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## **The Routledge Handbook in Spatial History**

### **Geographies of welfare in nineteenth-century England and Wales**

Douglas Brown, Department of Geography & Geology, Kingston University, UK

Why did the amounts and types of poor relief given in mid-nineteenth century England and Wales vary so greatly in different parts of the country? The research described in this chapter is an effort to tackle this question using geographic information systems techniques. The problem has tended to be addressed only in regional aggregate, and though the broad-brush approach has yielded a useful overall impression it has not provided the fine resolution required for a full, detailed picture of relief practices and experiences across the country. This research shows the significance of detailed spatial thinking in examining poor relief. First, it shows that mapping relief expenditure at the local level provides the opportunity for a more nuanced understanding of the welfare landscape; and second, it demonstrates the importance of socio-spatial relationships between poor law unions – the local authorities responsible for administering relief – and their surrounding economies.

#### **The New Poor Law**

From 1834 the destitute of England and Wales had a new environment of rights, responsibilities and hazards to navigate, in the form of the Poor Law Amendment Act.<sup>1</sup> Since the end of Elizabeth's reign, some 15,535 parishes had been responsible for the distribution of relief.<sup>2</sup> Each had its own practices and policies, and reformers pointed to the social and economic ills which resulted from this patchwork of administration.<sup>3</sup> Under the new poor law – the framework for poor relief in England and Wales which persisted until the early twentieth century – parishes were encouraged to come together as poor law unions run by elected guardians. The object was to ease the tax burden for local ratepayers by reducing the number of paupers and by cutting costs through economies of scale. The local administration of relief was brought under unprecedented central government scrutiny with the formation of the Poor Law Commission and its successors, the Poor Law Board and the Local Government Board. The use of payments in cash or in kind ('outdoor' relief), for able-bodied males at least, was to be discouraged in favour of relief inside the workhouse ('indoor' relief). To

encourage this class of person to find employment, rather than apply for relief, indoor relief was to be governed by the principle of 'less eligibility': that conditions in the workhouse should be no better than those enjoyed by the lowest-paid independent labourer. In other words, the poor would exhaust all other options before 'throwing themselves on the parish'. This, reformers believed, would reduce applications for relief and therefore overall expenditure.

The new poor law guardians, elected by ratepayers, had much less discretion over relief practices under the new law than the local officials who had formerly administered relief. However, it was not the purpose of the central authority to ensure every aspect of relief was identical across the country. Expenditure and types of relief varied widely between unions throughout the life of the new poor law. The reasons for this variation were the subject of the doctoral thesis which formed the basis for the research discussed in this chapter.<sup>4</sup>

Historians have so far explained differences primarily by local divergence in policy and by the uneven demand for poor relief.<sup>5</sup> But this research project added a new layer of analysis, made possible by GIS: it investigated how far variations in local relief expenditure and policy were linked to the local provision of goods and services. Prices had an effect both on the buying power of poor law unions, and on the decisions guardians made about the extent and types of relief they made available. There were complex links between prices and relief provision: High commodity prices could force many people to seek relief, or could arise from the same economic circumstances that caused destitution. High prices in some circumstances could lead to stricter entitlement regimes, through unions' budgetary constraints. More important, however, were the relationships between unions and their suppliers. An institution like a workhouse could have had a significant impact on a local economy by creating demand that would otherwise not have existed. Suppliers might in some cases have owed their existence to the local workhouse consuming their goods. Furthermore, individual unions were dependent on markets with varying degrees of competition, flexibility, organisation and size.

Boards of guardians took decisions based on their local circumstances and these national and regional contexts. Guardians had little power in the face of economic

cycles, regional trade depressions, local outbreaks of infectious diseases and the like. However, they could exercise a certain amount of discretion when it came to contracting for the supply of goods and services to the union. Regulations issued by the central authority could circumscribe guardians' activities, but they could not bind the independent traders who sold goods to the unions. Rather, these interactions were subject to existing contract law. This gave boards of guardians flexibility in their financial management and thereby their local relationships, putting social structures and processes at the heart of poor law economies. To map supplier networks is, therefore, to map social relationships. These relationships formed a significant part of poor law guardians' strategies for controlling costs: The demand for goods from poor law unions was considerable as workhouses consumed very great quantities of food, fuel and clothing – and guardians therefore had significant bargaining power.<sup>6</sup>

Nonetheless, in many respects it was the large suppliers who had the advantage in dictating prices, and guardians' procurement practices were not always efficient. Workhouse inmates suffered the consequences of unions' efforts to save costs, with suppliers delivering poor quality and sometimes adulterated food. Guardians had the dual priorities of keeping costs down, while wanting to spend the rates within their unions. They were also constrained by the number of potential suppliers. For reasons of availability and cost, therefore, relatively remote unions – such as Llanfyllin, Wales, which is examined here – had to rely on cheap suppliers from major towns outside their unions. Yet there was also space in the market for more minor traders to gain business from poor law supply, and unions gave some trade to local businesses on an *ad hoc* basis.

The research described in this chapter therefore has three intertwined strands. One is the mapping and analysis of poor relief itself. This provides context for the second strand: the charting of the prices paid for certain key commodities by poor law unions. The third strand is the mapping of supplier locations and networks, which enables a deeper understanding of the social relations underpinning poor law supply.

### **Data sources**

Historians have tended to aggregate poor law data by county or region, partly as a result of the necessity of making the data manageable. The assumption underlying this

aggregation is that counties or regions contained little enough variation between their constituent poor law unions for that variation to be irrelevant. This is not necessarily the case. At the same time, historians have lamented that the sheer volume of material on the poor law makes it necessary to illustrate chiefly by example, and that it is impossible to know how representative any such example might be.<sup>7</sup> Variations in poor relief must be considered with more granularity, and this chapter therefore uses disaggregated data from all individual poor law unions in Wales, manually digitised from British Parliamentary Papers. In so doing, it shows that it is possible to understand individual unions in the contexts of their wider regions. The poor law was a local institution and was treated as such by paupers, guardians, local officials, ratepayers, central government and policymakers. Furthermore, union-level data enable a more thorough set of GIS techniques to be adopted than would be the case using county-level data.

The annual poor rate returns published by the Poor Law Commission (PLC) and its successors in their annual reports contain information on amounts spent on different types of relief and the incidental administrative running costs of poor law unions. Other union returns giving numbers of paupers are also available in the 'Poor rates and pauperism' series of central authority publications ordered annually by Parliament from 1857 onwards. Decennial censuses provide the demographic backdrop. This chapter explores spatial and temporal variation in poor law practices by using comprehensive, union-level data for the early 1850s. By 1850, the Poor Law Board (PLB) had been in place for three years and was operating what might be termed a 'mature' system of relief. The early 1850s were also an important demographic turning-point. The 1851 census revealed for the first time that more people in England lived in urban areas than in rural, as a result both of direct migration to towns and of those new urban dwellers increasing local birth rates.<sup>8</sup> This period also has the advantage of data availability. 1850 is the earliest year for which a daily pauper count (held on 1 January) was published nationally for all unions.<sup>9</sup> A population census was held in 1851, permitting demographic analysis; and rateable value (the local tax base) was recorded for the period. Records of the prices paid by individual unions for goods and services on a national scale are not readily found, as guardians were very rarely required to make returns of their contract prices. Data are available for 1850 and 1851, however,

published in an 1852 parliamentary paper which gives data for two six-month periods ending 25 March 1850 and 1851 respectively.<sup>10</sup> There were other similar reports published, such as in 1843, but the 1852 paper gives costs per standardised quantities for the greatest number of unions. Details of suppliers to poor law unions were not recorded centrally, so local archives form the basis of that part of the analysis for Llanfyllin, a case-study union in this chapter.

Most of the centrally-collected data is found in Parliamentary papers published by the Poor Law Commission, Poor Law Board or Local Government Board (Table 1). The central authority in all its forms was characterised by a focus on enumerating poor relief expenditure and on quantifying pauperism. The operation of the poor laws had been a subject of statistical inquiry well before their amendment in 1834, but a central government department with specific responsibility for poor relief administration had an unprecedented ability to gather, publish and analyse information on national and local practice.<sup>11</sup> In part, this activity was aimed at holding poor law unions to account. It also can be seen in the context of increasing interest in methodologically rigorous approaches to data collection, evident in the close connections between poor law personnel and the Statistical Society of London. Edwin Chadwick, for instance, was appointed auditor to the society in 1835, within months of its establishment, and fellows included Frederick Purdy, who became head of the PLB's statistical department, and William Golden Lumley, the PLC's Assistant Secretary.<sup>12</sup> The first article published in the society's journal proper was by Assistant Poor Law Commissioner James Phillips Kay.<sup>13</sup> The sheer bulk of information collected by the poor law authorities presented analytical difficulties, and indeed the 1834 *Report* began with a description of the problems the commissioners had encountered: The replies to their circulated queries were 'so numerous, that it became a question how they should be disposed of'.<sup>14</sup> Modern scholarship has also found the volume of data to be a barrier to research.<sup>15</sup> However, the quantity and detail of available information should be treated as an opportunity, rather than an obstacle.

Data type	Source
Population, 1851.	British Parliamentary Papers (PP) 1876 LXIII 1. Paupers.
Indoor and outdoor paupers, 1 Jan 1850.	
Area in acres, 1854.	PP 1854 LVI 1. Poor rates, &c.
Rateable value of property assessed to the poor rate, 1852.	
Relief expenditure, year to 25 Mar 1850.	PP 1851 XXVI 1. Third annual report of the Poor Law Board. 1850.
Provisions prices, 1850 and 1851.	PP 1852 XLV 7: Poor relief.
Supplier records, Llanfyllin, 1844-80.	Powys County Archives, M/G/B/8/1.

**Table 1: Selected poor law union data sources.**

The central authority collected information on the numbers of paupers in different ways over time. In 1847 the Poor Law Commission decided that the way it had counted paupers until then – in six-month periods to Lady-day and Michaelmas – was unwieldy. The possibility existed that different unions would count their paupers by different methods. Furthermore, the figures for indoor and outdoor paupers might not be comparable as, for example, an individual entering the workhouse three times in six months could be counted three times, whereas an individual receiving outdoor relief every fortnight for the same six months could be counted once.<sup>16</sup> The PLB from 1848 therefore asked unions to report their respective pauper numbers in and out of the workhouse on 1 January and 1 July.<sup>17</sup> The relationship between these day-counts and total numbers of paupers relieved in the whole year is a difficult one to ascertain, given the flaws in the six-month counts, though some historians have attempted to ‘correct’ the day-counts by multiplying their averages by certain constants.<sup>18</sup>

In this study, unless otherwise specified, only the 1 January count is used without any attempt at ‘correction’. 1 January is an arbitrary date for the collection of the figures – chosen for its administrative convenience by the Poor Law Board – and the numbers of paupers on that date do not represent the same proportion of paupers relieved for the whole year for every union. Figures for ‘expenditure per pauper’, for example, therefore should be read as expenditure *for the full year* divided by the number of paupers *on 1 January of that year*. This ensures that all the figures are comparable. Figures for expenditure per pauper should therefore be treated as indicative only, as they do not represent actual sums spent per individual pauper.

Having digitised the quantitative data from Parliamentary Papers, they were visualised and analysed using shapefiles created by EDINA UKBorders.<sup>19</sup> Joining the data was a

fairly straightforward procedure, using unique identifying numbers for each poor law union. The shapefiles were available only for 1840 but the quantitative data was for 1850, so some manual editing of the shapefile was required first to reflect boundary changes in the intervening years.

Geo-referencing supplier locations was somewhat more challenging. Identities of winners of contracts were recorded in the minutes of unions' board of guardians, which are usually in local archives if they have survived. Street addresses tended to be noted when the supplier was located within the union, especially within the town in which the workhouse stood. In many cases, though, just parishes, villages or towns were named, especially when the supplier was outside the union or in a village elsewhere in it. For example, a hypothetical record such as 'James Smith, Baker, High Street' would most likely have indicated the high street in the town containing the union workhouse. For a supplier outside the town, 'John Brown, Butcher, Newtown' would have been the usual record. Many records were more vague, however, especially when a long-standing supplier was well known to the board. Some archival cross-referencing provided more detail, but in most cases contemporary business directories were invaluable in narrowing down identities when there were multiple candidates.<sup>20</sup> Business directories could also give addresses when they were missing from guardians' minutes. The next step in geo-referencing was to use historic and modern maps to assign a modern equivalent street address to each supplier. This had to be done manually in the absence of reliable gazetteers capable of parsing historic addresses. These addresses were then run through Esri's ArcGIS geocoding database to provide mappable coordinates. Inevitable gaps in the resulting data were filled manually by entering coordinates identified by cross-referencing historic and modern maps. Addresses could not reliably be identified for a handful of suppliers and these were omitted from the final database.

### **Geographies of poor relief**

North Wales's poor law unions in 1850 had among the highest rates of paupers in England and Wales. Pauperism cannot necessarily be seen a direct proxy for poverty, as paupers were people the guardians and their officers *chose* to relieve (though pauperism rates cannot be divorced from local poverty entirely). Low numbers of paupers, therefore, might not always indicate low levels of poverty in a given union: The



guardians might have been keen to keep the poor rates down and thus declined many applications. Though there was a regional trend towards higher pauperism in the north of Wales, clearly there was a good deal of intra-regional disparity between neighbouring unions nonetheless (Figure 1).

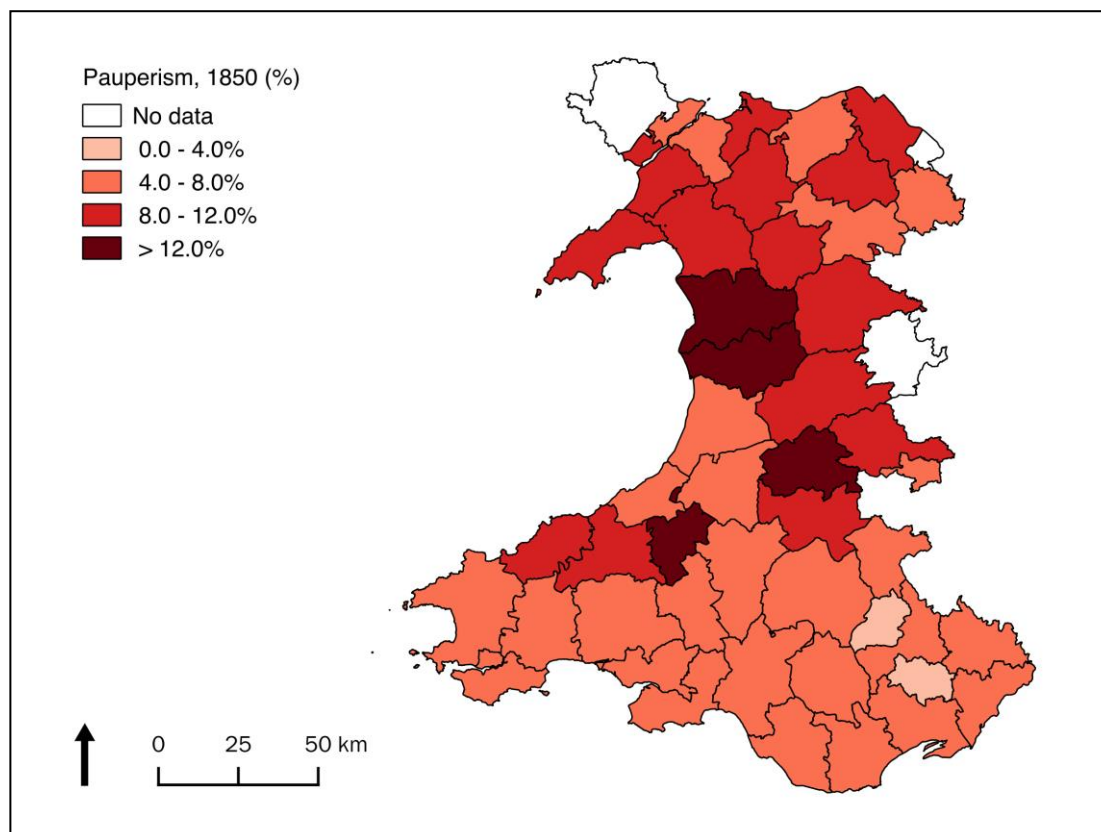


Figure 1. Percentage of paupers in populations in poor law unions, Wales, 1 January 1850. Source: See Table 1.

This underlines the importance of local granularity in spatial analysis, a fact not lost on contemporaries: The guardians of individual unions did not like being treated as part of a single bloc, especially when it came to implementing policies seen as being a London solution to a problem inherent in the labour market of south-eastern England. Unions in Wales tended to use much more outdoor relief compared to their English counterparts, because of the expense of running workhouses in rural and remote areas – and no Welsh unions contained more than one person per acre on average (Figure 2).

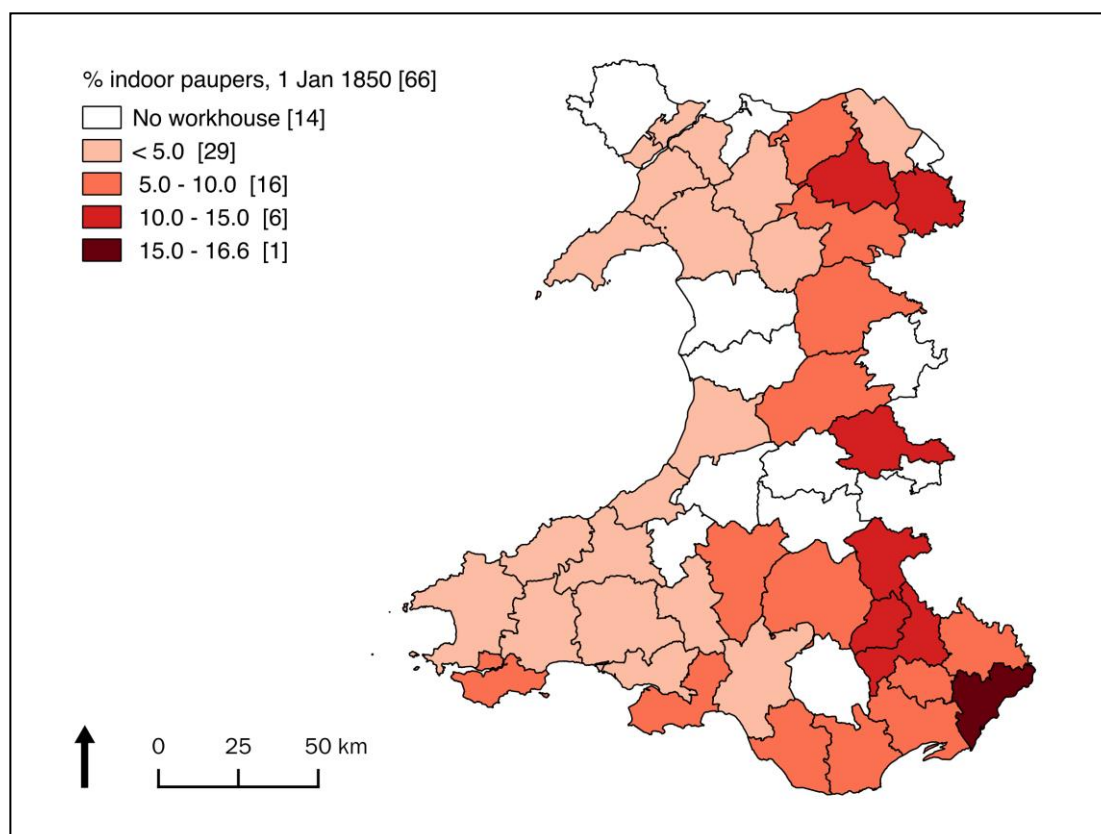


Figure 2. Percentage of paupers relieved in the workhouse, 1 January 1850. Source: See Table 1.

Between 1850 and 1870 most regions increased their use of the workhouse or were already using it to a significant degree. But in Wales, indoor pauperism increased over the twenty-year period by just one percentage point from a very low five per cent (Table 2).

Location type	Spend per indoor pauper			Spend per outdoor pauper			Indoor pauperism %		
	1850 (£)	1870 (£)	Change (%)	1850 (£)	1870 (£)	Change (%)	1850 (%)	1870 (%)	Change (%)
London	8.92	9.75	+9	2.94	2.85	-3	23	26	+13
Northern rural	6.10	7.50	+23	3.97	3.95	-1	12	13	+14
Northern urban	6.12	7.60	+24	3.12	3.16	+1	11	17	+59
Southern rural	5.65	6.97	+23	3.90	3.76	-4	16	14	-8
Southern urban	6.36	8.20	+29	3.44	3.29	-4	19	19	+1
Wales	5.80	7.31	+26	3.65	4.08	+12	5	6	+15

Table 2. Mean spend per pauper type by relief and location-type of union, 1850 and 1870 (at 1850 values). Source: PP 1851 XXVI 1; PP 1876 LXIII 1.

Why did so many unions in Wales resist using the workhouse? Wales had among the lowest indoor pauperism rates, and was typified by resistance to the principles of the new poor law. The experiences of William Day, an assistant poor law commissioner

from 1835 to 1843, suggest some characteristics of the unions in Wales under his superintendence which contributed to their low indoor pauperism rate. From his perspective, the area was rife with abuses and intractable opposition to investing in workhouses, stemming from a combination of misconceptions about the new system and the vested interests of landowners. The ratepayers and guardians of the poor in many unions were stubbornly opposed to adopting the policies advocated by Day and the PLC, such as replacing their old and (in Day's view) inadequate workhouses with expensive modern institutions. In 1839 he told the PLC: 'I cannot but feel that the question henceforth whether you or the Guardians are to be masters in Wales is now in peril. I have been repeatedly told by the Guardians that you dare not enforce your orders, & in the confidence of this it is that they dare to disobey them.'<sup>21</sup> He wrote to fellow assistant commissioner Sir John Walsham in 1840: 'You cannot know the miseries of thirty or forty Welsh Guardians who won't build a Workhouse, and consequently meet in the parlour of a pot house twelve feet by fourteen and keep all the windows shut and spit tobacco on your shoes – to say nothing of knowing not a word of what they are talking of in an unknown tongue.'<sup>22</sup> Day's confrontational style might have contributed to the guardians' resistance, and after his forced resignation in 1843 the PLC suggested he 'was wanting not in activity but in discretion'.<sup>23</sup> Here was entrenched resistance to expensive central government policies seen to be designed for the south of England, reinforced by a personality clash.

### **Goods and suppliers**

Guardians acted locally, but they bought goods and services that were subject to national, regional and local markets and supply networks. Local variations in price were key to some of the differences visible in relief practices, not simply because prices affected relief costs but because they were a product of the relationships between unions and suppliers in local economies. Understanding geographies of supply, therefore, is important in developing a clearer grasp of the factors that influenced the overall costs of poor relief.

Buying low quality goods in bulk usually meant that unions paid prices at the bottom end of the range. However unions' buying practices were also shaped by the nature of production costs, supply chains, local demand and competition – all of which varied by

commodity and by location. Regions of low prices did not necessarily produce regions of low relief expenditure, but relief practices were strongly influenced by the nature of the wider markets for particular goods, whether local, regional or national. Workhouse supplies must therefore be seen as a field of poor law management that was subject not just to administrative activity but also to market forces.

Bread was the staple food of the general population and of paupers in particular.<sup>24</sup> When outdoor relief was given in kind, it tended to be wholly or partly in bread. It was also consumed in the workhouse, frequently with tea and butter for breakfast, as an accompaniment to soup or broth, as a substitute for potatoes with meat, or with cheese or butter for supper.<sup>25</sup> Bread for paupers was renowned in popular culture for its poor quality, and *Punch* parodied the commercial prices columns in the likes of the *Economist* by reporting on 'mysterious transactions in sawdust by the baker who liberally deals with the workhouse.'<sup>26</sup>

The purchasing of bread and flour by poor law unions clearly demonstrates the significance of price in guardians' procurement decisions. Unions had to supply bread to paupers and could choose between baking their own or buying from an external supplier (or a combination of both). In areas where high bread prices prevailed, unions tended to buy flour instead and baked their own loaves. Welsh unions almost entirely made their own, leading to large gaps in mapping the contract prices of bread agreed by poor law unions (Figure 3). It can also be seen in the low percentage of unions reporting their contract prices to the central authority compared to the other regions (Table 3).

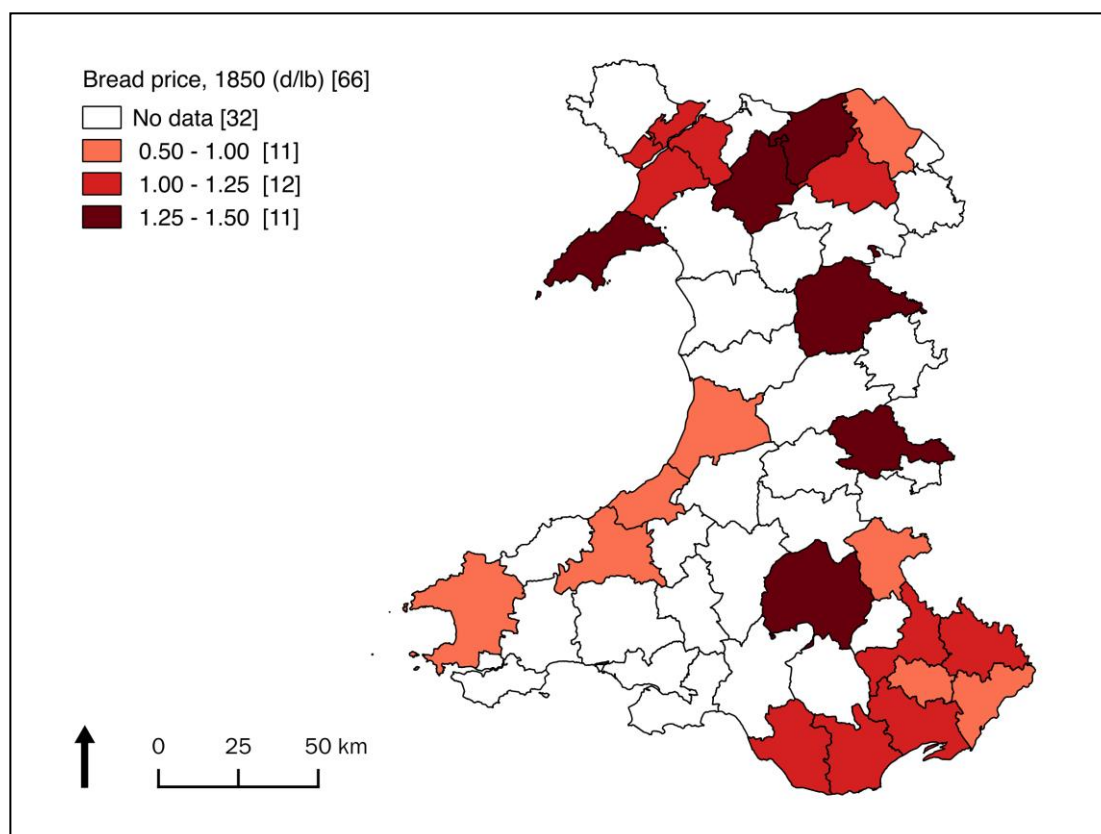


Figure 3. Price paid by poor law unions in Wales for bread, 1850. Source: See Table 1.

	Mean price, d/lb	% returning prices
London	1.19	92.6
Northern Rural	1.15	65.0
Northern Urban	1.13	66.0
Southern Rural	1.09	89.7
Southern Urban	1.06	96.0
Wales	1.11	59.5
All	1.11	78.5

Table 3. Mean prices paid for bread by unions, by location type. Source: PP 1852 XLV 7.

In many parts of England, unions gave a good deal of outdoor relief in kind – usually bread. In Wales, though, outdoor relief was not usually given in kind: Bread was not especially cheap, and we have seen that Welsh guardians defended their long-standing policies of giving outdoor paupers cash (Figure 4). There were fewer workhouses, and fewer paupers in them. But those workhouses that were in place were, at the very least, obliged to buy flour for their indoor paupers to bake into bread themselves. The map of flour prices has far fewer gaps than that of bread prices, therefore (many gaps being because of the absence of a workhouse), and we can also see much more regional uniformity in flour prices (Figure 5).

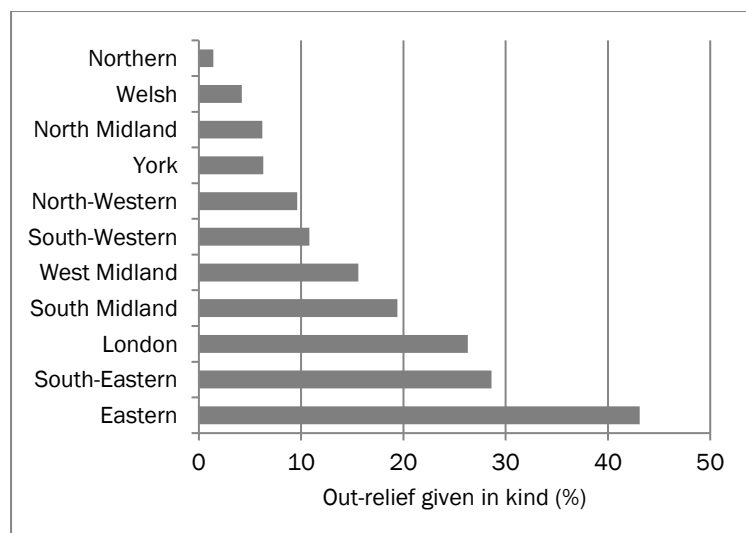


Figure 4. Percentage of outdoor relief given in kind, 1881, by Local Government Board poor law union divisions. Source: PP 1882 XXX Pt. I 1.

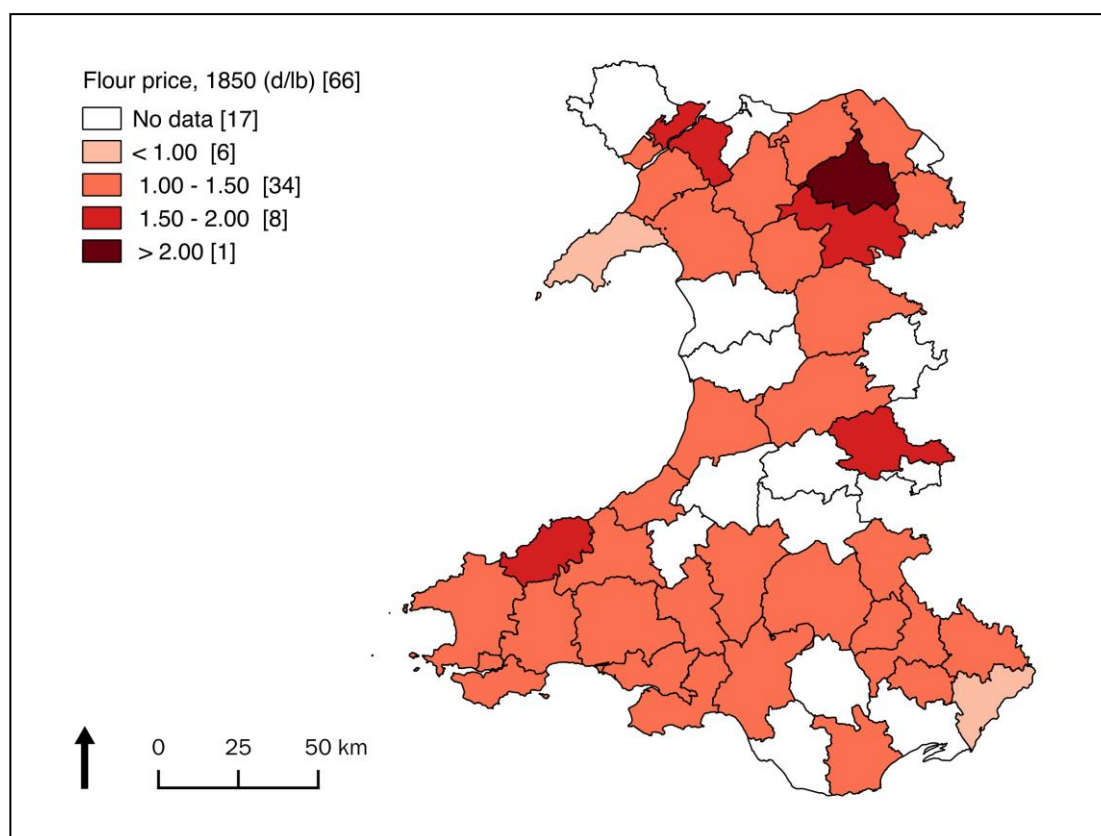


Figure 5. Price paid by poor law unions in Wales for flour, 1850. Source: See Table 1.

Where flour prices were high, so too were bread prices. The districts with fewer bread-buyers were therefore those districts with high flour prices too – and the unions within

them had little option but to buy flour. Wales had the highest flour prices, yet nearly 95 per cent of Welsh unions with workhouses returned prices (Table 4).

	Mean price, d/lb	% returning prices
London	1.38	96.3
Northern Rural	1.36	94.4
Northern Urban	1.36	90.6
Southern Rural	1.28	96.2
Southern Urban	1.26	100.0
Wales	1.42	94.6
All	1.32	95.2

Table 4. Mean prices paid for flour by unions, by location type. Source: PP 1852 XLV 7.

Mapping the local prices of goods therefore enables us to see how costs directly affected unions' purchasing decisions and relief policies.

### **Case study: Llanfyllin poor law union**

The geography of the supply of goods to poor law unions was of fundamental importance to boards of guardians, to paupers and to the suppliers themselves. For guardians, knowledge of potential contracting partners was essential for achieving a suitable balance of cost and quality for ratepayers and paupers, and for maintaining good terms with those ratepayers who sold to unions. For suppliers, institutions such as workhouses, schools, infirmaries and asylums could be vital sources of income, and it was in suppliers' interests to form connections with the officials responsible for allocating contracts. Poor law supply was therefore constituted socially, in the relationships between guardians and local business.

These relationships potentially diminished with distance, however.<sup>27</sup> Guardians were more likely to know businesses well if they were in their own unions – and especially in the same town – compared to those further away. Small traders were most likely to supply only the unions in which they were located, first because the ability to send goods cheaply over any greater distance was a function of scale, and second because the opportunities to form essential selling relationships were more present locally. Larger enterprises were therefore better able to supply distant unions. Over the second half of the nineteenth century, these larger businesses took on a greater role in poor law supply. Business was increasingly given to suppliers further from the workhouse – including some based in London. By around 1880 unions bought more from larger businesses which supplied a wider variety of goods, compared to thirty years earlier

when smaller local specialised traders had more poor law business. Nonetheless there were still, in 1880, opportunities for the smaller traders to supply unions, and the poor law remained a key source of revenue for these small businesses. Poor law unions could represent very stable and long-lasting sources of business for local suppliers who were capable of meeting their requirements.

Llanfyllin was a large and mountainous union with a fairly small population, with Llanfyllin town connected by road and, from 1863, a branch rail line to the market towns of Oswestry and Shrewsbury. The majority of its workhouse's suppliers in the 1840s were inside the union, but a significant minority were outside. Several suppliers from outside Llanfyllin town, but within the union's boundaries, provided goods such as straw, shoes, dairy produce, brushes and some groceries. The workhouse was supplied by a wide range of businesses from outside the union, including grocers, chandlers and potato merchants in Oswestry, stationers and shoemakers in Shrewsbury, and two dairy farmers in Llandidloes. Some goods had to be bought from suppliers at a greater distance: glass from Birmingham, drapery from Manchester, stationery from London and slate from Pontrhydyfen, near Port Talbot. Five of the union's fifty-three suppliers in 1844 were partnerships and one was a company, all of which were outside the union. Because of the town's remoteness, Llanfyllin's traders did not have direct access to goods on the scale that the workhouse required, whereas those in Oswestry and Shrewsbury did.

By 1880 there was a similar number and variety of suppliers from within the union as in 1844, but patterns of distribution from outside the union had changed somewhat. It had fewer suppliers in total, and fewer suppliers from outside the union, in 1880 compared to 1844. But much of its provisions came from a single, out-of-union supplier: Joseph Evans of Oswestry, who sold the union oatmeal, split peas, coffee, sugar, candles, soap and soda. This business was performing the functions which thirty years earlier may well have been carried out by individual mealmen, grocers, chandlers and oilmen. Five companies supplied the union in 1880, four of which were outside the union, the other being the Llanfyllin Coal Company. As well as a few specialist suppliers (such as a shoemaker and cheesemonger in Shrewsbury, and a clock repairer in Corwen), there were now some larger enterprises supplying a greater range of goods. Because the region was increasingly well connected, Llanfyllin union was not obliged to seek goods from distant suppliers, though it was still not a hub in itself: Rather than buying from



businesses in Neath, Birmingham, Manchester and so on, therefore, it could buy more from Oswestry and Shrewsbury.

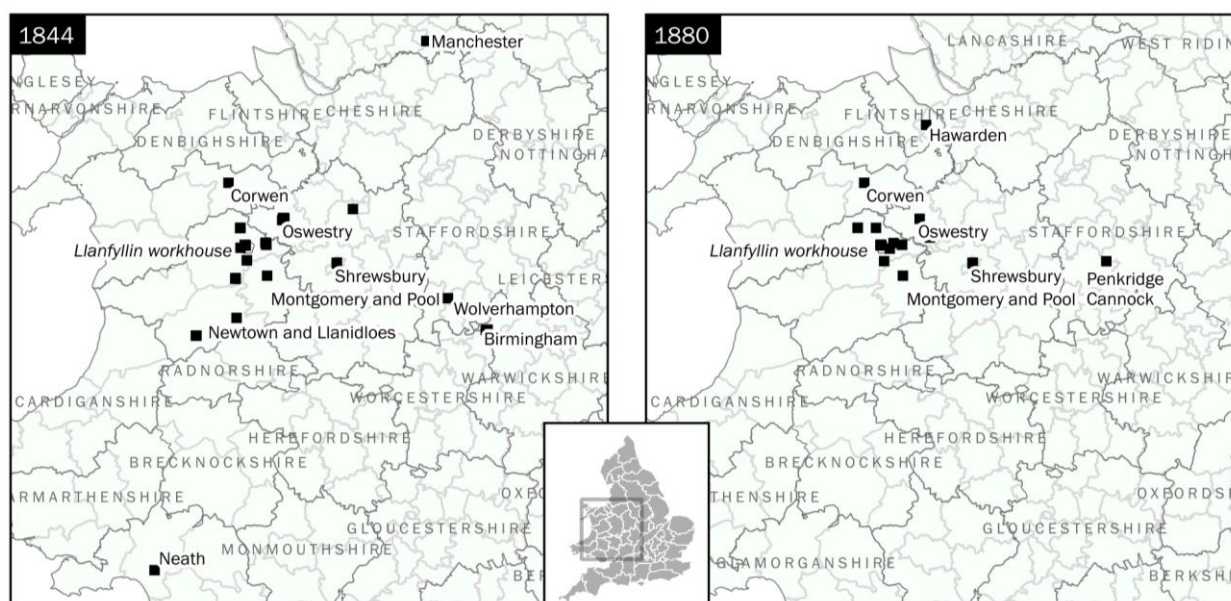


Figure 6. Locations of suppliers to Llanfyllin poor law union, 1844 and 1880. Source: Minutes of board of guardians.

Llanfyllin's workhouse was a substantial consumer of goods from outside the union in the 1840s, despite not getting a rail link until 1863. In this respect, Llanfyllin resembled other Welsh unions that were hampered by poor communications. Merthyr Tydfil, for example, imported flour from Ireland to avoid high internal transport costs.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, mid and north Wales did not have an effective internal market, and farmers tended to export to the Midlands and northern counties of England rather than finding buyers closer to home.<sup>29</sup> This trade, and presumably the trade that brought goods into Llanfyllin, was frequently conducted on waterways.<sup>30</sup> Nearby Newtown and Welshpool were on a branch of the Ellesmere canal which linked to the navigable Severn at Llanymynech, not far from Oswestry.<sup>31</sup> Both the Severn and the Montgomeryshire Canal were used for freight transport.<sup>32</sup> Those businesses which supplied Llanfyllin with goods from further afield would have used waterways such as these.

Businesses did not simply interact with their customers: they also existed in relation to their competitors and colleagues and in the context of wider society. These relations constituted, and were a product of, the business environment. Contractual

arrangements made by poor law unions were characterised by a reliance on reputation and reliability, as well as on price, and Rose points to the ‘informal networks of mutual trust and interest’ in local business communities which kept transaction costs ‘comparatively low’.<sup>33</sup> This is borne out by poor law contracting, which was indeed a combination of formal and informal networks and arrangements, enabling well-placed small local businesses to participate. There were low barriers to entry for traders, but the ability to supply on a large scale was still restricted to those who had the required capital.

Gaining a contract to supply a poor law union could be highly lucrative over the long term, though it was not easy to maintain a working relationship over many years when contracts were re-advertised every three or six months. This is clear from examining the longevity of supply relationships over the period 1850 to 1880. According to the guardians’ minutes, Llanfyllin bought from 75 individually named suppliers in that period, 24 of whom only held a contract for a single quarter. A relationship, once formed, could be fruitful for many years, underscoring the importance of social processes in the market economy. Many suppliers won poor-law business frequently, if not continuously, and a few suppliers held contracts for very long periods: James Fox supplied Llanfyllin with milk and butter, and occasionally shoes, for nearly the full 30 years (110 quarters). Charles Jones supplied the workhouse with shoes for 90 quarters.

Businesses attempting to gain the custom of the Llanfyllin guardians may well have found it very hard to gain a contract in the first place, but easier to maintain it once won (Figure 7). There were six periods of more than a year when no new suppliers were given any business. Furthermore, Llanfyllin’s guardians tended to award only one new supplier with a contract in any given period. The advantages to suppliers of bidding for poor law business were clear: Income was not just relatively secure over the course of one contract but also very likely to be repeated in future contracts. This was dependent on the supplier proving his or her reliability by meeting the expectations of the union. Winning the initial contract was the more difficult task, therefore, as the competition was between the known suppliers who potentially dominated the tendering process and the newcomers who relied on reputations built elsewhere and on lower bids. Guardians were wary of the ability of a low-bidding newcomer to deliver reliably, yet

they could not afford to ignore low bidders because of their responsibility to their ratepayer electorates.

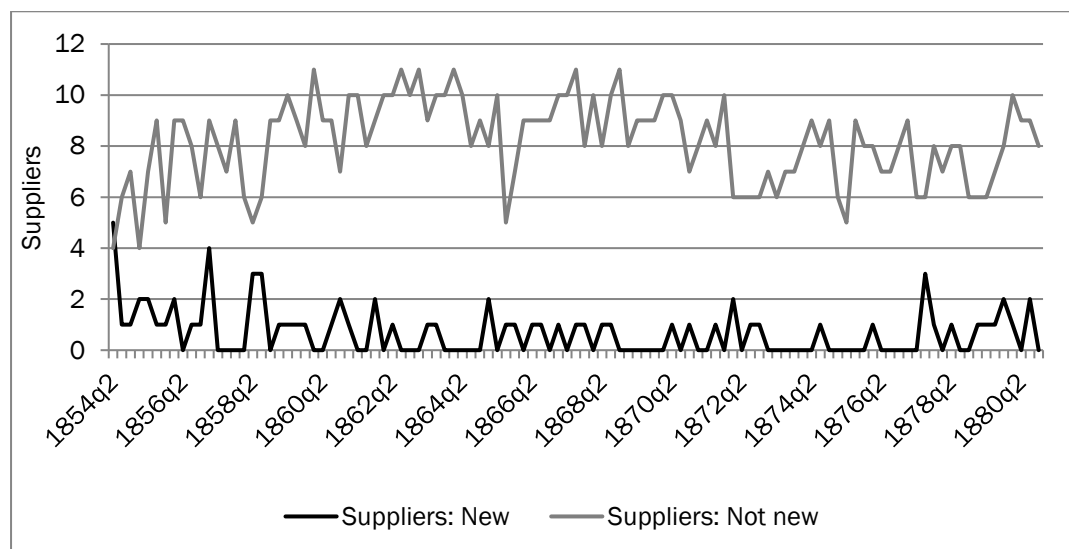


Figure 7. Number of new and not new suppliers to Llanfyllin union, 1854-80. Source: Minutes of board of guardians.

Poor law supply can be seen as something akin to the exercise of patronage by union boards at those times and places where guardians knew their local pool of suppliers. Guardians relied on information about price and reliability which, in an open market and with all else being equal, would enable them to make the most appropriate decision for their ratepayers. Yet all else could not be equal as long as guardians had the discretion to choose arbitrarily: Trust – a social feature – was an integral part of poor law supply. This was true throughout the period considered here, but can be seen operating in different ways as bigger firms with a longer reach entered the market between the 1840s and 1880s. Boards of guardians formed business relationships with these bigger and more distant suppliers, but continued to work with smaller local suppliers too. As a relatively remote union, Llanfyllin had to buy from somewhat distant suppliers: its local businesses were comparatively poorly connected to wider markets, so it was obliged to buy from firms further afield (such as in Oswestry) which were higher up the supply chain. But contractors were ratepayers wherever possible, and guardians relied on continuity and reliability. Suppliers therefore ranged from individual shopkeepers and dealers to large industrial enterprises. However, *ad hoc* purchases may have been made in small quantities from local traders who were not ratepayers and who might have had incomes at the smaller end of the scale. The

changes between the 1850s and 1880s can be attributed to a number of factors. Railway communications were important in reducing the cost of transporting goods, though existing infrastructure such as waterways were vital for relatively remote places earlier in the period. On a wider scale, developments such as telegraphy and cheaper steel allowed information and goods to be distributed in greater quantities and at longer distances.<sup>34</sup> Poor law supply was therefore, for the most part, characterised by local knowledge networks and relationships, and this persisted even with the gradual introduction of bigger enterprises capable of supplying on a greater scale.

### **Spatial thinking in socio-economic history**

The relative independence of guardians in their contracting practices means that the local geography of supply, and hence the spatial dimension of poor law activity, must be a vital consideration for poor law historians, just as it was for union boards. Unions did not have to form contracts based on the lowest tender, and a supplier could be chosen on the basis of a reputation for reliability, a personal relationship, or even a bribe. Poor law economies were thus emphatically embedded in social structures rather than adhering rigidly to the dictates of market prices. Geographic information systems are central to this understanding. By mapping and analysing poor relief, prices of goods and supplier locations we can begin to see how the social and the economic were intertwined.

The research discussed in this chapter used relatively straightforward mapping techniques but defied a selection of more complex essays. An entire dataset for every union in England and Wales, containing a number of variables including expenditure, local tax base, pauper numbers and contract prices for several key goods, yielded no satisfactory results when attempts were made to model the drivers of local spending and relief type patterns through geographically weighted regression and principal components analysis. Meanwhile, regions of high and low spending, pauperism rates and workhouse use can be identified using clustering techniques and heat mapping, but these correspond so neatly to the choropleth maps shown here that they add little to our understanding. The findings discussed here can therefore be seen as a demonstration of the importance of mapping and visualising local, granular data for identifying trends, with the potential for more multifaceted analysis in the future. Until

now, little effort has been made to address Humphrey Southall's 'tentative' suggestion, made in 1991, that 'the general neglect of the spatially disaggregated national statistics in existing studies of the Poor Law is not altogether justified'.<sup>35</sup> This research shows that GIS is capable of answering this call.

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<sup>1</sup> 4 & 5 Will. IV, c. 76. An Act for the Amendment and Better Administration of the Laws relating to the Poor in England and Wales (1834).

<sup>2</sup> 43 Eliz., c. 2. An Acte for the Reliefe of the Poore (1601).

<sup>3</sup> British Parliamentary Papers (PP 1834 XXVII 1 - XXXIX 1: Report from His Majesty's commissioners for inquiring into the administration and practical operation of the Poor Laws.

<sup>4</sup> D.H.L. Brown, 'Pauperism and profit: Financial management, business practices and the new poor law in England and Wales' (Unpublished PhD thesis: King's College London, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> M. MacKinnon, 'Poor Law Policy, Unemployment and Pauperism', *Explorations in Economic History* 23:3 (1986), pp. 229-336; S. King, *Poverty and Welfare in England, 1700-1850: A Regional Perspective* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000); K. Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981); L.H. Lees, *The Solidarities of Strangers: The English Poor Laws and the People, 1700-1948* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> Take, for example, Wandsworth & Clapham union's workhouse, which accommodated around 450 people: it held in its store on 22 March 1851 some 443 lb of cheese, 280 lb of oatmeal, 956 pints of porter, 351 pints of ale, 70 tons of coal, 1,680 lb of potatoes and over a mile of cloth. Minutes of Board of Guardians, London Metropolitan Archives (LMA) WABG/010, 22 March 1851.

<sup>7</sup> M.A. Crowther, *The Workhouse System 1834-1929: The History of an English Social Institution* (London: Batsford Academic & Educational, 1981), p. 6; King, *Poverty and Welfare*, p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> J.G. Williamson, 'Migrant Selectivity, Urbanization, and Industrial Revolutions', *Population and Development Review* 14:2 (June 1988), pp. 289 ff.

<sup>9</sup> PP 1876 LXIII 1: Paupers. Return for the years 1850, 1860, 1870, and 1874, of the number of paupers in receipt of relief in each union in England on 1 January of each year respectively, together with the cost of total relief to the poor; also, a general summary of the same particulars for the whole of England in each of the specified years.

<sup>10</sup> PP 1852 XLV 7: Poor relief. Return of the number of paupers receiving in and out-door relief in 607 unions and single parishes in England and Wales, during the half-years ended at Lady-Day 1850 and 1851 respectively; together with the average prices of provisions contracted for during the aforesaid respective periods by the boards of guardians for the different counties.

<sup>11</sup> For discussion of quantitative information gathered under the old system, see S. King, 'In these you may trust': Numerical information, accounting practices and the Poor Law, c.1790 to 1840', in T. Crook and G. O'Hara (eds), *Statistics and the public sphere* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 51-66

- <sup>12</sup> *Proceedings of the Statistical Society of London* 1:2 (19 January 1835), pp. 9-11
- <sup>13</sup> J.P. Kay, 'On the Establishment of County or District Schools, for the Training of the Pauper Children Maintained in Union Workhouses. Part I', *Journal of the Statistical Society of London* 1:1 (1838), pp. 14-27.
- <sup>14</sup> PP 1834 XXVII 1 – XXXIX, p. 2.
- <sup>15</sup> H.R. Southall, 'Poor law statistics and the geography of economic distress', in J. Foreman-Peck (ed), *New perspectives on the late Victorian economy* (1991), p. 213.
- <sup>16</sup> C. Booth, 'Enumeration and classification of paupers, and state pensions for the aged', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society* 54:4 (1891), pp. 600-643; Booth, *Pauperism: A Picture; and the Endowment of Old Age: An Argument* (London: Macmillan, 1892), chapter 6.
- <sup>17</sup> PP 1850 XXVII Second Annual Report of the Poor Law Board. 1849. In Pursuance of the Statute 10 & 11 Vict. c. 109 s. 13, pp. 8-9.
- <sup>18</sup> See, for example, Lees, *Solidarities of Strangers*, pp. 180-181; Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty*, pp. 158-162; S. Webb and B. Webb, *English Local Government, Vol. 9: English Poor Law History Part II: The Last Hundred Years* (London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1929).
- <sup>19</sup> This work is based on data provided through EDINA UKBorders with the support of the ESRC and JISC and uses boundary material which is copyright of the Great Britain Historic GIS Project, Portsmouth University. Prof. Ian Gregory, Lancaster University, also kindly supplied shapefiles. Historic boundary shapefiles are downloadable at <http://census.edina.ac.uk/> but poor law unions were no longer available at the time of writing.
- <sup>20</sup> *Pigot & Co's Royal National and Commercial Directory and Topography of the counties of Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Cornwall, Devonshire, Dorsetshire, Gloucestershire, Hampshire, Herefordshire, Monmouthshire, Oxfordshire, Somersetshire, Wiltshire, and North and South Wales* (London & Manchester: Isaac Slater, 1844); *Royal National Commercial Directory of North and South Wales* (Manchester: Isaac Slater, 1880).
- <sup>21</sup> TNA MH32/14, Day to PLC, 15 August 1839.
- <sup>22</sup> National Library of Wales, Day MSS 3146 F, Day to Sir John Walsham, 9 August 1840, in R.A. Lewis, 'William Day and the Poor Law Commissioners', *University of Birmingham Historical Journal* 9:1 (1963), p. 180.
- <sup>23</sup> TNA HO45/1611, PLC to Sir William Somerville, 5 October 1846.
- <sup>24</sup> D.J. Oddy, 'Working-Class Diets in Late Nineteenth-Century Britain', *Economic History Review* New Series, 23:2 (1970), p. 318.
- <sup>25</sup> PP 1866 XXXV 321, pp. 6-13.
- <sup>26</sup> *Punch, or the London Charivari*, 3: 64 (1843), p. 141.
- <sup>27</sup> As per the 'first law of geography' articulated by Waldo Tobler: 'Everything is related to everything else, but near things are more related than distant things'. W.R. Tobler, 'A computer movie simulating urban growth in the Detroit region', *Economic Geography* 46:2 (1970), p. 236.
- <sup>28</sup> D.W. Howell, *Land and people in nineteenth-century Wales* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 120.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 121-22.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.
- <sup>31</sup> E. Paget-Tomlinson, *Illustrated History of Canal and River Navigations* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), map 10.

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<sup>32</sup> A.S. Davies, 'The river trade of Montgomeryshire and its borders', *Collections Historical and Archaeological relating to Montgomeryshire and its Borders* 43:1 (1934), p. 35.

<sup>33</sup> M.B. Rose, 'The family firm in British business', in M.W. Kirby and M.B. Rose (eds), *Business Enterprise in Modern Britain from the Eighteenth to the Twentieth Century* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 75-6.

<sup>34</sup> O.M. Westall, 'The Competitive Environment of British Business, 1850-1914', in M.W. Kirby and M.B. Rose (eds), *Business Enterprise in Modern Britain from the Eighteenth to the Twentieth Century* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 213; D.S. Landes, *The Unbound Prometheus: Technological change and industrial development in Western Europe from 1750 to the present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

<sup>35</sup> Southall, 'Poor law statistics,' p. 212.