the low ratio of staff to inmates; in Norwich workhouse in 1881, for instance, there were 529 paupers to twenty staff members.⁵

The new act set up the Poor Law Commission, based at Somerset House in London and composed of three men: Thomas Frankland Lewis, George Nicholls, and John George Shaw Lefevre. Although independent of Parliament, it “did not have the power many people assumed.”⁶ Nevertheless, to their opponents, including some Tories, radical defenders of the rights of the poor and the working class, the Poor Law commissioners were the “Tyrants of Somerset House.”⁷ The commission ordered the formation of Poor Law unions—confederations of parishes large enough to support a workhouse. Parishes were grouped into some six hundred unions, and while some of these unions adapted existing workhouses, by 1841 about 320 new buildings had been completed.⁸ The new union workhouses were the most iconic expressions of the change in policy, deliberately imposing structures designed not only to cow those applying at the workhouse gate but also to surveil them once they became inmates.⁹ The assistant Poor Law commissioner E. C. Tufnell commented that workhouses’ “prison-like appearance, and the notion that they are intended to torment the poor, inspires a salutary dread of them.”¹⁰ Commonly referred to as “bastilles,”¹¹ they represented the principle and practice of the strict separation of paupers from the rest of society, as well as from each other.

Little work has been published, however, on the day-to-day attempts to maintain discipline in union workhouses, the many acts of defiance by paupers, and the punishment inflicted upon inmates by workhouse staff.¹² This internal misbehavior and insubordination of workhouse paupers is the subject of this article, which draws upon a range of union punishment books. Workhouse masters logged instances of breaches in discipline in pre-printed books that recorded the name of the pauper, the offense, the date committed, the punishment inflicted by the master or other official, the opinion of the guardians on this punishment, the punishment ordered by the guardians, date of that punishment, and any notes attached to the case (which might include referrals to local courts and their outcomes). In my research, set within the context of contemporary understandings of discipline and the appropriate response of authorities through punishment, I explored the types of recorded offenses

⁵ “Norwich workhouse residents, 1881 census,” in *The Workhouse: The Story of an Institution . . .* (website), comp. Peter Higginbotham, accessed 29 July 2020, <http://www.workhouses.org.uk/Norwich/Norwich.1881.shtml>.

⁶ Derek Fraser, *The Evolution of the British Welfare State*, 3rd ed. (Basingstoke, 2003), 52.

⁷ Brundage, *English Poor Laws*, 70–71.

⁸ David R. Green, “Pauper Protests: Power and Resistance in Early Nineteenth-Century London Workhouses,” *Social History* 31, no. 2 (2006): 137–59; Charlotte Newman, “To Punish or Protect: The New Poor Law and the English Workhouse,” *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 18, no. 1 (2014): 122–45.

⁹ Felix Driver, *Power and Pauperism: The Workhouse System, 1834–1884* (Cambridge, 2004); Newman, “To Punish or Protect,” 131–34.

¹⁰ *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, 3rd series, vol. 76 (1844), col. 1821.

¹¹ G. R. Wythen Baxter, *The Book of the Bastiles; or, the History of the Working of the New Poor-Law* (London, 1841); Norman Longmate, *The Workhouse* (London, 1974), chap. 7; Anne Digby, *Pauper Palaces* (London, 1978); Peter Higginbotham, *Voices from the Workhouse* (Stroud, 2012), 20.

¹² There is a short section in Simon Fowler, *Workhouse: The People, the Places, the Life behind Doors* (Richmond, 2007), 133–36; see also Paul Carter and Kate Thompson, eds., *Pauper Prisons, Pauper Palaces: The Victorian Poor Law in the East and West Midlands, 1834–1871* (Kibworth Beauchamp, 2017).

against workhouse rules and the punishments meted out by workhouse masters and other officers and those ordered by the Board of Guardians and local magistrates. Tensions were inherent within the union workhouse, and I assessed the exercise of agency and authority by various residents of the workhouse, the paupers' chafing at its rules, and the lived experience of all within its walls. Misbehavior by inmates and responses to it as evidenced in the punishment books provided a window into agency and authority.

While there have been studies of the worst behavior—workhouse riots—and the most severe punishment—committals to prison¹³—the only detailed study of pauper punishment is David Green's on London workhouses. Green draws primarily upon parliamentary returns, the London *Times*, and the West London Union Board of Guardians minutes,¹⁴ a different set of sources than I used in my research. Green's study shows that "only a small number of breaches of discipline ended in a prosecution . . . the remainder were dealt with internally . . . [There was] a much larger problem of insubordination in the workhouse reflecting a wider variety of types of misbehavior than just those paraded before the courts."¹⁵ Green argues that, although the combined authority of the workhouse master, Board of Guardians, and Poor Law commissioners tried to create "docile bodies," the "paupers themselves could be feisty" and misbehavior enabled them to challenge workhouse discipline. Inmates had individual as well as group agency; the workhouse was a site of resistance in which they negotiated with workhouse officials over the provision of poor relief.¹⁶ Green contends that the union workhouse was a "deeply contested institution" and, further, that pauper misbehavior could challenge even "the legitimacy and authority of the poor law itself."¹⁷

The spectrum of misbehavior within workhouses is the focus here, in a variety of workhouse settings beyond London. I initially focus on the concept of discipline and its purposes within institutions, and I then turn to the analysis of workhouse offenses and punishment. While I found broad similarity across unions, I also found striking local difference—a high degree of regional disparity in recorded pauper offenses between workhouses and in workhouse punishment policy. In the final section, I consider whether localism was a consequence of welfare policies and practices at the county or the union level by examining two workhouses in each of the counties of Lincolnshire and Norfolk.

DISCIPLINE IN THE WORKHOUSE

Discipline within the workhouse may be understood in two overlapping ways: conceptually and through the definitions of contemporaries. M. A. Crowther has argued

¹³ Crowther, *Workhouse System*, 208–13; Green, "Pauper Protests," 147; Anna Clark, "Wild Workhouse Girls and the Liberal Imperial State in Mid-nineteenth Century Ireland," *Journal of Social History* 39, no. 2 (2005): 389–409; Virginia Crossman, "The New Ross Workhouse Riot of 1887: Nationalism, Class and the Irish Poor Laws," *Past and Present*, no. 179 (2003): 135–58, at 135.

¹⁴ Green, "Pauper Protests." For more on prosecutions and committals to prison, see also Crowther, *Workhouse System*, 208–13.

¹⁵ Green, "Pauper Protests," 145.

¹⁶ Green, 159.

¹⁷ Green, 140, 159.

that “most obviously, the workhouse was not Victorian at all,” as there is ample evidence of continuity between the old and the new poor laws—in workhouse provision, the internal management of inmates and officials, and the understanding of discipline within the institutions.¹⁸ Old poor law workhouses established under the Workhouse Test Act of 1723 were also designed to discipline inmates, and this legislation thus “anticipated the new poor law by over 100 years.”¹⁹ Discipline had been necessary to the good running of old poor law workhouses, and misbehavior was punished with a range of measures, from being reported to the master or the workhouse committee to a pardon or reprimand, the restriction of leave or diet, or discharge to short spells of incarceration in houses of correction.²⁰ There were 3,327 workhouses in Britain by the start of the nineteenth century;²¹ the New Poor Law did not necessarily entail an increase in the numbers of people accommodated in workhouses in regions of the country that had previously possessed them.²² Nevertheless, with the new union workhouses, the numbers accommodated almost doubled—from an average of 123,004 indoor paupers in 1850 to 215,377 in 1900.²³ Discipline was an organizing principal of the New Poor Law project. From the late eighteenth century, significant shifts in conceptions of discipline had been increasingly defined by institutions, surveillance, and restriction of liberty, reflecting a change in the wider ethos of criminal justice and punishment.²⁴ Between the 1780s and the 1830s, argues V. A. C. Gatrell, “disciplinary responses to the poor and workshy accelerated markedly.”²⁵

Discipline, despite its centrality in policy, was not articulated in relation to punishment in the Poor Law Report of 1834. Instead, somewhat surprisingly, it was associated with a “well-regulated workhouse” and the classification of the indoor poor and the provision of work to prevent the “mischief [that] arises more from the bad example of the *few*, than from the *many*.”²⁶ The commissioners were critical of the general mixed workhouses under the old poor law but praised those like that at Southwell (one of the workhouses in the study) that categorized their poor

¹⁸ M. A. Crowther, “The Workhouse,” *Proceedings of the British Academy*, no. 78 (1992): 183–94.

¹⁹ Jeremy Boulton and John Black, “Paupers and Their Experience of a London Workhouse: St. Martin-in-the-Fields, 1725–1824,” in *Residential Institutions in Britain, 1725–1970: Inmates and Environments*, ed. Jane Hamlett, Lesley Hoskins, and Rebecca Preston (London, 2013), 79–92, at 79. See also Joanna Innes, *Inferior Politics: Social Problems and Social Policies in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford, 2009), 30; Tim Hitchcock and Robert Shoemaker, *London Lives: Poverty, Crime and the Making of a Modern City, 1690–1800* (Cambridge 2015).

²⁰ Boulton and Black, “Paupers and Their Experience,” 89–91; Susannah Ottaway, “‘A Very Bad Presidente in the House’: Workhouse Masters, Care and Discipline in the Eighteenth-Century Workhouse,” *Journal of Social History*, 22n27, published ahead of print <https://doi.org/10.1093/jsh/shaa016>; Hitchcock and Shoemaker, *London Lives*, 54.

²¹ Abstract of the Answers and Returns Made Pursuant to Act 43 Geo 3, Relative to the Expense and Maintenance of the Poor in England, in *Parliamentary Papers, Session 1803–4*, House of Commons, vol. 13; figure calculated by Susannah Ottaway, “‘Very Bad Presidente,’” 22n27.

²² K. D. M. Snell, *Parish and Belonging: Community, Identity and Welfare in England and Wales, 1700–1950* (Cambridge, 2006), chap. 5.

²³ Kidd, *State, Society and the Poor*, 169, table A2.

²⁴ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, 2012).

²⁵ V. A. C. Gatrell, “Crime, Authority and the Policeman-State,” in *The Cambridge Social History of Britain, 1750–1950*, ed. F. M. L. Thompson (Cambridge, 1990), 243–310, at 250.

²⁶ Evidence of Mr Mott, Poor Law Report, 173 (emphasis in original).

according to an “Anti-Pauper System” set up in 1824.²⁷ One of its instigators, the Rev. John T. Becher, stated, “The whole System is conducted upon the Principles of salutary Restraint and strict Discipline,” based upon the classification and separation of paupers.²⁸ This concept greatly influenced the authors of the Poor Law Report. Its appendices indicated that “a strict system of discipline” for the young and able-bodied must be combined with “hard work, low diet, and restricted liberty.”²⁹

The resulting Poor Law Amendment Act stated “Parties wilfully neglecting or disobeying [workhouse] Rules, Orders, or Regulations” were “liable to such Penalties and Punishments.”³⁰ The term *regulation* was used primarily to refer, again, to the provision of irksome work for the adult able-bodied, classification between the deserving and the indolent, and restrictions on alcohol and tobacco that, it was claimed, were “intolerable to the indolent and disorderly.” The “regularity and discipline” provided in the workhouse would, somewhat paradoxically, “render the workhouse a place of comparable comfort . . . to the aged, the feeble and other proper objects of relief,” who also had to be appropriately accommodated.³¹ A well-regulated workhouse classified and separated the indoor poor as an essential aspect of discipline.

Work remained central to the disciplining and reforming of laboring bodies, reflecting considerable continuity in policy from the Elizabethan poor laws and punishment for the poor idle and disorderly in houses of correction.³² The amount of work required of workhouse inmates was designed to be less than that required of prisoners. However, paupers objected to undertaking the same labor; oakum picking, for example, was viewed as “felons’ work.”³³ As in the prison and the wider the philanthropic culture, the notion of discipline shifted, now understood as a means of correcting and reforming behavior. Under the new system of union workhouses and the new prisons, the working classes would become “accustomed to hard work, instead of idleness.”³⁴ In the union workhouses, deterrence and discipline were ensured by classification and segregation, thereby separating husbands, wives, and their children, and by the provision of a monotonous diet, a daily routine punctuated by bells for rising, eating, working, bedtime, and religious instruction. From the 1830s, the tone of the regulation and control of daily life within workhouses—and thus its discipline—took on a more moral, religious flavor.³⁵

²⁷ Poor Law Report, 30, 31, 129, 132.

²⁸ Higginbotham, *Voices from the Workhouse*, 82.

²⁹ Poor Law Report, Appendix to the First Report, Appendix A: Reports from Assistant Commissioners, part I, Harrison Gordon Codd’s Report, Report 4, 28:74A.

³⁰ An Act for the Amendment and Better Administration of the Laws Relating to the Poor in England and Wales, 1834, 4 & 5 Will. IV, c. 76, para. 43, 93. (Hereafter New Poor Law.)

³¹ Poor Law Report, 129; see also 152, 173, 183; Ottaway, “Very Bad Presidente,” 4.

³² Robert Brink Shoemaker, *Prosecution and Punishment: Petty Crime and the Law in London and Rural Middlesex, c.1660–1725* (Cambridge, 1991); Innes, *Inferior Politics*; Paul Griffiths, *Lost Londons: Change, Crime, and Control in the Capital City, 1550–1660* (Cambridge, 2008).

³³ Fowler, *Workhouse*, 139.

³⁴ Clive Emsley, *Crime and Society in England, 1750–1900*, 3rd ed. (Harlow, 2005), 270.

³⁵ Boulton and Black, “Paupers and Their Experiences,” 89–91.

Specific workhouse rules around discipline and related punishment were set out in detail in the *First Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners* of 1835.³⁶ These rules still allowed for considerable autonomy by the local Board of Guardians, and so the Poor Law Commission attempted in 1841 to impose a uniform policy.³⁷ Offenses could be classified as “disorderly” or “refractory.” Disorderly behavior included relatively trivial offenses such as swearing, making a noise, playing card games, disobeying orders, or refusing to work; punishment was a reduced diet, such as just bread or potatoes, and the withholding of “luxuries” like butter or tea. Refractory conduct included any disorderly offense repeated within a week, as well as more serious behaviors, such as reviling a workhouse staff member, damage to workhouse property, spoiling provisions, drunkenness, and assault. Such acts were punishable with confinement for up to twenty-four hours and alteration of diet. Serious and persistent offenders could be prosecuted, and magistrates could sentence paupers to up to twenty-one days’ hard labor.³⁸

The law specified that the regulations were to be publicized widely and that they were to be enforced by inspections.³⁹ It is clear from the correspondence of Sir John Walsham, an assistant Poor Law commissioner, that the rules had to be displayed in the workhouse: when he visited Mitford and Launditch workhouse (another of the workhouses in the study) in Norfolk on 14 June 1847 he commented, “The Commission are concerned that the regulations for pauper punishment are not displayed in the appropriate places in the workhouse.”⁴⁰ Masters, matrons, and guardians had considerable power to punish inmates but only within the terms of their authority within the rules; indeed, the 1834 act anticipated the risk of abuse and so specified restrictions to their power.⁴¹ Workhouse scandals reveal instances when officials overreached their authority and when they were upbraided by the Poor Law Commission or Poor Law Board, assistant commissioners, or visiting committees.⁴² At times, the press scrutinized poor

³⁶ *First Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners for England and Wales* (London, 1835), Appendix A, Documents Issued by the Central Board, No. 9 Workhouse Rules / Orders and Regulations to be Observed in the Workhouse of __ Union, 111–12.

³⁷ *Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners* (London, 1841) Appendix A, Orders, Instructional Circulars, and Minutes of the Commissioners, No. 3, ‘Workhouse Discipline,’ part 2, ‘Copy of Circular Letter to Boards of Guardians,’ from Poor Law Commission to Boards of Guardians, January 1841, 118; Samantha A. Shave, *Pauper Policies: Poor Law Practice in England, 1780–1850* (Manchester, 2017), 350–51.

³⁸ Shave, *Pauper Policies*, 141–42.

³⁹ New Poor Law, paras. 22, 43.

⁴⁰ The National Archives [hereafter TNA], MH/12/8478/66, Draft letter from the Poor Law Commission to Charles Wright, Clerk to the Guardians of the Mitford and Launditch Poor Law Union, fols. 109–10. See also TNA, MH12/11364/225, Workhouse Inspection Report Form from Robert Weale, Poor Law Inspector, to the Poor Law Board, reporting his inspection of the Newcastle under Lyme Poor Law Union Workhouse on 5 May 1848, fols. 289–90.

⁴¹ Green, “Pauper Protests,” 140–41. See also “Rules and Punishment,” in Higginbotham, in *The Workhouse*, accessed 29 July 2020, <http://www.workhouses.org.uk/life/rules.shtml>. The rules were originally published in John Frederick Archbold, *The New Poor Law Amendment Act, and the Recent Rules and Orders of the Poor Law Commissioners; With a Practical Introduction, Notes and Forms* (London, 1842).

⁴² Samantha Shave, “‘Immediate Death or a Life of Torture Are the Consequences of the System’: The Bridgwater Union Scandal and Policy Change,” in *Medicine and the Workhouse*, ed. Jonathan Reinarz and Leonard Schwarz (Woodbridge, 2013), 164–91; Shave, *Pauper Policies*, chap. 5; Steven King, “Thinking and Rethinking the New Poor Law,” *Local Population Studies* 99, no. 1 (2017): 5–19, at 16.

practices or abuses.⁴³ Moreover, magistrates might sympathize with the poor and could undermine workhouse officials by giving lenient sentences or discharging cases.⁴⁴

Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* offers a powerful conceptual critique of the role of discipline, punishment, and institutions in modernity. Workhouses in some respects resemble the prisons of Foucault's study. They shared many aspects of the design of Bentham's "Panopticon" prison; activities were scheduled, and work was intended to make the body ready for utility. The classification of paupers was arranged spatially, and authorities sought uniformity of punishment for infractions of workhouse rules.⁴⁵ Paupers certainly recognized the "bastille" quality of the buildings: "The very vastness of [the workhouse] chilled us," Charles Shaw recalled in his autobiography. His description evokes the prison: "Doors were unlocked by keys belonging to bunches, and the sound of keys and locks and bars, and doors banging, froze the blood within us." So, too, does James Reynolds Withers's poem in a letter to his sister: "I sometimes look at the bit of blue sky / High over my head, with a tear in my eye, / Surrounded by walls that are too high to climb, / Confin'd like a felon without any crime."⁴⁶ Workhouse punishment, like that in prisons, was no longer corporal (except for schoolboys) but based on incarceration, surveillance, and reform.⁴⁷ Moreover, some workhouse inmates found themselves propelled for their behavior from the workhouse to prison.

However, while the architects of the New Poor Law might have designed the workhouse as a "carceral system" to "neutralise . . . anti-social instincts," such a view does not take account of the power of resistance of those submitted to regimes of discipline.⁴⁸ The historian must also seek to recover individual agency and the "semi-autonomous culture of the poor."⁴⁹ Poor behavior in workhouses can be understood as "weapons of the weak," powerfully disruptive actions that frustrated discourses of discipline.⁵⁰ The understandings of repression and resistance put forward by James C. Scott, in terms such as "exchange of small arms fire" and "a small skirmish," provide a model within which to contextualize social relations in the workhouse.⁵¹ The interactions between workhouse officials and inmates also offer a window into what Michel de Certeau characterizes as the "strategies and tactics" of "the practice everyday life."⁵² The punishment books certainly suggest that workhouse inmates took advantages of "opportunities" and "cracks" in the "surveillance of the proprietary powers."⁵³ Inmates not only expressed their agency by

⁴³ David Roberts, "How Cruel Was the Victorian Poor Law?," *Historical Journal* 6, no. 1 (1963): 97–107; Ursula Henriques, "How Cruel Was the Victorian Poor Law?," *Historical Journal* 11, no. 2 (1968): 365–71.

⁴⁴ Green, "Pauper Protests," 156–57, 145.

⁴⁵ Lisa Downing, *The Cambridge Introduction to Michel Foucault* (Cambridge, 2008), 75–80; Emsley, *Crime and Society*, 253–54, 270.

⁴⁶ Higginbotham, *Voices from the Workhouse*, 20, 27.

⁴⁷ Downing, *Cambridge Introduction to Foucault*, 75–78.

⁴⁸ Downing, 80–83.

⁴⁹ Hitchcock and Shoemaker, *London Lives*, 21–23.

⁵⁰ James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (London, 1985).

⁵¹ Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, 22.

⁵² Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (London, 1984), 34–37.

⁵³ de Certeau, 34–37.

their actions within the house but also projected their complaints outside it. Steven King argues that under the New Poor Law, inmates were never “merely subject to the regimes of the workhouse”: “Individually and collectively, inmates protested when they or their friends and peers experienced medical neglect, when diet or clothing was inadequate, when people were disciplined unjustly and where relief decisions were taken or not taken by staff and workhouse masters and mistresses.”⁵⁴ This dissent was over and above the anti-New Poor Law movement and local protests.⁵⁵ Tim Hitchcock and Robert Shoemaker have recently gone further than has de Certeau: “It is the character of tactics, despite the frequent absence of an explicit collective voice, that turns individual actions . . . into a collective, at times even strategic, engagement with the social system.”⁵⁶ The argument here is that, even though power was far from equally distributed within workhouse walls, paupers displayed agency by employing “blow by blow” tactics that could be strategic.

OFFENSES AND PUNISHMENT IN THE WORKHOUSE

I studied evidence from eleven English workhouses over a wide range of locations to reflect the broad range of experience of provincial workhouse life.⁵⁷ Together, these workhouses cover the northwest (Cockermouth, Cumberland), the northeast (Patrinton, East Riding of Yorkshire), the Midlands (Amphill, Bedfordshire, Foleshill, Warwickshire, Sleaford and Spalding, Lincolnshire, and Southwell, Nottinghamshire), East Anglia (Mitford and Launditch and Norwich, Norfolk), the south (Petworth, Sussex), and the southwest (Beaminster, Dorset). The smallest workhouse was that of Petworth, with just twenty-five inmates in 1881, and the largest was Norwich, with a population of 529 at one time. (Table 1 provides a comparative

⁵⁴ King, “Thinking and Rethinking,” 9. See also Elizabeth Hurren, *Protesting about Pauperism: Poverty, Politics and Poor Relief in Late-Victorian England, 1870–1900* (Woodbridge, 2007); Kim Price, *Medical Negligence in Victorian Britain: The Crisis of Care under the English Poor Law, c.1834–1900* (London, 2015); Shave, *Pauper Policies*, chap. 5.

⁵⁵ Michael E. Rose, “The Anti-Poor Law Movement in the North of England,” *Northern History* 1, no. 1 (1966): 70–91; Nicholas C. Edsall, *The Anti-Poor Law Movement, 1834–44* (Manchester, 1971); Katrina Navickas, *Protest and the Politics of Space and Place, 1789–1848* (Manchester, 2016).

⁵⁶ Hitchcock and Shoemaker, *London Lives*, 23.

⁵⁷ In this, I drew on inmate and staff data at Higginbotham, The Workhouse, and from the following punishment and offense books of the eleven workhouses: Amphill Union Workhouse punishment book, 1853–1864, archival transcription, PUAV22/1, Bedfordshire Archives and Records Service, Bedford; Beaminster Pauper offence book, 1842–1869, BG/BE/B/3/2, Dorset History Centre, Dorchester; Cockermouth Workhouse punishment book, 1864–1901, SPUCo/6/38, Cumbria Archive and Local Studies Centre, Whitehaven; Eileen Castle and Beverley Wishart, *Foleshill Union Workhouse Punishment Book, 1864–1900* (Coventry, 1995); Mitford and Launditch Workhouse punishment book, 1871–1901, C/GP 14/105, Norfolk Record Office, Norwich; Norwich Workhouse punishment book, 1846–1864, 1866–1925, N/GP 1/75–77, Norfolk Record Office, Norwich; Patrinton Pauper offence book, 1847–1896, PUO 3/1/10, East Riding of Yorkshire Archives and Library Service, Beverley; Petworth punishment book, 1858–1901, WG8/38, West Sussex Record Office, Chichester; Ann Benson, Anne Cole, Pat Pomeroy, and Ruth Tinley, *Spalding Union Workhouse Punishment Book, 1862–1902, Sleaford Union Workhouse Punishment Book, 1853–1902: With Extracts from the Relevant Census Returns* (Lincoln, 2004) (hereafter *Spalding and Sleaford Punishment Books*); Southwell Workhouse punishment book, 1852–1901, SO/PUS/3/3/1, Nottinghamshire Archives, Nottingham. My analyses of Higginbotham’s datasets and these books yielded the data detailed in table 1 and figures 1–3 and 5–9.

Table 1—Profiles of Eleven Workhouses

Workhouse/dates of punishment books	Inmates, 1881	Staff, 1881	Cases	Offenders	Offenses	Punishments	Proportion male
Amphill, Bedfordshire, 1853–1864	84	5	233	80	299	248	71%
Beaminster, Dorset, 1842–1869	65	5	386	179	475	397	65%
Cockermouth, Cumberland, 1864–1901	258	4	768	101	896	784	22%
Foleshill, Warwickshire, 1864–1900	102	4	235	108	329	252	71%
Mitford and Launditch, Norfolk, 1871–1900	154	7	342	183	402	357	81%
Norwich, Norfolk, 1846–1901	529	20	1146	621	1728	1380	60%
Patrington, East Riding, 1847–1898	56	3	37	23	50	33	43%
Petworth, West Sussex, 1853–1901	25	2	178	108	223	177	78%
Sleaford, Lincolnshire, 1853–1902	143	6	183	111	231	187	75%
Southwell, Nottinghamshire, 1852, 1901	113	4	218	127	255	300	64%
Spalding, Lincolnshire, 1862–1902	168	6	261	130	326	275	72%
<i>Totals</i>			3987	1771	5214	4390	

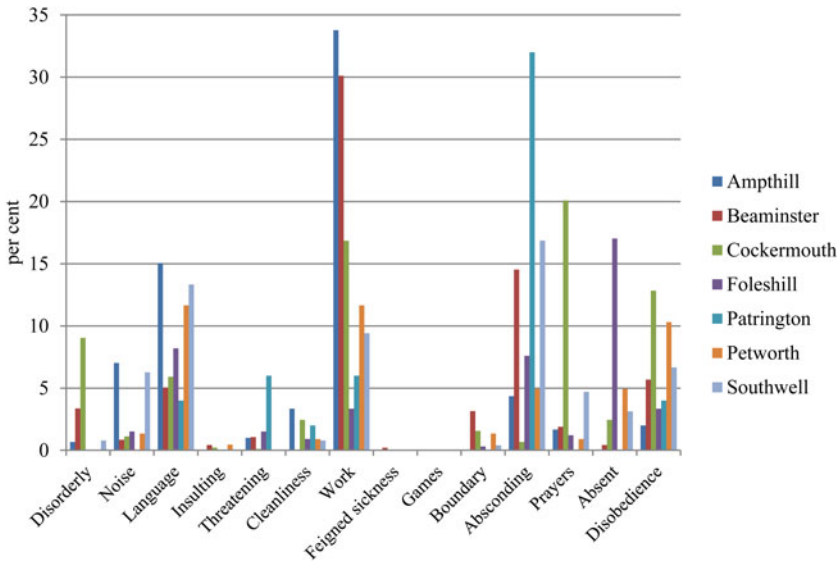


Figure 1—Disorderly Offenses, Seven Workhouses

profile of the eleven workhouses.) I chose two workhouses in each of Lincolnshire and Norfolk to allow comparison both within counties and between them. I supplement this largely statistical evidence with “voices from the workhouse”—accounts from those who were once inmates and workhouse staff.⁵⁸

The keeping of punishment books, separate from reporting punishments to the Board of Guardians, was not compulsory, perhaps explaining their poor survival.⁵⁹ Not only do relatively few survive, but they must be used with caution. Where such books were kept, workhouse masters were supposed to enter into them all workhouse offenses. Yet the diary of Benjamin Woodcock, master of the Barnet Workhouse, reveals that this was not always done. Woodcock merely “talked” to some workhouse boys who destroyed a garden hedge, and when Thomas Bourne

⁵⁸ To borrow the title of Higginbotham’s *Voices from the Workhouse*, extracts from working-class autobiographies. On working-class autobiographies, see Jane Humphries, *Childhood and Child Labour in the British Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge, 2010); Emma Griffin, *Liberty’s Dawn: A People’s History of the Industrial Revolution* (New Haven, 2013). On working-class experiences of the workhouse in autobiographies, see Megan Doolittle, “Fatherhood and Family Shame: Masculinity, Welfare and the Workhouse in Late Nineteenth-Century England,” in *The Politics of Domestic Authority in Britain since 1800*, ed. Lucy Delap, Ben Griffin, and Abigail Wills (Basingstoke, 2009), 84–108, at 96; Megan Doolittle, “The Duty to Provide: Fathers, Families and the Workhouse in England, 1880–1914,” in *The Welfare State and the “Deviant Poor” in Europe, 1870–1933*, ed. Beate Althammer, Andreas Gestrich, and Jens Gr ndler (Basingstoke, 2014), 58–77; Alanah Tomkins, “Poor-Law Institutions through Working-Class Eyes: Autobiographers and Their Family,” *Journal of British Studies* (forthcoming).

⁵⁹ Samantha A. Shave, “Great Inhumanity”: Scandal, Child Punishment and Policymaking in the Early Years of the New Poor Law Workhouse System,” *Continuity and Change* 33, no. 3 (2018): 339–63, at 347; Paul Carter, *A Guide to Records Created under the New Poor Law* (Macclesfield, 2015), 35–36, https://www.balh.org.uk/_resources/presentation/wdytyalive2017/dr-paul-carter-a-guide-to-records-created-under-the-new-poor-law.pdf.

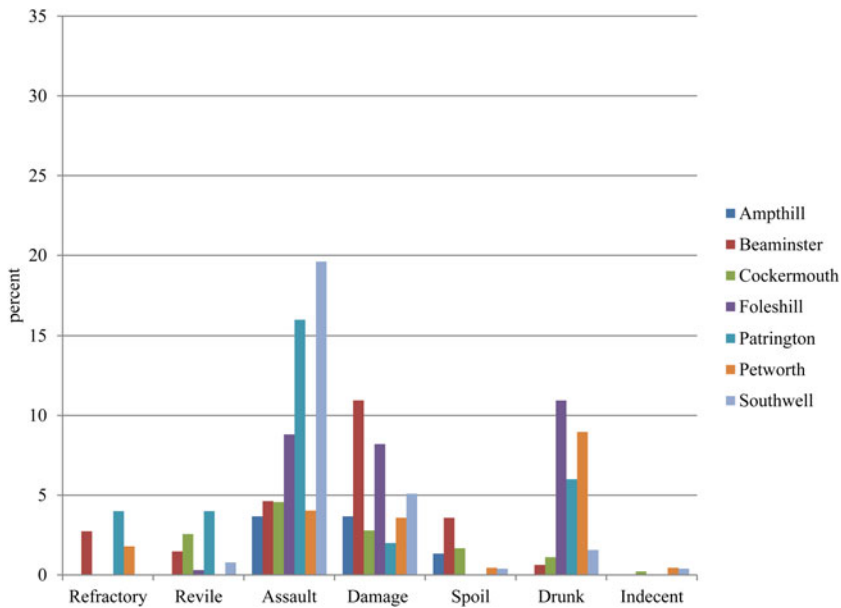


Figure 2—Refractory Offenses, Seven Workhouses

returned late from church worse for drink, this “being his first—offence since his admission,” and considering that he “Acknowledged his Transgression [and] went quiet & orderly to Bed,” Woodcock chose not to punish him.⁶⁰ Instances of informal punishment likely also went unrecorded, such as the “pulling or ‘clipping’ of [children’s] ears,” which, argues Lesley Hulonce, “survived long into the twentieth century.”⁶¹ Moreover, workhouse scandals make it clear that not all punishments meted out were recorded and some were explicitly against workhouse rules.⁶² Thus, these books document only recorded offenses, not necessarily the sum total of offenses.

Punishment books include the date of the recorded offense, the name of the inmate, the nature of the offense, the punishment inflicted by the master or other officer or that ordered by the Board of Guardians, the opinion of the guardians, and any observations. If paupers were sent before local magistrates and sentenced to prison, this, too, was entered. Many punishment books show more offenses than cases, as an entry in the book may record more than one offense; the eleven books record 3,987 cases reflecting 5,214 offenses (an average of 1.3 offenses per case). This was also the situation for punishments (numbering 4,390); due to

⁶⁰ Gillian Gear, ed., *The Diary of Benjamin Woodcock, Master of the Barnet Union Workhouse, 1836–1838* (Rickmansworth, 2010), 31, 37; Higginbotham, *Voices from the Workhouse*, 84–86.

⁶¹ Lesley Hulonce, *Pauper Children and Poor Law Childhoods in England and Wales, 1834–1910* (2016), 21, https://www.academia.edu/27951893/Book_Pauper_Children_and_Poor_Law_Childhoods_in_England_and_Wales_1834-1910.

⁶² Shave, “Great Inhumanity”; David Finlow, “Staffing Issues in a Closed Institution: The Bromsgrove Union Case of 1863,” in Carter and Thompson, *Pauper Prisons*, 18–36, at 31.

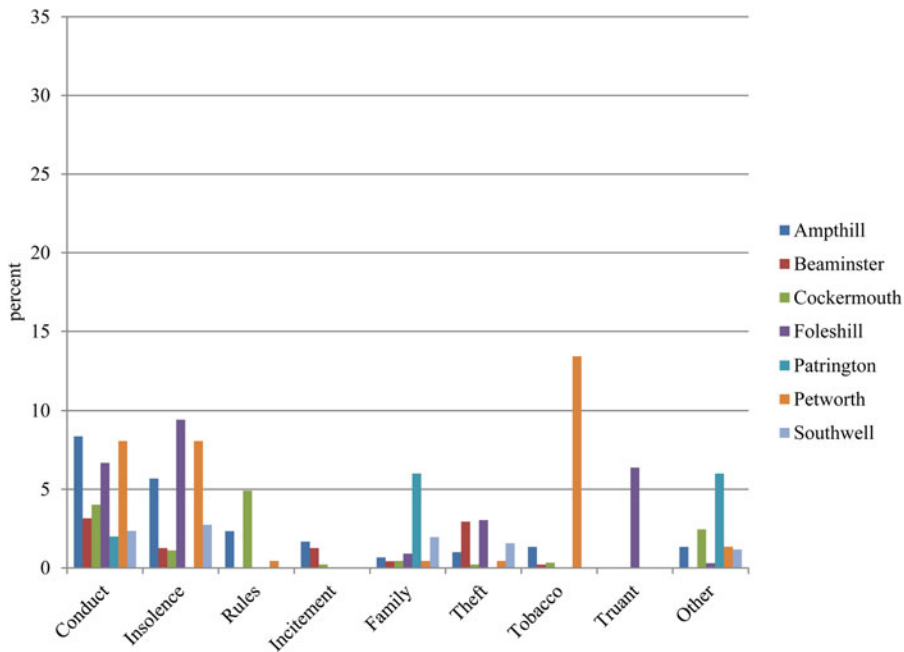


Figure 3—Other Offenses, Seven Workhouses

repeat offenders, there were many more offenses than there were offenders. Across all eleven workhouses studied and all dates, I found the average was 1.5 cases per offender, but in Cockermouth, for instance, the name of Elizabeth Fawcett was listed twenty-eight times.

Recorded offenders were disproportionately male: I found that at least 60 percent of offenses were committed by boys and men; in some places, the figure was 81 percent (table 1). The perception of offending was undoubtedly gendered, and male misbehavior, seen as more threatening, appears more frequently in the punishments books. The masculinization of recorded offenses was the case for all the workhouses except Cockermouth (where only 22 percent of cases were committed by males, yet 55 percent of inmates were male in 1881), and in Patrington (where males were responsible for 43 percent of offenses but were 54 percent of inmates in 1881).⁶³ Historians of crime have shown that men were far more likely to be prosecuted and imprisoned.⁶⁴ Men reacted to the undermining of their domestic authority and social standing with flared tempers or worse.

⁶³ See above table 1 for proportion of offenders who were male. For proportions of all pauper inmates in these workhouses who were male, see “1881 Census: Residents of Cockermouth Union Workhouse,” in Higginbotham, *The Workhouse*, accessed 30 March 2019, <http://www.workhouses.org.uk/Cockermouth/Cockermouth1881.shtml>; “1881 Census: Residents of Patrington Union Workhouse,” in Higginbotham, *The Workhouse*, accessed 30 March 2019, <http://www.workhouses.org.uk/Patrington/Patrington1881.shtml>.

⁶⁴ Emsley, *Crime and Society*, chap. 4; Lucy Williams and Barry Godfrey, “Bringing the Prisoner into View: English and Welsh Census Data and the Victorian Prison Population,” *Australian Historical Studies* 47, no. 3 (2016): 398–413.



Figure 4—Graffiti game on wall, Southwell workhouse yard. Photo © Samantha Williams.

As several scholars have found, offending fell into a clear seasonal pattern: January showed more than double the number of recorded offenses of those in June, reflecting increasing resort to the workhouse in the winter months.⁶⁵ This seasonal pattern was not evident in London, where employment did not wax and wane according to the time of year.⁶⁶ In analyzing the punishment books of the workhouses in my study, I found that the number of cases per year fluctuated between twenty and fifty, with the occasional peaks of 177 cases in Cockermonth in 1865 and 193 in Norwich in both 1862 and 1874. I also found that after the late 1870s, the number of recorded cases across all workhouses fell to the end of the Victorian period.

I analyzed the offenses that appear in the selected punishment books according to the 1841 classification, although they did not always fit neatly into them. I found that 62 percent of all recorded offenses across the workhouses were disorderly, and 22 percent were refractory. The remaining 16 percent were not accommodated by these schema. A wide range of other acts were neither specifically disorderly nor refractory, including cruelty to children or desertion of family members, theft, tobacco-related offenses, and truancy. Thus, almost two-thirds of bad behavior incidents were not serious or not repeated within a week. However, the consequences of refractory actions could be far more severe: in 9.7 percent of cases, paupers were imprisoned. Unlike at the national level, workhouse officers did not resort increasingly to the courts; such recourse fluctuated between no cases in a given year (1856) and forty-three (1848), with no upward trend.⁶⁷ (Of course, 1848 was a year dominated with concerns with public order, embodied in the Chartist petition, and revolutions in Europe.⁶⁸) In my analysis of the eleven workhouses, I found that magistrates ordered spells in prison of up to twenty-one days in most cases: seven

⁶⁵ Andrew Hinde and Fiona Turnbull, “The Populations of Two Hampshire Workhouses, 1851–1861,” *Local Population Studies*, no. 61 (1998): 38–53, at 43–48; David G. Jackson, “The Medway Union Workhouse, 1876–1881: A Study Based on the Admission and Discharge Registers and the Census Enumerators’ Books,” *Local Population Studies*, no. 75 (2005): 11–32, at 17; Johanna Purser, “The Workhouse Population of the Nottingham Union, 1881–1882,” *Local Population Studies* 99 (2017): 66–80, at 72–75.

⁶⁶ Green, “Pauper Protests,” 146, figure 3.

⁶⁷ Crowther, *The Workhouse System*, 209–10; Green, “Pauper Protests,” 151–52.

⁶⁸ Navickas, *Protest and the Politics of Space and Place*, chap. 9.

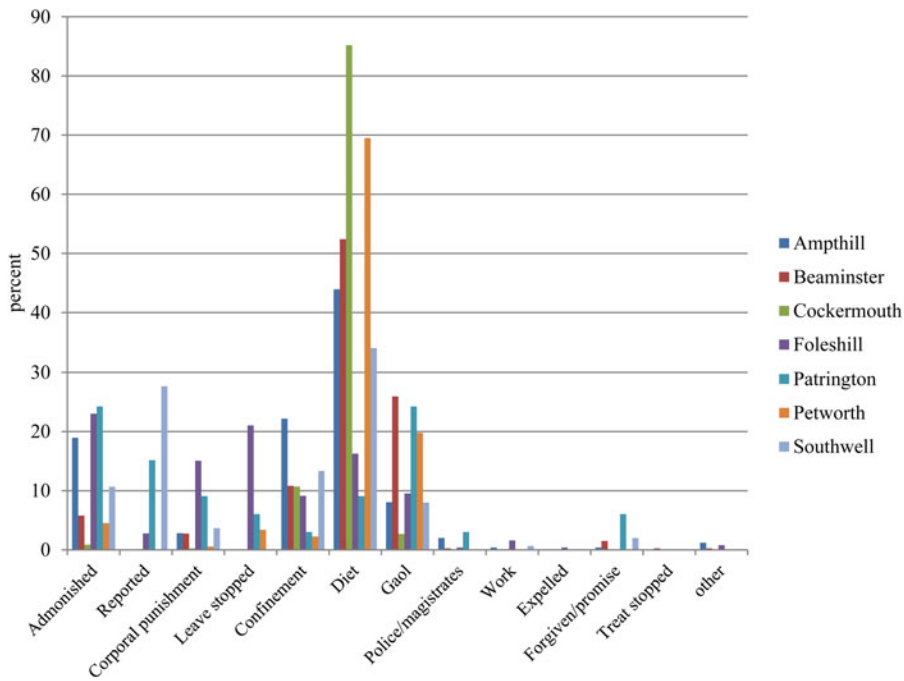


Figure 5—Punishments, Seven Workhouses

days (13 percent), fourteen days (19 percent) and twenty-one days (28 percent), but, in a significant minority of cases, they actually sentenced beyond the twenty-one days given in the regulations, with 20 percent imprisoned for one month and one-fifth up to three months. Imprisonment with hard labor was specified for two-fifths of paupers. In rare instances, the outcome was far more severe: for instance, in December 1845, William Mills was transported from Beaminster union workhouse for seven years for “robbing in the school room & desertion with clothing.”⁶⁹

The workhouse punishment books reveal simmering underlying tensions, with different motives, perceptions, and expectations between and within each of the groups in the hierarchy of authority: inmates, workhouse staff (master and matron, chaplain, schoolmaster and schoolmistress, medical officer, taskmaster, and any domestic staff), Board of Guardians, Poor Law inspectors, magistrates, and the Poor Law Commission (later the Poor Law Board).

The working classes found the separation of husbands, wives, and children particularly cruel. Indeed, there were protests against it in Spalding Union in 1836.⁷⁰ Charles Shaw recalled that upon entering Chell workhouse (near Stoke-on-Trent) as a child, his family was “parted amid bitter cries, the young ones being taken one way and the parents (separated too) taken as well to different regions” of the

⁶⁹ Beaminster Pauper offence book, 8 December 1845.

⁷⁰ J. A. H. Brocklebank, “The New Poor Law in Lincolnshire,” *Lincolnshire Historian* 2, no. 9 (1962): 21–33, at 25.

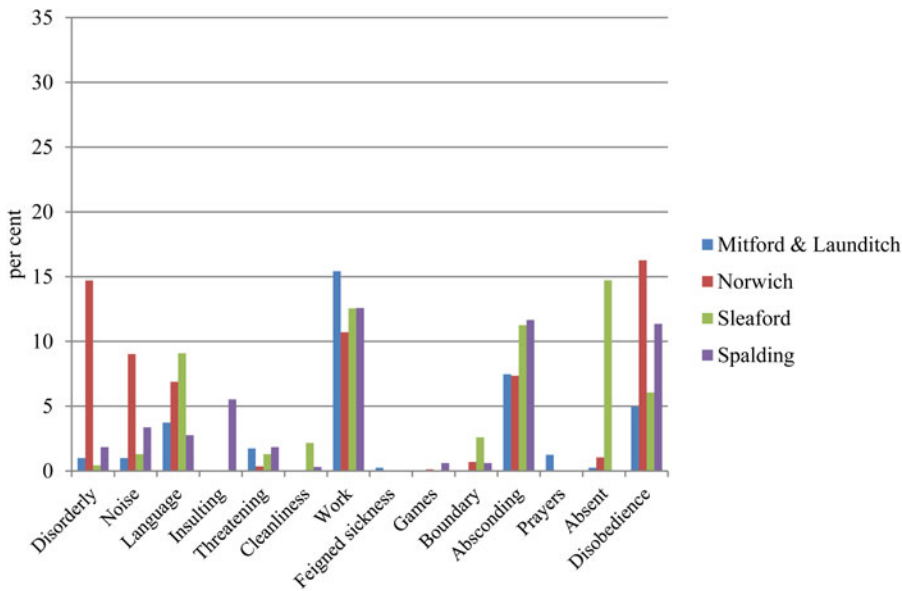


Figure 6—Disorderly Offenses, Four Workhouses

building.⁷¹ Megan Doolittle argues that the workhouse “had particularly devastating impacts on masculine identities,” since the splitting-up of families deprived men of “their position as the head of their household and their standing in the world as providers and protectors.”⁷² Families were reunited briefly on Sunday afternoons, and children recalled the heavy emotional toll of these reunions. Charlie Chaplin recollected, “How well I remember the poignant sadness of that first visiting day: the shock of seeing Mother enter the visiting-room garbed in workhouse clothes. How forlorn and embarrassed she looked! In one week she had aged and grown thin, but her face lit up when she saw us.”⁷³ The fracturing of familial relationships according to the classification scheme of the commissioners was no doubt a motivating factor in misbehaviors.

In contrast, masters found themselves caught between surly resentful paupers and the local ratepayers sitting as guardians, who, in turn, were directed by the commissioners. Charles Shaw cannily recognized in hindsight that the master had to play a part in order to keep discipline: “[W]hen the New Poor Laws meant making a workhouse a dread and a horror to be avoided, he was perhaps only acting the part he felt to be due to his office.”⁷⁴ While this “governor” could be “the Bastille (*sic*) in its most repulsive embodiment,” Benjamin Woodcock, master at Barnet, was far from the

⁷¹ Higginbotham, *Voices from the Workhouse*, 20.

⁷² Doolittle, “Fatherhood and Family Shame,” 96. See also Doolittle, “The Duty to Provide”; Tomkins, “Poor-Law Institutions”; Humphries, *Childhood and Child Labour*, 197–201, 323–28, 362–63.

⁷³ Higginbotham, *Voices from the Workhouse*, 61.

⁷⁴ Higginbotham, 23.

bullying stereotype of Mr. Bumble of *Oliver Twist*.⁷⁵ There might also be strain between the master and guardians, as shown when the master of Poplar workhouse attempted to bar Will Crooks, the first working-class guardian in the union (who had been in the workhouse as a child) from entering the premises.⁷⁶ Chaplains could be pompous and boring but might also bring consolation to inmates, and such acts of kindness would not be evident in the punishment books.⁷⁷ It might have been a thankless job for the taskmaster to extract work from the able-bodied, but taskmasters, too, might have behaved badly. Inmates in Stepney workhouse in 1850, for instance, wrote to the Poor Law Board to report the drunkenness, brutality, and bad language of the taskmaster, who called them “old buggers” and “old sods.”⁷⁸ Bentham recognized that the custodians of the institution also needed watching.⁷⁹ Thus, keeping the peace in the workhouse was fraught, particularly given that children and the elderly made up large sections of workhouse populations and officials had to provide appropriate care for these groups alongside discipline for the able-bodied. Workhouses, as Susannah Ottaway argues, “featured a complex mix of caring and disciplinary imperatives.”⁸⁰

The recorded offenses of indoor paupers varied greatly from workhouse to workhouse and reveal a repertoire of “tactics” amounting to local cultures of resistance (see below figures 1–3 and 6–8). Paupers chafed against the restrictions of indoor life. They resented, for instance, the regulation to keep silent at mealtimes, so at variance with working-class custom. Benjamin Mackharness was recorded as “making a noise in the dining hall when silence was ordered to be kept,”⁸¹ while James Webb had been “disturbing the quiet of the house by singing songs in the day room.”⁸² Webb also sought to turn individual into collective action since he was “endeavouring to excite the other inmates to acts of insubordination.”⁸³ Other restrictions of workhouse life included strictures on smoking and drinking, which were fundamental to working-class male sociability. Men rebelled in Petworth, in particular, with 13.5 percent of offenses being tobacco-related. James Reynolds Withers bemoaned the lack of alcohol in the workhouse in his verse: “I’ll drink your health with a tin of cold water: / Of course, we’ve no wine, no porter nor beer, / So you see that we all are teetotallers here.”⁸⁴ Men made the most of any temporary leaves of absence from the workhouse to drink, with a further 9 percent of offenses in Petworth being for drunkenness. On 7 June 1862, Robert Mallett, an inmate of Beaminster workhouse, “Had leave from the Board for One day Left the House on Saturday morning & did not return until Sunday morning and then in a Beastly state of Drunkenness.”⁸⁵ Religion might also be a flashpoint. In Cockermonth, for instance, women in particular objected to the imposition of compulsory prayers; such

⁷⁵ Higginbotham, 23, 84–86.

⁷⁶ Higginbotham, 104–5.

⁷⁷ Higginbotham, 86–89.

⁷⁸ Fowler, *Workhouse*, 137–38.

⁷⁹ Emsley, *Crime and Society*, 270.

⁸⁰ Ottaway, “‘Very Bad Presidente,’” 1.

⁸¹ Benson et al., *Spalding and Sleaford Punishment Books*, 1.

⁸² Norwich Workhouse punishment book, 19 February 1886.

⁸³ Norwich Workhouse punishment book, 19 February 1886.

⁸⁴ Higginbotham, *Voices from the Workhouse*, 27.

⁸⁵ Beaminster Pauper offence book, 7 June 1862.

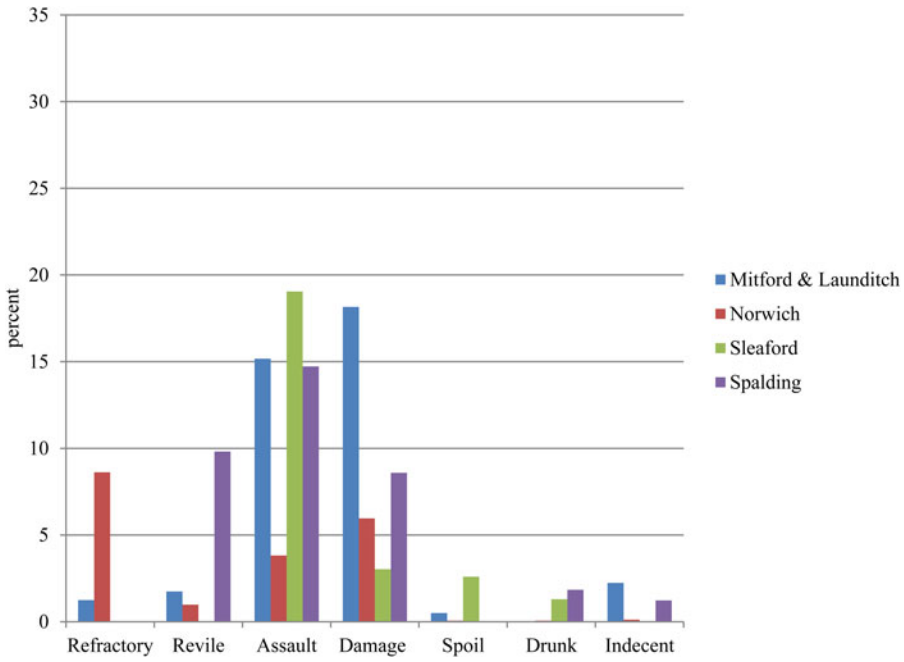


Figure 7—Refractory Offenses, Four Workhouses

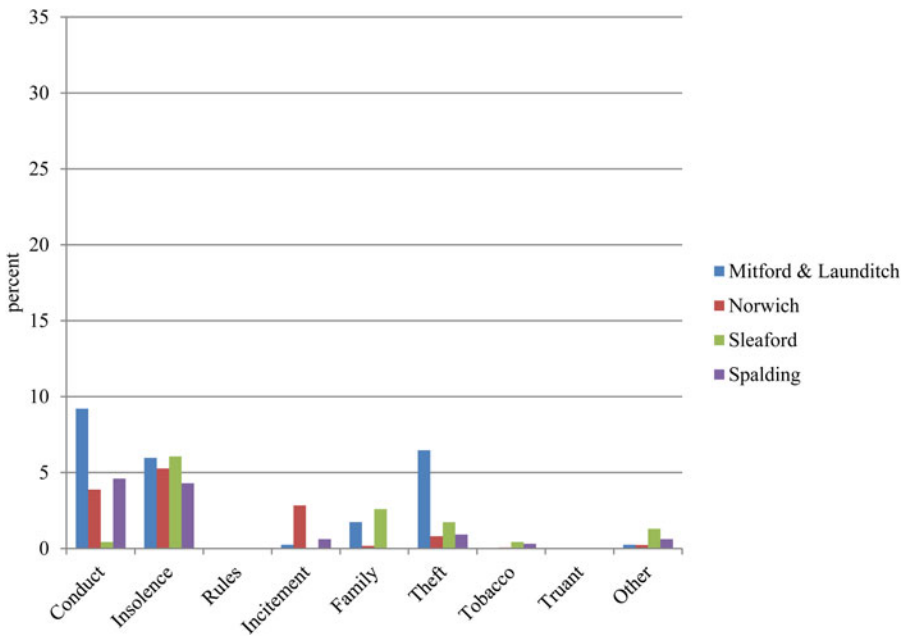


Figure 8—Other Offenses, Four Workhouses

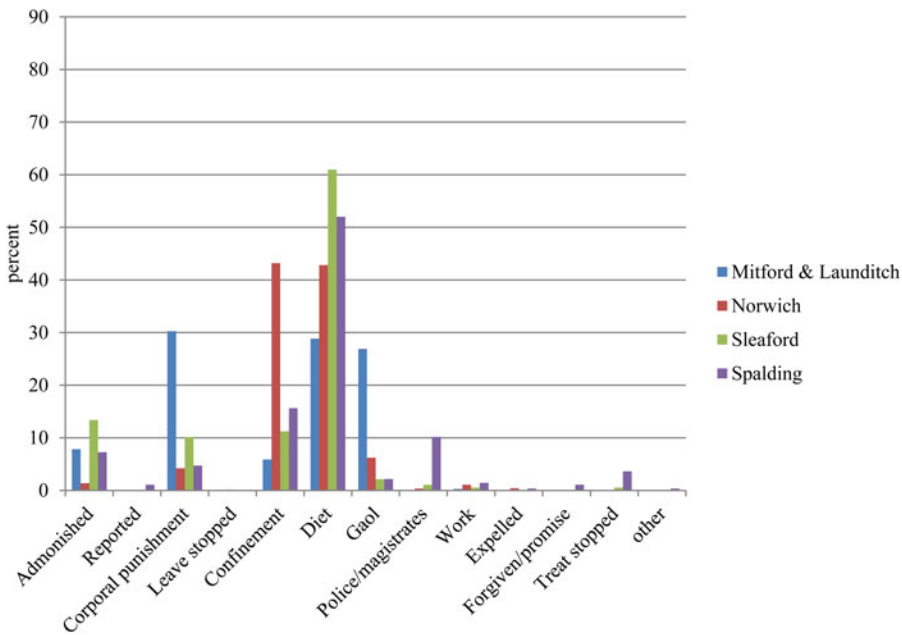


Figure 9—Punishments, Four Workhouses

disturbances accounted for one-fifth of all offenses, with 86.1 percent of offenders being female. Church attendance in Cumberland was very low across all denominations and was some of the lowest in England.⁸⁶ Even if workhouse routine was designed as a “temporal means of discipline,”⁸⁷ paupers exploited available “cracks” to protest against it.⁸⁸

Workhouse staff faced a battery of abuse from inmates. Outbursts of “obscene or profane language” were the easiest form of resistance and regularly upset workhouse life.⁸⁹ John Pearson, aged forty, swore at Amptill’s porter, and two days later was using bad language to the barber.⁹⁰ Bad language was three times more common in Amptill (15.1 percent) than in Patrington (4 percent), and in Spalding it was even lower (2.8 percent). Assault was the most serious refractory offense; inmates assaulted masters, matrons, schoolmasters, porters, and caretakers. Henry Jarvis was punished for “assaulting the lab[or] master & throwing an iron scraper at him,”⁹¹ while Mary Scarborough violently assaulted the Sleaford workhouse

⁸⁶ John Burgess, “A Religious History of Cumbria, 1780–1920” (PhD diss., University of Sheffield, 1984); John D. Gay, *The Geography of Religion in England* (London, 1971), maps 3, 4, 8, 23, and 24.

⁸⁷ Downing, *Cambridge Introduction to Foucault*, 80.

⁸⁸ De Certeau, *Everyday Life*, 37.

⁸⁹ *Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners* (London, 1841), Appendix A, Orders, Instructional Circulars, and Minutes of the Commissioners, No. 3, “Workhouse Discipline,” part 2, “Copy of Circular Letter to Boards of Guardians, from Poor Law Commission to Boards of Guardians, January 1841,” 118.

⁹⁰ Amptill Union Workhouse punishment book, 1853–1864, 20 and 22 August 1863.

⁹¹ Mitford and Launditch Workhouse punishment book, 5 March 1899.

matron and tore off her cap.⁹² Such wrongdoing made up a significant proportion of offenses in some workhouses: assault accounted for almost one-fifth of offenses in Southwell and Sleaford and more than 15 percent in Patrington and in Mitford and Launditch. That paupers felt able to resort to assault points to the limits of the disciplinary regime of the workhouse and, at times, their very real agency within it.

Frustration at institutional life was expressed in damaging workhouse doors and smashing windows, breaking kitchen utensils and cupboards, or tearing union clothes. In Beaminster, such damage accounted for almost 11 percent of cases. Breaking windows was a particular favorite of refractory paupers (one-third of all damage offenses), since it was an easy and visible way to protest; Elizabeth Thursby of Cocker-mouth broke “23 panes of glass in the receiving ward.”⁹³ Digby suggests that vagrants in Norfolk purposely broke windows in an attempt to be sent to prison where, she argues, there was a “superior diet . . . light labour and a more spacious environment.”⁹⁴ William Cummings, also of Cocker-mouth, set fire to the straw loft and John Castlehow burned the outhouse,⁹⁵ while Thomas Bone willfully broke the Mitford and Launditch workhouse doorbell.⁹⁶ In 1876, William Roberts, in Sleaford workhouse, was accused of damaging workhouse property: he broke open the field gate and made away with the lock and chain, he broke open the door of the work cell, and scaled the wall of the yard, with the local policeman returning him.⁹⁷ Other paupers targeted their sleeping quarters; George You smashed up his chamber,⁹⁸ while Emily Rix threw her bedclothes out of the Norwich workhouse window.⁹⁹ No less than sixteen naughty schoolboys damaged the workhouse garden when returning from school to Mitford and Launditch workhouse,¹⁰⁰ and in Spalding workhouse, Alfred Stanger (aged twelve) and Frederick Thompson (aged fifteen), were recorded as “climbing over the roof of the schoolroom, going to the town & buying a pennyworth of gunpowder and a half pennyworth of lucifer matches, and on going to bed setting fire to the gunpowder on the landing adjoining their bedroom.”¹⁰¹ Despite a “good flogging,” two weeks later, Alfred was again “climbing over the roof of the schoolroom and going into the womens day drying ground without permission,” this time with William Bannister (aged thirteen).¹⁰²

Defiance manifested in damage to workhouse clothing accounted for 55 percent of offenses of damage. John Cousins, in Beaminster workhouse, was accused of “wilfully destroying a shirt and trowsers this being a very frequent

⁹² Benson et al., *Spalding and Sleaford Punishment Books*, 26.

⁹³ Cocker-mouth Workhouse punishment book, 7 February 1888.

⁹⁴ Digby, *Pauper Palaces*, 148.

⁹⁵ Cocker-mouth Workhouse punishment book, 10 June 1867.

⁹⁶ Mitford and Launditch Workhouse punishment book, between 10 April and 18 May 1898, offense number 188.

⁹⁷ Benson et al., *Spalding and Sleaford Punishment Books*, 40.

⁹⁸ Mitford and Launditch Workhouse punishment book, 23 March 1898.

⁹⁹ Norwich Workhouse punishment book, 27 January 1869.

¹⁰⁰ Mitford and Launditch Workhouse punishment book, “on Several occasions” between 30 May 1899 and 19 August 1899, offense number 268.

¹⁰¹ Benson et al., *Spalding and Sleaford Punishment Books*, 1.

¹⁰² Benson et al., 2.

offence.”¹⁰³ Richmond has recently shown that “workhouse dress” was rarely an actual uniform but that the economies of scale in provision of these items meant that in practice it amounted to one. Those entering the house were clothed from the stock of available clothing, which meant that it rarely fitted.¹⁰⁴ In Norfolk, male inmates were dressed in a Duffield jacket, drab trousers, a waistcoat, cotton shirt, and neckerchief; women wore stays, a flannel or linsey petticoat, striped serge or grosgrain or union chambrey gown, hessian apron, checked neckerchief, camlet jacket or shawl, grey stockings, and a white calico or cambric hat; children were dressed in striped or checked gowns, with aprons for the girls and jackets, and trousers of a coarse cloth with a spotted neckerchief for the boys. Men and children might have their hair roughly cut.¹⁰⁵ John Castle recalled workhouse clothing as “the regimentals of the Union.”¹⁰⁶ Charles Shaw wrote that when he entered the workhouse at age ten he was “roughly disrobed, roughly and coldly washed, and roughly attired in rough clothes.”¹⁰⁷ At Kent workhouse, clothing for boys was badly torn and stained, and such poor attire must have resonated negatively with the working classes who expressed the unacceptability of their poverty in pauper letters through the motif of the ragged child.¹⁰⁸ Paupers were expected to wear such clothing even when leaving the workhouse on an errand or to attend church or school.¹⁰⁹ One female workhouse visitor commented that children’s uniforms had “brought real misery.”¹¹⁰ When paupers absconded, they were of course wearing workhouse clothing and thereby compounded one offense with another one; correspondence with the Poor Law Commission suggests that some contemporaries argued a specific punishment for this should be devised.¹¹¹ When John Osborn, Edward Southeron, and William Warren were given three months in Ipswich prison for absconding with workhouse clothing, a petition for clemency was made due to their youth and a fear that severe punishment might have a bad effect.¹¹²

Vagrants were not clothed in workhouse attire, but wore their own clothes nonetheless. The punishment books inconsistently register whether paupers were vagrants,

¹⁰³ Beaminster Pauper offence book, 13 September 1857.

¹⁰⁴ Vivienne Richmond, *Clothing the Poor in Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 2013), 274. See also Longmate, *Workhouse*, 93, 138–39, 145, 178.

¹⁰⁵ Digby, *Pauper Palaces*, 146, 155, 157; Longmate, *Workhouse*, 93.

¹⁰⁶ Richmond, *Clothing the Poor*, 274.

¹⁰⁷ Richmond, 274.

¹⁰⁸ Richmond, 274; Peter D. Jones, “‘I Cannot Keep My Place without Being Deascent’: Pauper Letters, Parish Clothing and Pragmatism in the South of England, 1750–1830,” *Rural History* 20, no. 1 (2009): 31–49; Steven King, “‘I Fear You Will Think Me Too Presumptuous in My Demands but Necessity Has No Law’: Clothing in English Pauper Letters, 1800–1834,” *International Review of Social History* 54, no. 2 (2009): 207–36.

¹⁰⁹ Richmond, *Clothing the Poor*, 274–75.

¹¹⁰ Cited in Longmate, *Workhouse*, 93.

¹¹¹ TNA, HO 73/56/1, Home Office, Correspondence between the Home Office and the Poor Law Commission 1835–1840, including copies of reports from Assistant Poor Law Commissioners, Private covering letter, from John Lefevre, [Poor Law Commissioner], to [S M] Phillippis, [Home Office], enclosing a copy of a letter, dated 1 January 1840, from J [William] Wilson of Louth Poor Law Union to the Poor Law Commissioners, fols. 1–6.

¹¹² TNA, HO 17/66/89, Home Office, Criminal Petitions, Series 1, John Osborn, Edward Southeron and William Warren, Ipswich Borough Petty Sessions [Suffolk] 14 February 1839.

but tramping men and women had another motive to tear their own clothes. Seth Koven argues that vagrants' "'tearing' or 'breaking' up their clothes was at once a pathetic gesture of defiance and a practical response to their situation," since it "allowed inmates to vent outrage over their treatment and forced officials to provide them with a new and valuable suit of clothes."¹¹³ Workhouse masters sought to prevent this abuse by issuing poor-quality clothing to tramps.¹¹⁴ This is one instance where the tactics of vagrants could be seen as strategic.

Bad behavior was not solely directed at officials, and staff frequently found themselves keeping the peace between inmates in ways unanticipated by the Poor Law Commission. The oppressive workhouse environment divided paupers as much as it united them and fractured the efficacy of their agency. In Norwich, the workhouse master recorded that William Philo was "persisting in disturbing the quiet of the wards by swearing, shouting & making use of filthy & disgusting language, refusing to obey the warder or keeping his proper room."¹¹⁵ Sarah Godson drove workhouse inmates mad by "singing songs nearly the whole of the day,"¹¹⁶ and Mary Moss and Mary Jane Graham in Cockermonth¹¹⁷ and James Platten, Richard Leeds, and Robert Buckenham in Norwich¹¹⁸ were all punished for singing filthy songs. The line between resistance to authority and disturbing other inmates was a thin one: the workhouse master of Norwich believed that some inmates' bad behavior was much to the annoyance of others and regularly recorded it as such (9 percent of cases), as when Hannah Harvey, Martha Chatten, and Esther Betts were "persisting in being disorderly and annoying the other inmates. Also making use of very foul language."¹¹⁹ Authorities might also have to intervene in cases of theft, as when Rebecca Cason was recorded as "stealing cake & oranges from Emma Saw,"¹²⁰ or abuse to children or parents. In her poem about the workhouse, Ann Candler described fellow inmates as "the dregs of human kind" whose "rude behaviour gives offence."¹²¹

It is no surprise, then, that fighting broke out between paupers. Age did not prevent Edward Thompson, seventy-seven years old, and Jeremiah Cross, aged sixty-eight, from assaulting one another in Spalding workhouse.¹²² Women also struck one another; Margaret Topley and Jane McCartney were found "fighting on women's landing (Sunday)" in Cockermonth workhouse.¹²³ Those least able to defend themselves might also be targeted: George Greaves was accused of "striking Geo Adcock an idiot aged 55 blacking his eye and cutting his cheek,"¹²⁴ while Susan Gulliver was accused of "striking an idiot (H^t Tyson) in a cruel manner, her eye and

¹¹³ Seth Koven, *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London* (Princeton, 2004), 69.

¹¹⁴ Green, "Pauper Protests," 148.

¹¹⁵ Norwich Workhouse punishment book, 18 June 1892.

¹¹⁶ Southwell Workhouse punishment book, 29 January 1854.

¹¹⁷ Cockermonth Workhouse punishment book, 7 February 1870.

¹¹⁸ Norwich Workhouse punishment book, 5 April 1857.

¹¹⁹ Norwich Workhouse punishment book, 9 January 1868.

¹²⁰ Mitford and Launditch Workhouse punishment book, 7 January 1899.

¹²¹ Higginbotham, *Voices from the Workhouse*, 19.

¹²² Benson et al., *Spalding and Sleaford Punishment Books*, 2.

¹²³ Cockermonth Workhouse punishment book, 28 November 1886.

¹²⁴ Southwell Workhouse punishment book, 8 October 1894.

face discoloured very much.”¹²⁵ Such examples highlight the real problems faced by workhouse staff in combining the caring and disciplinary features of the workhouse.

Being set to work put the “work” in “workhouse.” Paupers in union workhouses pumped water, ground corn at a hand-mill, broke stone, grew cereals or vegetables in the workhouse garden, performed household tasks, picked oakum, crushed bone, did tailoring and sewing, and managed the boiler house.¹²⁶ My calculations reveal that refusal to work was one of the most common recorded offenses, particularly so in Ampthill (34 percent) and Beaminster (30 percent), while it accounted for more than one-tenth of offenses in Cockermonth, Petworth, Mitford and Launditch, Norwich, Sleaford, and Spalding. William Everitt committed the offense of “not picking 3lbs of oakum a day which is the quantity ordered by the board for each able-bodied man” in Spalding workhouse in September 1862.¹²⁷ Susan Gilliver, at Ampt-hill, was recorded as “refusing to do any kind of work and screaming murder the whole morning, threatening to smash the windows and after throwing two stone[s] through the kitchen windows got over the wall and absconded with the House clothing.”¹²⁸ The master at Beaminster workhouse had a particular problem with “idleness,” a word I found used in 12 percent of offenses. Samuel Dunn’s name appeared seventeen times in the pauper offense book, mostly for being idle, refusing to work, or leaving his work. In order to resist the imposition of workhouse work, some paupers destroyed material or equipment. Ruth Dickinson was punished for “destroying oakum.”¹²⁹ Ingeniously, Henry Howes, George Homes, Richard Howard, and Michael Creed of Norwich workhouse broke open the door of the pump and took off the gear wheels so that they could not be set to work on the pump.¹³⁰

The setting of the poor to such tasks went against the cultural notions of the right of the poor to fair work and fair pay. John Rutherford’s recollection of Poplar Union workhouse in 1885 provides an insight into the ways in which the poor might subvert the expectations of the authorities. Set to work stripping hemp from telegraph wires, he noted, “There was no hurry over the job—very much the contrary—but plenty of chatter and larking when the taskmaster was out of sight.” When transferred to that staple of workhouse work, oakum picking, Rutherford observed that “only a few” ever completed their allocation, and that “no young man that ever I saw completed his four pounds.”¹³¹ Decisions to deliberately work slowly highlight pauper agency, showing that work was not so exhausting that it prevented transgressions, and that inmates could turn it into a time of camaraderie.¹³² However, workhouse officials had ways of subverting such subversion. Richard Ellis, master of Abingdon Union workhouse, told the Poor Law Board that labor in the workhouse garden was too good for able-bodied men: “I make it a matter of favour to employ

¹²⁵ Ampthill Union Workhouse punishment book, 7 February 1858.

¹²⁶ Digby, *Pauper Palaces*, 145–46; Shave, *Pauper Policies*, table 4.1, 174, 218–19; Newman, “Punish or Protect,” 134.

¹²⁷ Benson et al., *Spalding and Sleaford Punishment Books*, 1.

¹²⁸ Ampthill Union Workhouse punishment book, 19 December 1854.

¹²⁹ Cockermonth Workhouse punishment book, 24 November 1869.

¹³⁰ Norwich Workhouse punishment book, 8 December 1869.

¹³¹ Higginbotham, *Voices from the Workhouse*, 50–51.

¹³² Downing, *Cambridge Introduction to Foucault*, 78–80.

them there; and for those who do not work well while there, some sort of employment within the house is found.” Instead, he let the old men and boys occasionally work in the garden, “which makes them cheerful and keeps them in good health.”¹³³

Workhouse walls were far more porous than the ideal of separating paupers from one another and the outside world by the “spatial means of discipline” outlined by Foucault: sectioned-off staircases, day rooms, dormitories, and high surrounding walls.¹³⁴ Many inmates avoided the due process of asking the master for permission to leave and collecting one’s own clothes, instead absconding beyond the boundaries of the workhouse; this accounted for 32 percent of offenses in Patrington and 16.9 percent in Beaminster, but just 0.7 percent of offenses in Cockermonth. In Southwell, almost 17 percent of offenses related to absconding, despite the institution’s infamous and influential design. George Nicholls, a retired officer of the East India Company’s merchant marine and Poor Law Commissioner, when overseer of Southwell workhouse, had ordered in 1821 that the workhouse be “enclosed by walls sufficiently high to prevent persons entering or leaving the premises without permission.”¹³⁵ No doubt some, following an altercation, impetuously shinned over the external wall; however, refusal to engage with the proper discharge procedure was a powerful rejection of the Poor Law Commission’s rules.

While officials frequently could not keep their inmates inside the workhouse, paupers rarely got into one another’s ward or yard (“boundary”), with the highest proportion of offenses at just 2.6 in Sleaford. Samuel Dunn was punished (yet again) for “thrusting himself through the bannisters of the mens stairs to get into the mens bed rooms during the working hours” and for “leaving his work and getting on the top of the infirmary wall and talking to a boy an inmate in the infirmary.”¹³⁶ The *Norfolk Mercury* recorded a case in early 1847 in Shipmeadow workhouse, in which “male married Paupers (about 70 of them) forced their way into the Female Quarters: then Lock[ed] themselves in Dormitories upstairs, refusing to Surrender.” The police arrived, battered the door in, and arrested the three ringleaders.¹³⁷ The Poor Law Commissioners also sought to restrict sexual relations between men and women through the separation of the sexes, yet at North Bierley, West Yorkshire, segregation was breached and a female inmate became pregnant in the workhouse.¹³⁸ Workhouse officials were not just trying to keep inmates in their wards or yards or within the workhouse walls; they were also attempting to prevent “persons who are not inmates trying to enter the workhouse perhaps aiming to enter the able-bodied women’s yard.”¹³⁹

Some forms of bad behavior envisaged by the Poor Law Commissioners were not realized and there were few offenses of pretending sickness, playing at cards or other games of chance, and lapses in cleanliness; however, able-bodied men in Southwell scratched a “graffiti” game upon the wall of their yard in the only corner that

¹³³ Higginbotham, *Voices from the Workhouse*, 91.

¹³⁴ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 218.

¹³⁵ Lees, *Solidarities of Strangers*, 109.

¹³⁶ Beaminster Pauper offence book, 18 November 1853.

¹³⁷ *Norwich Mercury*, 27 February 1847. I thank David Green for this reference.

¹³⁸ Newman, “Punish or Protect,” 134–35.

¹³⁹ TNA, MH 12/11733/8, Letter from Reverend Stephen Clissold of Wrentham Rectory to the Poor Law Commission.

could not be observed by the master from his office (figure 4). There were also few cases of wasting or spoiling provisions, although George Hill was “refusing to eat his gruel for breakfast stating that it was not good and thick.”¹⁴⁰ Inmates did not spoil their provisions because, like *Oliver Twist*, they were hungry. Indeed, Samuel Allen was found “Stealing Potatoes from the Potato Store and Boiling them in the Mens Day Room” on 6 April 1863.¹⁴¹ While diets might have been more generous in quantity than were those of the independent laborer and his family outside, workhouse diets were frequently monotonous and deficient in fat, vitamins, and minerals; the calorific intake was insufficient by 25 percent.¹⁴² At times, locals outside the workhouse protested the workhouse fare; in Alford Union, Lincolnshire, complaints were made about the poor quality of workhouse bread.¹⁴³

Paupers were allowed to leave the workhouse with permission, to attend church services, run errands, or visit the local fair, and for children to attend school. Many, however, returned late and were therefore “absent” (17 percent in Foleshill, 14.7 percent in Sleaford). John Vine was sent to the Petworth Board of Guardians with the workhouse book, but while he was out, he got drunk and neglected to bring the book back to the workhouse.¹⁴⁴ Given the prohibition on drink inside, it is not surprising that men made the most of this opportunity. Drinking alcohol compounded offending behavior with the refractory offense of drunkenness. However, absenteeism and drunkenness undermined the capability of the master to keep order and must have been exasperating. Benjamin Woodcock thought such paupers “very troublesome.”¹⁴⁵

Trips out offered paupers opportunities beyond popping to the local public house.¹⁴⁶ Quite what Jane Welbourne got up to is not given in Spalding’s punishment book, but she was accused of “[w]ilfully neglecting to attend a place of worship after leaving the workhouse for that purpose.”¹⁴⁷ Given the strictures of workhouse rules, inmates used outings as smuggling opportunities. In Shipmeadow workhouse, Suffolk, Elizabeth Stannard returned from her Sunday outing and when she was searched, “the following articles were found upon her person: three quarters of a pint of rum, two pounds of pork, half a pound of sausages, six eggs, some apples, some bread, half a pound of cheese, three packets of sweetmeats, two bunches of keys, £1 9s. 0d. in silver, 7³/₄d. in copper, and in her box £5 10s. 0d. in gold and many articles of clothing.”¹⁴⁸ This was clearly an exceptional amount of contraband to smuggle into the workhouse. In February 1870, William Stamp and John Vaise, Petworth workhouse, asked boys going out to school to smuggle them in tobacco; a few months later John Pennicard asked “W^m Brooks, who is weak minded, to buy him ½oz tobacco, when returning from church on Sunday morning.”¹⁴⁹ In

¹⁴⁰ Petworth punishment book, 2 December 1877.

¹⁴¹ Beaminster Pauper offence book, 6 April 1863.

¹⁴² Crowther, *Workhouse System*, 213–19; Peter Higginbotham, *The Workhouse Cookbook* (Stroud, 2008), 56–57. See also Longmate, *Workhouse*, 93–94.

¹⁴³ Brocklebank, “New Poor Law in Lincolnshire,” 26.

¹⁴⁴ Beaminster Pauper offence book, 31 January 1871.

¹⁴⁵ Gear, *Benjamin Woodcock*; Higginbotham, *Voices from the Workhouse*, 84–86.

¹⁴⁶ See Fowler, *Workhouse*, 140–42.

¹⁴⁷ Benson et al., *Spalding and Sleaford Punishment Books*, 1.

¹⁴⁸ Longmate, *The Workhouse*, 82.

¹⁴⁹ Petworth punishment book, 24 July 1870.

Beaminster, Thomas Fraughton was caught with “3 salt fishes concealed upon his person”—no doubt betrayed by the smell.¹⁵⁰

The evidence presented here refutes King’s claim that letter writing by inmates gave then an “actuality of agency” such that “the full range of punishments available to masters against refractory paupers was almost never used.”¹⁵¹ The full range of punishments were used and more besides. Moreover, although the disciplinary procedures within workhouses remained relatively static, there were significant variations in punishments by location (figure 5; see also figure 9). I found that alterations of diet dwarfed most other punishments and accounted for more than half in Cockermonth (85.2 percent), Petworth (69.5 percent), Sleaford (61 percent), Beaminster (52.4 percent), and Spalding (52 percent), with workhouse masters stopping a meal or replacing a set number of meals with potatoes, rice, or bread and water. Workhouse masters might withhold meat, cheese, or butter. I found that Cockermonth usually reduced dinner to a pound of boiled rice, while both Mitford and Launditch and Norwich gave inmates bread and water. However, while these five workhouses routinely changed the diets of their paupers, I found that Patrington did so in only 9.1 percent of punishments, highlighting once again strong local policies with regard to punishment by workhouse masters and Board of Guardians.

Confinement in another ward, the refractory ward, or the lockup was common in Amptill at one-fifth of punishments, while it accounted for around one-tenth of punishments in Beaminster, Cockermonth, and Foleshill. It was sometimes accompanied by an alteration in diet. Cockermonth’s almost total resort to just two punishments, alteration of diet (85.2 percent) and confinement (10.7 percent) (a total of 95.9 percent), is extraordinary. All the other workhouses used a greater variety of punishments. Foleshill and Patrington used the widest range of punishments.

Reporting misbehavior to the Board of Guardians was one way that workhouse officials could reclaim authority over inmates. Instead of facing just one or two workhouse officials, the offender would be brought before the board for a more public dressing-down. The books describe this process variously as being “admonished,” “cautioned,” “censured,” “chastised,” “reprimanded,” “reproved,” “warned,” or even “threatened.” Amptill admonished 19 percent of its paupers, while the figure was higher at 23 percent in Foleshill and 24.2 percent in Patrington. If “reported” and “admonished” are combined, Southwell used these methods in 34.7 percent of punishments and Patrington in 39.4 percent. It would seem that workhouse officials viewed the more lenient punishment of a good telling off as preferable in many cases to confinement or a reduced diet.

Nevertheless, workhouse masters also took cases before the courts, and local magistrates sentenced miscreants to prison: this was specified in around two-fifths to a quarter of recorded punishments in Petworth, Patrington, Beaminster, and Mitford and Launditch. Imprisonment was a serious outcome, as it might mean being locked up for months with hard labor. Having been expected to work in the workhouse, these men and women were now set to hard labor in prison. But resorting to the courts was one way of getting rid of troublesome paupers and reveals the

¹⁵⁰ Beaminster Pauper offence book, 1 January 1866.

¹⁵¹ King, “Thinking and Rethinking,” 17.

very real power of the Poor Law and judicial machinery. The actions of William Henry Barson and Lewis Coleman at Foleshill workhouse were disastrous for everyone involved. In May 1879, the men damaged the greenhouses along with other property worth £20. They attacked the master, assaulting him with lengths of wood on the head and body, rendering him insensible, and chased the governess uttering threats of murder. The police were called, and the pair were committed to Warwick prison for trial on charge of attempted murder of the master. Brought two months later before Lord Justice Thesiger, they were sentenced to five years of penal servitude.¹⁵² Nevertheless, the highly regionalized nature of workhouse punishments is again evident in that Cockermonth, Sleaford, and Spalding resorted to the courts and the higher authority of magistrates in far fewer instances (2.7 percent, 2.1 percent, and 2.2 percent respectively). Green's evidence allowed him to calculate an annual rate of committals to prison per hundred indoor paupers in the period 1836–1842; his findings also reveal differential rates by workhouse irrespective of the size of the workhouse, from 0.2 percent in Bermondsey to 3.9 percent in West London.¹⁵³ He notes that prosecutions of paupers were expensive, “time consuming and risky.”¹⁵⁴

Analysis of the eleven workhouses reveals a high degree of regional disparity both in types of offenses and in policy decisions on appropriate punishment. For this study, I chose two workhouses in Lincolnshire and two in Norfolk to allow comparison of workhouses within the same county in order to explore whether the localism identified so far was a consequence of welfare policies and practices at the county or at the union level (figures 6–9). The comparison reveals that both could be true; disparities between the Norfolk workhouses in offending behavior and in policies of punishment suggest localism at the level of the workhouse, but, in contrast, Sleaford and Spalding workhouses were very similar, raising the possibility that there was shared knowledge in Lincolnshire.¹⁵⁵ Of course, the New Poor Law sought to create uniformity of practice through central direction from the Poor Law Commission and later the Poor Law Board, with orders, inspections, and the auditing of accounts; yet diversity persisted.¹⁵⁶ Samantha Shave has shown how Boards of Guardians, assistant Poor Law commissioners, and the Poor Law Commission transferred locally derived knowledge in “knowledge networks” through correspondence, visits, and publications.¹⁵⁷ This was evidently not the case in Norfolk, however, where Mitford and Launditch and Norwich operated very differently.

Sleaford and Spalding workhouses were very similar in terms of size, types of offenses, and policies for punishment. Both drew upon impoverished agricultural districts, and at least half of adults in each had been employed in agriculture.¹⁵⁸ Both had comparable proportions of disorderly offenses (61.5 percent in Sleaford

¹⁵² Castle and Wishart, *Foleshill Union Workhouse Punishment Book*, 17.

¹⁵³ Green, “Pauper Protests,” 143, table 1.

¹⁵⁴ Green, 145.

¹⁵⁵ Shave, *Pauper Policies*, chap. 4.

¹⁵⁶ Crowther, *Workhouse System*, ch. 2.

¹⁵⁷ Shave, *Pauper Policies*, 165–81.

¹⁵⁸ Nicola Verdon, *Rural Women Workers in Nineteenth-Century England* (Woodbridge, 2002), 55; see also “1881 Census: Residents of Sleaford Union Workhouse,” in Higginbotham, *The Workhouse*, accessed 30 June 2018, <http://www.workhouses.org.uk/Sleaford/Sleaford1881.shtml>; “1881 Census: Residents of Work House, Pinchbeck Rd., Spalding, Lincoln,” in Higginbotham, *The Workhouse*, accessed 30 June 2018, <http://www.workhouses.org.uk/Spalding/Spalding1881.shtml>.

and 52.5 percent in Spalding). Assault and refusal to work made up the largest categories of offenses in both places: 19 percent (Sleaford) and 14.7 percent (Spalding) for assault, and 12.6 percent in both Sleaford and Spalding workhouses for refusal to work. Paupers in Lincolnshire objected to using the hand mill to grind wheat and barley.¹⁵⁹ Offenses of bad language were most common in Sleaford, while in Spalding paupers were more disobedient and reviled workhouse officers more frequently, but these differences were slight. In terms of punishment, both Sleaford and Spalding ordered alterations in diet (61 percent and 52 percent respectively), although Spalding called the police or took paupers to court in more instances. Nevertheless, the similarities in these two Lincolnshire workhouses suggest common punishment policies and shared knowledge.

In contrast, Norwich and Mitford and Launditch were very different in terms of size, offending behaviors, and punishments. Norwich, the largest workhouse in the study, was more than three times the size of Mitford and Launditch. Both were incorporated at the time of the 1834 act, but the latter dissolved its corporation in 1836.¹⁶⁰ Norwich remained incorporated until 1863, thus keeping “substantial protection from external interference by the Poor Law Commission,” and there was no workhouse test until the 1860s.¹⁶¹ Continuing incorporation, along with the fact that Norwich was an urban union and the inmates had been employed in a far more diverse range of occupations, contributed to different cultures of resistance and responses to it by workhouse officials.¹⁶² The Norwich workhouse master used the terms “disorderly” and “refractory” far more than did the master at Mitford and Launditch, obscuring the true nature of the offenses committed by inmates. Work-related offenses accounted for significant proportions in both workhouses, at 10.7 percent in Norwich and 15.4 percent in Mitford and Launditch. However, refractory behavior was a larger problem in Mitford and Launditch. Although paupers were more disobedient in Norwich’s large workhouse (16.3 percent; compare Mitford and Launditch’s 5 percent), the latter had proportionally far more of the serious offenses of assault and damage. Punishment for disobedience in Norwich appears to have contained the more violent behavior of its inmates. Understandably, the officials in the urban union needed to keep such strict order, given its size, but it is surprising that they managed to accomplish it.

Norwich workhouse officials punished paupers primarily through confinement (43.5 percent) and alteration of diet (43.1 percent), but Mitford and Launditch chose corporal punishment (30.3 percent, for boys), diet (28.9 percent), and imprisonment (26.9 percent). Although only boys were allowed to be corporally punished, in thirteen cases across all the workhouses in the study, girls were caned or slapped: Letitia Sharman’s punishment in Ampthill was recorded, presumably by the workhouse master, as “slap’d her with my hand (twice).”¹⁶³ In Norwich on 16 July 1867, five girls were recorded as “absconding from the school on the morning of 16th inst. and remaining absent till brought back by the master the same evening”; the next day another four girls committed “misbehaviour in

¹⁵⁹ Brocklebank, “New Poor Law in Lincolnshire,” 27.

¹⁶⁰ Digby, *Pauper Palaces*, 35, 39, 47.

¹⁶¹ Digby, 128.

¹⁶² Digby, 124–27.

¹⁶³ Ampthill Union Workhouse punishment book, 10 December 1855.

school.” The first group of girls was punished with “3 meals bread & water & 3 days oakum picking & privately punished by matron,” while the second group had “one meal bread & water & privately punished by matron.”¹⁶⁴ “Private punishment” was likely to have been caning—which was against regulations, as the punishment book recognized: “On enquiry it appeared that the ‘private punishment’ here reported was a slight corporal punishment inflicted before the matron by the laundress & in the presence of the superintendent of female labour. It was pointed [out to] the matron that this punishment was against the order N^o 126 and the matron was desired under no circumstances to punish a female child in this way again.”¹⁶⁵ As Green points out, “regulations acted not just to restrain paupers but also to curb the actions of staff” in an attempt to prevent abuse.¹⁶⁶

CONCLUSION

Workhouses were sites of resistance. Paupers behaved badly as a response to stifling rules and regulations that dictated every aspect of their day-to-day existence; in challenging those in authority, they questioned the very legitimacy of the workhouse.¹⁶⁷ A symbol of state authority, it was implemented from the center as well as at the local level, yet, as in London workhouses, maintaining discipline for workhouse officials was a constant struggle.¹⁶⁸ Workhouses were disagreeable institutions deliberately designed to be deterrent and disciplinary, yet pauper inmates undermined poor law policy at every turn. While the true power of the Panopticon was supposed to be its internalization by its inmates, the evidence from the punishment books suggest that paupers failed to interiorize the all-seeing eye of the workhouse master.

The most contentious aspect of workhouse life was the expectation of work. Inmates resisted picking their allocation of oakum, breaking stones, working in the garden, or cleaning the workhouse. The Poor Law commissioners were astute in their assessment that work would play a central role in the policy of deterrence, but, although they foresaw in the General Workhouse Regulations potential problems in extracting work from the poor, they could not have predicted the level of resistance to these tasks, suggesting, in turn, that paupers’ actions were not just tactical but strategic. It is also doubtful that the commissioners expected quite so many inmates to abscond over workhouse walls and fences and hedges. The ideal of the strict separation of paupers from society and from one another might have bred dread in the working classes, but it was not so easily enforced in reality. Damage to the fabric of the workhouse, particularly the breaking of windows, also demonstrated paupers’ refusal to accept spatial segregation and the prison-like buildings from which they could not come and go as they pleased. Equally, though, the difficulty of running a workhouse where paupers did in fact come in and out fairly regularly, usually for a short time, and with others circumventing the proper discharge procedure, must be recognized. Indeed, John Cole, workhouse master in Rochdale

¹⁶⁴ Norwich Workhouse punishment book, 16 July 1867.

¹⁶⁵ Norwich Workhouse punishment book, 16 July 1867.

¹⁶⁶ Green, “Pauper Protests,” 158.

¹⁶⁷ Green, 158.

¹⁶⁸ Green, 158.

in the 1840s, described in his journal how inmates “think they can disobey, insult, or abuse us with impunity.”¹⁶⁹

Paupers’ frustration at workhouse life manifested in outbursts of bad language to staff—the easiest and perhaps most understandable form of protest, and one resorted to by roughly equal numbers of men and women. Unsurprisingly, it was men whose tempers flared further and who committed assault, largely upon other inmates, sometimes workhouse staff and, at times, the most vulnerable. This was the ugly side of working-class masculinity as men sought to control their immediate environment in a situation in which their social status had been reduced and they were no longer “providers and protectors” of wives and children.¹⁷⁰

Analysis of workhouse punishment books reveals distinct local cultures of offending; work-related offenses dominated in Ampthill and Beaminster, for example, but were minor in Foleshill, the workhouse that displayed the greatest variation in offending behaviors. Workhouse masters had a particular problem with tobacco in Petworth and in Cockermonth with disruption of prayers. While historians have long acknowledged that, despite the desire of the Poor Law commissioners to enforce uniformity from the center, local cultures of poor relief policy persisted; what has not been evident before is the strong localism in workhouse misbehavior.

Workhouse officials and magistrates used the full range of powers and punishments available to them, albeit again with local variation. Alteration of diet was the most common punishment and, since workhouse food was neither plentiful nor appealing, additional restrictions on meals would have been unwelcome to disorderly and refractory inmates. Masters and matrons were also authorized to confine and isolate inmates in refractory cells. In this way men and women could be successfully separated from society and other inmates for the period of their incarceration (incarcerated within a “carceral” building). Unruly boys were controlled with the birch. Above and beyond the regulations, workhouse officials also sought to bolster their authority and reassert workhouse discipline by asking their Board of Guardians to admonish inmates. As in London, only a small proportion of offenses ended in court; workhouse punishment books reflect the much wider pattern and full range of breaches of workhouse discipline.¹⁷¹ However, it must be remembered that the analysis of workhouse punishment books reveals as much about workhouse management as it does about pauper indiscipline.

That paupers behaved badly reveals significant agency in the face of considerable power from above, highlights their attempts to negotiate relief, and shows that they were not mere subjects in workhouse regimes.¹⁷² Such behavior also demonstrates that discipline was an endemic problem in all workhouses.¹⁷³ The agency of paupers should not be overstated, however: the power balance between workhouse officials and inmates was extremely unequal and the disciplinary apparatus of staff and magistrates was decidedly inmates. Despite the misbehavior of the poor men, women, and children, the English workhouse was, both in design and everyday experience, a deterrent institution.

¹⁶⁹ Cited in Lees, *Solidarities of Strangers*, 149.

¹⁷⁰ Doolittle, “Fatherhood and Family Shame,” 96; Doolittle, “Duty to Provide, 59.”

¹⁷¹ Green, “Pauper Protests,” 139, 145.

¹⁷² Green, 137–38; King, “Thinking and Rethinking,” 9.

¹⁷³ Green, “Pauper Protests,” 41.