

CHAPTER III

THE NEW POOR LAW

BEFORE analysing the Report of the Poor Law Commissioners it will be as well to examine in some detail the Poor Law administration prior to 1832, since the latter, coupled with the corruption and inefficiency in local government, must be held responsible for the then existing chaos.

In 1883 local government was described as a "chaos of areas, a chaos of authorities, and a chaos of rates," and the same might be said of the system prevailing in 1832. With the rapid development of machinery and commerce there was created a need for the extension of local administration in such matters as public lighting, roads and sewers. This need was met by the indiscriminate appointment of *ad hoc* bodies to administer the various services. The result

The New Poor Law

was that there existed innumerable Boards and Commissions each having separate offices and rating powers. Their boundaries overlapped and interlaced; there was no attempt at co-ordination; and no regular audits were kept. They neither possessed nor deserved to possess the confidence of the nation as "useful and efficient instruments of local government."

The examination of the Poor Law administration may conveniently be started with the Act of 1601 for the Relief of the Poor. The necessity for this Act came about mainly through the conditions arising out of the dissolution of the monasteries. Prior to the Reformation the poor, sick and aged had generally been looked after by the monks. When the religious houses were broken up the poor were deprived of the main bulwark standing between them and starvation and disease. At one blow Henry VIII had removed from the Church the responsibility for the poor, and Elizabeth was forced by her father's action and by the obvious increase in distress among her subjects to pass into law an Act for the Relief of the Poor, the first genuine Poor Law.

The administration of this Act was in the hands of the Justices of the Peace, who were responsible to the Privy Council. The local parish was the administrative unit. The Act arranged "for the setting to work of the children of all such whose parents shall not . . . be thought able to keep and maintain their children; and also for setting to work all such persons married or unmarried having no means to maintain them." The parish was to be taxed to buy stock of flax, hemp, wool, thread and iron to provide work for the poor; money was to be raised to relieve the lame, impotent, old and blind; the parish was to find work for the children by apprenticing them to the various trades operating within the parish; and finally the parish, through its appointed churchwardens and overseers, was to be responsible for the various sums received and expended, and for the true and proper assessment of the stock in their hands, on which the poor were working.

It will be seen that in its origin this was a preventive Act. Its success depended on effective administration by the Justices of the Peace and the Privy Council. A

national system of relief was created to replace the previous purely benevolent efforts of local bodies. The Act definitely stated that the able-bodied unemployed should be provided with work, but it dealt primarily with trades and did not touch the agricultural labourer. But it was precisely the unemployed agricultural labourer who created the problem at the opening of the nineteenth century.

Until after the struggle between Parliament and the King had been settled little was effected, but in the reign of Charles II the Settlement Law (1662) was passed forbidding poor people "to settle themselves in those parishes where there is best stock," and gave power to the Justices of the Peace to convey these would-be settlers back to their native parishes. This Act also set up workhouses in London.

In 1704 Defoe published his pamphlet *Giving Alms No Charity*, in which he laid down several maxims regarding the poor in England, the most important of which was, "that it is a regulation of the poor that is wanted in England, not a setting them to work." He accused the poor of idleness. He accused them of working until their

Sir Edwin Chadwick

pockets were full and then wasting the money in drink and slothfulness. By "regulation" Defoe meant that the poor must pass a standard test as to their poorness, and only when they proved to the satisfaction of the guardians that they really were incapable of work would relief be given them.

It took eighteen years before this more drastic treatment was applied under the Workhouse Test Act of 1722. Under this Act the poor were to be looked after and cared for only in the workhouses and any who "shall refuse to be lodged, kept or maintained in such house or houses . . . shall not be entitled to ask or receive collection or relief from the churchwardens and overseers." This Act was intended to prevent idleness, for it was thought that the poor would prefer to try to obtain work in preference to being maintained in the workhouse of the parish. Moreover, seeing that the new workhouses had been built, it was obviously more economical for the overseers to have them filled rather than to provide relief at the pauper's house.

During the time between the passing of this Act and the Poor Law Amendment

The New Poor Law

Act, devised by Chadwick, the Industrial Revolution had altered the conditions of the problem. There had been an enormous increase in the population; Enclosure Acts had done away with the poor man's right to graze his cattle on common land; the new inventions had caused a redistribution of the population; and owing to the continual wars with France no attempt at reform had been made.

During this period an Act of Parliament and an administrative decision had enhanced rather than lessened the chaotic state of the Poor Law Administration. Gilbert's Act of 1782 states in the preamble that notwithstanding the many Acts for the relief of the poor now on the statute book distress is still grievous and incapacity and misconduct of overseers is prevalent. There follows the provision "that no person shall be sent to such poor house or houses [workhouses], except such as are become indigent by old age, sickness or infirmities, and all unable to acquire a maintenance by their labour." This excludes the able-bodied man, who is to have work found for him near his place of residence. This Act was followed in 1795 by the adoption of the so-called Speen-

hamland "Act of Parliament" which authorized relief in aid of wages. This course was first decided on at a meeting of the local Justices of the Peace at the Pelican Inn, Speenhamland. This was in May, 1795. In December of the same year Pitt passed an Act which upheld the decision of the Justices in Berkshire and entirely reversed the policy of 1722, since relief might now be given in the poor person's home.

This policy, although it gave the labourer a wage based on the price of the loaf, was demoralizing. It left wages at a low level and was therefore a benefit to the employer. It resulted in the labourer not receiving an economic wage and being forced to rely on outdoor relief. The labourer was given no incentive to work because he was sure of a living from the rates. Further, there was the system of "roundsmen." These were able-bodied paupers hired to farmers and employers of labour who, in return for employing the pauper, were relieved of a certain portion of their rates. The Justices fixed the amount of the wages to be paid according to the price of the loaf and the ratepayers made up the difference between

this scale and the amount paid in wages by the employer. Thus free labour competed with pauper; in fact in many places it paid a free man better to become a pauper for he was then certain of a wage. Moreover if he was married he received extra allowance in respect of each child legitimate or illegitimate.

From the events which followed the Speenhamland period rose the necessity for the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834.

The constitution of the Board of Inquiry into the administration of the Poor Law was almost the last act of the unreformed Parliament. The instructions given by the Commissioners to their Assistant Commissioners were comprehensive and detailed, and may be divided into four parts.

Firstly they were to investigate the method by which relief was administered; secondly they were to report to whom such relief was given; thirdly they were to investigate by whom such relief was given; and fourthly they were to examine at whose expense such relief was given.

The Commissioners were faced with a grave problem. They had to deal with the

agricultural labourers, who thought that wages were a matter of right and not of contract. They had to deal with those employers who wanted the scandalous system to continue; and finally they had to contend with those people who hated central authority and efficiency and who desired things to go on as they were so long as they personally were allowed to pursue their own pleasures.

The Commissioners appointed in 1832 included among others the Bishop of London (Doctor Blomfield), W. Sturges Bourne and Nassau W. Senior. Chadwick, who in his capacity of Assistant Commissioner had been making exhaustive inquiries in Windsor and Reading, was invited in 1833 to become a Commissioner. His new position at once gave him a wider scope. He was now able not only to investigate but to advise, direct and instruct. His dominating personality persuaded his fellow Commissioners to discuss and consider matters which but for his insistence would never have been considered at all.

The report, which was presented on 20th February, 1834, is an interesting document of great historical importance.

It recommended the abolition of any form of outdoor relief to able-bodied paupers and their families. It created a Central Board of Commissioners, who were to control the whole Poor Law machinery with such Assistant Commissioners as might be necessary. It gave power to the Commissioners to make rules and regulations binding on all the existing authorities. To simplify workhouse management parishes were to be united and a uniform system of accounts was to be established.

It will be seen that these recommendations were of a revolutionary character in the history of the Relief of the Poor. It was at once a reversal of Gilbert's Act and the Act of 1795, and reverted back to the main theory of the Elizabethan Law. By saying to the worker: "Either you are a pauper, in which case come into the workhouse and we will give you relief, or you are not, in which case stay outside," it did away with the subsidy in aid of wages and forced the able-bodied pauper to respect himself and look for work in the knowledge that if he did not the workhouse awaited him.

By creating a Central Board the Commissioners were initiating a new departure

in Local Government administration the effects of which were to be felt later on in many other Government departments. In doing this they were actuated by the belief that efficiency and good administration were only to be obtained by central control. They felt that it would be impossible to administer the new Act unless there was uniformity throughout the administration: and uniformity implied control. "Under the old system," says Mark Hovell, "each parish had been an independent corporation, administering relief and levying rates with scarcely a shadow of control from the Central Government."¹ Under the recommendations of the Commissioners the piece-meal system of management by over fifteen thousand local sovereignties was abolished and the whole administration was to be placed under the control of a specially constituted Board responsible to the Secretary of State for Home Affairs.

The report which was presented by the Commissioners was largely the work of Senior and Chadwick. The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 introduced in the

¹ *The Chartist Movement*, Mark Hovell.

House of Commons by Lord Althorp was based on the report of the Commissioners and became law in August. It deviated in many ways from the original proposals of Chadwick. He held strongly that the destitute should be divided into distinct classes. He would have built industrial schools for the children of the workless; the aged he would have housed in almshouses; the insane he would have housed in proper asylums under scientific medical care; the sick he would have placed in hospitals. But he was before his time. These humane improvements were left out of the Act and the "rigorous and scientific administration of the Poor Law (1834) under the control of the central government . . . favoured by Benthamites"¹ was put into practice. Bentham's late pupil was appointed the paid secretary of the first Poor Law Board.

The Act was passed into law amidst the acclamations of two widely different personalities. Lord John Russell spoke of it as a "measure that saved the country from great social evils, if not absolutely from social revolution";² while the Duke of

¹ *Law and Opinion in England*, Dicey.

² *The Health of Nations*, Vol. I, B. W. Richardson, quoted.

Sir Edwin Chadwick

Wellington, whose habit of opposing all innovating Acts was a byword, thought "that the measure was the only plan he had ever seen that he approved of, and . . . he gave it his cordial support."¹ Later Gladstone spoke of the Act as being perhaps "the greatest reform of this [the nineteenth] century."²

But many harsh words were said in opposition to the measure. It was considered to be cruel and oppressive. The labouring classes disliked it because they were suspicious of the new workhouses; the manufacturers because they feared that it would be the start of an agitation for an increase in wages—which indeed it was; the philanthropic Tories like Sadler and Oastler because they hated utilitarianism and because they believed that the Act merely further increased the hardships of the poor. The landowners and the Church were stupefied. They were aghast at the idea of the labouring man doing anything for himself. They were still steeped in the theories of Paternal Government. They were horrified that a central body in London

¹ *The Health of Nations*, Vol. I, B. W. Richardson, quoted.

² *Ibid.*

The New Poor Law

should be given power to control and look after the welfare of the poor they had so mismanaged for years. Here was an Act passed into law which urged the labourer to use his own individualism, his own initiative; for if he was unable to find work he was forced to become a pauper. No wonder they hurled abuse at Chadwick and his radicalism; but they were to receive many similar shocks before he was hounded from public life.

For the next thirteen years Chadwick remained as the Board's secretary. During this time he strove to make the Act a success. With indefatigable energy he worked for the Act for which he was so largely responsible. He met with great difficulties. He was forced to fight strong opponents whose interests were seriously affected, men who were exploiting the pauper and public alike for the benefit of their own pockets. Not only did he meet with obstacles outside the Commission, but he found the Commissioners themselves apathetic and uninterested. The only exception was Sir George Nicholls, who for the greater part of the time, however,

was occupied with the administration of the Poor Law in Ireland. Finally there was the difficulty of Chadwick's own character. He did not suffer fools gladly. He had a will of iron and an objective to reach. No matter what obstacles were in his path he brushed them aside, and the manner in which he did this was far from tactful. He made enemies unnecessarily because he would waste no time in trying to convert people to his own opinion. They either agreed with him or they did not. If they did not they were wrong and must be pushed aside to make way for him who was right. That was his method. Such a driving, forceful, pushing man, who was right and knew he was right, was a startling innovation in nineteenth century administrative method.

The Board issued its first report in August, 1835. In this report the Commissioners stated that over one hundred new unions, comprising two thousand parishes, had been formed. These figures show with what zeal the Commissioners had got down to work. Chadwick had always believed in the principle of aggregating in order to segregate. By collecting and unify-

ing the various parishes and then re-forming them in Unions he had gone far to get rid of overlapping in Local Administration. It is true that he wished to see the administration of the Unions in the hands of paid officials, "acting under the consciousness of constant superintendence and strict responsibility." This he could not do: but to have changed in one year the system under which there was no responsibility to anyone to one under which there was a semblance of administrative efficiency was an act of perseverance for which Chadwick alone of the Commissioners was responsible.

In circulating the details of his Act and in attempting to make it more widely known and understood by the people, Chadwick was greatly helped by Francis Place, with whom he had been in constant touch since his first appointment as an Assistant Commissioner. In fact the Chartist paper *Northern Liberator* writes of Place that he was "the very head and chief, the life and soul of the Poor Law Board."¹ This is perhaps an exaggeration, but Place, who

¹ Quoted in *The Life of Francis Place*, Graham Wallas.

was a born publicity agent, and who would even to-day be of real service to the Trade Union Movement, had exactly those qualities which Chadwick lacked. He had influence with the workers' movement, then just beginning, and he had a happy method of advertisement which always reached its intended readers.

One of the great objections to the New Act was that it forbade married couples to live together in the workhouse unless these were of an age when children were unlikely to be born. This harsh rule, though possibly necessary at that time, was not contained in Chadwick's report, but was inserted in the Bill to prevent the workhouses from being filled with pauperized children.

The rule of the three Commissioners was vastly unpopular on this account. The workhouses, or the Bastilles as they were popularly called, for which the Commissioners were held responsible, were considered with distrust and hatred by the people. Cobbett, arguing that poor relief out of the rates was not an ill advised charity but a legal right, fiercely attacked the Malthusian school. "How can Malthus

and his nasty and silly disciples," he writes in the *Poor Man's Friend*, "how can those who want to abolish the Poor Rates, to prevent the poor from marrying; how can this at once stupid and conceited tribe look the labouring man in the face, while they call on him to take up arms, to risk his life in defence of the land?" John Fielden successfully prevented the Act from being introduced into his own district of Todmorden, whilst J. R. Stephens made violent speeches in opposition to the Act. "If Lord John Russell wanted to know what he [Stephens] thought of the New Poor Law, he would tell him plainly he thought it was the law of devils . . . if vengeance was to come, let it come; it would be an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, limb for limb, wife for wife, child for child, and blood for blood."¹ Finally Carlyle, writing in 1839, said: "*Laissez faire, laissez passer!* Whatever goes on, ought it not to go on. . . . Such at bottom seems to be the chief social principle, if principle it have, which the Poor Law Amendment Act has the merit of courageously asserting, in opposition to many things. A chief social

¹ *The Chartist Movement*, Mark Hovell.

Sir Edwin Chadwick

principle which this present writer, for one, will by no manner of means believe in, but pronounce at all times to be false, heretical, and damnable, if ever aught was." Even the sixpenny *Times*, the organ of the governing classes, was caustic in its views. "The pinch-pauper triumvirate,"¹ "worse than Egyptian Bondage"² were two of the expressions it used against the Commissioners and their Act, whilst on hearing that someone had had the audacity to circularize the House of Commons with a pamphlet in praise of the Acts its indignation knew no bounds. "Sucking Solon of the Benthamite breed"³ it politely called him. The "sucking Solon" was probably Chadwick inspired by Place. Nor was the hostility to Chadwick confined to the public. The Commissioners whose secretary he was cordially disliked him, and relations were very strained. This is quite intelligible, for these men were neither social reformers nor radicals. They were not really interested in the Act they were administering. Tradition and custom were their parents and yet they found them-

¹ *History of the Poor Law*, Mackay.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

The New Poor Law

selves egged on to administer the first Act of Benthamite radicalism introduced in this country. An ironical position indeed, but a position made worse by the fact that their secretary was one of the chief authors of the Act, a man who realized all its implications and was determined to make it work.

Chadwick understood the position of the Commissioners. He saw clearly that they did not appreciate the urgent necessity for curbing the demoralizing effect of subsidizing wages out of the rates. "These faults," he tells us, "were slow to die out; they had been the implants of centuries, and to men born and bred in country life were so familiar that the value of the new principle was not recognized. From these men the idea of supplying Labour from the workhouse to persons who had lands and buildings outside the workhouse could never be fully eradicated."

It is not difficult to imagine the disgust with which these Commissioners must have met Chadwick's exuberant energy, sincerity and horror of inefficiency. How they must have hated this man who worked so abominably hard and was so keen, this

worker among drones! "If only he would leave us alone," we can imagine them saying. "What does it matter about the precise procedure of an unruly Union. We have a comfortable position here. It is true that we are not immune from attack in Parliament, but so long as we publish figures to satisfy people that we are reducing the rates, what does it matter if we do not interpret the Act exactly as it was passed." But they reckoned without their secretary.

The Act had been passed with (to Chadwick) many grievous alterations and deviations from the report. No sooner was the Board established than he made efforts by administrative orders to incorporate these various omissions. To a large extent he was successful, the better education of the pauper children being one of the results of these activities.

Matters got worse when new appointments were made. In 1839 and 1841 respectively two of the original Commissioners resigned and two more were appointed. This made Chadwick's position almost intolerable, for these two new members relegated him to the position of

a clerk, a mere recorder of the Commissioners' meetings, resolutions and discussions. Unable to do anything actively Chadwick let the Commissioners have their own way. When they were wrong at law he told them so, in a not too tactful way. Moreover he constantly obtained the support of Lord John Russell against his Commissioners, but was careful to carry out his own duties of secretary methodically and punctiliously so that they could have no possible complaint against him on the grounds of inefficiency.

The Commissioners had undoubtedly some ground for complaint. Chadwick was certainly lacking in tact in approaching Lord John Russell in this way. But his defence was a simple one. He would have argued that in his opinion unless and until the Act was properly administered, agitation against it would not cease. The Commissioners were preventing this; therefore it was his duty to report them. The Act was his Bible. When other men would have resigned from an intolerable position, he clung to his post in the hope that the Commissioners would mend their ways.

Sir Edwin Chadwick

A man who is usually right is a disagreeable friend. Such men will commit any act, however uncalled for, to prove themselves right. Behind their sincerity and earnestness there lurks a delight in pointing out the mistakes of others. Chadwick had this fault to a degree. Lacking in tact he did not even attempt to prove his arguments, he merely stated what he knew to be right and fiercely attacked those who disagreed with him. If he had resigned his post he would have been deserting his duty. Therefore he made himself unpopular by reiterating his views to men quite unable to grasp either his outlook or his meaning.

For several years these differences continued, until in 1845 there arose what became known as the Andover scandal. If the opponents of the Act had not been strong and numerous, this scandal would never have assumed the proportions it did. It was because Chadwick's enemies thought that by making mischief they would be doing him harm that the details were subject to a House of Commons Committee of Inquiry. Added to this, political feeling

The New Poor Law

was raised to fever heat by the intensive agitation of the Anti-Corn Law League. The country was excited politically, and any hint of maladministration by the Board was bound to create a deep impression and be used by opponents of the Government as a political arrow.

One of the occupations to which paupers in the Union Workhouses were put was crushing bones. In the case of the Andover Union Workhouse it was alleged that the paupers had, presumably for lack of other food, been found eating the marrow extracted from the bones. Immediately there was an outcry, and the Member for Andover moved a motion in the House of Commons for a Committee of Inquiry. Sir James Graham, the Home Secretary, a man whose chameleon-like changes from Tory to Whig Cabinets seriously challenges Mr. Winston Churchill, refused, but on a vote being taken he was found to be in the minority. In the meantime the Board had sent down one of their own Assistant Commissioners to hold an inquiry. This inquiry was an absolute fiasco. The Assistant Commissioner had great difficulty in keeping the inquiry to

the point at issue. He found that some witnesses charged the Master of the workhouse with all sorts of crimes and wickednesses; others held forth on the misdemeanours of the Board itself. In fact the inquiry devolved into a round of personal abuse and mud slinging. Although the charges brought against the Master were probably unfounded or at any rate grossly exaggerated, there was undoubtedly some ground for believing that the Act was not being administered as it should be. The Commissioners were undoubtedly shutting their eyes to many illegal procedures and abuses.

The results of the inquiry were that the Master resigned and that the Board, rather ungenerously, forced the Assistant Commissioner to resign also. Sir James Graham and the Board itself were highly dissatisfied with the way the inquiry had been conducted.

At the Parliamentary inquiry which followed, Chadwick gave evidence against his Commissioners. With a vehemence which showed his intense dislike for anything underhand he denounced them, and declared that time and again he had given

the Board proof that the Act was not being properly administered. He stated frankly that these proofs had been ignored and that many illegal practices had been countenanced by the Board.

Disraeli, who had pertinently asked the Commissioners why if their Secretary, "this monster in human shape," had been insubordinate, as they alleged, they had not removed him, then proposed a motion against the Commissioners accusing them of being negligent in their duties. The motion was carried and the Board was doomed.

A graphic description of this Committee was given in a leading article which appeared in *The Daily News* of 19th August, 1846. "Chadwick," says the writer, "stands alone, dark and terrible as Milton's hero, confronting the whole three Commissioners, who are waxing more and more vehement. It is not easy to conceive how the belligerents can be got to meet on terms of truce." Sir George Nicholls in his *A History of the English Poor Law* gives an interesting account of a correspondence which passed between himself, at that time the senior Commissioner,

the junior Commissioners and Chadwick. In the spring of 1847 Chadwick wrote to Sir George asking him if he would state whether he had found anything unsatisfactory or detrimental to the prestige of the Board in his behaviour as Secretary to the Commissioners. Sir George replied that whilst they had many times differed as to the manner in which the Commission should be conducted, he held him (Chadwick) in high esteem as a secretary, and recognized his valuable work for the community. A copy of Chadwick's original letter together with this reply was then sent to the other two Commissioners, for Sir George was naturally anxious that there should be no question of intrigue between him and Chadwick against his fellow Commissioners. These two Commissioners, who had very much resented Chadwick's outspoken attitude before the Committee of Inquiry, replied that they entirely dissented from the sentiments expressed by Sir George, and that Chadwick's behaviour had been irregular and prejudicial to the public service. To this Sir George replied pointing out what valuable work Chadwick had done in

administering the Act, how he had never spared himself in working for the Commissioners, and finally, after admitting that they had often differed, he says: "Of all men with whom it has been my lot to be brought in contact, I never have met one with higher impulses, or whose efforts appeared to be more singly and earnestly directed to what he believed to be the public good." And then, in commenting on their insistence that Chadwick should be excluded from the Board's consultations and be relegated to the position of secretary, merely attending to the details of routine, Sir George says: "Such an exclusion must have deeply hurt his feelings, and, coupled with the opinion he entertained with respect to the mode of transacting the business of the department, led, I believe, to much of what has recently ensued."

Sir George was perfectly right. Chadwick did feel very deeply that he had been insulted by being relegated to the background, for he was the chief author of the Act, and he hated to see the Commissioners operating it wrongly, badly and without enthusiasm. He had nursed his grievance while awaiting an opportunity to state his

Sir Edwin Chadwick

case. At the Andover inquiry his patience was at an end, and he lashed out. Disraeli's question to the Commissioners as to why this "monster" had not been dismissed was left unanswered, but the reason is not difficult to find. If Chadwick had been dismissed he would have been free to denounce them, an opportunity he would not have let pass. As it was, they played on his devotion to duty by keeping him at the Board but ignored his protests on behalf of efficient local government.

In June, 1846, Sir Robert Peel's Government gave way to Lord John Russell's, and in the following May the Poor Law Board Act was introduced and became law. By this Act the Poor Law Commission was abolished, and in its place a new Board constituted, with the Lord President of the Council, the Lord Privy Seal, the Home Secretary and the Chancellor of the Exchequer as ex-officio members. The President, with a casting vote, was to be appointed by the Crown and he, together with a Parliamentary Secretary, represented the Board in Parliament.

"It is to be hoped he [Chadwick] will keep quiet," said the junior Commissioners.

The New Poor Law

Their hope was vain. For another nine years Chadwick was to be a worry to Governments, a curse to profit-making capitalists, and a source of continual irritation to the more rigid adherents of *laissez faire*. But at the same time it is to be regretted that his determined adherence to what he considered his duty was the cause of his early retirement from public service.

To sum up the good and bad points of the Act: It may be said, firstly, that it rendered good service by greatly diminishing the system of outdoor relief to able-bodied men. This was perhaps its chief asset, for any system which countenances relief in aid of wages is bound to be demoralizing both to the giver and receiver of the relief. Secondly, in appointing a central authority to control the local authorities, an effort was made to eliminate the various local customs and to regulate the system on a sound administrative basis. Thirdly, by creating the Union as the unit of administration in place of the parish a great deal of unnecessary overlapping was done away with. Fourthly, Chadwick's idea of the

salariated official was introduced and found to be a vast improvement on the compulsory unpaid worker. Fifthly, the Act embodied the principle of "less eligibility," which means that the lot of destitute paupers should be less desirable than that of the employed labouring man: an admirable principle provided that the status of the labourer is economically just and stable.

On all these grounds the Act may be said to have improved greatly on its predecessor, but it failed in many directions. The Central Board were unable to appreciate that the enormous increase in production brought with it many attendant evils. The cyclical trade depression was then, as it is to-day, one of the chief causes of unemployment. Under the Act a man unemployed through no fault of his own was forced to accept relief below the level of his ordinary existence inside a workhouse along with others who could not work and who would not work. There can be no justification for this treatment except that neither the economists of the day nor the Commissioners understood the situation. Cyclical trade depression as a cause of

unemployment is the greatest of all industrial problems, and the Commissioners failed lamentably to grasp its importance.

Taking the Act as a whole it did good. It was bitterly opposed in the North of England, where employment depended so largely on trade. It was here that Oastler and Stevens preached resistance. But in the rural districts it helped the agricultural labourer by stopping the terribly demoralizing effect of relief in aid of wages. The labourer could no longer imagine "that wages are not a matter of contract but of right; that any diminution of their comforts occasioned by an increase of their numbers, without an equal increase of the fund for their subsistence, is an evil to be remedied not by themselves, but by the magistrates; not an error, or even a misfortune, but an injustice."¹

"The Act of 1834," said Mark Hovell in his book *The Chartist Movement*, "was the first piece of genuine radical legislation which this country has enjoyed; it was the first fruits of Benthamism. For the first

¹ Poor Law Commission Report, 1834.