

THE CASUAL POOR AND THE CITY OF LONDON POOR LAW UNION, 1837–1869*

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ABSTRACT. *The City of London Poor Law Union in the early to mid-Victorian period was the richest and least populated of all the metropolitan Poor Law districts. A wide range of parochial, livery, and other charities within the City not only attracted vast numbers of applicants for assistance, but influenced the quality and nature of the care given by the local union. This not only meant that provision for the outdoor poor, children, and the elderly tended to be more liberal than elsewhere in the capital, but that vagrants, many of whom took up winter residence in the City, also experienced a higher standard of pauper treatment than that offered by the surrounding unions. The combination of high Poor Law receipts from a low poor rate base, civic pride, competition from City charities, and the willingness of neighbouring unions to off-load this most troublesome class of pauper on to their rich neighbour gave an unparalleled level of choice to those who were truly at the bottom of the heap in Victorian London.*

I

A growing band of historians has begun to look at the workings of the 1834 Poor Law Reform Act from the point of view of local experiences, rather than, as has been the pattern hitherto, that of the great and good who framed the legislation, and the central government departments which purportedly directed a nationally uniform system of relief.¹ Metropolitan London has featured in this renewed interest, most notably in the work of David Green, although detailed studies of individual unions have tended still to concentrate on the supposedly rebellious north of England.² Anne Digby's comprehensive

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¹ The seminal studies here are A. Brundage, *The making of the New Poor Law: the politics of inquiry, enactment and implementation, 1832–1839* (London, 1978), and idem, *England's 'Prussian' minister – Edwin Chadwick and the politics of government growth, 1832–1854* (Pennsylvania, 1988); D. Roberts, *Paternalism in early Victorian Britain* (London, 1979). L. S. Levy, *Nassau W. Senior, 1790–1864* (Newton Abbot, 1970), is a useful study of the close relationships between the cadre of influential political economists, civil servants, and politicians which created the 1834 Act.

² David Green, *From artisans to paupers: economic change and poverty in London, 1790–1870* (Aldershot, 1995). See also D. Ashforth, 'Settlement and removal in urban areas: Bradford, 1834–1871', and P. Wood, 'Finance and the urban poor law: Sunderland union, 1836–1914', in M. E. Rose, ed., *The poor and the City: the English Poor Law in its urban context, 1834–1914* (Leicester, 1985); J. Knott, *Popular opposition to the 1834 Poor Law* (London, 1986); E. C. Midwinter, *Social administration in Lancashire, 1830–1860, Poor Law, public health and police* (Manchester, 1969); D. Fraser, *Urban politics in Victorian England* (Leicester, 1976); idem, *Power and authority in the Victorian City* (Oxford, 1979).

examination of poor relief in Norfolk is a notable exception to this rule.³ The significance of the capital in the annals of the Poor Law has been seen as lying largely in the rating crisis of the 1860s, when the poorer unions of the East End nearly collapsed under the weight of too few ratepayers and too few receipts and a huge increase in pauperism prompted by bad winters and the collapse of the London shipbuilding industry.⁴ But the activities of the metropolitan Poor Law authorities in the years immediately after the passing of the 1834 Act were arguably just as important in shaping the history of the English Poor Law. In particular, the refusal in 1836 of the Trustees of the Poor in the large parish of St Pancras to be unionized highlighted an oversight in the drafting of the legislation. After a costly battle between the Poor Law commissioners and the trustees in the court of King's Bench, it was decreed that those parishes, like St Pancras, which had been incorporated under local acts of parliament or under the Gilbert Acts could not be forced to become unionized and could retain their traditional boundaries and their old administrators. This decision allowed not just many metropolitan parishes to retain a high level of independence from the central body, but enabled such important cities as Bristol, Manchester, and Liverpool to retain a high level of local power over poor relief.

Karel Williams's analysis of workhouse building nationally shows that most new workhouses built in the years immediately after the passing of the 1834 Act were situated in rural areas, but London unions appear to have been active in the early workhouse construction movement, and were certainly among the first of the urban authorities to erect them. Only 30 per cent of urban unions in the period 1834–9, and 20 per cent in 1840–9 erected new buildings, and the metropolis accounted for a significant proportion of those.⁵ This rush to build the new 'Bastilles' might be interpreted as an endorsement of the tenets of the New Poor Law and a commitment to indoor relief by the London unions, but there may have been a more practical reason for the early spate of metropolitan workhouse building. The capital's property prices meant that the London unions had higher rateable values than elsewhere in the country. This enabled most of the metropolitan unions to build workhouses within the first ten years of the life of the new regime without having to either raise the poor rate to unacceptable levels or commit the union to decades of high loan repayments.⁶

³ A. Digby, *Pauper palaces* (London, 1978).

⁴ This precipitated the Metropolitan Amendment Act of 1867, a seminal piece of legislation that not only allowed the redistribution of poor rate revenue to be siphoned from richer unions for the benefit of those less well-off, but created the Metropolitan Asylums Board, a body whose responsibilities had far-reaching consequences for the poor of London suffering from mental illness or infectious diseases.

⁵ Karel Williams, *From pauperism to poverty* (London, 1981), table 4.34, p. 221. It is possible that the metropolitan unions were taking advantage of a favourable economic climate, by selling the sites of their old workhouses for business and domestic building and using the money raised to construct new workhouses on cheaper sites. Several of the new London union workhouses were not situated within the boundaries of their unions, but in neighbouring districts where land was less expensive.

⁶ For an analysis of the pattern of workhouse building in England and Wales, see F. Driver,

Whatever the reason, it must have been gratifying to the Poor Law commissioners in their Somerset House headquarters to view the new workhouses springing up all over the capital, the physical evidence of compliance with one of the principal innovations of the 1834 Act.

While the metropolitan Poor Law is now attracting attention, the social history of poverty in the *City* of London has been largely ignored by historians of the nineteenth century, perhaps because they believe that its small, mainly prosperous, resident population could offer too little of interest. Even the juxtaposition of the words 'poverty' and 'City of London' seems oxymoronic, if not faintly ridiculous. The contemporary literature and historiography of London's New Poor Law is dominated by the East End but the importance of the City's charitable provision for the whole of London cannot be underestimated.⁷ The ancient foundation of St Bartholomew's Hospital, with its attendant dispensary, served the capital north of the Thames exclusively until the explosion of hospital foundation in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; City livery companies provided pensions, almshouses, and doles from bequests made centuries before 1834, and the parochial charities of the Square Mile supported thousands of poverty-stricken Londoners, who had only the most tenuous of links with the City of London.⁸ The City's provision for the poor did not end with eighteenth-century almshouses, and its wealth was used (and mis-used) to relieve poverty in the metropolis long after the last merchant had abandoned his town house and departed for a villa in Blackheath, Kensington, or Hampstead. As well as vast resources, the Square Mile had the added advantage of being the only part of the post-1834 metropolis to have an established, integrated system of local government, whose members were used to wielding considerable political and economic power (it had no fewer than four members of parliament at this time).⁹ Its citizens controlled a huge network of charities, the combined income of which rivalled that of some European nation states, and the City of London's streets, long after the days of Dick Whittington, still acted as a powerful magnet for the ambitions and opportunism of strangers from all parts of the world.¹⁰ As John

Power and pauperism (Cambridge, 1993), ch. 5, and K. Williams, *From pauperism to poverty* (London, 1981), pp. 75–81, 87–90, 108–16, 217–28.

⁷ For example, see P. Ryan, 'Politics and relief: east London unions in the late 19th and early 20th centuries', in Rose, ed., *The poor and the city*; and L. Marks: 'Medical care for pauper mothers and their infants: poor law provision and local demand in east London, 1870–1929', *Economic History Review*, 46 (1993), pp. 518–42.

⁸ D. Owen's *English philanthropy, 1660–1960* (Cambridge, MA., 1964) has detailed descriptions of City charities, while S. Low's *Handbook to the charities of London* (London, 1872) gives a good overview of philanthropic agencies in London, many of which had City headquarters.

⁹ For a comprehensive description of the structure of local government in the City of London, see F. Sheppard, *London, 1808–1870: the infernal wen* (London, 1971); J. Davis, *Reforming London: the London government problem, 1855–1900* (Oxford, 1988); and D. Owen, *The government of Victorian London, 1855–1889*, ed. R. Macleod (Cambridge, MA., 1982).

¹⁰ F. Prochaska, 'Philanthropy', in F. M. L. Thompson, ed., *The Cambridge social history of*

Summerson has remarked, 'London grew by sucking in provincial migrants because jobs were either better paid there or thought to be so; it also offered a more liberal array of charities, richer rewards for crime, a more persuasive legend of opportunity than could be found anywhere in the country.'¹¹

The Poor Law within the City of London in the period from the passing of the Poor Law Amendment Act in 1834 to the Metropolitan Poor Law Act of 1867 functioned in a way contrary to the accepted picture of Poor Law provision in the south of England. Until 1849, the City of London Union (CLU) refused to build a workhouse, spending vast sums on farming out its indoor poor miles away from the union offices, while most of its paupers received outdoor relief, largely in cash, supplemented by generous allowances of food and drink. The pauper children were housed at William Aubin's school in Norwood, taught only by qualified staff, and allowed regular parental visits.¹² Once the pauper child was ready for the outside world, apprenticeships were arranged with respectable, church-going masters, and the school chaplain kept a close eye on the young people for the first year of their working lives.¹³ The union's claim of generous treatment of their own unfortunates was, however, undermined by the pressure placed on them by the casual poor: the vagrant, homeless, and demanding population, often viewed by the CLU as impostors, attracted to the City by its reputation, or encouraged by neighbouring unions to seek relief within the Square Mile. I shall examine whether the lofty opinion which the City guardians and staff had of the provision given to their poor was justified, or whether their treatment of casuals showed that the CLU's liberality was merely a product of wealth and not a conscious policy. I shall also look at the role which the demands of the casual poor played in bringing about the collapse of parish domination of the Poor Law and the transformation of London Poor Relief into a metropolis-wide concern.

II

During the first half of the nineteenth century Britain became the first widely urbanized society and London assumed its place as the greatest city in a country of constantly increasing town dwellers. The population of London was

Britain, 1750–1950 (Cambridge, 1990). See also Ellen Ross, 'Hungry children: housewives and London charity, 1870–1918', in P. Mandler, ed., *The uses of charity: the poor on relief in the nineteenth century metropolis* (Pennsylvania, 1990), pp. 162–5.

¹¹ J. Summerson, 'London, the artifact', in H. J. Dyos and M. Wolff, eds., *The Victorian city: images and realities* (London, 1973), p. 362.

¹² William Aubin's regime at Norwood was sanctioned by the Poor Law Commission's educational experts, Dr James Kay-Shuttleworth and E. C. Tuffnell: F. Duke, 'Pauper education', in D. Fraser, ed. *The New Poor Law in the nineteenth century* (London, 1976).

¹³ London Metropolitan Archives (LMA), minutes of the Board of Guardians of the City of London Union, C.BG.28, 23 July 1844.

already a million by 1815, rising to 2,362,000 (one eighth of the population of England and Wales) by 1851.¹⁴ Although towns in the north of England were growing in size and importance, London remained at the heart of the nation. While the population of the capital mushroomed, that of the City of London itself seemed to be stagnating, if not shrinking inexorably; of the 2,362,000 metropolitan inhabitants enumerated in the 1851 census, only 127,000 (5 per cent) lived in the Square Mile.¹⁵ Housing there was increasingly demolished to make way for commercial warehouses and office buildings, and those City workers who could not afford to move to the suburbs were forced to add to the overcrowding of neighbouring districts. In 1851, those left resident in the City were small tradesmen and shopkeepers, caretakers, porters, and junior clerks who lived in the garrets above their offices. The merchants and men of business had forsaken the narrow alleys and courts for Kensington, the passages and winds for the sweeter air of Wandsworth.

If the City of London could not provide roofs over the heads of its workforce, it gave no shortage of opportunity for the enterprising labourer, street-trader, or beggar. The powerful attraction it held for opportunists of all stamps did not diminish with its transformation into a City of predominantly daytime inhabitants. For centuries it had attracted migrants in search of work, or food, or charity. This last was there in abundance, ranging from the ancient royal foundation of St Bartholomew's hospital, several dispensaries, livery company trusts, and innumerable parochial charities, to the lord mayor's poor box at the Mansion House.¹⁶ A great deal of City land had been bequeathed over centuries to local charities, and the increasing value of these assets ensured that City charities enjoyed a rising income. In addition to the official charities, the daytime population of the City provided many opportunities for street and door-to-door begging.

The Old Poor Law in the City was renowned for its liberality; the Corporation of the City of London had been the first local authority to establish a poor rate after the Reformation, for the care of the poor by impotency and casualty, as well as the 'thrifless poor', which group included: 'the rioter that consumeth all, the vagabond that will abide in no place, and the idle person,

¹⁴ E. E. Lampard, 'The urbanising world', in Dyos and Wolff, eds., *Victorian city*, p. 4.

¹⁵ This figure was the same as that enumerated in 1831; thereafter the depopulation continued to decline, not to be reversed until the Barbican complex opened in the second half of the twentieth century.

¹⁶ The most comprehensive account of City charities is found in the volumes of the Royal Commission on Charities in England and Wales, 1819-34. Sampson Low's *Handbook* gives a not altogether approving list of charities, old and new, based in the City of London in the mid-Victorian era. W. K. Jordan recounts the growth of land bequests and City trusts in *The charities of London, 1480-1660* (London, 1960). A full chapter is devoted to City of London charities in Owen's *English Philanthropy*; also useful is B. Kirkman Gray, *A history of English philanthropy* (New York, 1967). More recent studies of City charities have concentrated on individual charities, such as Lindsay Granshaw's *St. Mark's hospital, London: a social history of a specialist hospital* (London, 1985).

as the strumpet'.¹⁷ In 1647, a Corporation of the Poor, headed by the lord mayor, was formed to run the workhouses and pay the outdoor poor, its stated principal object being to reduce the amount of begging in the City. It was not a success, principally because it could not easily work in tandem with the other layers of City administration. When it was wound up in 1825, its workhouses were sold and the money raised was given to charity.

The pre-1837 City Poor Law was in the hands of paid parish officials; each of the 117 parishes had its full complement of officers. In many parishes, charity funds that had long since lost their relevance were used to support the poor rate. This relieved the ratepayers of any fiscal responsibility and almost guaranteed a positive response to applicants, no matter how long they had resided in the parish.

The City authorities were long used to their cold-weather visitors: people booking into workhouses and night shelters for the winter and discharging themselves to go tramping in the summer.¹⁸ Metropolitan London parishes tended to be generous with casual relief, often giving temporary assistance to applicants rather than going through the complicated process of obtaining a removal order.¹⁹ It was frequently cheaper to grant temporary aid, or give something from the poor box, than to return the numerous applicants to their place of settlement. This was generally at some distance and the cost of removal was borne by the removing parish.²⁰ In any case, the magistrates well knew that relocated paupers would head straight back to the City as soon as possible. There was a general tolerance of pauperism and parish aid in the City before 1834;²¹ the lack of workhouse provision meant that thousands of paupers were aided in their own homes; and parish officials regularly financed extras, such as spectacles, shoes, and tools, from the poor rates.²²

The witnesses to the 1832 Royal Commission on the Poor Laws confirmed the particularly lax and cumbersome City Poor Law administration. Applicants for casual relief first attended on the overseer or churchwarden of the individual parish, men who were appointed annually. Few of the tradesmen who served as parochial officers knew the applicants, and the opportunity for fraud was immense. The chief clerk to the lord mayor claimed: 'There are vagabonds who go about hunting the new parish officers. I have known as much as thirteen or fourteen pounds per day obtained from parishes by fraud of the new overseers in the season.'²³ The overseers took the pauper up before

¹⁷ Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *English local government: English Poor Law history* (London, 1927), p. 48. ¹⁸ Raphael Samuel, 'Comers and goers', in Dyos and Wolff, eds., *Victorian city*.

¹⁹ See T. Hitchcock, P. King, and P. Sharpe, *Chronicling poverty, the voices and strategies of the English poor, 1640-1840* (Basingstoke, 1997), for an analysis of Poor Law treatment of the poor in the eighteenth century.

²⁰ M. D. George, *London life in the eighteenth century* (London, 1925; repr 1992), pp. 154-5.

²¹ Perhaps it is no coincidence, given the generous character of City Poor Law provision, that St Martin Vintry had two parish officers in the eighteenth century named Scattergood and Spendlove. Guildhall Library MSS 601/1 and 606.

²² Lynn Hollen Lees, *Poverty and pauperism in nineteenth century London* (Leicester, 1988), p. 5.

²³ *Report of the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws. 1834. Appendix A.*

the Guildhall magistrates or the lord mayor at the Mansion House. As these courts also dealt with police cases, the paupers were invariably at the end of the queue and they and the overseers had to wait for hours to be seen by the magistrates, each of whom had their own view of the law.²⁴

If a removal or committal order was required, a second magistrate had to be sought, usually at his place of business. With very few exceptions, he rubber stamped his colleague's judgement, thus rendering the safeguard of having a second magistrate farcical. Removals were almost entirely restricted to paupers having settlement in a City parish other than the one to which application was made, and rarely to parishes at any distance from the City. The aldermen were notorious for finding in favour of the applicant in cases where relief had been refused and generous sums of money were dispensed from the Mansion House. When beggars were deemed to have deserved punishment, they were sentenced to a spell on the tread mill, but even this was not viewed as particularly onerous, at least by one member of the City bureaucracy, 'the Lord Mayor's footmen have more severe labour in running up and down the stairs of the Mansion House'.²⁵ The liberality of the City of London Poor Law authorities before unionization can partly be explained by the logistics of organizing parochially-based relief in an area, measuring just over a square mile, containing so many separate parishes. Moreover, the huge amount of money sitting in parish charitable accounts had to be spent by men whose jobs were not dependent on the approbation of ratepayers.

III

Unionization came rather late to the City of London.²⁶ The CLU was not formed until July 1837, from an amalgamation of 98 parishes containing a population of some 57,080; the remaining City parishes either remained self-governing under local acts, or were placed in the East or West London Unions.²⁷ The CLU had 101 guardians, the twelve smallest parishes averaging one guardian per 153 people, the twelve largest one guardian per 1,440. There were 8,807 houses in the union, and the poor rates had been estimated at £59,943 per annum for the three years since the Poor Law Amendment Act had been passed.²⁸ The guardians were mostly small tradesmen resident in the

²⁴ William Payne, second clerk to the magistrates at Guildhall, noted: 'We may be said to have twenty six different systems of Poor Law administered within our district.' *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.* Evidence of Francis Hobler.

²⁶ There had been strong representations from the City authorities that they be excluded from the 1834 Poor Law Reform Act, as they had been from so much legislation in the past. The City was only unionized after Edwin Chadwick, in a rare conciliatory mood, had persuaded the Corporation of the City that little would change once a union had been formed. Oliver MacDonagh, *Early Victorian government, 1830-1870* (London, 1977), pp. 96-116.

²⁷ The parishes making up these two unions, being on the edge of the ancient city, were generally much more populous and poorer than their neighbours within the City union.

²⁸ Guildhall Library: Broadsheet 23.16.

City and liked to regard themselves as being part of the ancient City administration, predisposed to maintaining local tradition and local autonomy. The vast majority of paupers were on generous outdoor relief, and there was no question of a new workhouse being built; the matter was not even discussed until well into the 1840s, the reasoning being that a shrinking resident population and changes to settlement qualifications would one day render the Poor Law obsolete within the Square Mile. Paupers were farmed out, children going to Aubin's school at Norwood, women to a house in Stepney, and the casuals went with the male able-bodied inmates to Marlborough House in Peckham, Surrey.

From the beginning, the sheer volume of casual applicants threatened to overwhelm the union, especially in winter, and the guardians tried several tactics to discourage the homeless poor from approaching their relieving officers. The CLU complained that it was the victim of the City's historic appeal to the unemployed and importunate, and initially refused to provide a night-time casual relief office within the City in order to dissuade the City police from bringing vagrants to them.²⁹ The workhouse was a four-mile walk from the union offices, a deterrent for the cold and footsore. In March 1840, the CLU further tried to reduce the numbers of applicants by redefining the term 'casual', deeming the true casuals to be those who applied for relief before 11 p.m. After that hour, they became vagrants, and were passed on to the City police. They also offered alternatives to the casual wards, including money for a night's lodging elsewhere. According to the City police commissioner, reporting in December 1840, the CLU offered most casuals bread and money for a night's shelter, rather than admission to the workhouse. The police passed 81 vagrants to the East London Union that month, all of whom were offered the workhouse; the West London Union offered 300 casuals the vagrant wards at the workhouse, 30 more were given bread, 2 handed cash, 4 were refused all help, and 19 were sent to hospital. Their near neighbour the CLU, on the other hand, gave 182 casuals bread, 90 money, 20 were refused assistance, and only 83 sent to Peckham.³⁰

The City casuals were made up of a wide variety of men and women: discharged servicemen, migrants attracted to London in the hope of work (or largesse), the mentally ill, Scottish and Irish natives who had no settlement in England, unmarried mothers, deserted wives, and prostitutes. The City commissioner of police described them with undisguised distaste:

The number of persons brought to the station houses upon charges and under circumstances too immaterial to call for magisterial interference is very great, and largely upon the increase, which I think in a considerable degree may be attributed to the inducements held out to the idle and dissipated, who flock from the remotest part of the country to London, under the impression that food and lodging are easily and

²⁹ The relieving officers bore the brunt of personal callers: in Nov. 1839 they claimed personal hardship on account of the weight of numbers of applicants calling at their homes. LMA, CLU minutes, C.BG.25.

³⁰ *Times*, 30 Dec. 1840.

gratuitously to be obtained...there is something obviously vicious in the system ...which inundates our streets every morning with hundreds of persons who prowl about, in every form of affected distress, seeking and seizing whatever may come in their way.³¹

They were attracted to the City because it offered unmatched possibilities for survival: there were parochial charities and rich businessmen from whom to beg during the day, a lord mayoralty renowned as a fount of benefices, police courts with bulging poor boxes, City compters with cheap beds, and a City Poor Law that not only handed out money, but also had none of the disciplinary authority of the other London unions. The workhouse contractors were not employed under the New Poor Law, and, therefore, had no right to use the sanctions and punishments against the workhouse inmates that were enjoyed by directly employed union staff in approved workhouses.

Marlborough House had room for approximately 300 casuals at night, just about enough in summer, but wholly inadequate once the cold weather began to attract the capital's seasonal visitors. Within three years, it was obvious that the provision for winter casuals was inadequate: in January 1841, over 1,000 casual applicants besieged the doors of Peckham every night, and were crammed three to a bed in temporary wooden huts.³² The press of cold weather demand caused friction between the various agencies within the City: the union wanted the police to deal with violent casual applicants, the police wanted the union to process the applications more quickly to avoid civil disturbances, and the City solicitor, the servant of the Corporation, rapped the union across the knuckles for inadequate arrangements:

[I]t is the duty of the board of Guardians in the City of London Union to make provision for giving, in cases of urgent necessity, immediate shelter, either temporary or permanent, as the case may require, to houseless wanderers found in a state of destitution within the limits of the union...

[T]he fact that the workhouse is at a distance does not exonerate them from the obligation of providing temporary shelter upon the spot, in all cases of emergency where the necessities of the case do not admit of immediate removal to the house provided in ordinary cases for the reception of the poor...

The 54th section [of the Poor Law Amendment Act] expressly says that the relief is to be 'such as each case shall require' and it would be an insult to common sense to say that this requirement of the statute would be complied with by offering bread to a houseless stranger, about to perish of cold, and to refuse him shelter.³³

The pressure to provide a decent service to the casuals from the Corporation ensured that the CLU expended huge amounts of effort and resources in dealing with vagrants. The first three months of 1842 alone saw them relieving over 10,000 casuals, at a cost of nearly £2,000. These included many discharged seamen, and a large number of Lascars who were found casually destitute

³¹ Quoted in *10th Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners*, xix (1844), p. 9.

³² *Report of the City of London union committee on the need for a workhouse*, Guildhall Library, FO.pam.5920, 8 Feb. 1847.

³³ *Times*, 2 Jan. 1841.

within the City and were totally unprotected by the law.³⁴ While such care for the unfortunate foreigner did wonders for the civic pride of the citizens of London, it placed a huge burden on the ratepayers. The union charged the cost of providing for the casuals to the parish where they happened to be when they applied for relief. The tiny parish of St Mary Woolchurch Haw had the misfortune to have the Mansion House, ‘To which all the destitute and homeless poor resort for relief’, within its boundaries. Many casuals were given orders for relief by the lord mayor, acting in his capacity as chief City magistrate. In anguish, the parish vestry wrote to the Poor Law Commission in May 1841 complaining of the resultant escalating poor rates: St Mary’s had only thirty residential houses, but their poor rates had risen from £250 a year in 1834, for all charges, to over £1,000 for casuals alone.³⁵

As long as it refused to provide a workhouse of its own, the CLU could do no right with regard to the casuals: when they tried to limit the number of applicants from the homeless, the City authorities censured them; when they gave money for lodgings instead of an order for Peckham, the ratepayers and the Poor Law Commission complained; and when they allowed the majority of applicants to go to Peckham, the discipline of the workhouse collapsed, attracting the opprobrium of the press and Somerset House, the seat of the Poor Law Commissioners. As table 1 shows, in the early 1840s, the union cared for the largest number of casuals of any of the metropolitan districts. The variations are quite extraordinary. Why did Bethnal Green, with its huge population, average just seven casual paupers a night, while its near neighbour, St George in the East, looked after more than four times that number, and the East London Union had the care of forty-one casuals nightly? If one argues that the casuals were the authors of their own fate, then it would be reasonable to assume that they chose the best accommodation or most lax regime, or the cleanest workhouse. If, on the other hand, one accepts that no union actually welcomed the casuals, as they represented a drain on resources, a great deal of work and potential discord on ejection in the morning, it is possible that the CLU was correct in claiming that casual applicants were ‘encouraged’ by other unions to seek shelter with them. Given the wealth of the CLU, which was neither offered to nor shared with its neighbours, this does not seem unlikely and may have been the only means by which the hard-pressed unions of the East End could ensure that the costs were spread at all. The unions south of the river were also used heavily, but none more so than the CLU. Given that scant inquiry was made into the casuals’ circumstances, and that the unions were obliged to offer help to the destitute, it seems logical to conclude that the casuals either tended to go to the unions who treated them best, or were being

³⁴ They were not the only foreigners to burden the CLU. In 1841, the union spent over £1,360 returning Irish and Scottish paupers to their birthplaces. PRO, MH12/7460.

³⁵ PRO, MH12/7460. Letter to Poor Law commissioners (PLC), 28 May 1841. This anomaly was not rectified until the passing of the Union Chargeability Act of 1865, whereby poor rates were calculated and charged on a union basis.

Table 1. *Caring for the casual poor: the London unions in the 1840s*

Union	Population	Number of casuals	Average per night
West Ham	26,919	2,468	7
Bethnal Green	74,087	386	7
Whitechapel	71,758	5,545	15
St George in East	41,351	10,385	29
Stepney	90,657	6,155	17
Poplar	31,091	4,247	12
Hackney	42,274	627	2
Strand	43,894	2,250	6
Holborn	39,720	5,111	14
East London	39,655	14,824	41
West London	33,629	7,653	21
City of London	55,629	18,466	67
St Martin in Fields	25,195	1,249	3
St Luke Chelsea	40,177	1,564	4
Kensington	74,775	7,760	21
St Olave So'wark	18,427	4,059	11
Rotherhithe	13,916	1,315	4
Camberwell	39,867	863	2
Greenwich	80,811	8,551	23
Lewisham	23,013	36	—
St Saviour's	32,980	10,369	28
St Geo the Martyr	46,622	8,215	23
Lambeth	115,883	15,593	43
Wandsworth & Clapham	39,853	2,617	7
Brentford	37,054	6,159	17
Richmond	13,558	2,018	6

Source: 12th annual report of the Poor Law Commissioners, XIX (1845).

passed on to the CLU by their neighbouring unions. The Strand Union, situated less than a mile from the CLU, had a reputation for harshness, so it is perhaps not surprising that they only looked after an average of six casuals nightly. The CLU often complained that other unions directed casuals towards their doors, and these figures seem to bear this out. Apart from anything else, there was no work requirement for casuals at Peckham; as soon as they had breakfasted, they were free to leave, without having to pick oakum or break stones.

On specific nights throughout 1844, the CLU averaged 102 casuals per night, the next busiest union being the ELU, with 32. However, the figures, while impressive, do not compare with those shelters which had nothing to do with the Poor Law. The Central Asylum for the Houseless Poor in Playhouse

Yard in the City looked after 420 people per night during its open season and the Society for the Relief of Distress's shelter, open in winter, housed on average 838 homeless people every night, a figure which could rise to 1,000 in bad weather. This would confirm contemporary reports that the London night shelters, free from the stigma and taint of the workhouse, were the first resort of the huge numbers of homeless in London, with the City Poor Law provision being the next acceptable alternative.³⁶

A 'promiscuous' examination by the guardians of twelve casual paupers of both sexes, ranging from sixteen to forty-nine years of age, at Peckham in November 1848 paints an unusually rosy picture of casual provision.³⁷ One of the questions asked was, 'Why come to the City so often when other unions are nearer?' Only one man said that it was the most convenient after disembarking at London Bridge from the Kent harvest, where he had been taken ill; all the others cited the fact that the CLU allowed them to stay for more than one night at a time; and many said how clean it was compared to the other unions. Asked about their treatment they said – perhaps not surprisingly – how good it was. Unfavourable remarks were made on other London unions, which were said to require the casuals to sleep on loose straw in cellars, the bedding being often filthy and covered in vermin; unlike the CLU, other unions put them out in the morning with insufficient food. One man said: 'The general belief among us is that the treatment is so much better here, in fact I have heard it stated that this House is better than Lodging Houses. I prefer it here to a lodging house as it is clean.'³⁸

The foregoing must be treated with caution, not least because the paupers were being quizzed by the guardians. While it was perfectly true that the CLU allowed casuals to stay for several nights when the house was not too crowded, and that cleanliness was a priority, Peckham was a long walk from the CLU offices or the Mansion House. Many casuals preferred the reward for breaking a few City windows of a night in Bridewell, or the City Compter, to the long trudge to Marlborough House. Equally, while casuals and regular inmates were not separated, the difference in the treatment between the classes was all too obvious and the source of much trouble. It is perhaps no accident that the survey was undertaken in 1848, when the union was making a last stand against Somerset House's insistence that they abandon the contractors' premises and build their own workhouse.

IV

In November 1844, the chairman of the CLU, Alderman Michael Gibbs, was elected lord mayor, and vowed to take action with regard to the casuals, in part as a response to repeated pressure from the Poor Law Board to build a proper workhouse where discipline over unruly casuals could be imposed. His existing action was limited to several meetings with the City police commissioner and

³⁶ *12th Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners*, XIX (1845).

³⁷ LMA, C.BG.30, 12 Nov. 1848.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

stern judgements from his bench on vagrants unfortunate enough to find themselves before him. During his mayoralty, however, the Poor Law Board established Metropolitan Asylum Districts for casuals, the CLU being placed in the Central district with Holborn, Strand, West London Union, St Giles in the Fields, St George Bloomsbury, St James Clerkenwell, St Luke Middlesex, St Mary Islington, and St Pancras. The district covered a population of 561,891, and its twenty-three managers, appointed by the member parishes and unions, were expected to set up casual wards with a standard regime, the costs being borne by the districts according to their various poor rates. However the expectations of Somerset House were never realized: as long as the City continued to play overnight host to the largest number of vagrants, the other bodies within the Asylum District had no incentive to standardize the service, and the scheme was disbanded in 1852.

The issue of inadequate provision for casuals and the violence they visited upon the streets of the City created the most public area of conflict between the elected City government and the CLU, and highlights the relationship between the Corporation and the guardians. The former was an ancient, proud, wealthy, venial, and independent institution, comprising the most rich and important citizens, which guarded its privileges jealously and regarded any encroachment on its power or purse by central government with deep suspicion. The latter was a large and unwieldy body, made up of small City tradesmen, who were desperate to be seen as part of the City's noble heritage, but who were regarded by the Corporation as representatives of a central government intent on curbing City autonomy and acquiring City assets, but who were also subject to the law as determined within the Square Mile. The care and cost of the roving casual population was an obvious area for City muscle-flexing and was taken up by John Johnson, Gibbs's successor as lord mayor. The CLU's offices in Cannon Street were close to the Mansion House, and this proximity resulted in frequent replacement of windows at the official residence of the lord mayor,³⁹ although the clerk to the CLU blamed the increasing numbers and the growing insubordination of the casuals on leniency by the lord mayor himself.⁴⁰ The City authorities had become particularly alarmed at an incident in January 1845, when a mob had formed around the union office, having come straight from the Mansion House with their orders for relief. When they were given orders for admission into the vagrant wards at Peckham, they pelted the relieving officers with the bread that had been distributed, tore up the orders, and threw stones, coals, and even shoes at the office windows.

The CLU had resolutely refused to have a casual ward within the limits of the City of London until 1845, for fear that it would encourage even greater numbers of casuals to apply, but the inadequacy of the system was bringing them condemnation from all sides. Apart from the problems of social unrest on

³⁹ In 1845, 103 panes of Mansion House glass were broken by casuals. *Weekly Dispatch*, 11 Jan. 1846.

⁴⁰ LMA, C.BG.29, 13 Jan. 1846.

the streets of the City, the lord mayor highlighted the appalling conditions endured by the casuals at Peckham during winter.

In a few words, the System may be thus described: the Board of Guardians refuse to have any Asylum for Casual Poor within the limits of the Union, and whether the days are long or short, the weather wet or dry, warm or cold, all Applicants for relief are by the Relieving Officers, sent at all hours of the day or night, with an Order for the Relieving-House at Peckham – a distance of four miles. On their arrival at the house (if by supper time) sufficient portion of Bread and cheese is given to each pauper, and a Meal of Bread and Gruel is administered in the morning. They are dismissed from the house at 11 o'clock, to be received again in the evening, if they desire it, by a fresh order from the Relieving Officers in Town...

[The lord mayor] trusts, that having thus communicated to the Guardians the knowledge of the consequences of their proceedings which he himself has witnessed, they will not feel it any longer their 'imperious duty to the rate payers' to uphold a system, of which, His Lordship ventures to believe, the Ratepayers would be the last to approve.⁴¹

He acknowledged the huge rise in the number of casuals given aid in the last few years. In 1840, the City relieved 2,400 casuals, at a cost of £530. Between 1842 and 1845, over 170,000 had been helped, at a cost of £17,000. While the liberality of the union was partly responsible, he believed there was also an army of vagabonds and prostitutes who used the union when they could find nothing else. The lord mayor stated his belief that casuals cost the union £5,000 per annum, when the cost to many of the surrounding districts did not amount to as many farthings in the year.⁴²

Occasionally the Corporation and the CLU managed to co-operate in dealing with specific groups of casuals. In March 1848, a large number of British and Irish labourers were expelled from employment in France during the Revolution. Most of them appeared at the doors of the Mansion House and the CLU offices seeking help.⁴³ The authorities agreed that the relieving officers were to help the men, on production of proof of identity. Strict accounts were to be kept, as the money would be reimbursed by a fund set up for their relief by Lord Grey: 'many had already applied and could not be considered in the light of paupers – they were most respectful in their behaviour, decent and clean in appearance, and apparently industrious and well-disposed persons'.⁴⁴ But it was easy to agree on how to deal with such obvious victims of circumstances, who would go home to the chance of steady employment and never be seen again in the City of London. It was far more difficult to establish a satisfactory system for the growing band of regular casuals, frequently violent

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ The Mansion House was not unused to such visitations. In 1816, Matthew Wood, then lord mayor, begged the government's help in relieving the City of the expense of helping all the destitute ex-servicemen returning from the French Wars.

⁴⁴ The CLU also sent a donation of 100 guineas to the fund, and were reproved for so doing by the PLC. It was difficult for the guardians, who saw themselves as running a large charity, to comply with strictures on spending their money as they saw fit. LMA, C.BG.30.

and abusive, who knew perfectly well that the facilities at Peckham were pitifully inadequate and the staff had no power to discipline those who set the rules of the house on their head. In February 1848, one CLU relieving officer had to be rescued by the police from being beaten by ten young women who had applied to him for food and clothes, and on being offered a bed for the night instead, reacted strongly, 'Peckham be damned, we'll not go a step towards such a filthy place of confinement.'⁴⁵

At Peckham, the staff had not only to worry about attacks on their own persons by casuals, but the elderly regular inmates also were frequently robbed and assaulted by them.⁴⁶ There were near-riots by casuals in other London unions, but none gained similar levels of publicity before 1849, because their staff had the power of the Poor Law behind them. The City police courts refused to sanction disciplinary measures taken by the workhouse contractors, and many of the casuals not only knew this, but used that knowledge to abuse the system. As long as the union had no workhouse building of its own, with enforceable discipline, the casuals could act as they pleased. Attempts by the relieving officers to limit numbers in times of great demand were frustrated by the orders of the City's judiciary, one magistrate commenting that great numbers of the destitute must be relieved, or they would go about the City helping themselves.⁴⁷ Starving applicants refused relief in other metropolitan unions habitually entered the Square Mile to seek help from the union, the City police and the lord mayor.⁴⁸ Notable among the waves of immigrants into the capital, the Irish (many of whom disembarked at the docks in the East End and made straight for the City) were a particular problem in the 1840s,⁴⁹ but the CLU's attempts to send them home were often frustrated by the reluctance of the magistrates to sign the removal orders.⁵⁰ In refusing to send a widow back to Ireland in 1843, the lord mayor remarked, showing a liberality and rare appreciation of her circumstances: 'How can I put my pen to an authority by which she is to be removed with her three children into positive beggary in Ireland? I cannot do it.'⁵¹

⁴⁵ *Weekly Dispatch*, 13 Jan. and 20 Feb. 1848.

⁴⁶ LMA, C.BG.29, 29 Dec. 1846.

⁴⁷ *Weekly Dispatch*, 9 Jan. 1842.

⁴⁸ The city police often allowed the destitute to spend a night at the police station, rather than being taken before the magistrates at Guildhall to be given a ticket for Peckham.

⁴⁹ The *Weekly Dispatch* (8 Oct. 1848) railed against the huge influx of 'filthy Irish vagrants' from 1846, but the CLU reported to Richard Hall, the Poor Law assistant commissioner, that most of their Irish applicants had travelled to London with the Cork and Dublin Steam Packet Company, whose offices were in Leadenhall Street. They were not being paid to emigrate, or arrived expecting poor relief, but had been induced to London by rumours of wages as high as 3s 6d a day compared to 5s a week they might expect at home. PRO, MH32/36, 27 Apr. 1847.

⁵⁰ The City magistrates did show willing, however, by sitting at the Guildhall on a Saturday in rota to deal with Irish and Scottish paupers. Court of Common Hall minutes, 11 Feb. 1845. For a London-wide view of Irish colonies in London, see Lynn Hollen Lees, *Exiles of Erin: Irish migrants in Victorian London* (Manchester, 1979).

⁵¹ *Weekly Dispatch*, 19 Mar. 1843. He ordered the parish of St Botolph's Bishopsgate to give her outdoor relief until she was able to fend for herself, and gave the woman ten shillings from his own

As the pressure of casual applicants increased in the 1840s, the CLU found itself in the spotlight. Small children who were sent into the City to beg, old ladies who sought alms in the City streets, and starving rejects from other unions – all were offered the long walk to Peckham, whose temporary refuge was all that was available. The indignation of the CLU at being blamed for what it saw as the dereliction of duty by its neighbours was insufficient to prevent adverse publicity. Lord Mayor Johnson's feud with the union was reported in the press, which was inevitably sympathetic to his views:

I found occasion the other day to make some observations upon the manner in which the affairs of the City of London Union have been transacted, to the utter carelessness and contempt which seemed to prevail amongst those in power, when investigation should take place into the alleged condition and claims of applicants.⁵²

The CLU's constant refusal to make proper provision for the casual poor within the City irritated the Corporation and the commissioners. The union claimed that their arrangements provided the best and most humane care available for the deserving poor, but Lord Mayor Johnson's investigation showed that the lack of an office and a proper building for the casuals resulted in the deserving being given less than was their due and encouraged marauding hordes of casuals within the Square Mile. It made a nonsense of Gibbs's fierce stance on vagrancy and the union's claim to occupy the high moral ground, and prompted the opening of a night-time casual office in Northumberland Alley, very close to the Mansion House.

The problem was clearly growing beyond the capabilities of the union, which received no respite from the moribund Central Asylum District. In February 1846, it petitioned the House of Commons on the numbers of homeless poor in the metropolis, proposing a series of asylums be set up throughout London, with a general rate for the whole of the capital, to share the costs of providing care.⁵³

The growing numbers of casuals presented not just problems of funding and accommodation, but were perceived by the CLU as a risk to public health, particularly in spreading infectious diseases. The London Fever Hospital printed a report in February 1846 which claimed that 'fever had arisen and spread to an alarming extent from the insufficient accommodation afforded to the Casual Poor at Marlborough House'.⁵⁴

It took the Board five months to reply that the casual wards at Peckham were 'perfectly sweet and clean', but the union was in a quandary. The Board of

pocket to tide her over. The CLU stopped removing Irish paupers in Aug. 1863. LMA, C.BG.45, 9 Feb. 1864.

⁵² *Weekly Dispatch*, 11 Jan. 1846.

⁵³ The five asylum districts already formed for the purpose had no premises of their own, thanks to certain large, 'selfish' parishes who were content that the casual poor flocked to the City. LMA, C.BG.29, 18 Feb. 1846 and 21 July 1846. The CLU later identified these as Marylebone, St Pancras, Newington, and St Luke Shoreditch. *Times*, 27 Jan. 1848.

⁵⁴ LMA, C.BG.29, 21 Feb. 1846.

Guardians saw the scale of casual relief within the City as an advertisement for its great philanthropic status, but it was alarmed at the financial and public health consequences of the City's responsibility to the metropolitan casual population. They protested that many casuals arrived in a state of fever, and were only saved from destitution and death by the kindness of the union. An additional affront was to be criticized by the hospital, to which they not only subscribed, but to which they paid an extra one guinea per patient.

We beg to remind you of the source of the evils complained of... The Casual Poor have no connection whatever with the City of London Union. They flock thither from the surrounding Unions and parishes, and it cannot be too much to presume that in those other places they are refused the relief and Shelter they require, since upon a comparison of the numbers relieved in the Metropolis, the City of London Union is burthened with at least 4 or 5 times the largest number in any other place...

Moreover the City of London Union has never been properly prepared for so overwhelming an amount of casual poor, but has always looked upon the charge as a temporary one only more particularly as the subject of proper Asylums for this class of Poor has engaged the attention of the Legislature for many years past. It should be remembered that there is no legal mode of apportioning the charges for the casual poor amongst the several parishes of a Union, and even if there were, it would be most unjust that one Union which is more humane than its neighbours in providing for the casual poor, should be compelled to bear the whole burthen of their maintenance.⁵⁵

In the summer of 1848 a new, tougher, regime for dealing with casual applicants was announced; all applicants were to be searched, and those deemed not actually destitute turned away. Impostors were to be prosecuted and entrants to Peckham searched. They enlisted the support of the Mansion House and the police commissioner in dealing with impostors, and magistrates were urged to be strict with habitual mendicants, not to be moved by 'ingenious and cunning appeals to their humanity' and to enforce the Vagrancy Acts.⁵⁶

The following December the lord mayor requested a meeting with the guardians and the police committee to discuss the rapid increase in the numbers of the casual poor in the Square Mile. The Court of Common Council had passed a resolution encouraging the three City unions to amalgamate into an asylum district for the purpose of dealing with the homeless poor. Such districts had been set up in the capital to co-ordinate provision for sick paupers and also for the education of pauper children, and the City fathers believed that the control of vagrancy might be better managed by concerted action on the part of all of its Poor Law authorities. Unfortunately, the strategy had already been attempted. In 1845, the City unions had been formed into a casual asylum

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 21 July 1846. James Jopp was reported as having seen the majority of the 43,575 cases dealt with in 1843 at his own home. He was on call at all hours of the day and night, had to board up the windows of the ground floor of his house, and had given over the whole of that part of his home to Union business. The horrified guardians granted him compensation of 150 guineas, a sum later disallowed by the commissioners. *Ibid.*, 25 Aug. 1846.

⁵⁶ LMA, C.BG.30, 5 Sept. 1848.

district, but no joint action was ever taken, and the East and West London Unions continued to encourage applicants for casual relief to call at the CLU office. If the asylum district was revived, the CLU argued that it would still be the only one to provide asylum for the estimated 18,000 people in the metropolis classed as houseless poor. The City would thus have the burden of all of the casuals in London, not just, as hitherto, most of them. The CLU begged the Corporation to use its great power and influence to get the Poor Law Board to compel the managers of the asylum districts already formed to act according to the intent of the legislation.⁵⁷

V

The problems posed by the casuals of the City were the catalyst which finally brought the union completely within the New Poor Law. In spite of repeated pressure from the central authority, the guardians had refused to contemplate building a workhouse, repeatedly trotting out the old arguments that their shrinking resident population and the obsolescence of settlement by apprenticeship rendered the building of an expensive workhouse in or near the City pointless.

After years of wrangling, the workhouse issue was finally decided by the necessity for law and order. At Peckham inmates set the unenforceable house rules at defiance, and thereby made a mockery of the deterrent principles of the New Poor Law. The often overwhelming numbers of casuals could not be properly documented and certainly not controlled. The casuals caused trouble at the CLU office in the City at night, trouble at Peckham at night, and trouble again in the morning when they were ejected from Marlborough House. A properly regulated union workhouse would perhaps deter the great numbers of casual applicants and control those who entered its doors.

Local magistrates could not enforce discipline while there was no public workhouse and Somerset House would not sanction the bye-laws and regulations inside the existing poorhouses. Mingling of paupers, which was viewed as one of the prime causes of insubordination, could not be prevented in the present buildings and it was finally accepted that premises were required which enabled the separation of the paupers as decreed by law.

Having agreed to build a workhouse, the edifice on the Bow Road in Poplar was opened in December 1849, externally, at least, resembling an Italian palazzo rather than the Bastille of Poor Law cliché. However, the union did not completely accede to the demands and expectations of Somerset House, for this magnificent building (designed for 800 inmates, with the last word in central heating, Siberian marble pillars, and a chapel boasting stained glass windows and a new organ), costing over £55,000, had room only for those casual applicants deemed sick and helpless. Once Peckham closed, all healthy casuals

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 19 Dec. 1848.

would be discharged on to the streets, there being no vagrant wards provided in the workhouse. The CLU, after all the pressure from the commissioners, had repeatedly urged the Poor Law Board (PLB) to help them carry out the legislation relating to the casual poor and, because the CLU had the heaviest burden of casual relief, to give them greater representation on the board of the asylum district. They even took their case to the newspapers; Guardian William Rock wrote to the press, declaring that the union could no longer afford the extra £7,000 it spent annually on casual relief, and would be following the example of the other metropolitan unions and closing its doors to all casuals who were not sick: 'The City of London Guardians are the least to blame, they have had to meet the entire burthen of their neighbours' dishonesty and cruelty.'⁵⁸

Such resolution, however, was neutralized by the City police commissioner, who instructed his officers to take all casuals to the CLU relieving officers, and summons them for neglect of duty should they refuse help. It was Guildhall magistrates who ordered the CLU to distribute coffee, soup, or broth during the day to the houseless poor, at a time when no other metropolitan union was handing out such largesse.⁵⁹

The replies from Somerset House were sympathetic, but not encouraging, and in October 1849 it was the turn of the guardians to show their teeth.⁶⁰ They informed the commissioners that, as their reasonable request to have more members on the Board of the Metropolitan Asylum District had been refused, they were going to discontinue relief to the casual poor, for whose care and management the legislation had provided the asylum districts. The CLU was leaving their care from now on in the hands of the managers of those districts and the PLB itself.⁶¹

The Poor Law Board, however, could not force the other unions in the asylum districts to pull their weight. Until the 1860s, in spite of repeated attempts to revive centralized districts for casuals, those unions which had traditionally taken in others' casuals continued to do so.⁶² The City, meanwhile, reorganized the casuals office in Northumberland Alley (known to the clients as 'The Wooden Hotel') along as humane lines as possible. The assistant relieving officer was supposed to distribute only food and clothing, but destitute children were put up overnight in his own rooms, and all the sick were taken in a cab to Bow. He dealt with 68,513 applications between 1860 and 1864 (including 1,768 strayed children and 5,698 other children).⁶³

⁵⁸ *Weekly Dispatch*, 2 Dec. 1849; *Times*, 29 Nov. 1849. The CLU clerk was summoned to Somerset House to explain whether the guardian's letters reflected CLU policy. LMA, C.BG.31, 4 Dec. 1849. ⁵⁹ LMA, C.BG.51, 13 Oct. 1868. ⁶⁰ LMA, C.BG.31, July–Oct. 1849.

⁶¹ LMA, C.BG.30, 16 Oct. 1849.

⁶² In 1857, the CLU was joined by the West London Union (also hard hit by casuals) in petitioning the Mansion House to enforce asylum districts and set up shelters in the City. *Times*, 28 May 1857.

⁶³ LMA, C.BG.45, 23 Feb. 1864. Abandoned and lost children were a particular problem in the City, all of those picked up by the police were handed over to the union.

Although the CLU had a declared policy of offering shelter only to sick casuals, a six-bedded vagrant ward, large enough only for twelve men, was eventually opened at the Bow workhouse. A frequent resident, complaining bitterly about the lack of respect meted out to him by the staff there, highlighted the class distinctions among even these lowly social groups: ‘All the vagrants are separately and singly bathed, that is strangers; but the Citizens, being clean persons, are not so regularly bathed.’⁶⁴ Business was brisk at the casual office in winter, amounting to over 100 casuals a week around Christmas. In the terrible winter of 1866, when the CLU was the only metropolitan union not to employ policemen as vagrant officers, numbers reached nearly 800 a month.⁶⁵ From 1864, the union could claim the cost of relieving casuals in clothing and food from 8 p.m. to 8 a.m. from the Metropolitan Board of Works under the metropolitan Houseless Poor Act. Those deemed to be vagrants were still brought before the lord mayor. Under the Act, the CLU relieved 2,758 people in the six months between September 1864 and March 1865,⁶⁶ the majority being given food and money for a night’s shelter elsewhere. The numbers continued to increase, the figures being tallied each January: 1864: 1,581; 1865: 2,003; 1866: 1,613; 1867: 8,101; 1868: 6,101.⁶⁷ The union believed the 1867 figure was caused by a coroner’s jury recommendation that the master of the workhouse supply to the casual office warm broth, coffee, and soup in the winter.⁶⁸ In December 1867 the guardians renewed the instructions to give gruel or coffee, and bread to casual daytime applicants. When they checked with twenty-nine of the thirty-nine Metropolitan unions, they discovered that they were the only union to provide such fare, except in cases of sickness or urgent necessity. If they maintained this regime, vagrancy and improvidence would be encouraged, and they contemplated discontinuing all casual daytime relief. It was proposed that Northumberland Alley be closed, so that able-bodied paupers would be offered only the workhouse, and discharged in the morning. Sick casuals were to be kept in the infirmary until they recovered, then discharged, and all able-bodied casuals would henceforth work for their bread.⁶⁹ The casuals would have their own medical officer, and assisting staff. These measures did not save money; in 1868, £602 was overspent on casual relief at Northumberland Alley, and the master warned that there were far more workhouse orders for casuals than could be

⁶⁴ LMA, C.BG.41, Donald Thompson, pauper, writing to the guardians, 27 Aug. 1861.

⁶⁵ LMA, C.BG.48, 18 Dec. 1866. This was in spite of a fairly spartan casual dietary of bread and gruel for both breakfast and supper. Come Ladyday, the gruel was taken off the menu, and up to four hours work expected from each casual before they were released.

⁶⁶ LMA, C.BG.46, 2 May 1865.

⁶⁷ LMA, C.BG.51, 13 Oct. 1868.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* The inquest was into the cause of death of John Brooks, a casual pauper and ticket-of-leave man, who collapsed in Leadenhall Street in Jan. 1867 shortly after receiving bread from the casual relieving officer.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* In 1868, 112 casuals were retained on account of sickness, most staying in the infirmary less than a week, although one woman had been sick for 255 days. Using these numbers, it was decided to make nineteen male beds and thirteen female beds available in the sick wards for casuals. LMA, C.BG.51, 8 Dec. 1868.

accommodated.⁷⁰ On one night, there were 90 applicants for 52 beds, and the excess had to be accommodated on the floor of the receiving ward.⁷¹

A survey of male casual applicants was made in January 1869, showing that the numbers had grown from 255 in December 1864 to 1,772 in December 1868. During the week ending Saturday 2 January 1869, 434 mostly young men were admitted into the casual wards of the workhouse, which was equipped to look after only 42 male vagrants a night.⁷²

Each London union had to cope with operating in an extraordinary society, where underemployment of a mainly unskilled workforce, combined with a never-ending flow of immigrants and vagrants, made their casual wards notoriously unpleasant, and often violent. The CLU was not alone in employing policemen to keep order in the casual wards.⁷³ Relieving officers of all London unions were attacked by casuals when relief was not quickly forthcoming,⁷⁴ and every metropolitan union habitually treated the casuals worse than any other class of pauper.⁷⁵ Makeshift beds with no mattresses were supplied at best; often no beds at all were made available. Usually bread and water was the only sustenance given at night, and no food was distributed before the casuals were turned out in the morning. Union officers and guardians alike complained of the annual December influx of casuals, 'of whom a large proportion were subject to loathsome disease induced by vice or destitution'.⁷⁶

These were London's 'less-eligible' paupers, and they were treated harshly because of the threat that their numbers and their behaviour posed to the good order, not just of the City Poor Law, but of the capital itself. In spite of government legislation to regulate non-Poor Law provision for the houseless poor (principally in the Baths and Washhouses Act of 1846, the Lodging Houses Acts of 1851 and 1853 and the Labourers' Dwelling Act of 1855), pressure on the London unions from casuals remained high. From September 1864, under the Metropolitan Houseless Poor Act (London), the costs of relieving casual applicants from 8 p.m. to 8 a.m. in kind were met by the Metropolitan Board of Works, and the incentive for the other London unions to pass on such paupers was significantly reduced.⁷⁷ Until then, those City parishes unfortunate enough to house the casual ward, the magistrate's court, or the relieving officer's house had to bear the financial burden.

At times of bad weather and high unemployment, some of the London Poor

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 2 Dec. 1868.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 5 Jan. 1869.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 19 Jan. 1869.

⁷³ M. A. Crowther, *The workhouse system, 1834-1929* (London, 1981), p. 123. The CLU employed a City police officer as assistant relieving officer for vagrants. Most unions only had a policeman to hand in the evenings when the vagrants were being admitted. PRO, MH32/24.

⁷⁴ *Weekly Dispatch*, 9 Jan. and 6 Mar. 1842.

⁷⁵ Kensington, for example, had a regime that enforced work and silence, and even banned smoking. PRO, MH32/36, 6 Feb. 1844.

⁷⁶ LMA, C.BG.25, 9 Mar. 1841.

⁷⁷ This body was set up under the Metropolis Management Act of 1855 to construct and supervise the sewerage system, and also supervise street building and naming in the capital; its powers gradually increased to cover such areas as the fire brigade, parks and open spaces, and slum clearance until the creation of the London County Council in 1889 ended its existence.

Law authorities broke under the strain of increasing numbers of applicants.⁷⁸ Mile End Union in 1867, for example, had to cope with 1,600 appeals against poor rate assessments at a time of unprecedented demand for relief, and with collectors unable to extract the sums demanded from ratepayers.⁷⁹ Freezing over of the Thames in the winters of 1854–5, 1860–1, and 1866–7 threw an estimated 50,000 men out of work on each occasion, men whose final recourse was the Poor Law.⁸⁰ The CLU did not have such financial problems; it had a rich rate base; some of the parishes within the City paid less than ninepence in the pound in poor rate, compared to up to five shillings in the East End. No wonder, then, that its hard-pressed neighbours to the east encouraged vagrants to walk a little further before seeking a bed for the night. Even so, in the terrible winter of 1866, the CLU, in common with its neighbours, nearly collapsed under the strain of the huge increase in casuals asking for help, as their staff and facilities were overwhelmed.⁸¹

The London Poor Law crisis of the 1860s resulted in the Metropolitan Poor Law Act of 1867 (30 & 31 Vict. c. 6 s. 69), which set up the Metropolitan Common Poor Fund, and a separate authority, the Metropolitan Asylums Board, for the care of sick paupers. It granted the Poor Law Board the power to nominate guardians to London boards, and to redistribute the costs of indoor pauperism (which included casual relief) in London, whereby the wealthiest unions bore the brunt of the payments. This Act, strengthened in the following years, spelled the end of the City of London Union in its original form, and united the whole of the City's 117 parishes under one Poor Law authority. The CLU guardians had confidently expected the result of this legislation to be a reduction in expenditure, for they would no longer have physically to support the capital's homeless. It was a great shock, therefore, when it became clear that the City's poor rates would rise immediately and dramatically once the funds expended were readjusted according to each union's ability to pay.⁸² The press of the growing number of casuals and the threat they represented to the whole relief system had succeeded in forcing the City of London Poor Law to bow to central government pressure, and to surrender their jealously guarded income to a common purse.

⁷⁸ See *Morning Star*, 18 Jan. 1861, for an account of East End union problems during the six-week cessation of river work. The distress resulted in private relief being channelled through the police courts, and the foundation of the Society for the Relief of Distress. G. Stedman Jones, *Outcast London* (Oxford, 1971), p. 243. A generation earlier, the Irish potato famine resulted in so many Irish casual applications to St George the Martyr in Southwark in January 1847 that the PLC told the guardians to release the excess numbers and put them all on outdoor relief. *Weekly Dispatch*, 24 Jan. 1847.

⁷⁹ Stedman Jones, *Outcast London*, p. 250.

⁸⁰ J. H. Treble, *Urban poverty in Britain, 1830–1914* (London, 1983), p. 73.

⁸¹ The CLU had 1,819 casuals in the Sept. to Dec. period of 1865, and 2,513 in the same period in 1866. They thought that the reason they had so many casuals at that time was that they were the only London union not to employ police as vagrant officers. LMA, C.BG.48, 18 Dec. 1866.

⁸² The Act added 6s 5d in the pound to the poor rate of the City, whereas Bethnal Green gained to the extent of 17s 3d, and St George in the East 25s 3d. in the pound. Ryan: 'Politics and relief', p. 141.

The original CLU was strong in its belief that it had a correct and laudable attitude to poverty and pauperism, especially with regard to its settled poor. In many ways the guardians were right, particularly, perhaps, in the areas not touched on here concerning the special needs of children and the mentally ill. They strove to uphold the dignity of the City's traditions and hoped to be seen as a body worthy of the respect of Common Council and the mayoralty. The magistracy of the City of London had a tradition of generosity to uphold, they themselves were not dependent on the approval of the ratepayers, and they used their authority over the actions of the CLU to counter the policies of central government. The City guarded its ancient autonomy jealously, and, no matter how publicly the CLU identified itself with the traditions of the Square Mile, it was viewed by the ruling elite as an arm of Whitehall, vulnerable to the superior judgements of City authorities. Whatever action the CLU took to try to force other unions to take equal responsibility for the casual population, the City judiciary and police used their powers to negate it. The City ratepayers may have hoped fervently for a reduction in the annual casual bill, but the guardians were helpless to act unilaterally. The innate belief the CLU guardians had in their infallibility enabled them, over many years, to resist the central Poor Law administration's efforts to reduce their spending and instigate a harsher regime. Their comparative generosity to the poor was based on the great wealth of the City, and it was this that finally brought them down. It is debatable whether they could have staved off attacks on that wealth by the central Poor Law authorities and the other metropolitan unions had they built a workhouse earlier. Providing acceptable, legally sanctioned accommodation for the casual poor would have removed a visible threat to law and order in the capital, at least during the hours of darkness, and would have mollified the Corporation of the City and the Poor Law Board. However, given the tendency of the unions, particularly in the East End, to direct casual applicants to the City, it is difficult to imagine them being able to build a workhouse or a set of casual wards of sufficient size. As long as the CLU could collect vast sums of money in poor rates and was subject to the legal authority of the City magistracy, they were vulnerable to the envy of their neighbours. The numbers of casual applicants to the CLU increased throughout the period, and the nightly press of the homeless and hungry too often turned into a dangerous rabble that could not be tolerated so close to Westminster. Even the vast City resources could not expand to meet the ever-increasing demands of the homeless poor, whose numbers had swelled during the employment crises of the 1860s. Moreover, the Metropolitan Poor Act merely set in stone the government's expectation that the rich City of London should pay the lion's share of the cost of its poor relief. For the next generation, metropolitan poor relief would be characterized by an increased workhouse population, and, in parts, the virtual abolition of outdoor relief – the almost perfect embodiment of the principles of the 1834 Act. After thirty years of struggling to balance their legal obligations and the expectations of the City hierarchy, the CLU was

defeated by its very prosperity, forcibly united with its near neighbours with a reduced number of guardians. In the first year of the new dispensation, poor rates in the City of London soared, its representatives perhaps having the small consolation that its workhouse became a model infirmary for the pauper sick and that the new grouping rejoiced in the name of the City of London Union.