

**ATTITUDES TO POVERTY AND SOCIAL REFORM
IN CHELTENHAM 1870-1899**

RONALD EDLIN

A thesis submitted to
The University of Gloucestershire
in accordance with the requirements of the degree of
MA by Research in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities

January 2003

PARK LEARNING CENTRE
UNIVERSITY OF GLOUCESTERSHIRE
PO Box 220, The Park, Cheltenham, GL50 2QF
Tel: (01242) 532721

Abstract

Many modern historians argue that for much of the late Victorian period attitudes to social issues were largely determined by a widely held belief in “individualism” and *laissez faire* government. These beliefs were sustainable because, it is claimed, most people were unaware of the scale and nature of poverty and failed therefore to understand its economic and social causes. The revelation of conditions among London’s poor in the 1880s is alleged to have brought about a fundamental change in the way people viewed social conditions and, by the end of the century, a demand for central government intervention in social and economic affairs.

This study challenges these arguments by analysing the way the people of Cheltenham viewed social problems during the last thirty years of the nineteenth century against the background of local and national economic and social developments. It is based on a detailed survey of local records including local newspapers, which, in addition to providing factual information, also show the general trend of local opinion on social issues. The survey indicates that in Cheltenham by the early 1870s there was not only a great deal of awareness of the nature and cause of poverty but also an increasing degree of concern about the conditions of the poor. The economic depressions of the late 1870s and the mid-1880s, rather than the exposure of conditions in London, led to a more collectivist approach to local social problems. By the end of the century some people were beginning to accept that major problems were unlikely to be solved by local initiatives but there was still no clear demand for specific government action. Throughout the period there is little evidence that ideology played a significant role in determining attitudes to social problems and most views on the subject seem to be based on pragmatic considerations.

Although Cheltenham could be regarded as being somewhat unusual it was neither unique nor isolated from the rest of the country. These findings suggest therefore that, apart from London and possibly other large cities, the change in attitudes to social issues during the late nineteenth century was less profound than is often depicted.

Declaration

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of the University of Gloucestershire and is original except where indicated by specific reference in the text. No part of the thesis has been submitted as part of any other academic award. The thesis has not been presented to any other education institute in the United Kingdom or overseas. The contents of this copy are identical with the version submitted for examination, except where amendments have been made to meet the requirements of the examiners.

Any views expressed in the thesis are those of the author and in no way represent those of the University.

Signed

R. Gollin

Date

12/6/03.

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Introduction

Most modern historians consider that for much of the late Victorian period attitudes towards social issues were largely determined by a widely held ideological, almost religious belief in “individualism” and *laissez faire* government. There was it is argued little awareness of the scale and nature of poverty and little understanding of its economic causes. Such poverty as was seen to exist was considered to be the result of the failure of individuals to take advantage of available economic opportunities.¹ Stedman-Jones identifies a tendency in London to regard even seasonal or casual unemployment as “threadbare excuses used by the poor to explain their thriftless and mendicant habits”.² Laybourn argues that a fundamental determinant of social policy was the doctrine of “self help” as was expounded by Samuel Smiles in 1859; “self help is the root of all genuine growth in the individual and exhibited in the lives of many it constitutes the true cause of national vigour and strength”.³ The prevalence of the “personal failings” argument is considered to have determined the approach to poor relief and the emphasis on the need to distinguish between the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor. At the same time it is argued belief in the superiority of *laissez faire* government meant that there was strong opposition to central government intervention in social and economic affairs. Bradley argues that attitudes towards the relief of social problems were determined by the conviction that “the spontaneous action of individuals and groups was preferable to compulsory action by the state”.⁴ Prochaska argues that philanthropists generally were inclined to believe that social problems could be solved by discretionary charity and considered that state intervention in social issues obstructed the free development of home and community life.⁵

Much of the evidence used to support these interpretations seems to consist of the recorded views of senior members of the Charity Organisation Society (COS) and the

¹ K. De Schweintz, *England's Road to Social Security* (New York: A.S. Barnes & Co, 1943), p.143.

² G. Stedman-Jones, *Outcast London* (London: Clarendon Press, 1975), p.264.

³ S. Smiles *Self Help with Illustrations of Conduct and Perseverance* (London: Butler & Taverner, Centenary Edition 1958) p.35 cited in K. Laybourn, *Evolution of British Social Policy and the Welfare State* (Keele: University Press, 1995), p.134.

⁴ I. Bradley, *The Optimists. Themes and Personalities in Victorian Liberalism* (London: Faber & Faber, 1980), p.182.

⁵ F.K Prochaska, “Philanthropy”, in F.M.L. Thompson (Ed), *The Cambridge Social History of Britain 1750-1950*, Vol. 3, (Cambridge: University Press, 1990), pp .357-394.

Local Government Board (LGB), people who could be regarded as extreme individualists. Wohl nevertheless considers the COS to be the representative form of contemporary views about poverty and argues that its dominance reflected the wide acceptance of the “personal failings” argument.⁶

It is usually considered that belief in individualism and *laissez faire* government began to lose its hold on public opinion from the mid-1880s, and for some writers the key factor in the shift to more collectivist ideas was the exposure of the scale of destitution in London’s poorer districts. Fraser for example argues that as a result of these revelations society was made aware of “unknown conditions within it”. He claims that of the various factors that changed attitudes to social problems “there was no more crucial element than this growing awareness of poverty” which, by the end of the century had “well-nigh overwhelmed the *laissez faire* individualistic ethic”.⁷ More specifically Emy maintains that these investigations demonstrated that unemployment was the result of “measurable socio-economic causes rather than an individual aberration”.⁸ Harrison considers that the demand for state intervention increased in the 1880s as the nature and extent of poverty became more widely known.⁹ Some writers are more cautious. Pugh for example argues that even though the methods used to deal with poverty were increasingly seen to be inadequate concern about personal failings remained strong.¹⁰ Thane claims that at the end of the century there was still strong opposition to “reforming activity of the state” and a preference for increased voluntary action.¹¹

The main justification for the prevalence of individualism until mid-1880s is the belief that there was widespread ignorance about the scale of poverty and its economic and social causes. Most writers base their views on this subject on the situation in London where a great deal of ignorance was perhaps understandable because of the physical separation of classes. Beatrice Webb, who was already engaged in social research, was still unsure in the mid-1880s about the “extent and intensity of destitution” and whether

⁶ A.S. Wohl, *The Eternal Slum. Housing and Social Policy in Victorian London* (London: Edward Arnold, 1977), p.57.

⁷ D. Fraser, *The Evolution of the British Welfare State* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1973), pp.123 & 124.

⁸ H.V.Emy, *Liberals, Radicals and Social Politics 1892-1914* (Cambridge: University Press, 1973), p.32.

⁹ J. F. Harrison, *Late Victorian Britain 1875-1901* (London: Fontana Press, 1990), p.192.

¹⁰ M. Pugh, *State and Society. British Political and Social History 1870-1992* (London: Edward Arnold, 1994), p.45.

¹¹ P. Thane, *Foundations of the Welfare State* 2nd edition (London: Longmans Ltd, 1996), p.18.

it could be explained by the “shortcomings of the destitute themselves”.¹² It is difficult however to accept that there was a similar lack of awareness in smaller towns and cities if only because of greater physical proximity. In towns dependent on one main industry for example the effect of economic fluctuations on employment and wage rates would have been highly visible. In most areas even a general knowledge of local living costs must have led to some awareness of the fact that low wages made it difficult or impossible for many people to provide for periods of unemployment, sickness and old age. Some people at least would have been aware of housing conditions in the poorer districts as a result of their professional and charitable responsibilities. In such circumstances it would seem likely that individualism would have lost much of its hold on public opinion long before the exposure of conditions in London. Most writers portray the development of public opinion over the period as a conflict between two opposing ideologies, individualism and collectivism. This was no doubt the way it was seen in intellectual circles but for the majority of the public it seems likely that views on social problems were determined mainly by pragmatic considerations.

If these assumptions are valid the exposure of conditions in London would have had less impact on public opinion in smaller towns. Furthermore, since no major social reforms were introduced until after the Boer War, the change in attitudes to social reform and the role of central government over the last fifteen or twenty years of the century may have been less dramatic and far-reaching than is often described.

This study tests these arguments by examining the way in which attitudes to social problems in Cheltenham developed during the last thirty years of the nineteenth century against the background of local and national events. Cheltenham expanded very rapidly in the early nineteenth century as a spa town and between 1801 and 1841 its population increased from 3,000 to 36,000. The watering places became less popular after the 1840s and although the town continued to attract wealthy visitors during the winter months its role as a summer resort gradually declined. The impact of these trends on the local economy was to some extent compensated by the establishment of educational facilities suitable for the children of the wealthy but no significant industrial or manufacturing base was developed. The overall prosperity of the town therefore

¹² B. Webb, *My Apprenticeship* (London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1926), p.214.

remained dependent on the provision of goods and services to wealthy residents and visitors whose leisure habits ensured that the economic cycle was subject to pronounced seasonal variations

The material required for the study is available locally in the Gloucestershire Records Office (GRO) and the Public Libraries in Cheltenham (CL) and Gloucester (GL). Much of this documentation is however of a strictly factual nature and of limited value in assessing public opinion. The County Records Office for example has an extensive collection of documents relating to the transactions of the various local authorities and some of the more important charities but most of what is recorded relates entirely to routine administrative matters. Even where important matters of policy are discussed only the decisions made are recorded. Local newspapers however contain detailed verbatim reports of these meetings as well as editorial comments on a wide range of local and national issues. Most papers published correspondence from private individuals dealing with a very wide range of topics. Inevitably individual papers interpreted social issues in different ways but over a lengthy period it seems reasonable to assume that each paper represented the views of a section of the population if only for commercial reasons. In addition newspapers are also the only detailed source of the local historical background to the study. Inevitably therefore local newspapers have been the main source of material and in view of this a short appendix has been provided describing the main characteristics of each paper.

Part One The 1870s

Chapter 1. Economic Conditions

Although by 1870 Cheltenham had lost much of its attraction as a health resort its economy was still geared to the leisure habits of its wealthier residents and visitors and was becoming increasingly dependent on its reputation as an educational centre. During the winter months the ranks of the wealthy were still increased by visitors attracted to the town by its equable climate, the availability of suitable housing and entertainment facilities. Economic activity was at its peak during this period. In late April or early May, the commencement of the London season, visitors and residents began to depart leading to the “closure of many of those sources of employment and amusement which contribute to the vitality of country towns”.¹ The number of departures accelerated sharply in June when the summer vacations of the various private schools began. The two main proprietary colleges, The Cheltenham Boys College and The Ladies’ College, between them catered for approximately 1,100 pupils all of whom were from the wealthiest section of society. The boarders, probably around 50 per cent of the total were, no doubt absent for the whole of the vacation period and it appears that many day pupils accompanied their families to other resorts for much the same length of time.² Assuming that each of the day pupils represented a family unit of four it is possible that between 2,000 and 3,000 people associated with the colleges were absent during the college vacations. It is not surprising therefore that the local economy was considered to be at its lowest ebb during the vacation period. In August 1876 for example the *Looker On* could foresee no improvement in trade until the reopening of the colleges and the return of the families “upon whom the town’s prosperity depends”.³

The weekly lists of arrivals and departures published by local newspapers show that the town was not entirely devoid of visitors during the summer months. It appears however

¹ *Looker On*, 7 Feb 1880, p.88.

² In 1885 the Boys’ College had 168 “Home Boys” out of a total of 585. *Looker On*, 27 June 1885, p.410. A report presented to the Annual Meeting of shareholders of the Ladies’ College in June 1878 records 257 day pupils in a total of 420. Ladies’ College Library. Ref. No. 5726

³ *Looker On*, 19 Aug 1876, p.536.

that by the 1870s Cheltenham was finding it increasingly difficult to compete with the growing popularity of the seaside and overseas travel. In May 1861, when anticipating the early departure of some winter visitors, the *Looker On* was able to take comfort from the fact that “the Spas have all again resumed their summer actions”⁴. By the early 1870s, according to Dr. Edward Wilson, the spring water was rarely used for health purposes and was instead being “lavished on the public streets”⁵. In July 1874 the *Daily Telegraph* commented on the deserted appearance of the better parts of the town and claimed to have seldom seen so many empty houses in one place. It also noted that the winter season was now restricted to the period November to April.⁶ In October 1875 the *Looker On*, reviewing the prospects for the forthcoming winter season referred to the return of “Familiar faces, which have been strangers to our walks and drives for the past six months”⁷. Even this truncated season seems to have become progressively less successful as the decade wore on. In early 1870 the *Looker On* considered that the 1869-1870 season was “above averagely successful... Residents and visitors have freely reciprocated the hospitalities which appertain to their station in life, and the business portions of the population have correspondingly benefited thereby”⁸. Not everyone shared this view however. The *Mercury*, at the height of the 1870-1871 season, referred to continual concern about the “flatness of trade” which it claimed was due to the fact that fashionable and wealthy people who had been accustomed to visit the town in the season “have in many instances sought other venues for pleasure or health”⁹. In September 1874, although the return of several families had brought some improvement in trade it did not predict a brilliant winter season “those days are long since gone”¹⁰. By October 1875 even the *Looker On* was predicting that the new season would not be as prosperous as in the past. “Some houses, famous for their hospitalities in former winters will unfortunately be closed throughout”¹¹.

⁴*Looker On*, 18 May 1861, p.320.

⁵ Dr. Edward T. Wilson, “Sanitary Statistics of Cheltenham for the years 1865-1871 Inclusive”, an extract from the *BMA Journal*, 7 Sept 1872. GL: Ref. P4.31.

⁶ Cited in the *Examiner*, 12 Aug 1874, p.2.

⁷ *Looker On*, 16 Oct 1875, p.663.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 19 March 1870, p.184.

⁹ *Mercury*, 8 Jan 1871

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 19 Sept 1874, p.2.

¹¹ *Looker On*, 30 Oct 1875, p.699.

It is possible that the preoccupation with the season and the wealthier section of the community obscures the fact that by the 1870s Cheltenham's economy was becoming more dependent on the activities of a growing number of middle class residents. The schools and colleges would have required a permanent infrastructure, and teachers and administrators associated with private education would have formed part of what may have been a growing professional class. In 1875 the *Examiner* referred to an increase in the number of middle class households employing one or two domestic servants which it claimed had created a "sellers' market" for this occupation.¹² Cheltenham in the 1870s seems to have had considerable potential as a commercial centre. It was for example easily accessible by rail from London, the Southwest and Northeast of England and South Wales as well as nearby towns.¹³ When discussing the 1871 census, the *Examiner* referred to an increasing number of larger properties being used for business purposes rather than private houses. In many cases the owners or occupants of these premises now lived outside the town.¹⁴ The local shopping facilities were clearly an attraction and seem to have had a wide market as witnessed by the concern expressed in 1873 about the impact on local drapers and upholsterers of strikes the mining districts of South Wales.¹⁵ In 1874 the *Daily Telegraph* described Cheltenham as "a vast Champs Elysees, a town of open spaces, shady avenues, pretty enclosures and leaf-enshrouded trees".¹⁶ For people with money it may well have been a pleasant place in which to live.

There was still however no significant manufacturing base and the nature of the local economic cycle would have continued to ensure a high level of seasonal or casual labour and the existence of a good deal of unemployment particularly during the winter months. There are no statistics available with which to estimate the scale of the problem and little evidence that it was ever discussed as a general social issue in the same way as sanitation for example. It is possible that a certain level of unemployment was regarded as normal and unavoidable at certain periods of the year. This could explain, by way of contrast, the amount of attention given to the plight of men who were normally employed during the winter, but who were unemployed during periods of unusually severe weather. Unemployment in these circumstances was clearly regarded as exceptional and was treated almost as a state of emergency, even though the number of

¹² *Examiner*, 22 Sept 1875, p.4.

¹³ *Looker On*, 16 July 1870, pp.462-3.

¹⁴ *Examiner*, 26 April 1871, p.4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 8 Jan 1873, p.4.

¹⁶ Cited in the *Examiner*, 12 Aug 1874, p.2.

men involved was usually no more than several hundred, probably a fraction of the number regularly unemployed every winter. Within a few days of severe frost or snow appeals were launched for subscriptions to Distress Funds providing bread and coal in exchange for a few hours of manual labour. These instances apart there are very few direct references to the employment situation even in circumstances where it was inevitable that unemployment would increase. Newspaper reports on adverse trade conditions and business failures seem to ignore the consequences for the workers. Captain G.D. Pakenham's response to the destruction by fire of a large timber yard in December 1876 was therefore somewhat unusual. While acknowledging the loss of property his main concern was the fact that "numbers of men must of necessity lose their employment". He pledged £5 to start a fund to assist the men; a gesture that was matched by Agg-Gardner the Conservative MP.¹⁷ Funds were usually only raised to assist the owner of the business.

The existence of unemployment as a social problem more often emerges incidentally in discussions of some other issue. In March 1870 for example a letter published in the *Examiner* primarily concerned with the Education Act of 1870, included the comment that during the winter "half the labour force is out of work for four months".¹⁸ This statement is hardly precise but since the writer claims to have some knowledge of the working class it is probably indicative of a substantial problem. A report of a meeting of men in the building trade who were seeking improved conditions makes much the same point. The employers had rejected the men's proposal on the grounds that they required six months notice but this was seen as an attempt to delay matters until the winter when there was normally considerable unemployment.¹⁹ The annual report of the charitable activity carried out by Christ Church during 1879 states that its relief work was carried on throughout the autumn, winter and spring, the periods when "the needs of the poor are greatest".²⁰ It also seems that unemployment was not restricted to the working class. In October 1877, under the heading "An Overstocked Market" the *Examiner* reported that a Gas Company advertisement for a weigh bridge clerk at a salary of eighty pounds

¹⁷ *Examiner*, 6 December 1876, p.8. Pakenham later became involved in the provision of recreation facilities in working class areas.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 30 March 1870, p.8.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 6 March 1872, p.2.

²⁰ Christ Church Cheltenham Report of Charities 1879. GRO Ref. P78/3 CH1

per annum plus fuel attracted over one hundred applicants including army officers, certified teachers and tradesmen.²¹

Perhaps the clearest indication of high unemployment is the prevalence of poor working conditions and low wages, areas in which Cheltenham appears to have had an unenviable reputation. At the meeting of men in the building trade in 1872 referred to earlier it was claimed that in some towns wages were 10s per week higher and hours shorter than in Cheltenham.²² In April 1874 150 men went on strike backed by the Amalgamated Society of Tailors with the aim of securing a pay increase. The demand was based on the claim that wage rates were higher in Gloucester, Worcester, Hereford and Leamington than in Cheltenham where the hourly rate of 5d, described by the *Mercury* as “shamefully low”, had been in force since 1824.²³ The tailors were more successful than the building workers and within a week had been granted an increase of 1s 2d per week.²⁴ The following year the carpenters sought a similar increase for skilled workers and again it was claimed that wages in Cheltenham were 20-30 per cent lower than in neighbouring towns.²⁵ Significantly these claims were never disputed. Cheltenham also seems to have lagged behind other towns in the campaign for the early closing of shops and offices. Throughout the decade there was agitation for what appears to be a quite modest shortening of hours one day each week. Shop assistants regularly worked twelve to fourteen hours each day and sometimes even longer on Saturdays. The total time allowed for meals was around one hour but this could be lost in busy periods.²⁶ Until the August Bank holiday became established after 1871 the only holidays, apart from Sunday, were Good Friday and Christmas Day.²⁷

Among unskilled workers it seems that the only occupation where shortage of labour gave any real bargaining power was domestic service. In the summer of 1879 for example eight out of the eleven vacancies advertised in the *Examiner* were for female domestic servants.²⁸ For most unskilled men and women the reverse was true. In November 1873 at a public meeting of general and agricultural labourers, the Chairman,

²¹ *Examiner*, 31 Oct 1877, pp.2 & 4.

²² *Examiner*, 6 March 1872, p.2.

²³ *Mercury*, 8 April 1874.

²⁴ *Examiner*, 29 April 1874, p.4.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 10 March 1875, p.8.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 2 April 1873, p.8.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 23 Aug 1871, p.8.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 23 July 1879, p.5.

Samuel Onley Jun. said the men were “miserably underpaid”. Other speakers highlighted the problem of low wages in Cheltenham particularly for those men employed by the Cheltenham Improvement Commission (CIC).²⁹ A letter to the *Examiner* in June 1874 accused employers generally of taking advantage of high unemployment to keep wages low. The writer used as an example the scavengers employed by the CIC, “strong fellows in the prime of life” earning 12s per week who were forced to apply to the Poor Law when their wives were sick and unable to work. An official of the Commission had defended this position on the grounds that he had no difficulty in obtaining men at the current wage.³⁰ In 1877, at the annual outing of the scavengers, the Highways Inspector at the end of the day’s festivities told the men that their wages were lower than in Gloucester and some other towns. He expressed the hope that some increase would be possible in the future but in the meantime he urged them to set up some form of benefit society to provide a pension on retirement. He did not like to see men “after working on the Cheltenham roads for twenty or twenty-five years compelled at length to go to the parish for relief”.³¹ Given that the CIC, possibly the largest single employer in the town, experienced no difficulty in employing scavengers it is probably safe to assume that their wages were comparable with those of unskilled public and private sector workers generally. In 1878 a letter to the *Mercury* stated that “there are great numbers of married men in this town getting from 12s to 15s per week”.³² In 1874, according to one of their number, cab drivers were paid 12s per week. For this they were expected to wear white scarves and gloves and frequently required to stand and wait for the “so-called gentry” until three, four or even five in the morning. One cab owner had agreed to an extra 2s. 6d a week during the height of the season but none of the other owners had followed suit.³³ Cab drivers could no doubt expect to receive tips from their fares but it seems that the scavengers also attempted to supplement their income in this way.³⁴ It is even possible that their wages and those of other public servants such as postmen and lamp lighters were reduced over the Christmas period in the expectation that they would receive “Christmas boxes”.³⁵

²⁹ *Examiner*, 19 Nov 1873, p.2.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 24 June 1874. p.8.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 1 Aug 1877, p.8.

³² *Mercury*, 16 Nov 1878, p.4.

³³ *Ibid.*, 10 Jan 1874.

³⁴ *Examiner*, 10 Dec 1873, p.2.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 26 Nov 1879, p.8.

Total family incomes were no doubt higher in many cases due to the earnings of other family members. Older children for example could earn 4s to 5s a week.³⁶ It seems unlikely however that many families where the breadwinner was unskilled or perhaps even semi-skilled would have received much more than a pound a week while incomes of casual workers were probably a good deal less. To put this figure into some perspective it is worth noting that The Protestant Trinitarian Benefit Society, which probably covered the better-paid workers, provided sick pay of 10s. 6d. a week for twenty-six weeks and half that amount thereafter.³⁷ In his investigations into poverty in York at the end of the century, Rowntree calculated that the minimum level of weekly expenditure needed to maintain physical efficiency for a family of four was 21s. 8d.³⁸ Since his investigations were carried out at the end of a period in which real wages are generally considered to have improved it seems likely that in the 1870s a significant number of working people in Cheltenham were living at or below the poverty line.³⁹

From around the middle of the decade the national economic climate deteriorated⁴⁰ and Cheltenham could not escape the general malaise. The tone of the reports and comments on the local economy become increasingly pessimistic in the later years of the decade. Between 1875 and 1877 a number of business failures were reported including one of the oldest local building firms⁴¹ and a well known upholsterer occupying premises on the Promenade.⁴² Several charities closed due to lack of public support notably the Female Orphan Asylum, founded in 1807, Cheltenham's oldest charity.⁴³ By the summer of 1877 there were references to "extreme depression" and the effect on trade of the pressure on the incomes of the wealthy.⁴⁴ In February 1878 short-time working on the Great Western Railway was reported. Some railwaymen had received wage cuts and an attempt had been made to bring back the "ten hour system". These developments were important locally since a number of Cheltenham working men, probably among the

³⁶ *Examiner*, 6 June 1877, p.2.

³⁷ Protestant Trinitarian Benefit Society Annual Statement 1875-1876. GL Ref. PV 6.1

³⁸ E.J. Feuchtwanger, *Democracy and Empire. Britain 1865-1914* (London: Edward Arnold, 1985), p.303.

³⁹ I. Gazeley, "The Cost of Living for Urban Workers in Late Victorian and Edwardian Britain", *Economic History Review*, 2nd Ser 2 (1989), pp.207-221.

⁴⁰ J.Clifford, *Aspects of Economic Development 1760-1960* (New York: Longmans, 1967), p.9.

⁴¹ *Examiner*, 12 May 1875, p.8.

⁴² *Looker On*, 25 May 1877, p.530.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 9 Feb 1878, p.97.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 16 June 1877, p.376.

more affluent, were employed by the company.⁴⁵ In December 1878 the West of England and South Wales District Bank failed, one of two major failures in what has been described as year of crisis for the British banking industry.⁴⁶ Initially it was not felt that Cheltenham residents would be greatly affected but it soon became clear that the impact would be more serious. The bank had a deficit of £300,000 and since the Limited Liability Act 1855 did not apply⁴⁷ it was estimated that shareholders could be liable for between seven and ten pounds per share.⁴⁸ In its review of 1878 the *Examiner* noted that “The depressed state of trade seems to be worsening while the consequent distress is growing every day wider and deeper”.⁴⁹ The *Looker On*, commenting on the national situation at the beginning of 1879 identified the lack of tariffs on imports as a major cause of the depression which had brought high unemployment among the working classes and “the impoverishment of their natural employers”. It considered that Cheltenham could not wholly escape the distress experienced in mining and manufacturing towns.⁵⁰ In fact economic depression and severe weather conditions at the beginning of 1879 combined to produce exceptionally high unemployment among outdoor workers in Cheltenham. For the first time attempts were made to bring forward public work scheduled for the summer to alleviate the situation. Also for the first time it was recognised that there were people other than those usually employed in the winter in need of help. These included people on the “verge of pauperism who were not entitled to out relief and who would not enter the workhouse”.⁵¹ The final weeks of the decade saw an early return of severe weather leading to levels of unemployment even higher than at the beginning of the year. The *Examiner* reported that distress was now becoming acute and felt that finding work for the unemployed would be difficult and not appropriate in some cases. The funds available for relief purposes were not as large as in the previous year.⁵²

The seasonal nature of the Cheltenham economy and the way it developed during the 1870s would seem to indicate the existence of a significant and probably increasing level

⁴⁵ *Looker On*, 9 Feb 1878, p.102.

⁴⁶ M.Collins, “The Banking Crisis of 1878”, *Economic History Review*, XL114, 2nd SER. (1989), pp.504-527.

⁴⁷ E.G.Black, *Victorian Culture and Society* (London: The Macmillan Press), 1973), p.35.

⁴⁸ *Looker On*, 1 Dec 1878, p.802.

⁴⁹ *Examine*, 1 Jan 1879, p.4.

⁵⁰ *Looker On*, 4 Jan 1879, p.5.

⁵¹ *Examiner*, 22 Jan 1879, p.4 & 19 Feb 1879, p.8.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 17 Dec 1879, p.4.

of chronic poverty. The proportion of the population in this condition and what it meant in terms of living conditions and health will be examined in Chapter 2.

Chapter 2. The Condition of the People.

In the absence of any detailed contemporary investigations, such as those carried out in London in the 1880s, any view of the number of people who could be classified as chronically poor and the conditions in which they lived is bound to be somewhat speculative. There is however sufficient information available from which a broad estimate can be made of the numbers involved and a considerable body of anecdotal evidence that suggests that the term "Outcast" as applied to London's poor was equally applicable in Cheltenham.

At first sight Poor Law records, which contain the most comprehensive body of statistical information about the poor available for this period, would seem to offer the best prospect of assessing the scale of the problem. In particular the number of people who received out relief may have been indicative of short-term economic conditions. Unfortunately figures for both in-door and out relief were only produced on a weekly basis and do not show the total number of individuals relieved during the course of a year. Best notes that Victorian statisticians attempted to overcome this weakness by multiplying the weekly figures by three or three and a half to arrive at an annual total.⁵³ Applied to national figures this method may have been satisfactory but for the individual Union it is probably less reliable. Economic conditions and the policies adopted towards out relief varied from Union to Union and even within Unions over time. In addition the relationship between relief and the general level of poverty is somewhat tenuous since many people regarded the Poor Law only as a last resort. Calculations based on a simple multiplier would therefore tend to understate the scale of poverty. In the early 1870s however the Cheltenham Guardians resisted the demands of the LGB to reduce out-relief so it is possible that the weekly figures had some relationship to current poverty levels.⁵⁴ The figures for February 1870, when the total number of people relieved each week was approximately 3,600, seem representative of this period.⁵⁵ Applying the multipliers to this figure indicates an overall poverty level of between 10,800 and 12,600,

⁵³ G. Best, *Mid-Victorian Britain 1871-1875* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1971), p.146.

⁵⁴ *Examiner*, 22 Feb 1871, p.4.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 9 Feb 1870, p.2.

20 to 24 per cent of the Union population of 53,159.⁵⁶

Information prepared for an entirely different purpose may provide a more accurate estimate of the situation in Cheltenham as distinct from the Union as a whole which included surrounding rural districts. In the autumn of 1870 the Borough Surveyor produced a report on the deficiencies in the town's water supply for a special meeting of the CIC. This showed that in Cheltenham 2,574 houses with a total population of between 12,000 and 15,000, "all of the poorest classes", were not connected to the water mains.⁵⁷ There is no indication of the source of these statistics but the precise nature of the figure for the number of houses suggests that they relate to a clearly defined area. The term "poorest classes" is not defined and it may not be justified to assume that all of the people living in the areas identified were chronically poor. There is however some evidence that some of the more prosperous working families did move out of these districts when the opportunity arose. In 1879 the *Looker On* noted that in the Tivoli area in recent years there had been an influx of "artisans and working classes"⁵⁸ and it may be significant that in 1872 Dr Wilson considered the small streets in this district to be among the healthiest parts of the town.⁵⁹ At the same time it appears that even in areas which were supplied with mains water many poorer people were not connected purely on grounds of cost.⁶⁰ Taking account of these factors the lower estimate of 12,000 may be a reasonable indication of the number of people living in what contemporaries regarded as poverty. This represents 28.6 per cent of the total population according to the 1871 census; remarkably similar to the figures produced by the Booth and Rowntree investigations later in the century.⁶¹ It is perhaps significant that these figures were not challenged either at the CIC meeting or elsewhere and it is probably safe to assume that upwards of 25 per cent of Cheltenham's population was living in chronic poverty.

Poverty in Cheltenham was not subjected to the type of investigative journalism that exposed the living conditions of London's poor in the 1880s but there is a good deal of information available to suggest that local conditions were not significantly better.

⁵⁶ *Examiner.*, May 1871, p.4.

⁵⁷ *Looker On.*, 29 Oct 1870, p.699.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 18 Oct 1879, p.664.

⁵⁹ Dr. Edward T. Wilson, "Sanitary Statistics of Cheltenham for the years 1865-1871 Inclusive. Extract from *BMA Journal* 7 Sept 1872. GL: Ref. P4.31

⁶⁰ Medical Officer of Health (MOH) Annual Report 1874. GRO Ref. CBR C6/1/1/1

⁶¹ Digest of the English Census of 1871. GL.

Anthony Wohl in fact argues that housing problems in London merely magnified the situation that existed on a smaller scale throughout urban England.⁶² For much of the period public concern in Cheltenham was concentrated mainly on the inadequacy of the town's water supply and its effect on sanitary conditions in the poorer districts which were regarded as a breeding ground for contagious disease. People without access to the mains of the privately owned Cheltenham Water Company obtained water from shallow wells that were not only exposed to contamination but which could also fail in periods of drought. The contamination problem was demonstrated in 1875 when the Rivers Pollution Commission found that a sample of water taken from a well in the yard of the Plough Hotel consisted chiefly of "soakage from sewers and cesspools". Significantly the sample was considered to be representative of the water in the older parts of the town.⁶³ This situation was the result of the growth in population over the years and the consequent increase in the demand for water which had lowered the water table to a level where the soil in these districts was still contaminated by the extensive use of cesspools earlier in the century. In the older parts of the town, mainly the working class areas, the sewerage system was constructed of porous brick and was therefore a further source of contamination.⁶⁴ In areas without mains water the system was even less effective. In the summer of 1870 for example, the CIC attempted to obtain a temporary supply of water from the Water Company for certain localities so that streets could be cleaned and sewers flushed. No agreement could be reached about the cost and the scheme was not implemented.⁶⁵ The episode illustrates the fundamental problem posed by the water question, namely the impossibility of reconciling the commercial requirements of a private organisation with the needs of the community. A Royal Commission of 1868-69 recognised this when it stated "That the placing of the Water Supply under the Public control afforded the best and only feasible means of ensuring supply to the Poor which had been found under the present system".⁶⁶

Undoubtedly an adequate supply of pure water would have done much to improve living conditions in the poorer districts but there were wider problems. This was recognised in

⁶² A.S. Wohl, *The Eternal Slum. Housing and Social Policy in Victorian London* (London: Edward Arnold, 1977), p. XII.

⁶³ *Examiner*, 24 November 1875, p.4.

⁶⁴ MOH Annual Report 1874.

⁶⁵ CIC Minutes, 1852-1872. GRO: Ref. CBR/B2/1/1/1

⁶⁶ Cited in CIC Minutes 28 May 1870.

a letter published in the *Examiner* in May 1872 which drew attention to conditions in the poorer parts of the town such as the districts on the north side of the lower High street. It claimed that the houses in these areas were too small, badly ventilated and “too thick on the ground”. The air was polluted by ash pits and pigsties and the people were “badly clothed and fed, easy prey to disease and diphtheria.” The sanitary authority was urged to have slaughterhouses and pigsties removed from the town and to enforce the cleaning and disinfecting of ash pits.⁶⁷ The writer simply signed himself “sanitas” but the tone of the letter suggests that he may have been a medical practitioner and well qualified to make what was clearly a damning indictment. The annual reports of the Medical Officer for Health (MOH) for the period 1874-1876 present much the same picture and were based on detailed inspections of individual properties. These reports show that the effectiveness of the sewers was impaired not only by the lack of mains water but also by defective house drains. These were made of brick, infested with rats, often no longer watertight, a further source of contamination and air pollution. “Closets” were “insufficient in numbers, often badly ventilated and nearly all without a water supply”. In many cases the system of preventing sewer gas from entering houses was inadequate or faulty, a problem which was not apparently confined to the poorer districts. Outside the houses the ground was littered with refuse of various kinds and pools of stagnant water collected on uneven ground due to inadequate surface drainage. Further pollution arose from the practice of keeping pigs close to dwellings and in 1876 it was calculated that there were 1,000 pigs in the poorer districts the vast majority of which were owned by butchers and dealers. Pig manure was simply stored in pits and was allowed to drain into the sand bed. One pit was found to contain forty tons of manure. In addition there were over forty slaughterhouses that were considered to be badly constructed and sited too near housing. Concern was expressed about “the cubical capacity of the buildings in relation to their inmates” and much of the housing was described as “faulty, ill constructed dwellings both as regards health and comfort”.⁶⁸ These reports represent the most authoritative source of information available about living conditions in the poorer districts but they perhaps lack some of the power to shock displayed by the investigative journalism which drew attention to conditions in London in the 1880s. The *Mercury* however attempted a more colourful approach:

⁶⁷ *Examiner*, 22 May 1872, p.8.

⁶⁸ MOH Annual Reports 1874-1880.

“Rows of houses where the general sanitary surroundings are so shockingly manifest as to have required strong nerves and a total disregard of foul stench to visit. Water supply either absent or inadequate. Privy accommodation not even thought of or so scanty as to defy all semblance of decency. Some houses are mere shells of lathe and plaster, rooms of such cubical airspace as would be needed to keep a dog healthy”.⁶⁹

In spite of these statements and a continual stream of reports about the shocking condition of individual properties which appeared regularly in the newspapers the general state of working class housing received far less attention than the narrower issue of sanitation even though these conditions were seen as the main source of infectious disease. The existence of overcrowding suggests that the supply of working class houses had not kept pace with the increase in population and it does seem that housing development had for a long period been concentrated on the wealthier section of the market. In 1861 the *Looker On* referred to the number of houses completed during recent years “fortunately all in the fashionable parts of town”.⁷⁰ This trend seems to have continued in the 1870s with the development of districts away from the town centre such as St. Marks, described by the *Examiner* as “one of the pleasantest suburbs in town”.⁷¹ The reason for the lack of new housing in the poorer districts was probably the inability of the majority of the working population to afford the level of rent needed to make investment commercially viable.

Following the appointment of the first MOH under the 1870 Act at the end of 1873 and the Inspector of Nuisances soon afterwards public health problems were tackled with rather more urgency. A more interventionist policy was adopted and property owners were forced to carry out repairs to houses and drains and to arrange for connection to water mains where this was possible. In December 1875 the CIC was advised of two properties in Manchester Walk considered unfit for human habitation and decided to apply a bye-law which provided for the closing of property in this condition.⁷² Power to take this action was contained in the Act of 1852 under which the Commission had been set up⁷³ but according to the report of the meeting in the *Examiner* this was the first time

⁶⁹ *Mercury*, 25 Dec 1875, p.2.

⁷⁰ *Looker On*, 19 Oct 1861, p.688.

⁷¹ *Examiner*, 9 Aug 1871, p.4.

⁷² CIC Minutes 1872-1876, 1 Dec. 1875. GRO: Ref. CBR/B2/1/1/2

⁷³ Cheltenham Improvement Act 1852, Section 34. CL: Ref.63G352

the power had been exercised. It was anticipated that it would have to be used extensively in the future.⁷⁴

In 1878 a scheme was agreed with the LGB for improving access to the town centre which opened up the possibility of more ambitious house clearing programmes. Part of the scheme involved the widening of North Street and required the demolition of property that, according to Dr. Wilson suffered serious sanitation problems. "Beyond question several of the tenements are of a character that would make their removal an advantage there being no space to improve them".⁷⁵ A year later the MOH made a case for the clearance of sixteen to eighteen dilapidated cottages in New Street to open up "one of the most neglected parts of Cheltenham". He believed that the overall health of the area would be improved by the provision of "better dwellings, drier walls and more airy apartments".⁷⁶ Just who was to provide these new dwellings was not mentioned but when commenting on this proposal in his Annual Report for 1879 he clearly did not envisage this would be a problem arguing somewhat vaguely that "houses of superior character will doubtless be erected on the vacant space".⁷⁷ A far more ambitious proposal was put forward by James Howard in a letter published in the *Examiner* in November 1878 which envisaged the establishment of a privately owned organisation to carry out a slum clearance programme. New houses would be built on cleared land and let at the lowest possible rate. Profits made by the enterprise would be used to provide a modest return on capital and the remainder distributed to the tenants as a bonus or a reduction of rents.⁷⁸ This suggestion seems more idealistic than practical and does not appear to have generated any immediate response but it does show that around this time overcrowding as distinct from sanitation was becoming an issue in its own right.

Housing conditions were not of course the only problem faced by the poor. The daily struggle to provide the basic necessities of life from an inadequate income must for many have been an ever-present concern. During this period food costs generally were reduced somewhat as a result of the increase in imports of cheaper products such as

⁷⁴ *Examiner*, 8 Dec 1875, p.2.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 3 April 1878, p.3.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 5 March 1879, p.4.

⁷⁷ MOH Annual Report 1879.

⁷⁸ *Examiner*, 20 Nov 1878, p.3.

cereals and meat and the gradual reduction of food taxes.⁷⁹ By 1877 Cheltenham was receiving regular supplies of American beef which retailed at 2d or 3d below the price of home produced meat.⁸⁰ The town's first Co-operative grocery store was established in 1872 and offered reductions of ten to thirty per cent on a wide range of goods.⁸¹ What benefit the poor gained from these improvements however is open to question particularly during periods of unemployment. The Co-op for example gave no credit and therefore the savings available were probably often out of the reach of the poorest families. At the same time the price of some basic commodities increased rather than reduced. In September 1872 the threat of an increase in the price of coal was a matter of considerable concern because of the suffering and distress it was expected to cause among the poor during the coming winter.⁸² In the winter of 1873, when the price of coal was actually increased a scheme was arranged for the poor to obtain supplies at half price. Samuel Onley Jun. urged suppliers to deliver the coal to the poorer districts so as to avoid people paying additional transport costs.⁸³ Milk was clearly regarded as an important element in the diet of young children. Consequently, when reporting the death of a much-loved philanthropist Mrs Van Hagen, the *Examiner* referred specifically to the fact that her charitable activities had for many years included the provision of a daily allowance of milk for the poor based on the number of children in each family.⁸⁴ Yet in 1876, when there was a good deal of anger about the rising cost of milk, one letter described it as "almost a forbidden luxury" for the poor even before the increase.⁸⁵

The straitened circumstances in which many working families lived makes it unlikely that unskilled or casual labourers could make adequate provision for even short periods of unemployment. The cost of sickness schemes provided by benefit or friendly societies for example would have put them out of reach of this group of workers. The Protestant Trinitarian Benefit Society for example required contributions of 2s per month, payable even during sickness, and provided no benefit for the first year of membership. Membership in any case lasted only up to age forty and could be forfeited for non-payment of contributions. Occupations that involved some health risk, such as firemen,

⁷⁹ J. Burnett, *Plenty and Want. A Social History of Diet in England from 1815 to the Present Day* (London: Scolar Press, Revised edition 1979) p.132.

⁸⁰ *Looker, On* 24 Feb 1877, p.123.

⁸¹ *Mercury*, 5 Sept 1874, p.4.

⁸² *Looker, On*, 20 Sept, 1872, p.619.

⁸³ *Examiner*, 24 Dec 1873,

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 28 Feb 1877, p.4.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 4 Oct 1876, p.8.

painters of any kind and people working with white lead were excluded.⁸⁶ Life for many working families must therefore have been extremely insecure and the margin between independence and pauperism very narrow.

The consequences of poor living conditions and inadequate diet on the general health of the poor received comparatively little attention apart from the link with infectious diseases. Understandably perhaps, for a town that still regarded itself a health resort far more importance was attached to the health of the community as a whole as reflected in the annual death rate. On this basis Cheltenham's record was considered to compare favourably with the rest of the country but it is difficult to avoid the feeling that the statistical evidence was presented in a way that was perhaps somewhat misleading. For example the MOH in his annual report for 1874 compares Cheltenham's average death rate for the period 1861-1870 of 19.3 per thousand with the average for London of 24.3 and with some of the major industrial towns and cities of the north all of which were even higher. The average rate for Liverpool for example was 38.6. When calculating the rates for the later years of the 1870s when there was some deterioration a number of adjustments were made which, although logical in themselves nevertheless produced more acceptable figures. In 1878 and 1879 the total deaths were reduced to allow for visitors who were already sick when they arrived in the town and for late reported deaths from previous years. In the latter case a number of deaths simply disappeared from the record since the rates for previous years were not adjusted. For 1879 and 1880 the population figure used in the calculations was increased from 42,000 to 45,000 to reflect the probable increase since the 1871 census.⁸⁷ Unless a similar adjustment had been made elsewhere the change would have invalidated comparisons. Graham Davis has drawn attention to the difficulties experienced by the MOH for Bath in the late 1860s in reconciling his medical responsibilities with the need to promote the healthy image of the town. It seems that Dr. Wright may have faced similar conflict of interests.⁸⁸ Table 2.1, which excludes these adjustments, compares Cheltenham's death rate with that for

⁸⁶ Protestant Trinitarian Benefit Society Articles 1865.CL: Ref. 63G368

⁸⁷ MOH Reports 1874-1880

⁸⁸ G. Davis, "Beyond the Georgian Façade: The Avon Street District of Bath", in M. Gaskell (Ed), *Slums* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1990), pp.144-185.

England and Wales.

TABLE 2.I
AVERAGE DEATH RATES PER THOUSAND
Cheltenham England & Wales

1860-70	19.3	22.4
1871-75	18.4	22.0
1876-80	19.7	20.8

Figures for England and Wales 1871-1880 quoted in
 D Read, *Age of Urban Democracy* p.6. Remaining figures from the
 MOH Reports 1874-80.

These overall figures did not reflect the wide variations in the experience of the different districts of the town and some of the poorer areas were known to have an exceptionally poor record. The New Street area for example formed part of the West Ward which also included the Lansdown and Bayshill districts, some of the healthiest and also wealthiest districts of the town. In 1865 however, when statistics were compiled for individual Wards, it was found that the West Ward had a death rate of 23.6, the highest of the five Wards. This was considered to be due to the fact that the ward included the New Street area which had "unusually high death rates".⁸⁹ In 1879 the MOH claimed that the New Street area with a population of 427 had a death rate equal to over 30 per thousand.⁹⁰

The other main measure of public health, infant mortality, received less attention than the overall death rate although the basic information is included in the MOH reports for the period 1874-1880. For the years 1870-1873 total births and deaths are recorded but there are no data available for the number of children who died before reaching the age of one. However between 1874 and 1880 deaths in this category averaged twenty per cent of total deaths and applying this ratio it is possible to make a reasonable estimate of the experience for the earlier period.

⁸⁹ Dr. Wilson, *Sanitary Statistics 1865-1871*.

⁹⁰ *Examiner*, 5 March 1879, p.4.

TABLE 2.2
INFANT MORALITY 1870-1880.

Year	Births	Deaths under one year	Ratio %
1870	1096	175 e	16.0 e
1871	1150	167 e	14.5 e
1872	1053	151 e	14.3 e
1873	1082	146 e	13.5 e
1874	1061	118	11.1
1875	1045	155	14.8
1876	1008	194	19.2
1877	1057	153	14.5
1878	1102	176	16.0
1879	1133	121	10.7
1880	1076	230	21.4

MOH Reports 1874-1880. e=estimate.

In 1873 Cheltenham experienced a severe outbreak of smallpox with around forty fatalities.⁹¹ Based on the impact of later epidemics this could well have produced a higher ratio than the estimate for that year as shown in Table 2.2. Subject to this qualification it seems possible that Cheltenham's average infant mortality experience for this period was slightly in excess of the average ratio of fifteen per cent for the whole of England and Wales.⁹² It also seems that, in line with the overall death rate, there was a noticeable deterioration in the second half of the 1870s. The analysis of the main causes of deaths among young children shown in Table 2.3 below identifies some of the reasons for this trend.

⁹¹ *Looker On*, 9 Aug 1873, p.508.

⁹² F. B. Smith, "Health" in J. Benson (ed), *The Working Class in England 1875-1914* (Beckenham: Croom Helm 1985), pp.36-62.

TABLE 2.3
MAIN CAUSES OF DEATH FOR CHILDREN UNDER FIVE 1870-1880.

Cause of Death	1874	1875	1876	1877	1878	1879	1880
Measles	13	1	0	10	84	1	9
Scarlatina	2	0	63	9	0	0	4
Diarrhoea	18	27	46	6	23	2	36
Convulsions	32	20	42	32	20	33	67
Premature Births	10	19	19	21	16	16	14
Respiratory diseases	54	53	51	60	47	42	63
Nutritional	22	43	40	55	56	31	55
Other	<u>36</u>	<u>30</u>	<u>42</u>	<u>34</u>	<u>37</u>	<u>34</u>	<u>22</u>
Total	<u>187</u>	<u>193</u>	<u>303</u>	<u>227</u>	<u>283</u>	<u>159</u>	<u>270</u>

Source MOH Reports 1874-1880

In 1874 the MOH noted that the Registrar General regarded the incidence of zymotic diseases such as scarlatina, measles and diphtheria as the main test of local health conditions “because they related to conditions which are preventable”. Understandably therefore the scarlatina and measles outbreaks of 1876 and 1878, which were exceptional, gave rise to a good deal of concern. The scarlatina epidemic resulted in over ninety deaths for all age groups and was particularly prevalent “in small, ill-ventilated dwellings situated in populous districts where every bed has its two or three occupants”.⁹³ The measles outbreak attracted similar comments and represented a further indictment of housing conditions in the poorer districts. Rather less concern was expressed about the annual number of deaths from diarrhoea and respiratory diseases which claimed far more lives over the period and could also have been associated with poor housing and inadequate sanitation. Nutritional diseases attracted no comment whatsoever even though, on average, they accounted for almost twenty per cent of all infant deaths.

On Christmas Day 1872 the *Examiner* in an appeal for charity to assist the poor observed that “In social conditions there are matters which require amendment. Honest industry, in many instances, reaps but scant reward. The cry of hopeless hunger mingles in a thousand homes with the kiss of affection”.⁹⁴ The effectiveness of the various organisations attempting to deal with what were clearly major social problems is examined in the following chapter.

⁹³ MOH Annual reports 1874-1880

⁹⁴ *Examiner*, 25 December 1872, p.4.

Chapter 3. Social Services

Under the prevailing economic and fiscal policies it was clearly beyond the capacity of local organisations to achieve the degree of wealth redistribution needed to solve the problem of chronic poverty. The most that could be done was to relieve or contain some of its worst consequences. However the extent to which even this could be achieved was impaired by the lack of any overall policy or objective and an almost complete absence of co-ordination in the way resources were applied. The two elected bodies, the Improvement Commission (later the Borough Council) and the Board of Guardians, were constrained by legislation but were also influenced by the electorate. There was little co-operation between the two bodies even though individuals often held office in both organisations. The various charities and voluntary organisations were subject to sectional interests and policies and often seemed to pursue their objectives in complete isolation from the rest of the community. This was particularly true of the Church and individual members of the clergy sometimes seem to have assumed a surprising degree of authority.

The Poor Law.

As noted in the previous chapter the Cheltenham Guardians seemed to ignore the central LGB campaign to reduce out relief. Whether this was a deliberate policy decision or the result of ignorance is unclear but there is no mention in the minutes of the weekly Board meetings of either the Goschen memorandum of 1869 or the circular issued by the LGB in November 1871. According to Hurren prior to this “crusade” Guardians had considerable discretionary powers to administer out relief according to local economic conditions and the approach adopted in Cheltenham may, consciously or otherwise, have reflected the seasonal nature of the local economy.⁹⁵ In May 1870 the *Examiner* appeared

⁹⁵ E.T.Hurren, “Agricultural trade unionism and the crusade against out relief: poor law politics in the Brixworth Union, Northamptonshire, 1870-1875, *The Agricultural History Review*, Vol. 48, Part 11 (2000), pp.200 –222.

to justify the policy when it published an extract from a paper by Professor Rogers presented to the Statistical Society in which the poor rate was described as “a rate in aid of wages”. “Cut away poor relief and one of two things must happen. Either the labourer must be paid better, or many of those habitually maintained by the poor rate must perish”.⁹⁶ The Guardians’ approach does not appear to have met with any significant local opposition and in June 1870, when around 3,000 people were receiving out relief each week at an annual cost of £10,000, the *Examiner* praised the Board for its efficient administration. There was no mention whatsoever of possible adverse moral consequences.⁹⁷ As a result of severe weather conditions in the early weeks of 1871 out relief figures increased significantly and attracted strong criticism from the Poor Law Board (PLB). A letter read at a Board meeting in February referred to “exceptionally large” numbers of able-bodied men receiving out relief even though there were few such cases in the workhouse. It was pointed out that “mere severity of the weather” should not mean “immediate recourse to the poor rates” and concluded with a warning about the moral consequences of indiscriminate relief. The Guardians seem to have been unimpressed by the criticism and did not even give instructions for a suitable reply. Two weeks later when a further letter was received requesting an acknowledgement the Clerk was simply instructed to point out that the rules were followed to the extent that the workhouse accommodation allowed.⁹⁸

At the time there appeared to be no local criticism of this somewhat cavalier attitude but some unease began to emerge, as people became aware that Cheltenham’s pauper population was unusually large compared with other towns. In February 1873 statistics were presented to a meeting of the Guardians which showed that 6% of the Union population was receiving relief of which only 10% was in the workhouse. It was claimed that these proportions were higher than those of other Unions where in some cases out relief had been almost completely eliminated. Burton on Trent for example, with a slightly smaller population than Cheltenham had only half the number of paupers.⁹⁹ In the following months a number of letters were published expressing concern about the possible misuse of relief and the Guardians eventually accepted that they would have to

⁹⁶ *Examiner*, 25 May 1870, p.3.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 22 June 1870, p.4.

⁹⁸ Minutes of Board of Guardians Meetings 2 Feb 1871 & 16 Feb 1871. GRO: Ref. G/CH/8A/15

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 19 Feb 1873, Ref. G/CH/8A/16

become more directly involved in the assessment of applications. In 1874 lists of people receiving relief were produced for examination by the Board but even at this stage some Guardians seemed to attach little importance to the review process. During the reading of the lists the majority paid little attention and there was “a buzz of conversation round the table joined in by nearly all the members of the Board”.¹⁰⁰ The exercise produced some savings but the LGB was still not satisfied and in August the District Inspector, Mr F. D. Longe, attended a Board meeting to emphasise the point. At this meeting the Relieving Officer argued that more involvement of individual Guardians in the initial assessment of applicants would help to prevent fraudulent claims.¹⁰¹ By October it was clear that some action would be needed and a committee was formed under the chairmanship of Samuel Onley Jun. to draw up proposals for tighter control. The committee reported at a special meeting in November when Onley pointed out that in England and Wales at the beginning of 1871 there was one pauper for every twenty-three of the population. By August 1875 the ratio had reduced to one in thirty-three. Cheltenham in July 1871 had a ratio of one in sixteen, which, by July 1875 had reduced to one in twenty-one. He therefore proposed that out relief should be restricted to married people whose poverty was due to factors outside their control. Destitution due to improvidence and intemperance would only be relieved in the workhouse and widows with dependent children would receive out relief for no more than the first six months after the death of their husbands. He also suggested that recipients of out relief should be visited regularly to ensure that their circumstances had not changed. As a more general comment he felt that the workhouse test should be applied more often but accepted that this was of limited value since only 400 people could be accommodated in the present building. The number currently in the house was stated to be 303.¹⁰² The new approach produced further reductions and in November 1878 the Chairman of the Board reported a total saving of £7,000 in the last three years.¹⁰³ In October of the following year, a period of continuing economic decline, the *Examiner* referred to the “gratifying news” that the poor rate was to be reduced still further.¹⁰⁴ The effect of the change in policy on the number of people receiving out relief is shown in table 3.1 below.

¹⁰⁰ *Mercury*, 5 Sept 1874, p.2.

¹⁰¹ *Examiner*, 10 Aug 1875 p.2.

¹⁰² *Ibid* 24, Nov 1875, p.8.

¹⁰³ *Ibid* 20, Nov 1878, p.8.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 1 Oct 1879, p.4.

TABLE 3.1.
OUT RELIEF IN THE CHELTENHAM UNION 1870-1879

<u>Date</u>	<u>Non-able bodied</u>	<u>Able bodied</u>	<u>Children</u>	<u>Total</u>
Jan 1870	1424	614	1211	3279
July 1870	1383	454	1055	2892
Jan 1871	1488	815	1376	3679
July 1871	1456	432	1058	2946
Jan 1872	1566	397	1079	3042
July 1872	1514	322	919	2755
Jan 1873	1554	286	912	2752
July 1873	1521	294	830	2645
Jan 1874	1453	263	852	2568
July 1874	1431	243	864	2538
Jan 1875	1372	224	725	2321
July 1875	1308	181	693	2182
Jan 1876	1249	161	630	2040
July 1876	1203	147	566	1916
Jan 1877	1049	167	557	1773
July 1877	1021	148	525	1694
Jan 1878	1023	143	531	1697
July 1878	1014	118	497	1629
Jan 1879	1001	125	517	1643
July 1879	980	92	450	1522
Dec 1879	986	94	475	1555

Source: Board of Guardian meetings as reported in the *Examiner*.

The relatively low level of seasonal variation in the numbers of non able-bodied paupers would seem to indicate the existence of a group of long-term paupers many of whom were probably elderly. The *Mercury*, when it attended the review of the pauper lists in 1874, expressed some surprise at the large number of old people who appeared before the Guardians.¹⁰⁵ In these cases the loss of relief no doubt meant that younger relatives incurred an additional financial burden since, according to de Ferrieres, some old people would gradually starve rather than enter the workhouse. At a Board meeting in November 1876 he suggested that people who were struggling to support their “aged and indigent parents” should be assisted. There was sympathy among the other Board members for this view but obviously any such assistance would have negated the reduction in out relief and no action was taken.¹⁰⁶ It does in fact seem that a rather more

¹⁰⁵ *Mercury*, 5 Sept 1874, p.2.

¹⁰⁶ *Examiner*, 22 Nov 1876, p.2.

sympathetic approach was adopted towards this group since the overall reduction in the numbers relieved between 1870 and 1879 was around thirty per cent compared with almost eighty per cent for the able-bodied.

The extent to which the overall reduction was due to the elimination of fraudulent claims is not recorded in official minutes and, under an agreement reached in the 1840s, comments on individual cases were generally excluded from press reports.¹⁰⁷ It must be assumed however that under the lax policies followed in the first half of the decade there was scope for minor fraud. In 1874 the *Mercury* referred those “artful dodgers” who extract what they can from the Union and supplement it by “victimising the charitable public daily”. In some cases bread obtained from the Union was sold to “the really deserving poor at 5d a loaf”. It also describes a case that suggests the Guardians may not have been immune to pressure from the more respectable and influential sources. During the review of the pauper lists in 1874 a woman receiving 2s per week out relief was found to have an income of 9s 9d for work carried out for the one of the churches. This was higher than the income of many who were paying poor rates and should have rendered her ineligible for relief. On the intervention of a clergyman however one of the Guardians was persuaded to continue relief at the existing rate. The paper regarded this incident and “others of a similar ilk” as discreditable to the Church and the Guardians. “The Church does not pay proper wages so the rate-payers supplement the Church”.¹⁰⁸ No doubt there were similar cases but it seems unlikely that the reduction of around one thousand in the number of people receiving out relief could have resulted in anything other than a significant increase in the overall level of distress and an increased need for other forms of relief. For most of those deprived of out relief entry into the workhouse was not an alternative due to the limited accommodation available and in fact the number of people accommodated increased by less than one hundred between 1874 and December 1879.

The inadequacy and condition of the building, erected in 1846 had in fact been a cause of concern since the 1860s and from time to time attracted a good deal of adverse comment from the public and the press. At a Board meeting in November 1877 the LGB District Inspector said that he knew of no workhouse as overcrowded or where the

¹⁰⁷ *Examiner*, 12 Jan 1870, p.2.

¹⁰⁸ *Mercury*, 5 Sept 1874, p.2.

children were in such “bad and ill-ventilated” conditions.¹⁰⁹ . In September 1878 the LGB architect strongly recommended the acquisition of a nearby property, the Elms which was described as comprising seven acres of “park like grounds” with a main building that would accommodate eighty children with scope for an infirmary.¹¹⁰ Most people saw this as preferable to extending the current accommodation or erecting a completely new building but the Board was unable to reach agreement before the end of the decade. This was largely due to the influence of Samuel Onley Sen. whose opposition to the Elms scheme was, according to one correspondent, based on his dislike of the owner, J Chesshyre. He argued that Onley was out of step with the majority of the ratepayers on the issue and considered that this would influence the next election of Guardians.¹¹¹

Medical Services

As befitted a health resort Cheltenham appears to have acquired a reputation for medical excellence well before the 1870s. In 1826 one observer noted that in terms of medical practitioners the town “is provided with talent more than adequate to the occasions which require it”.¹¹² In the early years of the decade there were 48 physicians and surgeons resident in the town, the largest professional group apart from teachers.¹¹³ The town’s main medical institution, the General Hospital opened in 1839, had been developed from a Dispensary established in the early years of the century. In addition there were several specialist organisations such as the Coburg Society and Dispensary for the Diseases of Women and Children and the Cheltenham Medic Eclectic Dispensary.¹¹⁴ In October 1867 a nursing organisation was established in the Christchurch district by Rev. J.F. Fenn to supply “highly trained and trustworthy nurses to rich and poor.” In 1869 it became the Cheltenham Nursing Institution with a staff of eight private nurses and one district nurse. It ceased operating in 1872 however due to “a considerable want of support”.¹¹⁵ A more successful development was the building of the Delancey Fever Hospital on the outskirts of the town financed in part by a bequest of £5,000 from a

¹⁰⁹ *Examiner*, 7 Nov 1877, p.2.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 8 Sept 1878, p.2.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 22 Jan 1879, p.3.

¹¹² D. M. Doughton, “Charles Fowler (1799-1858), surgeon of Cheltenham, and his contemporaries” in *Journal of Medical Biography*, Vol. 6 1998, pp.187-193.

¹¹³ The Royal Cheltenham and County Directory, 1872-1873. GRO: Ref. ROL.H11

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ Cheltenham Nursing Institution Minutes of Meetings 1867-1872. GRO: Ref. D2465. 3/1

Miss Delancey in 1870. Unlike the General Hospital the Delancey was designed to cater for all sections of the community including the wealthy, who were normally treated in their own homes. In 1872 the *Examiner* noted with satisfaction that it would have private rooms for the “well-to-do”, a feature it considered to be of “paramount importance”.¹¹⁶

The extent to which these services were available to the very poor is unclear. Although the various bodies were subsidised by voluntary contributions they nevertheless charged for treatment. In some cases however subscribers also received “tickets” which could be used to provide treatment to poorer people as a form of charity. The Coburg Society for example provided three midwifery and two Dispensary tickets for an annual subscription of £1 10s 6d.¹¹⁷ The General Hospital operated a similar system with subscribers at the highest level, ten guineas, receiving nine tickets for treatment in the hospital and six for out patients together with the right to vote at annual meetings.¹¹⁸ Exactly who benefited from the tickets is uncertain but the General Hospital’s annual report for 1869 identifies the practice of giving “relief tickets” to those who were not “rightly entitled to them” as one of the reasons for the increase in the number of out patients recorded during that year.¹¹⁹ This tone of this comment suggests that some of the very poor may have been involved. It certainly appears that in some circumstances paupers had access to the hospital facilities since the Poor Law’s half yearly financial statements show regular subscriptions of around fifty pounds annually.¹²⁰ The Delancey, which was designed to prevent the spread of infectious diseases, obviously catered for the very poor and paupers were charged 3s per day compared with 7s for other patients.¹²¹ The Cheltenham Provident Dispensary, formed in 1879, provided outpatient and home visiting for a small weekly sum, 1d for a single person and 2d for a married couple, and appears to have been aimed at people who could not afford the other services but wished to avoid the Poor Law. A similar organisation had been operating successfully in Leamington for several years.¹²² This development came too late to provide any significant benefits during the 1870s and it appears that a significant number of people were largely dependent on the Poor Law for medical assistance. To some extent this analysis is supported by the

¹¹⁶ *Examiner*, 24 Jan 1872, p.2.

¹¹⁷ Royal Cheltenham and County Directory 1872-1873

¹¹⁸ Cheltenham General Hospital Annual Reports 1870-1879. GRO: Ref. CH/HO3 8/8

¹¹⁹ *Examiner*, 26 Jan 1870, p.8.

¹²⁰ Poor Law Financial Statements 1870-1880. GRO: Ref. G. CH. 12/1

¹²¹ *Examiner*, 11 July 1877, p.2.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 2 April 1879, p.2.

information shown in Table 3.2 which is based on the MOH's annual reports for the second half of the decade.

TABLE 3.2
ANALYSIS OF SICKNESS CASES

<u>Year</u>	<u>General Hospital and Dispensaries</u>	<u>Poor Law</u>	<u>Total</u>
1874	6089	1449	7538
1875	6120	2237	8357
1876	6436	1529	7965
1877	6152	1191	7343
1878	6397	2161	8558
1879	6232	2425	8657

Source: MOH Annual Reports 1874-1880

The figures for Poor Law cases shown in the table are less than satisfactory. In 1874 for example the Poor Law Medical Officers did not report full details. Furthermore no explanation is given for the wide fluctuations in Poor Law cases apart from the comment that the figures for 1875 were due to bad weather late in the year. It nevertheless seems possible that as a result of the campaign against out relief and the failure to increase workhouse accommodation the provision of medical services was, by the end of the decade becoming the Poor Law's most important welfare function.

Charity.

Charity was the key element in the provision of social welfare and presumably must have become increasingly important during the 1870s as economic conditions deteriorated and the level of relief provided by the Poor Law was reduced. The level of charitable activity in its widest sense was a matter of civic pride and in 1875 for example the *Looker On* claimed that "No town in the country does more to alleviate the sufferings of the poor".¹²³ There are unfortunately no reliable estimates of the total funds involved but it is clear that social welfare organisations designed for the benefit of the local poor were by no means the only activities financed on a voluntary basis. Charity did not always begin at home.

¹²³ *Looker On*, 25 Dec 1875, p.832.

There were of course many charitable actions for which measurement in monetary terms would be irrelevant even if it were possible. In 1875, to quote just one example, a group of people associated with St. John's church renovated a disused public house so that it could be used as a crèche during the daytime and as a club for working men in the evening. In less than a year the crèche had recorded five thousand attendances and the club had two hundred members.¹²⁴ The time invested by individuals in initiatives such as this was probably almost as important as money. Nevertheless all the voluntary organisations whatever their purpose were partly or wholly dependent on financial contributions from the wealthier sections of the community and many people discharged their charitable obligations by making cash donations, either directly to individual charities or through the Church. The churches seem to have acted as collection and distribution agencies as well as providers of welfare services within their individual parishes and the funds they administered were clearly regarded as the major component of the overall level of routine charitable expenditure. For example in December 1873 the *Examiner* expressed concern about the unsatisfactory condition "of our charitable and philanthropic undertakings all of which are inadequately supported." This situation was considered to be the consequence of increased spending by the churches on education.¹²⁵ Since some, perhaps all, churches published detailed annual statements of income and expenditure it seems reasonable to assume therefore that the way in which the funds were administered was broadly acceptable to the majority of their parishioners.

Unfortunately the only annual statement available for this period is the 1879 report for Christ Church from which a number of pages are missing. Up to 1875 however the *Looker On* published articles on the annual reports prepared by the "Principal Churches of Cheltenham".¹²⁶ In many cases the articles contain few figures but more detailed statements were usually published for what appear to have been regarded as the three main churches, the Parish Church, St. James and Christ Church. Table 3.3 below has been compiled from these reports which appear in the newspaper in the first three or four months of the year. Data for the late 1860s have been included in order to establish the pattern of expenditure over a reasonable period.

¹²⁴ *Examiner*, 12 Jan 1876, p.2.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 17 Dec 1873, p.4.

¹²⁶ *Looker On*, 14 March 1868.

TABLE 3.3
CHRIST CHURCH, THE PARISH CHURCH AND ST. JAMES
CHARITABLE EXPENDITURE 1867-1873

<u>Year</u>	<u>Secular Charity</u>	<u>Education</u>	<u>Religious Charity</u>	<u>Total</u>
	£	£	£	£
1867	2,210	2,008	2,907	7,125
1868	2,214	2,101	2,429	6,744
1869	2,102	2,915	2,561	7,578
1870	2,246	1,998	2,682	6,926
1871	1,848	2,148	2,532	6,528
1872	2,067	1,832	2,490	6,389
1873	<u>2,280</u>	<u>2,415</u>	<u>2,336</u>	<u>7,031</u>
Total	<u>14,967</u>	<u>15,417</u>	<u>17,947</u>	<u>48,321</u>

Source: *Looker On*

Educational expenditure during this period includes the cost of enlarging and improving school premises in order to comply with the Education Act of 1870. The exact amounts involved are not often mentioned and in most cases may not therefore have been particularly large. The 1869 report on the Parish Church however shows that total education costs of £2,165 included capital expenditure of £1,100. The figures also include income received from non-charitable sources in the form of government grants and the "school pence" although the amounts involved are not shown. However the 1879 Christ Church Report shows that this income may have provided approximately 50 per cent of educational costs excluding capital expenditure.¹²⁷

Secular expenditure also reflects an element of non-charitable income in the form of the various provident funds built up from the small savings of the members in order to provide such items as fuel and clothing during the winter. Contributions to other welfare organisations, notably the various medical services which were perhaps of little benefit to the very poor, were also included under this heading and where shown separately appear to represent 20 to 25 per cent of the total secular expenditure. In addition contributions were made to the frequent appeals for external causes and in 1870 for example the three churches included in the table provided over £200 for the wounded in the Franco-

¹²⁷ Christ Church, Cheltenham Report of Charities 1879.

Prussian War. Church administrative costs were also treated by the *Looker On* as a secular item and in some cases may have been significant. An article dealing with Trinity Church expenditure for 1869 shows a total of £178 for church expenses compared with £303 for poor relief.¹²⁸ Unfortunately the accounts of this church were not often dealt with in detail and it is possible that 1869 was unusual in some way.

Adjusting for these items suggests that over this period these three churches allocated less than 25 per cent of the total funds they administered to the direct relief of poverty within their parishes. The proportion given to various external religious organisations however was almost 40 per cent with The Society for the Education of Females in the East, The Society for the Conversion of Jews and the Church Missionary Society being particularly well supported. In 1871 and 1872, the only years for which complete figures are available, total contributions to these bodies alone accounted for over 21 per cent of total funds administered. In its comments on church finances the *Looker On* went to considerable lengths to emphasise the level of secular charity to play down the level of support given to religious causes. All expenditure other than that relating to religious charities was presented as being exclusively for the benefit of the poor even though in the case of education there were strong religious motives involved. This method of presentation was particularly effective where, as was often the case, the published articles contained very few figures. It is possible in fact that the level of religious funding was beginning to become a sensitive issue and in the early 1870s a distinctly defensive note is apparent in some articles. The report on the St. James's accounts for 1871 for example justifies the emphasis on secular activities on the grounds that its value "might be made apparent to those who are apt to think of the National Establishment as of an Institution wholly concerning itself with spiritual things".¹²⁹

There is no significant variation in the pattern of distribution applied by the individual churches included in Table 3.3 and it is possible that it was common to all the Christian churches. For political reasons it may have been difficult for an individual church to break ranks. Whether any significant changes took place during the remainder of the

¹²⁸ *Looker On*, 26 March 1870, p.204.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 23 March 1872, p.187.

decade is unknown although capital expenditure on school premises would probably have been lower. At the same time it seems unlikely that any conscious effort was made to compensate for reduced levels of Poor Law relief since this would have undermined the justification for the reduction. It is more likely in fact that the worsening economic conditions of the late 1870s reduced church income. Between 1867 and 1873 Christ Church, whose congregation was described as “Confessedly the wealthiest in Cheltenham”,¹³⁰ allocated an average of about £800 each year to secular purposes including poor relief. In 1879 this had been reduced to under £500 although education costs, including government grants and the school fees, were maintained at much the same level.¹³¹

Although the churches were the main contributors to the voluntary social welfare system their commitment to education and external religious causes probably ensured that the level of poor relief they provided was barely adequate even in favourable economic circumstances. They were clearly unable to respond even to slightly unusual conditions such as the frequent periods of bad weather. At the same time the autonomy of the individual parishes must have created considerable differences in the level of voluntary services provided in the various districts. Churches in the poorer areas would have had fewer wealthy people in their congregations than Christ Church for example and the level of funds available for relief work would have been correspondingly lower. The essential weakness of the voluntary system seems to have become a matter of concern at the end of the decade. In 1879 the *Looker On* appealed for support for the winter relief fund on the grounds that the level of unemployment was beyond the capacity of the church charities: “machinery of a very different character is required”. No mention was made of the Poor Law however.¹³²

Most charitable expenditure was based on regular donations but funds required for special or unusual causes were raised by separate public appeals. Contributions to the Winter Distress Funds were raised by this method, one of the few instances when an appeal related to social problems in Cheltenham. In effect a work test was applied and relief was given to unemployed men who were prepared to work for a few hours a day on various tasks, mainly stone breaking, organised by the Inspector of Highways. The

¹³⁰ *Looker On*, 4 April 1868.

¹³¹ Christ Church Charities 1879

¹³² *Looker On*, 11 Jan 1879, p.23.

funds raised were used to pay for the work on the basis of the Inspector's valuation "of the work done".¹³³ Since the work carried out clearly had some value to the community as a whole it is difficult to understand why this scheme was regarded as charity and not simply financed from the rates.

The amounts raised for winter relief usually involved only a few hundred pounds but other appeals were far more impressive. As already mentioned, in September 1870 a fund was set up to raise money and clothing for the wounded of the Franco-Prussian War. A committee was established involving a remarkable number of prominent citizens and even the inmates of the workhouse were drafted in to assist with the wrapping of parcels. Within ten days of the launching of the appeal £1,200 had been collected and total donations eventually reached £1,700.¹³⁴ Famine in India in 1877 received even more generous support and in October, a matter of weeks after a fund had been set up, the *Examiner* reported that over £2,000 had been raised.¹³⁵ The General Hospital's income from charity, in the form of private donations, church collections and legacies, averaged a little over £1,800 per annum, slightly larger than its total subscriptions. The aim of its financial policy was to reserve legacies and donations, as far as possible, for future investment yet in 1878 a public appeal was made to finance the building of a new wing capable of housing twelve additional beds. The appeal raised £5,400 and the work was completed in 1879.¹³⁶

Public appeals did not always succeed however. In January 1874 the Industrial School for Boys, founded in 1857, was reported to be in financial difficulties. The *Looker On* strongly supported an appeal for funds describing the organisation as "eminently calculated to diminish crime by training up the children of the destitute in habits of industry". Nevertheless the appeal failed by £150 and in March the *Looker On* reported the closure of the school. In the same edition it also reported that £180 had been raised for the Bengal Famine Fund and £70 for the Hyman Defence Fund which was campaigning against the dismissal of the head of Rugby School.¹³⁷ In the severe weather conditions of January 1879 it became necessary to make a further appeal for subscriptions to the Distress Fund. This raised less than £50 with some subscribers contributing for the

¹³³ Town Council Street and Highway Committee Minutes, Vol.No1 9 Jan 1879. GRO: CBR.C2/3/33/1

¹³⁴ *Chronicle*, 13 Sept and 4 Oct 1870, p.5

¹³⁵ *Examiner*. 31 Oct 1877, p 4.

¹³⁶ Cheltenham General Hospital Annual Reports 1870-1879. GRO: HO 3 8/8

¹³⁷ *Looker On*, 3 Jan 1874, p.25 & 21 March 1874, p.188.

second time.¹³⁸ A week later an appeal for subscriptions to a memorial for the late D.J. Humphries, a former churchwarden and Borough Surveyor, had raised £365.¹³⁹

Local Government.

The CIC was established in the late eighteenth century and in 1870 was operating under an Act of Parliament of 1852 with broad powers to improve sanitary conditions and to exercise health responsibilities under various public health acts. Under the Local Government Act 1858 it was enabled to regulate building construction and to close buildings considered unfit for human habitation. Premises could also be purchased for the purpose of building new streets. Commissioners were elected under a system which enabled property owners to vote as both owners and occupiers with a maximum of twelve votes.¹⁴⁰ In its early years it seems to have acted decisively in improving the sanitary conditions of the town but in other areas, notably water and gas supply, it was fairly inactive. By the 1870s the press reports of the monthly meetings convey a strong sense of inertia, an unwillingness to take decisions and an overwhelming desire to avoid any increase in the rates. Meetings were often poorly attended and in 1870 a Liberal Commissioner lost his seat because he failed to attend for six consecutive monthly meetings. The *Looker On* took great delight in describing how, when the Chairman announced the position, the Liberal members “incontinently, sprang to their feet, two or three rushing past to scour the Borough for the absentees, and the others to speak against time”.¹⁴¹

A special meeting in January 1870 demonstrates many of these failings. It was held at the request of the Liberal J. Chesshyre and four other members who were concerned about the prevalence of “low fever” in the town during the past winter. They considered that the inadequacy of the sewerage system and the lack of mains water in the poorer parts of the town were the main causes of the outbreak. The need for Cheltenham to preserve its

¹³⁸ *Looker On*, 8 Feb 1879, p.82.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 15 Feb 1879, p.98.

¹⁴⁰ Summary of the Cheltenham Improvement Act 1852. CL: Ref. 63G352

¹⁴¹ *Looker On*, 10 Sept. 1870, p.587.

reputation for “healthfulness” was emphasised and the possibility of the CIC taking action against owners of defective housing, as it was empowered to do, was raised. To improve the situation they proposed the appointment of a Medical Officer of Health with wider powers than those of the current Inspector of Lodging Houses on the grounds that such an official would be better able to ensure that adequate precautions were taken to prevent the spread of infectious disease. One member agreed with the proposal in principle but felt that a decision should be delayed until the Government’s Sanitary Commission reported. Nevertheless he believed that Board should take more action in sanitary matters and deplored the tendency of some members to avoid the issue on the grounds that it would damage the town’s reputation as a health resort. Those who opposed the motion however seemed mainly concerned with the impact on the rates while some argued that Cheltenham’s death rate compared favourably with other parts of the country. Others simply refused to accept the relationship between disease and sanitary conditions and a clergyman adopted a somewhat fatalistic attitude describing the deaths that had occurred as “visitations of providence”. The meeting eventually became rather heated and Chesshyre claimed that the Board had a reputation for procrastination and that too often proposals were opposed for political and personal reasons. The motion was overwhelmingly defeated by nineteen votes to five.¹⁴² The division over this issue does not appear to have been based on party lines and Chesshyre received little support from his political colleagues who were in the majority at this time.

The concern expressed at this meeting about the ability of the CIC to cope with an outbreak of infectious disease was soon justified. In March 1871 the PLB warned of a possible smallpox epidemic¹⁴³ but despite several isolated cases in the town during the summer months no action was taken. In September the Rev Walker in an open letter to the CIC pointed out that small pox was severe in the “low parts of Oxford”. He urged the appointment of a medical practitioner to supervise sanitary arrangements and the provision of an isolation facility. These ideas were discussed in early September but Commissioners were clearly not convinced that such measures were called for. It was

¹⁴² *Examiner*, 12th Jan 1870 p.8.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 29th March 1871, p.2.

considered that the Inspector of Lodging Houses could deal with the situation and he was accordingly instructed to step up his programme of “whitewashing” in the “crowded parts of the town”.¹⁴⁴ A few days after the meeting in fact the *Examiner* reported that the Government had advised sanitary authorities to provide isolation facilities.¹⁴⁵ It was not until January 1872 however that the subject of isolation was taken seriously but even then no action was agreed and the matter was simply referred to the Fire Brigade and Nuisance Committee.¹⁴⁶ In January 1873, when several cases were reported in the poorer districts, this Committee finally presented a report recommending the erection of a temporary building in the grounds acquired by the trustees of the proposed Delancey Hospital.¹⁴⁷ After criticising the trustees for not commencing the building of the hospital earlier the Commission, with obvious reluctance, accepted the recommendation.¹⁴⁸ It was fortunate that the outbreak was not as severe as anticipated with 196 cases of which 40 were fatal.¹⁴⁹

In June 1873, while the small pox was gathering pace, a committee was set up to investigate the appointment of a Medical Officer of Health under the Public Health Act of 1872. The salary of this official was clearly a stumbling block and some members favoured a part-time post. The Inspector of Lodging Houses however strongly recommended that the position should be full time and that the person appointed should abandon his private practice.¹⁵⁰ The *Examiner* noted that a part-time appointment had been made in some other towns but argued that it would be wrong for Cheltenham since “much needs to be done”.¹⁵¹ Dr. Thomas Wright, a highly respected medical practitioner was at last appointed as Cheltenham’s full-time Medical Officer of Health in October 1873.¹⁵² In this instance Cheltenham seems to have acted with rather more urgency than the rest of the county and to have avoided involving the LGB. In his report to the Government on the working of the Public Health Act the local LGB Inspector records that in other Sanitary Authorities he had found it necessary to become personally

¹⁴⁴ *Looker On*, 9 Sept 1871, p.571.

¹⁴⁵ *Examiner*, 13 Sept 1871, p.4.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 3 Jan 1872, p.8.

¹⁴⁷ *Looker On*, 11 Jan 1873, p.26.

¹⁴⁸ *Examiner*, 8 Jan 1873, p.2.

¹⁴⁹ *Looker On*, 9 Aug 1873, p.508.

¹⁵⁰ *Examiner*, 11 June 1873, p.8.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 24 Sept 1873, p.4.

¹⁵² Minutes of CIC Meetings 1872-1876.14 October 1873.

involved in the appointment because of “divisions of opinion among the authorities”. In some cases an appointment had been made only after he had threatened to appoint a Poor Law medical officer to the position. At the date of his report, 20 May 1874, Tewkesbury had still not made an appointment.¹⁵³

By 1874 however it seems clear that there was growing dissatisfaction with the Commission. In August the *Examiner* noted that it was now seen as simply a “Sewers Committee” and claimed that it lacked the authority and support for any wider role. The main needs were seen to be an elected Mayor, the introduction of the secret ballot and an end to plural voting. It was accepted that the costs associated with local government would inevitably increase.¹⁵⁴ The Commissioners were obviously themselves aware of the need for change and on 26 September held a private meeting which resolved that “it would be of advantage to the Town that a Charter of Incorporation should be obtained”. A sub committee was formed to take the necessary steps to achieve this and on the 1st April 1876, in spite considerable opposition, the Privy Council advised that royal approval of the Charter had been given.¹⁵⁵ Some of the opposition was based on concern about the power the new Council would have to increase the rates which under the Improvement Act were limited to 2s 6d in the pound. There was also concern about the loss of influence of multiple property owners. The *Looker On* for example pointed out that the owner of the Queen’s Hotel, rated at £300 per annum, would have no more influence than that of the occupier of “the most squalid cottage”. It did accept the introduction of the secret ballot, albeit rather grudgingly, referring to “certain irregularities and corrupt practices” which had “recently been imported”.¹⁵⁶ Curiously enough at the enquiry into the proposal the owner of the Queen’s was in favour as were some with multiple votes including James Downing who had no fewer than seven votes.¹⁵⁷

The first meeting of the new Council in which the Liberals had a clear majority was held on 20th November 1876 and appointed William Nash Skillicorne as Mayor even though

¹⁵³ Reports on the Working of the Public Health Act 1874 in British Parliamentary Papers. General Health. Vol.11 Sessions 1874-1879 pp.296-7. Held at Warwick University.

¹⁵⁴ *Examiner*, 2 Aug and 30 Sept, 1874 p.4.

¹⁵⁵ A Book of Proceedings of Meetings of the Improvement Commission’s Incorporation Committee 1874-1877. GRO: CBR. Ref. C/1/1/1

¹⁵⁶ *Looker On*, 11 May 1875. p.284.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid* 23 Oct 1875.p.680

he and other Liberals had opposed incorporation. A week later the committee structure was reorganised and the Public Health Committee was given greater discretionary powers to tackle housing and sanitation problems. In January 1877 a School Attendance Committee was set up under the Elementary Education Act of 1876. A few months later negotiations were re-opened for the purchase of the Water Company and when this proved unsuccessful it was decided to seek an act of parliament for compulsory purchase.¹⁵⁸ The purchase of the Company was concluded in March 1878 and at the same time permission was obtained for the construction of a reservoir near Dowdswell.¹⁵⁹ The cost of the purchase was £220,000, over twice the amount the Company would have accepted in the 1860s.¹⁶⁰ Concurrently with the take-over of the Water Company a special committee was appointed to examine proposals, already mentioned, for improving access to the town centre and the St. James's railway station to be financed by a Government loan. The scheme was approved by the LGB in 1878.

These measures held out the prospect of economic and social benefits in the longer term and may have been regarded as compensation for the increased cost of local government. Incorporation did not however involve an injection of new blood; every Councillor elected in November 1876 had previously held office in the Commission.¹⁶¹ When in 1878 Samuel Onley Jun. died his father, who had first been elected as a Commissioner in 1865, was appointed as his replacement, a change that could only strengthen the reactionary element in the Council.¹⁶² It is hardly surprising therefore that the new body soon demonstrated some of the failings of its predecessor. In October 1878 it was reported that the MOH had been reprimanded for making unsolicited comments at a Council meeting concerned with certain sanitary bye-laws. Some members took the view that as an officer he should only speak when asked to do so. In October 1878 he included a comment in his Annual Report for 1877 stating that he had "definite instructions" under the minutes of the LGB issued in 1872/73 which required him to advise the Sanitary Authority on "all sanitary issues including the framing and operation

¹⁵⁸ Town Council General Minute Book 1876-1887. GRO: Ref. CBR.C2/1/1/1

¹⁵⁹ C. Hamlin, "Muddling in Bumbledon: On the Enormity of Large Sanitary Improvements in Four British Towns 1855-1885" in *Victorian Studies* Vol.32 No.1 Autumn 1988. Pp.55-83. There was a clearly a good deal of opposition to the purchase. The MOH, Dr Wright, who was leading the case for the acquisition, in a letter written from his London hotel to Dorothea Beale refers to "a tremendous fight" which "imposes a great strain on all concerned". Ladies' College Library Ref. 5340.

¹⁶⁰ *Express*, 20 March 1878, p.2.

¹⁶¹ J.W. Drew, *A Digest of the Cheltenham Improvement Act 1852 and the Public Health Act 1875*, 1885. GL: Ref.11350

¹⁶² Town Council Minutes 1876-1887. 7 May 1877

of bye-laws and regulations". When the report was considered by the Council this defence provoked considerable anger among some members and it was even suggested that a new MOH should be appointed "acting outside" the LGB. It was pointed out however that this would mean they would lose the LGB's contribution to Dr. Wright's salary, an addition to the rates of £150.¹⁶³ This appeared to settle the argument. It is worth noting that in May 1878 Dr. Wright had attended the National Water Supply Conference in London and had the honour of proposing the final resolution calling for a permanent Government Commission to examine the water situation at the national level.¹⁶⁴

The self-esteem of the Council may well have been a factor in its negative response to a tramway system proposed by the Preston Tramway Company in November 1878. The Company committed what the *Examiner* clearly regarded as a tactical error by announcing its intention to seek parliamentary approval for the scheme without first contacting the Council.¹⁶⁵ In fact it appears that contact was made with the Street and Highway Committee before the notices setting out the proposal were displayed. In January 1879 this Committee considered a statement from various local people in favour of the scheme and after talks with the promoters indicated it was prepared to lend its support subject to certain alterations.¹⁶⁶ In February the Council rejected this proposal by a narrow majority, the Mayor having to use a casting vote.¹⁶⁷ This decision was approved by most of the newspapers but there was nevertheless a strong body of opinion in opposition. In April the Mayor was therefore requested to convene a public meeting, the usual method for dealing with issues of this kind, but with the backing of a majority of his colleagues refused on the grounds that the request was not phrased appropriately. A well-attended public meeting was nevertheless held and unanimously approved a resolution respectfully urging the Council to assent to the "Cheltenham Tramways Bill".¹⁶⁸ Late in 1879 a further application was received and referred to the Streets and Highways Committee which recommended that "the opinion of the Burgesses on the subject should be ascertained by a Poll using the measures provided under the Public

¹⁶³ *Examiner*, 9 Oct 1878, p.2.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 29 May 1878, p.8.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 30 Nov 1878, p.4.

¹⁶⁶ Town Street and Highways Committee Minutes No.1 28 Jan 1879. GRO: Ref. CBR C2/3/33/1.

¹⁶⁷ Town Council Minutes 1876-1887

¹⁶⁸ *Examiner*, 8 April 1879, pp.4 & 8.

Libraries Act".¹⁶⁹ At the following Council meeting in early December, after a lengthy discussion it was proposed that the Committee's report should be adopted with the omission of this recommendation. The amendment was agreed thirteen votes to ten.¹⁷⁰ The *Looker On* was, not surprisingly, opposed to the scheme but was nevertheless very critical of the way the Council had avoided a vote on the recommendation.¹⁷¹ The *Mercury* was more outspoken referring to "dunderheaded obstruction" from both Liberals and Conservatives preventing Cheltenham from reaping the benefits of a cheap and efficient transport system. It clearly believed that some Councillors were influenced by a desire to protect their own business interests and claimed that this factor also accounted for the lack of support from the other newspapers.¹⁷² It is impossible to judge the validity of these charges but certainly the opposition of the *Examiner* to the scheme seems uncharacteristic. On the face of it the building of a tramway, along with the Town Improvement, scheme would have provided a stimulus to the local economy which, in the economic climate of 1879, was badly needed.

¹⁶⁹ Street and Highway Committee Minutes, 25 Nov 1879.

¹⁷⁰ Council Meeting Minutes 1876-1887. 1 Dec 1879

¹⁷¹ *Looker On*, 6 Dec. 1879, p.778.

¹⁷² *Mercury* 29 Nov 1879 p.2

Chapter 4. The State of Public Opinion

The examination of social and economic conditions in Cheltenham presented in the previous chapters is based entirely on information that was widely available to contemporaries, mainly but not exclusively through the local press. Much of what was published in articles, editorials and correspondence was often critical of local economic and social conditions and indicates not only an appreciation of the scale of poverty and its consequences but also a clear understanding of its causes. Furthermore there were clearly many people who saw the need for change in social conditions. Curiously it was only in the later years of the decade, when economic conditions deteriorated, that any real attempt was made to attribute poverty to the failings of the poor themselves.

Throughout the period a distinction was made between the “undeserving” and “deserving” poor but this was usually in circumstances that suggest that the main area of concern was what today would be termed “benefit fraud”. The potential for fraud in a society in which there was little co-ordination or regulation of charitable activity was of course recognised and it was also believed that a lax approach to dealing with applications for relief attracted people from elsewhere thereby increasing the overall level of poverty. The *Chronicle* in fact drew attention to this problem in 1870 when it published an article from a London evening paper which argued that this had occurred in Bethnal Green where one of the main consequences was an increase in the rents of working class housing.¹⁷³ The liberal attitude to out relief in Cheltenham around this time may well have been a factor in population growth and it is possible that Cheltenham was indeed “a veritable land of promise to the professional mendicant” as Onley Jun. claimed.¹⁷⁴ Onley served as a Guardian and a Commissioner and was also a member of the National Consultative Council of the National Agricultural Labourers’ Union in Gloucestershire.¹⁷⁵ He demonstrated great understanding of and sympathy for the problems of the poor yet he was largely responsible for the stricter procedures for granting out relief introduced after 1875. In a letter to the *Mercury*, no doubt intended for

¹⁷³ *Chronicle*, 5 April 1870, p.3.

¹⁷⁴ *Examiner*, 1 Dec 1875, p.4.

¹⁷⁵ Samuel Onley Jun. died in 1877 aged 38. His funeral was described as “one of the most imposing demonstrations of personal regard ever witnessed in Cheltenham”. N Scotland “The Decline and Collapse of the National Agricultural Labourers’ Union”, *Gloucestershire History*, No.2 (1986), pp.16-20. According to the *Examiner*, 24 April 1877, p.8 the funeral procession extended for three-quarters of a mile and was attended by 20,000 people.

working class readers, he expressed the view that out relief could not be abandoned in the present state of society. It was however necessary to reduce the burden of the poor rate particularly on those people who were themselves only marginally better off than the paupers. The new approach was therefore designed to eliminate fraud and to avoid attracting people to Cheltenham. He also felt that there was a need for an organisation that would co-ordinate charitable relief with a view to making it more effective and he envisaged the employment of "volunteer visitors" each of whom would "look after" a specific group of poor families.¹⁷⁶ He did not mention the COS specifically although it had made an attempt to become involved with the Cheltenham Union a few months previously. The Guardians had however shown no interest in the offer of assistance.¹⁷⁷

As distress among the poor increased in the later years of the decade this practical and humanitarian approach to poverty began to be challenged particularly by some members of the clergy. In May 1877 the Rev. Canon Trye, Chairman of the Board of Guardians, speaking at the West of England Poor Law Conference argued that "the working classes generally must be taught not to depend on out relief and fathers should be taught to provide for the future of their families". His comments were not apparently discussed by the Board either before or after the Conference and were perhaps not representative of the individual views of his fellow Guardians.¹⁷⁸ The Rev. J. Moore went even further during a meeting convened by the Mayor in December 1878 in connection with the winter relief programme. He referred to indiscriminate charity "that is so much practised in the Town" which he considered was "in great measure" the cause of the "vast amount of distress which now exists".¹⁷⁹ No statistics were produced to justify claims of this kind but nevertheless a number of letters were published arguing that poverty would be reduced if out relief was cut back still further or even stopped completely. These arguments were not allowed to pass without opposition however. One anonymous correspondent who claimed to have had considerable contact with the poor described the suggestion as "heartless and irrational" and argued that it would have little impact on poverty levels. He considered that more attention should be paid to the "real" causes of poverty which he identified as "a deficiency of production" and low wages.¹⁸⁰ The

¹⁷⁶ *Mercury*, 4 Dec 1875, p.2.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 19 May 1875 p.2.

¹⁷⁸ *Examiner*, 25 May 1877, p.3.

¹⁷⁹ *Mercury*, 28 Dec 1878, p.3.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 1 Feb 1879, p.3.

Examiner took a very similar approach. It accepted the need for charity to be more organised but argued that the deterrent nature of the Poor Law was inappropriate for the great mass of the people who “strive to remain independent”. Unemployment, the main cause of poverty, was the result of the “collapse of trade, locally or generally, and epidemic disease” and as such was outside the control of the individual.¹⁸¹

Against the background of this debate a group of clergymen led by the Rev. J. A. Owen agreed that a branch of the COS was needed and convened a public meeting to seek wider support. At the meeting the case for the proposed organisation was based on the claim that parts of the town were becoming “completely pauperised” due in part to indiscriminate charity. There was also a need to reduce the incidence of fraud, and to adopt a more consistent approach to the assessment of individual applications for relief. At the same time members of the public would be relieved of the emotional strain involved in trying to assess the need for relief of individual applicants. These arguments did not produce the unqualified support the organisers may have been hoping for and few seemed convinced by the moral argument. It was pointed out for example that the Cheltenham Loan Fund Society, which was still in existence, had been founded many years earlier with similar aims.¹⁸² Many speakers used the occasion to debate more practical issues mainly in connection with housing conditions. The Rev. Dr. Brown was particularly outspoken on this subject which he clearly saw as an area in which local government had some responsibility. He expressed the hope that the Council would see its way clear to improving conditions in “the poorer class neighbourhoods” as well as “beautifying the town”. There were he said, parts of the Lower High Street known to him and other ministers that were “positively disgraceful”. He referred to a recent case where the Coroner had described the premises in which a woman had died as being “not fit for a dog”. Part of his concern related to the “vast amount of immorality arising from overcrowding”. Capt. St. Clair Ford agreed with these views and in addition wanted some open space to be made available for working class leisure activities. Dr. Wilson advocated a system of trained nurses to help the poor “after the example of Liverpool”. Others

¹⁸¹ *Examiner*, 19 Feb 1879, p.4.

¹⁸² This body had been established in 1834 “to raise the character of the poorer classes, by assisting them in every honest endeavour to support themselves and to improve their condition”. At this period it had approximately 200 loans outstanding with a total value of £800. Cheltenham Loan Fund Society Minute Book. GRO: Ref.D2465 2/1

were obviously uneasy about becoming too closely associated with the London organisation and it was felt that more information was need about its rules and procedures. There was however general agreement that the elimination of fraud was a valid objective and it was eventually agreed that the Society should be established to “endeavour to promote the moral, social and sanitary welfare of the poor of the town”, a rather wider brief than originally intended.¹⁸³

In spite of the acceptance of wider objectives there was a still strong moral emphasis in the first report of the General Committee of the COS which, along with administrative matters, was greatly concerned with begging. It was stated that the Society acted on the principle that “the dangerous and vicious poor, who usually spend on drink what they receive from begging, are already provided with the necessaries of life” from the Poor Law. It was recommended therefore that the public should contact the Enquiry Officer before giving money to beggars.¹⁸⁴ According to a letter published in the *Mercury* a circular had in fact already been issued claiming that “a large proportion of the existing and increasing pauperism in the town” was due the practice of giving money or clothing to beggars “without sufficient enquiry”.¹⁸⁵ The records of routine relief work carried out in the early months of the Society’s existence are difficult to decipher but show that the majority of applicants were rejected. At the first Executive Committee meeting held on the 8th October 1879 for example it was reported that seventeen cases had been dealt with to date “of which only one was deemed worthy of support”.¹⁸⁶ The records give no reasons for rejection and it is of course possible that at this early stage some regular “artful dodgers” were testing the water. The Rev. J.A. Owen however seemed to regard this information as fully justifying the moral approach and in a sermon delivered in November in All Saint’s church argued that the centuries old practice of “giving away large sums of money to the poor” had created poverty. The poor were still suffering from the encouragement this gave to “thriftlessness and mendicancy”. He claimed that, on the basis of the COS figures to date, only one in five or six applicants for charitable relief was genuinely needy.¹⁸⁷ Owen eventually became a much-loved figure to

¹⁸³ *Examiner*, 18 June 1879, p.8 & 25 June 1879, p.4. The Minutes of the Executive Committee record only the decision of the meeting but copies of the two *Examiner* reports are attached. 26 June 1879. GRO: Ref. D2465 1/1.

¹⁸⁴ Charity Organisation Society (COS) Minutes 1879-1880 1 Oct 1879.

¹⁸⁵ *Mercury*, 20 Sept 1879.

¹⁸⁶ (COS) Minutes 1879-1880 8 Oct 1879.

¹⁸⁷ *Examiner*, 12 Nov 1879, p. 8.

Cheltenham's poor and, among other social initiatives, founded a mission in Rutland Street "then the worst street in the town".¹⁸⁸

The major newspapers tended to support the new organisation primarily on grounds of efficiency. The *Looker On* for example welcomed the involvement of the COS in the winter relief programme as the "securest and best medium" for ensuring that relief went to the "really deserving of the unemployed poor".¹⁸⁹ The *Mercury* on the other hand was strongly opposed; describing the COS as "The petty and contemptible association of skinflints aided by certain slimy leeches of the Church" aimed at "choking off the needy applicants for relief". It identified the "depression of the times" as the reason for its formation.¹⁹⁰ There is no evidence at this early stage of any great support from the general public either and the first report of the General Committee shows that the funds received by the end of September 1879 barely covered the administrative costs.¹⁹¹

No doubt there were many shades of opinion between the moral approach of the Rev. Owen and the pragmatism of Sam Onley Jun. but the general lack of enthusiasm for the COS suggests that Onley's views may have been more representative of the majority viewpoint. Nevertheless the debate surrounding the establishment of the COS indicates that at the end of the decade there was a general recognition of the need for improvements in social conditions. The major area of disagreement was the way in which this could be achieved. In fact concern about the inadequacy of a social welfare system largely dependent on the Church and the voluntary actions of individuals is apparent throughout the period. In December 1873 the *Examiner* referred to the unsatisfactory condition of "our charities and philanthropic undertakings" all of which were short of funds due to the amounts the churches had allocated to education.¹⁹² Early in 1876 the *Looker On* reported the imminent closure of The Clothing and Provident Society due to the lack of men to deal with the administration. It considered that this was

¹⁸⁸ A.S. Owen. *James Albert Owen. A Memorial.* (Cheltenham: Norman, Savoury & Co.), p.30.

¹⁸⁹ *Looker On*, 13 Dec 1879, p.793.

¹⁹⁰ *Mercury*, 20 Sept 1879.

¹⁹¹ COS Minutes 1879-1880 1 Oct 1879

¹⁹² *Examiner*, 17 Dec 1873, p.4.

not “creditable to the gentlemen of Cheltenham who have time enough and to spare on their hands”.¹⁹³ A year later Herbert Knyaston, Principal of the Cheltenham College, published an appeal for the Home for Incurable Children. A concert held to raise funds had been successful but Knyaston felt that irregular “feasts of emotion” of this kind were inadequate and more regular income was necessary.¹⁹⁴

Recognition of the need for change was responsible for the growing demand for stronger and more accountable local government. As already described the main concern was public health but there was also pressure for greater intervention in economic matters. In the summer of 1873 Henry Butt, a local farmer, expressed concern about the number of “young people in the town for whom no employment can be found” and criticised the Commissioners for not “turning their attention to remedying this state of affairs in their own town”. He appears to have felt that some attempt should have been made to attract employers to the town to provide employment opportunities.¹⁹⁵ Two years later prior to the public hearing on Incorporation the *Looker On* reminded its readers that “the well-being of every community is dependent on the form and composition of local government by which its internal economy is regulated”.¹⁹⁶ One of the first actions of the new Council was to seek LGB approval to raise funds for a scheme of town improvements. The intention was to make Cheltenham more attractive to visitors but the wider benefits of the investment were recognised. Dr. Thomas Smith for example argued that while the scheme was an investment in the future it would at the same time stimulate the “present depressed state of trade and the general gloom that prevails”.¹⁹⁷

The recourse to local government as the vehicle for reform was in a sense inevitable since in most areas of contemporary concern central government was not directly involved. There is however very little evidence of the ideological opposition to central government intervention that many modern historians see as a key element in political thinking during this period. The response to such compulsory government legislation as was introduced was mainly concerned with pragmatic issues rather than idealistic

¹⁹³ *Looker On*, 8 Jan 1876, p.24.

¹⁹⁴ *Examiner*, 3 Oct 1877, p.8.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 4 June 1873, p.2. In his letter Butt claimed that he had already spoken with the owner of a “large lucifer match manufactory” with a view to opening a branch in the Lower High St. Nothing appears to have come from the idea however.

¹⁹⁶ *Looker On*, 1 May 1875, p.283.

¹⁹⁷ *Examiner*, 5 Sept 1877, p.8.

attitudes to personal freedom. As already mentioned there was pressure for the appointment of a MOH, a key provision of the Public Health Act 1872, even before the Act came into operation. Opposition to the proposal was based almost entirely on grounds of cost, the *Looker On* for example regarding the proposal as an unnecessary burden on the rates.¹⁹⁸

The Education Act of 1870 was potentially a far more controversial issue but again the debate was mainly concerned with severely practical matters or sectional interests not all of which were concerned with benefiting the poor. The churches of course went to considerable lengths to retain control of religious teaching and this was reflected in their investment in school premises in the late 1860s and early 1870s. They were strongly supported by the *Looker On* which was mainly concerned to avoid the introduction of a School Board and the consequent impact on the rates.¹⁹⁹ In the event Cheltenham was able to avoid “the affliction of a School Board and the expense and contentions incident thereto”²⁰⁰ but there was a strong body of opinion which regarded the legislation as inadequate. Some felt that elementary education should have been made compulsory and one early letter felt it should also be free.²⁰¹ Onley Jun. claimed that without the means of enforcing attendance the Act was “a dead letter in Cheltenham”.²⁰² In November 1876 H. G. Tuke made a strong appeal for the establishment of a School Attendance Committee as provided under the 1876 Act. He advocated improving access to elementary education in order that working class people should have greater awareness of the rules and laws that affect them rather than regarding them with suspicion. He estimated that there were around 2,000 children in the town who were receiving no education whatsoever.²⁰³ The basis of many arguments was the belief that there was a correlation between lack of education and poverty and crime. One correspondent in 1871 argued that compulsory

¹⁹⁸ *Looker On*, 15 Jan 1870, p.39.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 19 Feb 1870, p.122.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 21 June 1873, p.397.

²⁰¹ *Examiner*, 30 March 1870, p.8.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 10 June 1874, p.8.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 22 Nov 1876, p.8.

education was the best remedy for poverty and claimed that the extra costs would be a worthwhile investment since it would slow the increase in the poor rate.²⁰⁴ A further letter in 1874 claimed that children who did not attend school would inevitably resort to “drunkenness, theft and crime”.²⁰⁵ Most comments related to local elementary education needs but there was also concern about wider educational issues. Charles Wilson argued that educational levels in England lagged behind those of the United State, a key factor in that country’s greater industrial efficiency. He felt that standards would be improved if the churches were relieved of responsibility for education and considered that financing education from charity was both unfair and inefficient.²⁰⁶

Vaccination was another issue where some felt that further government intervention was necessary since many people refused to be vaccinated themselves or to allow their children to be treated. An article in the *Examiner* in 1876 argued that the current law was ineffective and that stiffer penalties were needed. If this failed “the State would be justified in taking the matter out of the parent’s hands”.²⁰⁷ Vaccination raised the issue of personal freedom to a far greater extent than other government legislation but some resistance was based on more pragmatic considerations. A letter published in 1877 claimed that although there was an element of concern about personal freedom most of the objections to the treatment were based on the fact that its efficiency had yet to be proved.²⁰⁸

By the 1870s the involvement of central government in education and public health matters seems to have been quite widely accepted. The growing concern with the need for improvements in other areas does not however appear to have led to any demand for further legislation. Furthermore there is no evidence of any awareness that radical social change would require some form of wealth redistribution. For example the plight of elderly people who were forced to apply to the Poor Law attracted a great deal of sympathy. The *Examiner* in 1870 referred to “poor creatures who, at the close of a laborious life are entitled at our hands to some more cheerful shelter than the prison like

²⁰⁴ *Examiner*, 25 Jan 1871, p.2.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 10 June 1874, p.8.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 27 Feb 1878, p.8.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 27 Dec 1876, p.2.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 12 Sept 1877, p.8.

wards of a workhouse provide".²⁰⁹ It could however offer no solution to the problem other than to express the hope that benefit societies would eventually provide old-age pensions.²¹⁰ The inadequacies of the Poor Law as a relief agency were clearly recognised. In 1873 the *Examiner* argued that out relief rates were below the level needed "to supply the bodily wants of the poor" and claimed that there were in addition a large number of people in need who received no assistance whatsoever.²¹¹ Nevertheless in 1879, a time of severe depression and great distress among the poor, a further reduction in the poor rate was regarded as "gratifying news".²¹² Alternative methods of funding the Poor Law seem to have been considered by some Unions and in 1876 the *Examiner* reported that a meeting of the Yorkshire Guardians had suggested that the poor rate "should be relieved at the expense of taxes". The *Examiner*, although sympathetic to the idea in principle, nevertheless argued that the proposal would be of limited benefit to the working classes since they were already paying "above their due share of Imperial taxes, the amount raised being nearly as much as the poor rate itself". Whether this is what the meeting envisaged is unclear but the *Examiner*, although clearly aware of the unfairness of indirect taxes, does not appear to have even considered the obvious alternative of funding the costs from direct taxation. In fact a year later, when considering the forthcoming Budget, it described increases in income tax as "the ready resource of an unimaginative Chancellor".²¹³

While the use of fiscal policies to implement social reform was not, it seems, even contemplated the impact on social conditions of the deterioration of the national economy at the end of the decade led to demand for central government to assume some responsibility for economic management. Early in 1879 the *Looker On*, in a rare comment on the national rather than the local economic situation, argued that "Our production, stimulated by reckless speculation ... has outrun demand". The retention of the Free Trade policy in Britain in spite of the imposition of tariff barriers in foreign markets had brought high unemployment for the working classes and the "impoverishment of their natural employers".²¹⁴ Several weeks later the *Examiner* argued that the economic deterioration of the past five years had "brought economics to the

²⁰⁹ *Examiner*, 20 April 1870, p.4.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 15 April 1875, p.4.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 24 Dec 1873, p.4.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 24 Dec 1873, p.4 & 1 Oct 1879, p.4.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 12 April 1876 p.4 & 4 April 1877, p.4.

²¹⁴ *Looker On*, 4 Jan 1879, p.5.

level of practical consideration by politicians". It claimed that the current depression was the result of the Conservative Government's foreign policy which had undermined business confidence. Whichever party was in power attention would have to be "directed to prudent and economic development of the national resources".²¹⁵ The absence of any indication of the means by which government could control the national economy is of course consistent with the general level of economic understanding in this period. Changes in the Bank Rate for example were not seen as having any implications for trading activity.²¹⁶ Vague though they are these comments indicate that, although the term is not used, the *laissez faire* approach to economic management was beginning to be questioned by both Liberals and Conservatives as early as the late 1870s. There is however no sense that any ideological principle was involved except in connection with Free Trade where attitudes were influenced as much by political beliefs as economic understanding.

Political beliefs were a major divisive element in public life but at the local level there is little evidence of any significant differences between Liberals and Conservatives in their approach to social problems. Candidates for local government as Commissioners or Councillors rarely made any reference to their political beliefs, and usually appealed for support by promising only to protect the interests of their constituents and avoid increases in the rates. There is no evidence of any form of party manifesto or strategy. Fraser, in his examination of local politics in Leicester in the first half of the century, identifies differences between the Whig and Radical wings of the Liberal party as the main division in the approach to various improvement schemes. He sees this as a reflection of a generation gap as much as an ideological difference.²¹⁷ In Cheltenham in the 1870s the generation factor appears to have cut across party lines. The Editor of the Conservative *Looker On* for example served on the Commission for many years and his

²¹⁵ *Examiner*, 29 Jan 1879, p.4.

²¹⁶ S. Checkland, *British Public Policy 1776-1939. An Economic and Social Perspective* (Cambridge: University Press, 1983), p.166

²¹⁷ D. Fraser, *Urban Politics in Victorian England. The Structure of Politics in Victorian Cities*. (Leicester: University Press, 1976), p.167

publication retained its position as one of the town's leading newspapers throughout the 1870s. By this time he was in his seventies and throughout the decade seems to have resisted change of any kind almost as a matter of principle. Samuel Onley Sen. an independent Liberal had also served at various times on both local government and the Board of Guardians and was similarly averse to change. He had opposed the establishment of the Co-operative stores, the town improvement scheme and played a major role in the defeat of a campaign to establish a Free Public Library. The delay in the purchase of the Elms, the obvious and most popular solution to the workhouse accommodation problem, was largely due to his actions. His attitude is well captured by the *Mercury* which by 1879 had taken to referring to him as "Veteran Sammy".²¹⁸ By this time he was out of touch with current views and in October 1879 criticism about his reactionary attitude from the electorate of the Central Ward, usually regarded as a safe Liberal seat, forced him to withdraw from the Council elections.²¹⁹ The similarity in the attitude of these two elderly Cheltonians was such that when Onley returned to the Council in 1884 the *Looker On* expressed considerable satisfaction even though the Conservative majority was thereby reduced.²²⁰ The views these two men shared were no doubt representative of the attitudes of a much wider body of public opinion.

As far as parliamentary politics were concerned social issues were not a major issue and played little part in determining the outcome of general elections. Neither of the candidates in the 1874 general election paid much attention to social matters in their campaigns. The eventual winner, the Conservative J.T. Agg-Gardner, viewed "with regret the growing tendency of Liberal legislation to interfere in a meddlesome and compulsory manner with the social life of the Nation". He was however in favour of further sanitary measures which he considered were of particular importance to the working class.²²¹ He was later to attribute his victory to the Liberal licensing legislation, which is perhaps understandable, since he was the owner of a large brewery. The fact that he was an important local employer and a very generous benefactor was possibly more important.²²²

As the party in power, with a considerable body of social legislation to its credit, growing concern about social and economic conditions after 1874 did not appear to create any

²¹⁸ *Mercury*, 6 Sept 1879, p.2.

²¹⁹ *Examiner*, 18 Oct 1879, p.4.

²²⁰ *Looker On*, 8 Nov 1884, p.715.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 31 Jan 1874, p.72.

²²² J.T. Agg-Gardner, *Some Parliamentary Recollections* (Cheltenham: E.J. Burrow, undated), p.49 GRO.

division in local Tory ranks. For the Liberals however social issues were becoming more divisive and as the next general election drew nearer differences between the Whig and Radical wings of the Party began to emerge. In December 1876 Sir Henry Hoare, a prospective Liberal candidate, delivered an address to the Reform Club which was clearly far too radical for the majority of its members. Describing them as “Cheltenham’s Reformers” and congratulating them on the replacement of the Commission he then warned them that considerable expenditure would be needed to improve local social conditions. On a wider front he was opposed to the traditional Liberal policy of cheap government and retrenchment and clearly did not regard a reduction in income tax as a primary objective for a Liberal administration. At the same time he was critical of Gladstone’s wholesale condemnation of Conservative foreign policy. Some members of the club supported his views but most were opposed and he was not accepted.²²³ The *Examiner*, reviewing the meeting, described Sir Henry as “a politician of Liberal ideas and Conservative proclivities” but nevertheless felt that, on the evidence of an earlier meeting, his views were in fact acceptable to “many of Cheltenham’s Liberals” and should therefore be treated with “full and fair reconsideration”. The Editor’s main concern however seemed to be the possibility of “a schism in the Liberal electorate”.²²⁴ The “schism” soon emerged and in February 1877 Onley Jun., who had chaired the meeting with Hoare, called for a more representative body and proposed the formation of a Liberal Association.²²⁵ This proposal received some support and one correspondent argued this would end the dominance of “some two or three individuals”. He advocated an elected body based on the Ward structure including a “proper share” of working men which would draw up policies dealing with local and central government issues.²²⁶

The Liberals eventually found their candidate in the Baron de Ferrieres who in 1878 performed a “political summersault”²²⁷ leaving the Conservatives on the grounds that he was opposed to class legislation and party politics.²²⁸ He had served on both the Board of Guardians and local government and, although he opposed incorporation, he nevertheless became Cheltenham’s second Mayor using his personal wealth to promote the town. A kindly and paternalistic man who frequently demonstrated an understanding

²²³ *Examiner*, 20 Dec 1876, p.8.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 3 Jan 1877, p.4

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 14 Feb 1877, p.8.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 21 Feb 1877, p.8.

²²⁷ *Chronicle*, 19 Aug 1879, p.4.

²²⁸ *Examiner*, 30 Jan 1878, p.4.

of the problems faced by the poor it is surprising that his political creed involved no commitment to social reform. Fraser has argued that "The civic chain appealed especially to self-made, first generation entrepreneurs, often migrants, who looked to the mayoralty to legitimise their economic achievements."²²⁹ It seems possible that, as the son of a Belgian émigré, similar motives played some part in de Ferrieres's desire to become a Member of Parliament. His rival, Agg-Gardner considered that he had little interest in party politics and was not clear about the differences between Liberals and Conservatives.²³⁰ The acceptance of de Ferrieres therefore suggests that many Liberal voters were not yet convinced of the need for further central government social legislation. The *Examiner* was however becoming increasingly uneasy about Gladstone's concentration on Conservative foreign policy and in November 1879, under the heading The Liberal Ticket, argued that "it is in the highest degree desirable that some approach to a definite programme of legislation should be generally accepted".²³¹ How much of this concern stemmed from a desire for reform for humanitarian reasons as distinct from political considerations is unclear but it seems unlikely that the Editor was alone in his misgivings.

Pressure for reform, for whatever reason, did not however lead to any suggestion that society could or should become more equal or change the way in which the poorer classes were viewed by the rest of society. In fact working class people generally were often referred to in terms which suggest they were seen almost as a related but genetically inferior species of humanity incapable of foresight or even common sense. The *Looker On* appeared on occasions to be mildly critical of the unequal nature of society. In its review of the winter relief programme in January 1870 for example, it observed that "the unemployed poor have called forth a substantial expression of sympathy from the unemployed rich".²³² Similarly in January 1879, referring to severe weather conditions, it pointed out that "While this has brought entertainment to the skaters on the lake at Pittville it has brought suffering to the poor, exhausting their scanty means of subsistence and compelling them to seek relief from the Distress Fund".²³³ On other occasions however it could adopt a very different attitude. Commenting on the Budget proposals in April 1872 it described increases in income and property taxes as "a

²²⁹ D Fraser, *Urban Politics in Victorian England*, p 149.

²³⁰ J.T. Agg-Gardner *Some Parliamentary Recollections*, p.60.

²³¹ *Examiner*, 19 Nov 1879, p.4

²³² *Looker On*, 29 Jan 1870, p.74.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 11 Jan 1879, p.23.

gain to Labour at the expense of Capital". The working classes had achieved higher wages and more time in which to spend them. "That they will become more careful, or more temperate, by increased leisure few who are acquainted with their habits will be sanguine enough to anticipate". Attention was drawn to the evils of "profitless relaxation not absolutely needed for health".²³⁴ In 1876 it launched an attack on "Acts of Questionable Charity" which, it claimed, undermined "the foundations of self reliance on the part of the working classes to an extent but imperfectly appreciated". The consequences were becoming increasingly visible in society "fostering an indisposition to work and encouraging insubordination". The labouring classes submitted to misery and wretchedness in order to gain sympathy from philanthropists "whereby they may be enabled to live a life of unthrift and enjoy the luxury of idleness". There was a good deal more in this vein. The incident that sparked this tirade was nothing more than a proposal by three clergymen to provide an evening meal for the errand boys of the town and to use the opportunity of a captive audience to give them advice about their conduct.²³⁵

Even the *Liberal Examiner* could sometimes adopt an extremely patronising tone when referring to the poor. In 1877, when the Whitsun Bank Holiday was becoming less of a novelty, it noted that "the people are learning to enjoy these occasions without abusing them".²³⁶ In 1878, when the campaign for a Free Public Library was being fought, Charles Wilson, one of the town's the leading advocates of compulsory education, claimed that "Beef is better than books for poor people and infinitely more appreciated than books which only a few would open, fewer would read and only a select residuum understand".²³⁷ Expectations of what the poor could achieve or aspire to were limited and to some extent reflect a degree of self-interest. One writer, while pointing out some of the deficiencies of the Education Act of 1870, advocated the need for free schools and nurseries "if we would obtain from the older children our servants and workpeople".²³⁸ In 1878 the *Looker On* appealed for support for the Female Orphan Asylum on the grounds that the orphans received a "useful education" and were "trained to make good household servants".²³⁹ There is no evidence that it was considered possible for poor people to achieve a higher social status by their own efforts and

²³⁴ *Looker*, 20 April 1872, p.250.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 11 March 1876, p.169.

²³⁶ *Examiner*, 23 May 1877, p.4.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 2 Oct 1878, p.8.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 30 March 1870, p.8.

²³⁹ *Looker On*, 9 Feb 1878, p.97.

industry and the doctrine of "Self Help" which Laybourn sees as prevalent throughout society during this period is never mentioned.²⁴⁰ In fact little note seems to have been taken when the working class did attempt to help themselves. When reporting on winter relief programmes only the Distress Funds financed by contributions from the wealthy were mentioned. In early 1879 however a letter published in the *Mercury* shows that there was at least one working class relief scheme in operation. The letter, signed by W. Ursall on behalf of the Working Men's Relief Association, stated that contrary to a rumour the North Ward Relief Fund was still functioning. This fund provided a soup kitchen in Regent Place financed by working men who were fully employed. The wording of the letter suggests that some form of permanent organisation may have existed.²⁴¹

How working class people reacted to this attitude is largely unknown but in the later years of the decade there are indications of some protest. The comments of two of the most outspoken opponents of the Free Library movement, Stroud and Onley Sen. provoked a good deal of anger and were subjected to a strong and articulate attack by James Green who claimed to be a working man. He described their views of the working class as outdated while Stroud's comments about the irrelevance of books to working people were dismissed as an insult.²⁴² In a letter published in the *Examiner* in June 1879 J.G. Carr, (who was later a founder member of the Independent Labour Party and the Trade and Labour Council), referred to a Conservative meeting at which he asked Agg-Gardner why he had voted against Dilke's Bill for the extension of voting hours. The MP had explained that he believed that extended hours would increase bribery, corruption and rowdyism. Carr, who may have been hoping for just this kind of response, wrote "Now my fellow working men of Cheltenham you can form your own opinion of what Mr Agg-Gardner thinks of you by the way he has voted".²⁴³

This analysis of opinion can only present a broad view of the various ways people in Cheltenham responded to social problems in the 1870s. Nevertheless it is clear that many were aware of the nature of poverty and its social and economic causes and a growing number accepted that the solution was more likely to be achieved by social and economic change than by moral regeneration of the poor themselves. Since central government

²⁴⁰ K Laybourn, *Evolution of British Social Policy* p.134.

²⁴¹ *Mercury*, 18 Jan 1879, p.3.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 16 Nov 1878, p.4.

²⁴³ *Examiner*, 18 June 1879, p.2.

made little attempt to become directly involved in social issues there was a demand for a more interventionist form of local government. The middle and upper classes still enjoyed a very privileged position at the end of this decade and however aware they were of social problems it seems unlikely that many would have willingly accepted a move towards a more equal society, socially or economically without a powerful incentive. Part two of this study will examine the development of attitudes towards poverty and social reform over the last twenty years of the nineteenth century against the background of local economic and social changes and the growing national concern with social issues.

Part Two The 1880s and 1890s

Chapter 5. Economic and Social Developments.

At the beginning of this period Cheltenham's economy seems to have made a rapid recovery from the depression of the late 1870s and for a while the decline of the previous decade seemed to have been halted. In January 1881 the *Looker On* forecast that the current season would equal "any former corresponding period since Cheltenham became a place of Winter sojourn for the accomplished and fashionable of the land".¹ A year later it claimed that a "Higher Spring-tide of Gaiety has rarely, if ever been reached in Cheltenham".² While the increase in the number of winter visitors was reviving memories of more glamorous times the economy was also benefiting from an increase in the number of permanent residents. In 1880 the *Looker On* noted the number of "new accounts opened by families in for the Winter or taking up their permanent residence among them. Of both classes it is gratifying that there have been very many welcome additions during the past Autumn".³ In October 1882 the *Chronicle* drew attention to the number of new residents applying for membership of the New Club⁴ and in June 1883 the *Looker On* referred to housing construction on a scale "unknown for many years".⁵ The following January it reported that "new houses are rising up with wonderful rapidity-no sooner completed than they are immediately occupied by some new settler".⁶ The town's reputation as an educational centre was enhanced by the decision in November 1882 to establish a new middle class school "for boys of parents of limited means". Dean Close Memorial School as it was originally named was opened in May 1886.⁷ In 1885 steps were taken to establish a school for girls which the *Looker On* felt would be beneficial to the "Middle Classes of the Town" particularly for girls whose social position

¹ *Looker On*, 15 Jan 1881, p.39.

² *Ibid.*, 4 Feb 1882, p.71.

³ *Ibid.*, 11 Dec 1880, p.799.

⁴ *Chronicle*, 3 Oct 1882, p.4.

⁵ *Looker On*, 7 June 1883, p.423.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 5 Jan 1884, p.8.

⁷ Rev. R.F. McNeile, *A History of Dean Close School* 1966 GRO Ref. ROL F3/Chelt.

precluded admission to the Cheltenham Ladies College even though their parents could afford the fees.⁸

By this time however the optimism of the early 1880s had already evaporated as the national economy moved into depression. In December 1884 the *Looker On* was far more pessimistic about the prospects for the winter due to the “pressure of the times upon the landed interest, and the ugly spectre of increased taxation staring limited incomes in the face”.⁹ In the same month Henry Butt, in a letter to the *Mercury*, drew attention to an unusually high level of unemployment even though the weather was still very mild.¹⁰ The following January, at a meeting of the Board of Guardians one member claimed that in the thirty-five years he had lived in Cheltenham he had never known such distress. The *Examiner*, commenting on this meeting, referred to “Large bodies of men, as many as two hundred at one time, perambulating the streets” seeking relief. It was careful to point out there was as yet no indication of violence.¹¹ At the beginning of 1886 however violence seemed much more likely. At a meeting of the unemployed called to discuss relief measures the chairman, Joseph Lenthall stated “this was an anxious hour for the residents of Cheltenham” although he was confident that no action would be taken “that would disgrace respectable men”.¹² There were however further demonstrations in the early months of 1887 when a fall in contributions to the distress fund led to a reduction in the amount paid to men working in the stone yard.¹³ The decline in the distress funds no doubt reflected to some extent the effect of the depression on the wealthier sections of the community. In June 1886 the *Looker On* reported cases of individual bankruptcy one of which left liabilities of almost £2,000. Bad debts were a serious problem for local tradesmen and there were a number of business failures.¹⁴

The depression of the mid-1880s marked the end of the winter season as a major economic and social event with the result that the educational establishments and the wealthier residential population became even more important to the economy. It seems

⁸ *Looker On*, 14 March 1885, p.170.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 6 Dec 1884, p.776.

¹⁰ *Mercury*, 20 Dec 1884, p.3.

¹¹ *Examiner*, 21 Jan 1885, pp.2 & 4.

¹² *Ibid.*, 24 Feb 1886, p.6. At the meeting a number of the working men displayed cards in their hats to indicate that, if necessary they would assist the police to preserve order. This suggests that there was a very real threat of violence.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 12 Jan 1887, p.2. The revised daily rates were 1s for a married man and 9d for a single man.

¹⁴ *Looker On*, 12 June 1886, p.386.

however that by this time an increasing number of these wealthier residents were in fact elderly people living in comparatively straitened circumstances, “the genteelly poor” as Pakenham puts it.¹⁵ A letter published in the *Examiner* in 1887 for example claimed that the “continued increase in population was due to the advent of a less wealthy, if not often a lower class of residents”. The increased demand for “small new suburban villas with an annual rent of less than £50” was attributed to these people. A further letter of the same date identified three main classes on which the economy now depended; “The old Indian and military connection”; “retired ex-commercial people (a most important class)”, but principally people with “moderate but fixed incomes who are attracted to the town by its education facilities and stay on afterwards”. This correspondent claimed that for people in the last group low rents were Cheltenham’s main attraction.¹⁶ Since the population increased only marginally over the whole period it is likely that these features became increasingly characteristic of the upper levels of Cheltenham society as the century progressed. The MOH in his annual report for 1892 attributed Cheltenham’s low birth rate to the comparatively small number of young married people in the town. In his 1897 report he noted that while there was “a considerable influx of families with members at school age” this was offset by “an immigration of elderly people” who “have come here to end their days”.¹⁷ The occupational analysis provided in the 1901 Census Report shows that 24 per cent of Cheltenham males over ten years of age were “retired or unoccupied” as against 16 per cent in Gloucester.¹⁸

The change in the composition of society was bound to affect attitudes to economic change. Consequently when the collapse of the winter season renewed interest in the possibility of reviving the summer season there was considerable opposition. Some people were not prepared to take the long-term view. The Conservative MP, Agg-Gardner, in a letter to the *Examiner* in October 1887 could see only a short-term problem. “Everything is flat at the moment and we share the universal flatness”. He

¹⁵ S. Pakenham, *Cheltenham. A Biography* (London: Macmillan, 1971), p.138.

¹⁶ *Examiner*, 5 Jan 1887, p.8.

¹⁷ MOH Annual Reports 1892, 1897.GRO: Ref. CBR: Ref. C. 6/1/1/2. In the 1898 report it is claimed that birth rates in Worcester and Gloucester were 30 per cent higher than in Cheltenham.

¹⁸ Census Reports 1881-1901 GL. Although contemporaries believed that the population was increasing during the 1880s the 1891 Census shows a reduction of 2.4%. Since the census was taken in April it seems likely that the 1881 figure included a number of winter visitors who, due to the collapse of the winter season were no longer in the town in 1891. The increase between 1881 and 1901 was approximately 2%. A more accurate figure is not available due to the extension of the Borough in 1893. The increase for England and Wales over the same period was 25%. Read *Age of Urban Democracy*, p.214.

believed the main deficiency in Cheltenham was the lack of publicity.¹⁹ The *Looker On* adopted much the same approach. While it accepted that there were isolated cases of economic stagnation, such as the number of unoccupied houses, it nevertheless strongly rejected the view that that the town was declining.²⁰

Agg-Gardner's comments are somewhat surprising since he had played a major role in establishing the Borough Council with the aim, among other things, of attracting more summer visitors. Apart from the Town Improvement Scheme initiated in 1878, essentially a long-term project, the Liberal Council's approach to economic improvement had been rather negative. It had successfully opposed several further attempts to introduce a tramway system,²¹ rejected an opportunity to purchase the privately owned Winter Gardens and had defeated a proposal to convert the Cattle Market into a recreation area.²² After the Conservatives gained control in November 1882 a rather more progressive and costly approach was followed.²³ Additional loans were agreed with the LGB for the completion the Town Improvement Scheme, the improvement of the water supplies and the development of the Alstone Swimming Baths.²⁴ The Dowdswell Reservoir was officially opened in October 1886 providing the capacity to extend the water supply to the whole of the town.²⁵ While these measures were no doubt beneficial to the residents they clearly had not succeeded in reviving the summer season. They had however dramatically increased the Corporation debt, which by early 1887 had risen to over £400,000.²⁶ There was not unusual since according to Hay local authority spending increased rapidly after 1880 and by 1905 accounted for more than half of government expenditure.²⁷ The CIC however had borrowed only £89,000 during the whole twenty-five years of its existence and in 1876 when the Corporation was formed the debt had stood at £59,000. Most of the current debt must have related to the Water and Town

¹⁹ *Examiner*, 12 Oct 1887, p.8.

²⁰ *Looker On*, 15 Oct 1887, p.709.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 10 Sept 1881, p.587. On one occasion the Streets and Highways Committee, where a majority were known to be favour of a scheme, was unable to muster a quorum because the Liberal members "unitedly absented themselves".

²² *Ibid.*, 12 Aug 1882, p.507.

²³ *Ibid.*, 11 Nov 1882, p.715. Of the twenty-four original members of the Council only six remained in office.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 12 June 1886, p.384.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 2 Oct 1886, p.636.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 12 Feb 1887, p.119.

²⁷ J.R. Hay, *The Origins of the Liberal Welfare Reforms 1906-1914* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1975), p 40.

Improvement projects initiated by the Liberals.²⁸ Nevertheless when these figures became known opposition to further Council expenditure strengthened and in November 1887 the first steps were taken to establish a Ratepayers Association, a move that was supported by Agg-Gardner and de Ferrieres and generally approved by the press. De Ferrieres perhaps best expressed the aims of those who supported the Association in a letter to the preliminary meeting. All Cheltenham needed he argued was “its roads kept well and clean and better railway services; expensive parks, or (so-called) street improvements are merely destroying one of its main attractions, *viz.*, its cheapness”.²⁹

In spite of the opposition of the Association a majority of the electorate accepted the need for the Corporation to widen its powers and the Town Improvement Act became law in August 1889. The Conservatives retained control of the Council until the late 1890s and continued to improve the town’s amenities. The Town Improvement Scheme was completed and eventually applied to twenty-four of the main streets in the centre of the town. The Montpellier and Winter Gardens were acquired, the Pittville Estate to the north of the town was purchased and opened as a public park and a number of recreation grounds were established in working class areas. An electricity generating system was opened in May 1895³⁰ and a new building was erected for the Public Library in 1889.³¹ The only significant contribution from private enterprise was a new theatre, which was opened in 1891 by Mrs Langtry.³²

Valuable though these developments were something more radical was needed if Cheltenham was to compete with the coastal resorts. The only proposal put forward for achieving this however was the re-opening of the mineral springs and the provision of more sophisticated bathing facilities on the lines of the continental spas. This idea gained considerable support from the medical fraternity but raised little interest elsewhere. The *Looker On* for example claimed that improvements in medical science and the availability of cheap travel to the Continent meant that “any scheme for restoring to Cheltenham the

²⁸ *Examiner*, 11 Jan 1888, p.4. Nevertheless the Editor claimed that the total of the Poor and Borough rates was lower than in 1874.

²⁹ *Mercury*, 2 Nov 1887, p.2 & 26 Nov 1887, p.2

³⁰ R. Acock, *Electricity Comes to Cheltenham. A Hundred Years of Light and Power* (Amberly: Glenside Books, 1995), p.1.

³¹ *Looker On*, 7 Jan 1899, p.10.

³² *Ibid.*, 3 Oct 1891, p.900.

ephemeral popularity of its by gone Summer Season, must prove utterly abortive”.³³ The *Examiner* was more ambivalent on the subject and was clearly impressed by the efforts made in Bath, which in 1892 had plans to invest a further £40,000 in bathing facilities.³⁴ In 1895 a proposal was put forward for a “modest Spa scheme” in the Montpellier Gardens “for dispensing the mineral waters together with concert, reading and dining rooms” at an estimated cost £3,500. Even this relatively modest proposal aroused little interest among the general public and the *Examiner* reluctantly concluded that there was still no agreement in principle as to whether an attempt should be made to “revive the Waters”.³⁵ In early 1897 however Dr. Ward-Humphries, the Chairman of the Town Improvement Committee, proposed a similar but far more ambitious scheme which included new Municipal Offices. The complex was to be based on an existing building in the Winter Gardens adjacent to the Promenade and the estimated cost of the scheme was £45,000. The LGB however refused to sanction the necessary loan due to the strength of the opposition and the suspicion that the cost would be significantly higher than estimated.³⁶ This was perhaps the Ratepayer’s Association finest hour but its opposition generated a great deal of criticism and anger. One letter published in the *Examiner* claimed that it did not represent the majority view of the trade and labour section of the community and the writer suggested that an alternative body, The Cheltenham Improvement Association, should be set up.³⁷

The defeat of the scheme led to the resignation of Town Improvement Committee and in the weeks prior to the municipal elections the *Looker On* observed a “mood of indifference in the electorate” which it considered may have been due to the way the Winter Garden Scheme had been handled. The elections of November 1897 left the Liberals in control.³⁸ The following May Ward-Humphries retired from the Council and Cheltenham lost the services of one of its most progressive politicians.³⁹

³³ *Looker On*, 1 March 1890, p.174.

³⁴ *Examiner*, 16 March 1892, p.4. It appears that the annual income for 1890 & 1891 from these facilities was more than double that for 1880.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 23 Jan 1895, p.4.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 1 Sept 1897, p.4.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 8 Sept 1897, p.8.

³⁸ *Looker On*, 18 Sept, p.882, 30 Oct, p.1027 & 6 Nov, p.1052. 1897.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 7 May 1898, p.444.

The record of the Liberals during the remaining years of the century was less impressive. In February 1899 the *Looker On* claimed that “the interests of the town are not so well served as they might be”. Council meetings were ineffective due to “systematic fault-finding, imputations of motives and personal recriminations”. It laid the blame squarely on the Liberal Councillors⁴⁰ but also expressed concern about the poor quality of local representatives generally quoting J. Russell Lowel to illustrate the point.

“Ez to my principles, I glory
In hevin’ nothin’ o’ the sort.
I ain’t a Wig. I ain’t a Tory.
I’m just a candidate in, short”.

The *Examiner* had earlier identified the Liberal Councillor Margrett as the cause of the problem accusing him of “wantonly destructive wordiness.”⁴¹ After his death in August 1899 the *Looker On* noted that “a better atmosphere prevails”.⁴² Pugh has argued that the Liberals were often the party of expenditure and interference at the local authority level but this does not appear to have been the case in Cheltenham.⁴³

In the last years of the century the local economy seemed to revive somewhat and a Council meeting in June 1899 noted increased expenditure on house improvements and a record number of plans for new buildings.⁴⁴ In the following September the *Examiner*, while emphasising the continued importance of the “school calendar” in determining the movements of the wealthier residents nevertheless claimed that recent summers had been more prosperous than for some years.⁴⁵ In February 1882, during a period of similar optimism the *Looker On* had pointed out that Cheltenham “having no mercantile or manufacturing industries is still dependent on the wealthy”.⁴⁶ This statement was still valid at the end of the century.

While investment in the local economy increased during this period there is little evidence of any reduction in the level of poverty or improvement in the conditions of the poorer sections of the population. In his Annual Report for 1894 the MOH noted

⁴⁰ *Looker On*, 11 Feb 1899, p.136.

⁴¹ *Examiner*, 6 April 1898, p.4.

⁴² *Looker On*, 5 Aug 1899, p.737 & 9 Sept 1899, p.852.

⁴³ M. Pugh, *The Making of Modern British Politics* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982) p.111.

⁴⁴ *Looker On*, 10 June 1899, p.549.

⁴⁵ *Examiner*, 20 Sept 1899, p.4.

⁴⁶ *Looker On*, 18 Feb 1882, p.104.

that there were 3,095 houses in Cheltenham that were still not connected to the water mains. "These are chiefly of the poorer sort housing 14,000 people, almost one third of the population of the Borough". This figure is remarkably similar to that produced by a similar calculation in 1870, an indication of the lack of progress in this area. No doubt Dr Garrett and many others would have recognised the similarity of these figures with Booth's assessment of the scale of poverty in London. Many people were still employed on a casual or seasonal basis and were therefore regularly unemployed even during more prosperous times. In his annual report for 1895 the MOH described the population of the North Ward, almost 10,000, people as "living from hand to mouth by charring, washing, gardening and odd work".⁴⁷ If this statement is correct it indicates that, after taking account of other Wards approximately 25 per cent of Cheltenham's population was dependent on casual labour. Stedman-Jones has claimed that London presented the problem of "endemic poverty associated with casual labour in its most acute form".⁴⁸ Apart from the question of scale however it is difficult to accept that it was less "acute" in Cheltenham. This problem was not restricted to non-industrial areas and as Kidd has observed every Victorian city had a pool of casual and seasonal labour.⁴⁹

The existence of a more or less permanent pool of unemployed people ensured that the bargaining position of those workers who were permanently employed remained weak. In 1898 workers employed by the Streets and Highways department of the Council, who were still among the most poorly paid workers in the town, sought to increase their wages by 3s a week. The proposal was rejected on various grounds but basically because, as Councillor Margrett, rather brutally put it "if all the men left the Corporation we could fill their places three times over".⁵⁰ Domestic labour remained one of the few occupations with any real bargaining power and it appears that domestic servants were attracted to Cheltenham from the surrounding area.⁵¹ In 1896, during a severe outbreak of small pox in Gloucester, the MOH pointed out that there were "a great many domestic servants whose homes were in Gloucester" who should not be allowed to visit the city during the epidemic.⁵²

⁴⁷ MOH Annual Reports 1894 & 1895.

⁴⁸ G. Stedman-Jones, *Outcast London*, p.1

⁴⁹ A. Kidd, *Manchester* (Keele: University Press, 1996), p.121.

⁵⁰ *Examiner*, 9 May 1898, p.3.

⁵¹ Census Report 1901 p.76 GL shows that well over 4,000 women, 43 % of all working women were employed as domestic servants in private houses.

⁵² *Examiner*, 15 Jan 1896, p.8.

The continued weakness of the labour market is reflected in the fact that the overall level of money wages shows no improvement during the period and for many people remained well below the level defined by Booth as necessary for basic subsistence. In his annual report for 1897 the MOH pointed out that the rents demanded for working class houses erected by the Cheltenham Cottage Company, 4s to 5s a week, were as much as a third of the average weekly wage of many working class men.⁵³ In June 1898 Thomas Mann gave a lecture in Cheltenham in which he claimed that there were local men who were paid less than 14s a week while many women were paid 8s.⁵⁴ The wages of the majority of men employed by the Streets and Highways department of the Corporation ranged from 15s to 18s a week with a few more highly skilled men earning between 24s and 27s.⁵⁵

The main theme of Mann's lecture was "Combination among members of the working classes as a remedy for poverty" and in fact in the later part of the period union membership seems to have increased. In 1894 the Cheltenham Trade and Labour Council (TLC) was founded and by 1896 had nine affiliated trade unions representing 1,500 men.⁵⁶ There is however little indication that "combination" achieved any significant improvement in wages and conditions. Hobsbawn claims that nationally the gas workers

had forced the gas companies to change from a twelve-hour shift system to three eight-hour periods as early as 1889.⁵⁷ In March 1897 however Betteridge, the Secretary of the Gas Workers and Labourers Union, claimed that some of his members were paid 3d an hour for working twelve-hour shifts seven nights a week.⁵⁸ The more skilled workers may have been rather more successful. In May 1899 a well timed strike of the carpenters and joiners succeeded in increasing their hourly rate from 7d to 7 1/2d and secured an

⁵³ MOH Report 1897.

⁵⁴ *Examiner*, 22 June 1898, p.7.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 5 Jan 1898, p.3. The driver of the steamroller was the highest paid at 28s a week.

⁵⁶ J. Howe, "Liberals, Lib-Labs and Independent Labour", *Midlands History*, X1, (1986), pp 117-137.

⁵⁷ E.J. Hobsbawn, *Labouring Men. Studies in the History of Labour* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2nd Edition 1971), p.355. Describes work in gas production as being subject to significant seasonal variations due to the fact that gas output in the winter was three times that during the summer, p.161.

⁵⁸ *Examiner*, 31 March 1897, p.8.

agreement for a further 1/2d in 1901. This was only achieved after the local building trade was brought to a complete standstill.⁵⁹ On the whole however it would appear that the money wages of most unskilled workers throughout the 1880s and 1890s were much the same as in the previous decade. At the same time it is possible that many poor people gained little from the improvement in real wages arising from the fall in food prices which many writers consider occurred over this period.⁶⁰ As the *Looker On* put it in 1885 “It can be of no use to tell the working man that he can buy a quartern loaf for sixpence if he cannot earn sixpence to pay for it. Better by far that he should pay sevenpence for his loaf and earn a shilling”.⁶¹

There is also no evidence that the increased value of money brought about any improvement in the housing and living conditions of the poorer section of the community. The MOH’s report for 1887 for example describes much of the cottage property as “a scandal and a constant menace to the health of the town”. Some properties were “back to back tenements where there can be no proper cross ventilation”. Ten years later Dr. Garrett claimed that accommodation in “hundreds of houses, many of them occupied by respectable people”, was totally inadequate. Consequently if any attempt were made to deal with anything other than extreme cases of overcrowding hundreds of people would be made homeless.⁶² The attitude of the Council to the housing problem was well illustrated in 1896 when a member of the Public Health Committee suggested that certain old properties could be acquired for £75 and “reconstituted” under the Artisans Dwellings Act. The proposal was rejected on the grounds that it would be a very piecemeal way of dealing with a “large question”. While it was accepted that there was a great deal of “small property” in Cheltenham it was hoped it would eventually be replaced by the owners.⁶³ Private initiatives were clearly not the answer however and as already noted the accommodation provided by the Cheltenham Cottage Company was beyond the means of all but the “better class of artisans”. In any

⁵⁹ *Examiner*, 17 May 1899, p.8. The Census Report for 1891 lists almost 500 men as carpenters and joiners. Assuming that the majority were union members this group would have represented approximately one third of the total union membership.

⁶⁰ I. Gazeley, “The Cost of Living for Urban Worker in Late Victorian and Edwardian Britain”. *Economic History Review*, 2nd SER 2 (1989), pp.207-221.

⁶¹ *Looker On*, 31 Jan 1885, p.76.

⁶² MOH Annual Reports 1887, 1892 & 1897.

⁶³ *Examiner*, 8 Jan 1896, p.3

case the company built only thirty-four houses although towards the end of the century a further seventeen houses was erected by the local branch of the Christian Social Union.⁶⁴

Cheltenham's failure to take advantage of Government housing legislation is understandable. The impact on the rates would have been severe and any unilateral action would have reduced the town's main attraction, its "cheapness". The lack of progress in sanitation is perhaps more difficult to understand. When the Dowdswell Reservoir was opened in 1886 the *Looker On* noted that the Corporation was now in a position to extend the mains "especially into the numberless streets in the East and North Wards".⁶⁵ Eight years later however the MOH claimed that one third of the population was still using wells that were liable to pollution.⁶⁶ Furthermore no significant attempt was made to modernise the sewerage system which Dr. Wright had identified in the mid-1870s as the main cause of pollution. In 1888, when 107 cases of typhoid were reported Dr. Roche, Wright's successor, argued that this should not cause surprise since there were still over 70 miles of porous sewers in the town.⁶⁷ In August 1898 the *Examiner* was still referring to the urgent necessity of providing efficient sewerage to the "fifty or sixty" streets in the older part of the town which "have never yet been supplied with that essential to good sanitation".⁶⁸ By the end of the century the LGB had approved a loan for a partial replacement of the old brick sewers but no work had been carried out because the Council was unable to obtain a tender for the amount sanctioned.⁶⁹

In the absence of any major programme of slum clearance the Council could do little more than attempt to eradicate the worst conditions. For a long period however it seems to have failed to achieve even this limited objective. The resources allocated to the Health Department were clearly inadequate and until 1892 the MOH and the Inspector of Nuisances, the only professionals on the staff, were employed on a part-time basis. Around the middle of the period there was growing public dissatisfaction with the Health Department but no action was taken until a particularly distressing case of child neglect

⁶⁴ *A Handbook of the Social Assets of Cheltenham*. Compiled by the National Union of Women Workers, (Cheltenham: Norman, Sawyer & Co Ltd, 1909). GL: Ref.P.1.15.

⁶⁵ *Looker On*, 18 Sept 1886, p.640.

⁶⁶ MOH Annual Report 1894.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 1887 & 1888.

⁶⁸ *Examiner*, 12 Aug 1898, p.4.

⁶⁹ MOH Annual Report 1899.

was brought before the Cheltenham Police Court by the R.S.P.C.C in February 1892. The society's officer presenting the case said that the house in which the children were kept was in "a most abominable and filthy condition" and the Chairman claimed that the case was one of the most shocking that he had ever encountered. This was particularly damaging for the Council because the Inspector of Nuisances had been informed about the problem in the previous September. In April it was decided to appoint a full-time MOH and a full-time Inspector holding a diploma from the Sanitary Institute. Dr. J. Garrett was appointed in July.⁷⁰ On the basis of the information included in the routine reports of the Public Health Committee, the work of the Health Department appears thereafter to have been conducted in a more structured and disciplined manner. In his annual report for 1897 for example Garrett referred to improvements "in many hundreds of houses in regard to the establishment of good water supply, flushing apparatus and re-laid drains". The department was further strengthened by the appointment of two additional Inspectors before the end of the century.⁷¹

In addition to its role in the prevention of disease the Council also began to devote more attention to its control. The Cheltenham Improvement Act of 1889 made the notification of contagious disease compulsory and gave the Council power to make financial contributions to the General and Delancey hospitals. By agreement with the trustees it could also to be represented on the management board of the Delancey. The trustees strongly defended their independence but by 1893 the Council had gained two seats on the board and the MOH was able to attend meetings but not vote.⁷² Between 1893 and 1897 the Council paid over £3,400 for the treatment of people in the Delancey of which only £112 were recovered from the patients.⁷³

The health of the population as a whole as reflected in the death rate compares quite favourably with the rest of the country as shown in Table 5.1 below. The Cheltenham figures are however slightly suspect due to the uncertainty about the population levels particularly after the extension of the Borough in 1893. Since there was a tendency to

⁷⁰ *Examiner*, 24 Feb 1892, p3 & 6 April 1892, p.3.

⁷¹ MOH Annual Report 1897.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 1893.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 1897.

over estimate population growth the true position may have been slightly less favourable.

TABLE 5.1
AVERAGE DEATH RATES PER THOUSAND

	<u>Cheltenham</u>	<u>England and Wales</u>
1876-80	19.7	20.8
1881-85	16.8	19.4
1886-90	16.2	18.9
1891-95	17.1	18.7
1896-1900	15.8	17.7

Source: Figures for England and Wales from D. Read *Age of Urban Democracy* p.6.
Cheltenham figures from MOH annual Reports 1876-1900.

There were of course significant differences in the experience in the various districts of the town as shown below:

TABLE 5.2
AVERAGE DEATH RATES BY WARD
1892-1899

North Ward	17.6
Central Ward	15.5
East Ward	14.9
South Ward	14.9
West Ward	12.5
Middle Ward	10.5

Source: MOH Annual Reports 1892-1899

In his annual report for 1897 the MOH noted that although the population of the Middle Ward was much the same as that of the North Ward its death rate was approximately 40 per cent lower. In 1895 he claimed that average life expectancy in the North Ward was 34.6 years compared with 50.8 years in the West Ward, which he described as the "West End of Cheltenham".⁷⁴

Infant mortality was fairly stable over the last twenty years of the century and the average ratio at 14.5 per cent is almost identical to the average for England and Wales over the same period.⁷⁵ There is unfortunately no way of analysing infant mortality by ward but in

⁷⁴ MOH Annual Reports 1895 & 1897.

⁷⁵ The Cheltenham figures are obtained from the Annual Reports of the MOH. Those for England and Wales are quoted in F.B.Smith, "Health" in *The Working Class in England* pp.36-62

his report for 1897 the MOH claimed that two of the six wards, the Central and North Wards contributed half of the total infant deaths.⁷⁶

While the Council gradually increased its contribution to social welfare the Poor Law seemed to move in the opposite direction. At a meeting of the Board of Guardians in the winter of 1883 one member claimed that the workhouse was in a “disgustingly overcrowded state” due to the refusal of out relief to elderly people. The majority of members however argued that a less rigid approach to out relief would merely encourage more old people to apply for relief and it was therefore agreed that nothing could be done until extra accommodation became available.⁷⁷ This attitude towards out relief was maintained throughout the period even during the worst of the mid-1880s depression. In February 1886 the LGB issued a circular seeking information about the levels of distress “amongst persons of the Working Class who have not applied for relief”. In their reply the Guardians claimed that conditions were only slightly worse than in the average winter and nothing like as bad as in 1879-80. In March a further letter from the LGB argued that their enquiries indicated that among those who do not normally seek relief “there is evidence of much and increasing privation” and advised some relaxation of the rules governing out relief.⁷⁸ There is however no evidence of any change in policy either in the mid-1880s or, as Table 5.3 shows throughout the remainder of the century.

TABLE 5.3
OUT RELIEF IN THE CHELTENHAM UNION

<u>1875-1899</u>	
At mid-January	Average number of recipients
1875-1879	1895
1880-1884	1584
1885-1889	1525
1890-1894	1497
1895-1899	1261

Source: Board of Guardian meetings as reported by the *Examiner*.

The problem of overcrowding in the workhouse, which been a matter of concern since the late 1860s was finally solved in September 1882 by the purchase of the Elms, which

⁷⁶ MOH Annual Report 1897.

⁷⁷ *Examiner*, 17 Jan 1883, p.2.

⁷⁸ Letters dated 17 Feb 1886, 25 Feb 1886 and 15 March 1886 in Orders and Circulations from the Local Government Board. GRO: Ref.Ch. 57/4-5.

was intended to accommodate the children.⁷⁹ In November 1887 however the condition of the children in the new accommodation became a matter of public concern and the conduct of the medical officers and other officials was heavily criticised at an investigation carried out by the LGB. The *Examiner's* report on the investigation described the Guardians as "resentful of criticisms and suggestions".⁸⁰ One female correspondent claimed that the Medical Officers had visited the children's ward no more than two or three times in the past six months even though they had been repeatedly sent for. She advocated the introduction of female Guardians.⁸¹ It was not however until 1891 that the first female Guardians were elected.⁸² This appointment prompted "A Cheltenham Lady" to argue the case for female members of the Council and the boards of charitable organisations. She claimed that women would see aspects of poverty which were not noticed by most men.⁸³ There is however little evidence that the introduction of women or the removal of property qualifications for Guardians in 1894 led to more flexible or generous policies. In December 1896 for example the *Examiner* was critical of the attitude to out relief claiming that the amounts given were so low "as to convert the recipients into beggars at large".⁸⁴ In June 1899 statistics produced by the LGB showed that the average number of nursing staff employed by Unions in nearby counties was one to seventeen of patients in the infirmaries. The Cheltenham ratio was one in nineteen.⁸⁵

Unfortunately there is no information available about the level of medical services provided outside the infirmary during this period and it may have increased after 1886, when the receipt of medical relief no longer meant the loss of the franchise. At the same time however the number of cases dealt with annually by the General Hospital's Oxford Passage dispensary, situated close to the poorer districts, increased from an average of 3,000 for the period 1870 to 1884 to almost 4,000 between 1885 to 1899.⁸⁶

⁷⁹ *Looker On*, 9 Sept 1882, p.568. According to the *Examiner*, 22 March 1882, p.4 at the conclusion of the Board meeting which agreed the purchase Onley sen. gave notice that he would propose the rescindment of the resolution a fortnight hence. The Editor, with the pessimism born of experience, commented "Quite possibly, after a diligent whip-up he will succeed".

⁸⁰ *Examiner*, 9 Nov 1887, p.3 & 30 Nov 1887, p.4.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 16 & 23 Nov 1887, p.8.

⁸² *Looker On*, 18 April 1891, p.366.

⁸³ *Examiner*, 1 April 1891, p.8.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 16 Dec 1896, p.4.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 7 June 1899, p.4.

⁸⁶ General Hospital Annual Reports.

There were a number of additions to Cheltenham's charitable institutions during this period the most important of which was the Nursing Association which was reopened by the COS in 1880.⁸⁷ The COS itself failed to live up to the expectations of its promoters and in 1887 it was just another valuable but small charity assisting people "who it would be cruel to drive into the Workhouse". Like most charities it was short of funds and the relief given "rarely exceeds 1s per week, often less".⁸⁸ In 1889 the Eye, Ear and Throat Infirmary was opened "For the treatment of really indigent persons".⁸⁹ In spite of these improvements there is evidence of a reduction in the overall level of funds allocated to local charities during this period even though out relief continued to decline. In January 1886 for example the *Examiner* claimed that, with the exception of the General Hospital most charities seemed "doomed to sure but gradual extinction".⁹⁰ At the end of the year, when the Hospital Sunday collections showed a fall of 20 per cent over the previous year, the *Looker On* argued that most charities were experiencing a similar fall in income. By 1890 however, following further deterioration in the Hospital's income, it accepted that since financial resources were limited adding "every new venture means a reduced income for all".⁹¹ A letter published in the *Examiner* in October 1890 claimed that there was no "good work in Cheltenham of more than three years standing, which does not need more workers and more support" to make it effective.⁹² In March 1895 the *Looker On* reported that the Ladies Association for the Care of Friendless Girls and the Francis Owen Home were both seriously short of funds. It claimed that established organisations of this kind lost support when new charities were founded or when the novelty wore off. The Convalescent Home for example was still well supported because "it has youth on its side".⁹³ Such financial information as is available seems to support these views. As shown in Table 5.4 below the annual income of the General Hospital hardly changed

⁸⁷ The Nursing Association, operated quite separately from the COS and part of its facilities were intended for "the very poor who can pay nothing". 18th Annual Report of the Cheltenham and District Nursing Association. GL. Ref. P.6.21.

⁸⁸ *Looker On*, 26 Nov 1887, p.814.

⁸⁹ The Cheltenham and Gloucestershire Directory. CL.

⁹⁰ *Examiner*, 27 Jan 1886, p.4.

⁹¹ *Looker On*, 22 March 1890, p.230.

⁹² *Examiner*, 8 Oct 1890, p.8.

⁹³ *Looker On*, 23 March 1895. p.280.

over the last twenty-five years of the century in spite of continual growth in the number of people treated.

TABLE 5.4
GENERAL HOSPITAL INCOME
AND NUMBERS OF PATIENTS TREATED
1875-1899

Period	Average Annual Income in £s	Average Patients Treated Annually
1875-79	2968	6697
1880-84	3119	6109
1885-89	2947	7969
1890-94	2844	8550
1895-99	2912	9186

Source: General Hospital Annual Reports GRO Ref. Ho 3/8/8,9,13,14.

There is some evidence however, that contributions to local churches may have been significantly lower than in the early 1870s. After allowing for government grants for elementary education Christ Church average annual expenditure on social and religious causes for the period 1881-96 was a little over 50 per cent of that for the years 1871-73.⁹⁴ Most churches were probably in a similar position since it appears that there had been little investment in school buildings during the last twenty years of the century. In 1893 a survey carried out by Government inspectors revealed that many of Cheltenham's elementary school buildings were below standard. The *Examiner* warned that considerable capital expenditure would be required "at a time when voluntary income has reduced" adding that while most people favoured the voluntary system "comparatively few support their opinions by their pockets".⁹⁵ At the end of the year the *Looker On*, referred to a letter from the Education Department which stated that for a long period schools in Cheltenham had been "passed" which were "far short of present requirements". It pointed out that if a school board was established few of the existing buildings would survive.⁹⁶ A year later a public meeting agreed to an appeal for £6,000, which according to the *Examiner* covered only the Church of England schools. The

⁹⁴ The figures for the 1870s are taken from the reports that appeared regularly in the *Looker On* during that period. The calculations for 1881-1896 are based on the eight Annual Reports held in GRO: Ref. P78/3. CH 1.

⁹⁵ *Examiner*, 3 Jan 1894, p.4.

⁹⁶ *Looker On*, 8 Oct 1894, p.1123.

Editor calculated that a further £1,500 would be needed for other schools and pointed out that even this would not solve the problem of maintenance.⁹⁷

The increase in the number of “less wealthy residents” was undoubtedly a part of the reason for the decline. The General Hospital was clearly aware of this problem and in its Annual Report for 1892 it claimed that only 50 percent of the “resident gentry” contributed. In 1897 it stated that “comparatively few of the people who became residents became subscribers”.⁹⁸ The situation was however exacerbated by the diversion of funds to organisations dealing with conditions in the East End of London; “charitable piracy” as the *Looker On* put it.⁹⁹ This trend seems to have begun in 1884 when a meeting was held to discuss “a little tract entitled “*The Bitter Cry of Outcast London*”.¹⁰⁰ Two years later a further meeting took place to consider an appeal by Dr. Barnardos that eventually raised £150.¹⁰¹ From this point on the number of appeals on behalf of London-based organisations increased and were even directed to local charities. In 1889 the principal of the Ragged School claimed to have received several appeals from Dr. Barnardos and was aware that “much is sent to his Homes and other charities”. He argued that “the poor of Cheltenham should be our first care”.¹⁰² The Boys’ College obviously did not share this sentiment and in 1890 it decided to set up a mission in London and immediately withdrew its support for the Industrial School.¹⁰³ In 1892 the *Looker On*, reporting on the financial difficulties faced by many local charities, claimed that the inroads of London based institutions were increasing every year and “despite all protests is likely to continue”.¹⁰⁴

Well before the end of the century it must have been apparent to many people that Cheltenham’s social problems were unlikely to be solved by the improvement or development of the local economy. At the same time the voluntary welfare system was clearly unable to meet the demands made upon it. The effect these factors had on

⁹⁷ *Examiner*, 6 March 1895, p.4.

⁹⁸ General Hospital Annual Reports 1892 & 1897

⁹⁹ *Looker On*, 26 March 1892, p.299.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 19 April 1884, p.250.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 10 April 1886, p.237.

¹⁰² *Examiner*, 9 Oct 1889, p.8. These comments were included in an appeal for cast-off clothing and shoes which were “desperately needed for children between four and seven years of age”.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 14 May 1890, p.4.

¹⁰⁴ *Looker On*, 26 March 1892, p.299.

attitudes to social reform and the role of central government will be examined in the final chapter.

Chapter 6. The Development of Public Opinion

Although the depression of the late 1870s did not produce any serious civil unrest in Cheltenham it is clear that it had shaken confidence in the town's ability to cope with its social problems. In spite of the economic recovery of the early 1880s these problems continued to receive an unusual degree of attention and issues such as housing and sanitation in the working class areas were discussed more openly and with less regard for the town's reputation as a health resort. In June 1880 for example the *Examiner*, supporting an appeal for the Nursing Association, claimed that the poverty and squalor of the town was such that "any humane person living here cannot think of without some feeling of shame. Cheltenham is a wealthy and religious town, it also contains a large poor population, many of whom live in almost constant want, and are exposed to very serious suffering".¹⁰⁵ Housing conditions in the poorer districts were frequently described in considerable detail at Coroner's enquiries and widely publicised in the press reports of the proceedings. In February 1882 the *Mercury* claimed that the appalling conditions described at one such enquiry were merely typical of the "wretched dens" in which many poor people lived.¹⁰⁶ In 1883 a leading authority on sanitation and water supply, Dr. Benjamin Ward-Richardson, presented a paper entitled *Health in a Health Resort* to the inaugural meeting of the Cheltenham Health Society. At the conclusion of the presentation the MOH, Dr. Wright, conscious no doubt of the public nature of the occasion gave a quite glowing report on conditions in Cheltenham which he claimed compared favourably with any town in the British Isles. A wealthy local resident, Sir Brook Kay, was less inhibited however. While adopting a suitably diplomatic manner he was nevertheless surprisingly critical of housing conditions and the inadequacy of the water supply in Cheltenham's poorer districts.¹⁰⁷

The depression had clearly demonstrated the inadequacies of the voluntary social welfare system and the various relief organisations were therefore subjected to a good deal of criticism. The Church in particular was attacked for the degree of priority it gave to religious rather than social causes. When in August 1880 it was revealed that over £20,000 had been raised for the construction of a new church, St. Mathew's, the

¹⁰⁵ *Examiner*, 2 June 1880, p.4.

¹⁰⁶ *Mercury*, 18 Feb 1882, p.2.

¹⁰⁷ *Examiner*, 31 Jan 1883, p.3. Dr Richardson's paper was subsequently published in *Longmans Magazine*. A copy is held in GL Ref. P.6.8.

Examiner pointed out that during the period covered by the project funds had also been raised for church extensions and mission rooms elsewhere in the town. Consequently a considerable strain had been placed on the “rich and charitable” during a period of “admitted commercial depression”.¹⁰⁸ The proportion of funds allocated to internal and external religious charities was another contentious issue. In 1883 the *Looker On*, usually a staunch defender of the Church, attributed a fall in the amount raised by the Hospital Sunday collection to the increasing number of appeals particularly for religious objectives. As economic conditions deteriorated again in 1885 the *Examiner* complained about “an incessant and ever-varying series of exhortations for foreign missions and Christian enterprises” which, it claimed, absorbed “a very large share of local charitable contributions”. It claimed that large sums were also continually being raised not only for maintenance but also for the “ornamentation and even enlargement of churches whose congregations are declining”.¹⁰⁹ The linking of poor relief to religious observance and sobriety also caused considerable offence. One case, the subject of a coroner’s enquiry in October 1880, led the *Examiner* to describe a tendency to regard “a man as utterly depraved if he indulges in a pipe of tobacco or visits a public house once a week for a pint of beer” as a “great and growing evil”. “A Society which would relieve poverty, as poverty, is a want more sorely needed than many think”.¹¹⁰ Six years later the Pastor of King Street, Hebblethwaite-White, made much the same point when he argued that making relief conditional upon church attendance meant that there were many cases of severe destitution that received no assistance of any kind.¹¹¹

The depression of the mid-1880s focussed attention on the specific problem of large-scale, temporary unemployment where again the voluntary system of providing relief had proved inadequate. The *Looker On* claimed that unemployment on this scale in an unusually mild winter indicated “something rotten in the state” which required action on the part of central government. “Charity can do much to alleviate distress but cannot prevent its occurrence”.¹¹² Most people however looked for a local solution and a

¹⁰⁸ *Examiner*, 25 Aug 1880, p.4.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 23 Dec 1885, p.4.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 13 Oct 1880, p.8 & 20 Oct 1880, p.4.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 10, 17 & 24 March 1886. Comments of this nature may have contributed to the decline in church incomes noted in Chapter 5,

¹¹² *Looker On*, 31 Jan 1885, p.76.

number of suggestions for improving the system were put forward. Almost all were based on the belief that contributions to the distress fund would increase and more men would be employed if the work had more commercial and social value. One correspondent for example argued that work could be found in the form of local improvements in each parish identified by the principal residents and members of the clergy. People who had gained appropriate experience in India would supervise the work. A further writer identified improvements to school buildings as suitable projects, an early indication that the churches were finding it difficult to maintain their schools at the required standard.¹¹³ The weakness of these ideas was that they implied some degree of long-term planning when in fact the distress fund was essentially an emergency measure. Dorothea Beale, the principal of the Ladies College, suggested a more permanent system, a form of labour exchange based on the registers used for the domestic servant market. She warned however "it ought not to be a charitable foundation".¹¹⁴ As one of her biographers observed, Miss Beale had a "great horror of the demoralisation caused by the giving of doles".¹¹⁵ None of the suggestions was taken up and the voluntary distress fund, albeit more organised, remained the only method of relieving exceptional or unusual levels of unemployment at the end of the century.

The social unrest that occurred in various parts of the country during the mid-1880s clearly gave rise to a sense of unease in Cheltenham. Even though there was less violence than in some parts of the country the possibility of a "social explosion from below" was obviously not discounted.¹¹⁶ In 1887 the Government recommended that towns should mark Victoria's Jubilee by contributing to a fund for an Imperial Institute to be erected in London, a proposal which in the previous decade would have made a strong appeal to civic pride. On this occasion however the *Looker On* argued that such a move would be "treading on dangerous ground" in view of the "disaffection and insubordination now apparent among the masses". Attention was drawn to a comment made by Earl Brownlow: "the slightest spark may cause discontent and despair to break out in open rebellion".¹¹⁷ It is noticeable that there was less inclination during this period to regard the poor as a lower species of humanity.

¹¹³ *Chronicle*, 20 Feb, 1886, p.4 & 27 Feb 1886, p.5.

¹¹⁴ *Examiner*, 24 Feb 1886, p.8.

¹¹⁵ E.H. Shillito, *Pioneers of Progress. Dorothea Beale* (London: The Macmillan Co., 1920), p.56.

¹¹⁶ Read, *The Age of Urban Democracy* p.291

¹¹⁷ *Looker On*, 29 Jan 1887, p.48. The funds raised were used for a number of local causes.

During the late 1880s Cheltenham faced social and economic problems that were perhaps more serious and more widely recognised than in the previous decade. The response to this situation was a widening of the role of local government as reflected in the Town Improvement Act 1889 and the various initiatives designed to strengthen the economy. There are however no indications of any significant demand at this stage for State action. The general attitude towards the role of central government during this period is perhaps best captured in the statements made by local politicians and general election candidates whose views must have been broadly in tune with the electorate. As Palmowski observes “even the most prominent MPs representing urban constituencies had to engage closely with the social and political hierarchy of the locality”.¹¹⁸ The successful Liberal candidate in the general election of 1880, Baron de Ferrieres, argued that the “welfare of the many ought to be the first object of any government” which could best be achieved by “a policy of Economy at home and Peace abroad”. His Conservative opponent, Agg-Gardner, concentrated almost exclusively on foreign affairs and the maintenance of strong ties with the colonies.¹¹⁹ Agg-Gardner regained the seat in 1885 and on this occasion did at least refer to government involvement arguing that the guiding principle should be “universal tolerance provided that such tolerance is not made the excuse for infringement of the liberties of others”. He felt that more power should be given to local authorities in view of the “singular aptitude of the British people for self government” but accepted the need for central government to give some attention to general economic conditions. In 1886 A.B.Winterbotham, a prominent radical Liberal politician and MP for the Cirencester division opposed Home Rule arguing that social legislation should take priority in order “to decrease the great gulf between rich and poor”. He favoured free education and wanted a check placed on “the cursed drink trade”.¹²⁰

The winter of 1890/1 was particularly severe, “a period of unmitigated misery for the poor and outcast” according to the *Examiner*. The paper considered that if the two preceding years had not been prosperous, conditions might have led to “social

¹¹⁸ J Palmowski, “Liberalism and Local Government in Late Nineteenth Century Germany and England”, *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 45,2. 2002, pp.381-409.

¹¹⁹ *Looker On*, 20 March 1880, pp.178, 179.

¹²⁰ *Examiner*, 24, March 1886, p.6. He was also a cousin of a leading Cheltenham Liberal J.B.W. Winterbotham.

disturbances more sinister and alarming than the unemployed riots of a few years ago". One correspondent went as far as to suggest that out relief should be increased and that the distress fund should abandon the link between work and relief".¹²¹ There was however no further social unrest in Cheltenham during the remainder of the century but the amount of attention paid to social problems seemed to increase. Winter unemployment for example was now recognised as a major social problem even without bad weather. The Vicar of St Paul's began his appeal for funds for the winter of 1892/93 in October pointing out that "Halfpenny Dinners for School Children begin at the end of November, and urgent calls, as usual will be made on the Vicar by the Poor generally, many of whom are then out of work".¹²² In December 1893 a similar appeal by the COS for the approaching winter claimed that people needed to be reminded "that there is a very great deal of struggling and respectable poverty, and in the winter months, of absolute destitution in this fashionable Town".¹²³ The problem of low wages, which been recognised in the early 1870s, began to receive more attention and attempts were made to encourage trade unionism as a means of increasing the bargaining power of the labour force. In March 1897 a meeting was held by the local branch of the Christian Social Union which had been formed to study social questions and to provide practical assistance. At the meeting a lecture was given by the Rev. A. G. Carlisle encouraging men to form trade unions which had "conferred an immense amount of benefit on the working classes and the nation generally". The meeting was attended by some of the leading members of the labour movement including Betteridge and J. G. Carr.¹²⁴ As mentioned in the previous chapter the trade union issue was followed up in 1898 in a lecture given by Thomas Mann. The Vicar of All Saints, George Gardner, may have been involved in arranging Mann's visit and in a letter the week before the meeting drew attention to the benefits of union membership. He claimed that in Cheltenham men who were not union members, including skilled workers, were "earning quite inadequate wages and working under quite oppressive conditions".¹²⁵ Even though the Council rejected the demands of its workforce for higher wages in 1898 the decision was by no means unanimous. One Councillor argued that it was unreasonable to expect a man with a wife and three or four children "to give 18s or a £1's worth of work in return for a

¹²¹ *Examiner*, 21 Jan 1891, p.8 & 28 Jan 1891, p.4.

¹²² *Looker On*, 22 Oct 1892, p.955.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 2 Dec 1893, p.1099.

¹²⁴ *Examiner*, 31 March 1897, p.8.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 15 June 1898, p.8.

miserable pittance of 16s". He pointed out that it was impossible for men on the current rates of pay to make provision for periods of sickness and old age. "If the Council wished to improve the social conditions of the toiling masses one way to do so was to support the amendment". Another pointed out that the Council had forced the contractor for the "electric light station" to pay his men 5d an hour- "and quite right to, for it was barely a living wage".¹²⁶

Apart from the immediate problems of poverty the long-term consequences on the health of the poor, one of the "structural and organic" effects that Harris refers to, were also beginning to be discussed.¹²⁷ As noted in the previous chapter the MOH Dr. Garrett regularly included statistics in his annual reports demonstrating the link between health and living standards. In his report for 1892 he argued that in Cheltenham those children living in the poorer districts who survived the "terrible ordeal" of bad housing, poor sanitation and inadequate food and clothing "bear the brand upon them, with very few exceptions to the end of their days".¹²⁸ The same year the *Examiner* published a report of an investigation which had revealed that only a small proportion of men serving with the First Army Corp were "of really good physique". The majority were described as "underdeveloped men and boys who were physically totally incapable of enduring the hardships of war".¹²⁹ Working class housing had of course long been recognised as a major issue and in 1883 the MOH Dr. Wright had described it as "one of the great social problems of the day".¹³⁰ As mentioned in the previous chapter in the early 1890s there was a great deal of public concern about living conditions in certain parts of the town which led to changes in the Public Health Department. During the last years of the century however the impossibility of achieving a significant improvement from local resources was recognised. In November 1895 the progressive Conservative Councillor Ward-Humphries, in his election address to the South Ward, claimed that the need to improve housing conditions was now "a matter of national importance" and an

¹²⁶ *Examiner*, 5 Jan 1898, p.3.

¹²⁷ J. Harris, *Private Lives, Public Spirit: Britain 1870-1914* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), p.240.

¹²⁸ MOH Annual Report 1892.

¹²⁹ *Examiner*, 27 April 1892, p.4. This investigation appears to have anticipated the findings of The Committee of Physical Deterioration of 1904. Harris *Private Lives*, p.240.

¹³⁰ MOH Annual Report 1883.

argument for a “more equitable distribution of wealth between labour and capital”.¹³¹ Dr. Garrett, in his annual report for 1897, referred to the impossibility under current circumstances of reducing the serious overcrowding in the poorer districts. He argued that “It is a matter of the distribution of wealth, and nothing short of some sort of alteration in the distribution of money or means can ever permit the dwellings of the working classes to be everywhere what, according to the dictates of hygiene they ought to be”.¹³²

Statements made by candidates in the general elections of the 1890s also indicate that the need for greater involvement of central government in social affairs was becoming more widely recognised. Debenham, the Liberal candidate in the 1892 election, continued to give priority to Ireland and the improvement of the “Electoral Machinery”. On the question of social reform he could only refer to “Social Problems connected with Land and Labour which immediately concern the happiness and welfare of the working classes”. Agg-Gardner however was now a little more specific and recognised the need for legislation to “provide better Housing for the Working Classes”. He also favoured measures for the regulation of Friendly Societies and Savings Banks in order to improve the security of “the savings of the poor” but was opposed to “fussy interference” and “grandmotherly legislation”.¹³³ By 1895 both parties seemed to have moved towards a slightly more progressive approach. Agg-Gardner had retired from politics in 1894 and Colonel Russell, CMG now represented the Conservatives. In his acceptance speech Russell had argued that the Party must be “progressive” and recognised the need of the working classes for “social and domestic reform”.¹³⁴ His election statement was a little more detailed. He supported any scheme that would help working men to own their own houses and to prevent “the industrious poor from being consigned to the workhouse” providing “there is no additional taxation”. The Liberal candidate Blaydes, while giving priority to traditional Liberal issues, nevertheless claimed to be the representative of the party of “popular reform for the benefit of the working classes”. The only specific measures he referred to however was a revised Employer’s Liability Act. He was nevertheless in favour of “an adjustment of the financial burden” based on the principle

¹³¹ *Examiner*, 6 Nov 1895, p.2. This was probably the first time that a candidate referred to a major social problem in a local election.

¹³² MOH Annual Report 1897.

¹³³ *Looker On*, 18 June p.601 & 2 July, p.627 1892.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 6 Oct 1894, p.911.

“that extra taxation ought in all cases to be borne by those who will feel it least yet places no undue pressure on the rich”.¹³⁵ Russell retained the seat for the Conservatives albeit with a reduced majority, which was probably due to the absence of Agg-Gardner and the fact that he was still regarded as a “stranger”.¹³⁶

The Liberals did not contest the 1901 election and of course by this time the Boer War would no doubt have dominated politics. However political statements made during the last five years of the century suggest that little had changed since 1895. At a Conservative meeting held in May 1898 to approve changes in the local organisation the guest speaker, Sir Edward Clark, dealt almost entirely with foreign affairs. A Liberal meeting at the end of the year emphasised the importance of reform of the House of Lords but did not refer specifically to any social legislation.¹³⁷

The main subject discussed at this meeting was in fact the need for unity within the Liberal Party and this problem seemed to generate far more interest among Liberals. Following the meeting a number of letters were published in the *Examiner* expressing concern about the issue but only one seemed to recognise the political importance social reform. The writer argued that some measure for the provision of old age pensions and some changes to the House of Lords would unite all shades of Liberal opinion in Cheltenham.¹³⁸ The *Examiner*, which seemed to represent the more progressive Liberals, had long recognised the political implications of social reform for the Party. In November 1879 it had criticised Gladstone’s concentration on Tory foreign policy to the exclusion of “domestic legislation”.¹³⁹ During the last fifteen years of the century however it seemed to become increasingly alarmed about the growing strength of the Labour movement and the threat it posed not only to the Liberal Party but also to the social structure of the country as a whole. In 1886 it described the riots in London as the “Red Spectre of Socialism” which is “even now is seriously threatening our social stability”.¹⁴⁰ Three years later it claimed that “Official Liberalism” no longer represented

¹³⁵ *Looker On*, 6 July 1895, p.626.

¹³⁶ *Chronicle*, 13 July 1895. A third candidate, Alton Hillen, described the other contestants as “strangers and pilgrims and based his appeal solely on the grounds that he was a local man. He received 23 votes. *Looker On*, 20 July 1895, p.673.

¹³⁷ *Examiner*, 7 Dec 1898, p.8.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 21 Dec 1898, p.8.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 19 Nov 1879, p.4.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 17 Feb 1886, p.4.

the “masses” who were far more concerned with such matters as housing, health and free education than the problems of Ireland. It forecast a wave of “socialistic enthusiasm” when the working classes were properly organised.¹⁴¹ During the election campaign of 1895 it reacted strongly to Keir Hardie’s claim that in some industrial constituencies Independent Labour Party (ILP) representatives “detach two from the Liberal vote to one from the Conservatives”. It argued that in these circumstances party loyalties were no longer valid and called for a period of “quiet and persistent work for the amelioration of the condition of the people—for dealing with strikes and the unemployed, for mitigating the sufferings of old age among the poor, improvements in housing and sanitation. This is England’s need”.¹⁴²

None of these comments seemed to produce any public response which, perhaps suggests that few people were greatly concerned about the possibility of some form of social breakdown. There is certainly no indication that the Labour movement in Cheltenham posed any threat to either the Liberals or Conservatives. The importance of working class views on local issues, where opinion was not necessarily based on political loyalties, were of course recognised. The public meeting organised by the Ratepayers Association in 1888 to rally opposition to the Council’s proposed Improvement Act for example was arranged for a time which ensured that very few working class voters could attend. The *Looker On* saw this as a deliberate attempt to nullify the working class vote, which was expected to favour the proposal.¹⁴³ In municipal elections however both Conservatives and Liberals seemed to be able to retain the loyalty of sections of the working class and there are indications that personalities were often more important than politics even when Labour became more organised. The TLC’s general approach to local politics was to work within the existing system by persuading its members to support candidates who, irrespective of political affiliations, were considered to have the interests of the working class at heart. In 1898 however the committee agreed, against some

¹⁴¹ *Examiner*, 25 Sept 1889, p.4.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 10 July 1895, p.4.

¹⁴³ *Looker On*, 22 Dec 1888, p.877. There were other occasions when attempts were made to manipulate the working class vote. In 1893 for example opponents of a proposal to introduce electric street lighting argued that it would be resisted by the working classes. A letter from “A Working Man” claimed that, apart from the gas workers most working men supported the scheme. He claimed to have experienced the benefit of electric lighting in the coastal resort of Littlehampton where it was used on the sea front. Apparently the only occasion it had failed was during a Conservative demonstration. The local council was Liberal. *Examiner*, 18 Jan 1893, p.8.

opposition, that Betteridge should contest the predominately North Ward.¹⁴⁴ The result was a victory for the popular Liberal candidate Joseph Lenthall who gained 912 votes as against 222 votes for Betteridge.¹⁴⁵ The local branch of the ILP seemed to have little influence in Cheltenham and the possibility of a Labour parliamentary candidate does not seem to have been considered.¹⁴⁶ There is also no evidence of any form of political co-operation with the TLC and this was not entirely unusual even in areas where the Labour movement was more powerful than in Cheltenham. Walton for example argues that in Lancashire, where the ILP was strong, the trade unionists treated the socialists with suspicion and reserve, preferring to work within the existing system rather than “remaking society”.¹⁴⁷ Neither organisation appears to have exerted any pressure for social reform, which suggests that it was not a priority for working class voters generally. Again this was not unusual and Daunton identifies in Cardiff only a small minority group with the working classes who wanted social reform.¹⁴⁸ This general attitude was demonstrated by the response to the Small Dwellings Act 1899 described by the *Examiner* as a “large step towards a clear recognition by the State of its responsibilities in regard to the wellbeing of the people”.¹⁴⁹ In the municipal elections of that year Conservative candidates for the North and East Wards took the unusual step of supporting the adoption of the Act in Cheltenham. Both men were defeated by Liberals, G. Bence, a prominent local employer and Dr. R Davies, who although regarded as a newcomer had become popular in the working class districts as a result of his work for the Poor Law and the General Hospital Branch Dispensary.¹⁵⁰

Throughout this period attitudes towards social problems and the role of central government in relation to economic and social affairs appear to have been mainly influenced by pragmatic considerations. There are few indications of any philosophical or ideological debate. However, although there was clearly a growing concern about the conditions of the poor and the long-term consequences of poverty the general issue of

¹⁴⁴ Minutes of the Cheltenham Trade and Labour Council, 17 Aug & 21 Sept 1898. GRO: Ref. D3614/2

¹⁴⁵ *Looker On*, 5 Nov 1898, p.1052

¹⁴⁶ J. Howe, “A Political Problem. Local Liberal Candidates at the General Election of January 1910”, in *Gloucestershire History*, No15 2001, pp.16-20, claims that an annual income of £400 was required to run an election at the end of the century. This alone have made an independent candidate impractical

¹⁴⁷ J.K. Walton, *Lancashire. A Social History 1558-1939* (Manchester: University Press, 1987) pp.274 & 275.

¹⁴⁸ M.J. Daunton, *Coal Metropolis, Cardiff 1870 1914* (Leicester: University Press, 1971), p.180.

¹⁴⁹ *Examiner*, 26 April 1899, p.4.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 25 Oct 1899, p.4. Dr. Davies later unsuccessfully contested the 1918 general election as an “uncouped” Coalition Liberal.

social reform seemed to arouse little public interest. Far more attention was paid to local issues such as the need to improve elementary school accommodation or the Winter Garden scheme, which were of course matters that required individuals to make decisions. No government however had yet produced a significant social reform programme and consequently there was nothing tangible for the electorate to consider. As Alderman Winterbotham observed in December 1898, “during the past year there was hardly a home project or home reform in which it was possible to excite a large public interest”.¹⁵¹

¹⁵¹ *Examiner*, 7 Dec 1898, p.8.

Conclusion

Any attempt to portray changes in attitudes to social issues and the role of central government over a of thirty year period as a linear process is bound to be an over simplification. As Trevelyan has put it "The social customs of men and women and their economic circumstances, particularly in modern times, are always in movement, but they never change completely or all at once".¹

Nevertheless it is clear that in the early 1870s many people in Cheltenham were already aware of the scale of poverty in the town and also understood its social and economic causes. While however there is evidence of an increasing sense of unease about the conditions of the poor in this period there was, as yet, no demand for central government action. The economic deterioration of the late 1870s and the mid-1880s, coupled with the threat of social unrest undermined confidence in traditional methods of dealing with social problems but this lead only to a more interventionist approach on the part of local government. During the last ten years of the period however there is evidence of a growing realisation in some quarters that major problems such as working class housing and the plight of the aged poor could not be solved by local initiatives. At the end of the century however there are no indications that the question of direct State intervention was yet capable of generating a great deal of public interest. Throughout the period the debate about social issues was conducted almost entirely in pragmatic terms and there is little evidence that ideological beliefs were ever a significant part of the process. There is certainly no indication that the exposure of conditions in London in the 1880s was of major importance in the shaping of local opinion.

Cheltenham was no doubt a rather unusual town but it was neither unique nor isolated from the rest of society. Its economic and social characteristics would have been broadly similar to those of other small or medium sized non-industrial towns. The problems of casual labour, poor housing and sanitation would have existed in varying degrees even in large industrial towns. Its economic prosperity was influenced by local factors but it could not escape the impact of fluctuations in the national economy. Public views about social, economic and political matters were influenced not only by local conditions but also by the debate that was taking place at the national level. It seems reasonable to

¹ G.M. Trevelyan, *English Social History* (London: Longmans Group Ltd, 1978 edition), p.489.

assume therefore that the way in which opinions developed in Cheltenham between 1870 and 1899 was broadly representative of the experience of much of the rest of the country. It is probable therefore that the change which took place during the last fifteen or twenty years of the nineteenth century was something less than the ideological conversion perceived by some historians.

APPENDIX

The Cheltenham Newspapers

The newspapers published in Cheltenham during the late Victorian period were all locally owned and printed and most had been established much earlier in the century. Between them they covered a wide political spectrum although some were more valuable than others as a source of research material.

The oldest paper, the *Gloucestershire Chronicle and General Advertiser for Gloucestershire and Adjoining Counties*, was founded in 1809. In spite of its rather impressive title its local news reports were usually confined to Cheltenham, Gloucester and the surrounding area. It also reported a wide range of national and foreign news items but rarely expressed an opinion. Politically it was strongly Conservative and supportive of the Church of England. It seemed to take little interest in the general debate about social reform except for elementary education where it was primarily concerned to defend the position of the Church. Its correspondence columns generally reflect these priorities. On the rare occasions it referred to local social problems it adopted a strangely detached attitude. In the winter of 1878 for example, when economic depression and severe weather were causing an unusual degree of destitution it expressed satisfaction that “whatever distress there may happen to be in the town will be promptly and efficiently relieved”. It was also pleased to learn that “there is almost a total absence of the bitter distress that applies elsewhere”.¹

In 1884 the *Chronicle* became associated with the daily *Gloucestershire Echo* and the two papers were purchased by a newly formed limited company. The editorial policy did not appear to change however and, as the *Looker On* observed, the weekly *Chronicle* was compiled from the previous editions of the *Echo*.²

The other main Conservative paper, the *Cheltenham Looker On*, described itself as a “Note-Book of the Sayings and Doings of Social, Political and Fashionable Life” and in some ways seemed more of a magazine than a newspaper. Unlike all the other local papers for example it did not run a correspondence section. It was founded in 1833

¹ *Chronicle*, 31 Dec 1878, p.4.

when, according to the Editor, Henry Davies, Cheltenham “basked in the sunshine of Royalty”. Davies in fact owned and edited the paper from 1833 until his death, aged 86, in March 1890. During this period he maintained a quaint style of writing perhaps more suited to its earlier days. He clearly found it increasingly difficult to accept the changes in the form of local government and in spite of his political leanings was opposed to the more progressive policies followed by the Conservative Council in the 1880s. The paper is therefore valuable in the sense that it probably represented the views of many older residents irrespective of political loyalty. After Davies’ death his son became Editor and the paper became longer, less colourful and certainly less outspoken. Its editorial views were however less conservative and probably representative of a somewhat wider section of the population. Throughout the whole of the period the paper provided a great deal of information about local events and the clearest available assessments of local economic conditions. It also published a wide range of public notices and appeals for funds for a wide variety objectives as well as the general election statements made by Liberal and Conservative candidates.

For much of the period the *Cheltenham Mercury* was also regarded as a Conservative paper but it bore little resemblance to the *Chronicle* and the *Looker On*.³ The term “anti-establishment” perhaps more aptly describes its general approach. It criticised, in an extremely abusive fashion, the middle classes in general, the various local authorities and its fellow newspapers regardless of their political association. The Church and the Poor Law were prime targets for its invective. It was less constrained than other papers by the need to maintain the town’s reputation as a health resort and was very ready to expose cases of extreme hardship and incidents where the authorities acted harshly. In this sense it makes refreshing reading and it is hard on some occasions not to identify with some of its more vigorous comments. The use of terms such as “swells” and “blokes” when referring to the wealthier men of the town and the description of elderly upper class female churchgoers as “old tabbies” seems to indicate that it was aimed at working class readers. When reporting the London riots of 1886 however it adopted much the same approach as other papers and was critical of the “socialist orators”, particularly Hyndman, “whose aim is revolution rather than reform”.⁴ It was rarely constructive and after the mid-1880s its value as a research document declined as editorials became

² *Looker On*, 28 July 1888, p.496.

³ Royal Cheltenham and County Directory 1872-73. GRO. Ref: ROL H11

⁴ *Mercury*, 13 Feb 1886, p.2.

increasingly devoted to veiled criticisms and allegations about individuals who were often identified only by nickname or initials and consequently unintelligible to the modern reader.

The *Cheltenham Free Press* founded in 1834 represented the radical wing of the Liberal Party and by the 1870s seems to have been less influential than the *Cheltenham Examiner*, which followed a more progressive, collectivist approach to social issues. The *Examiner* is in many ways the best organised and informative of the local papers as evidenced by the fact that it is currently being indexed by the local history society. Its editorials covered a very wide range of national and local issues and its correspondence section seems to have been compiled without any discernible bias. There are a number of instances where in effect it provided a forum for public debate on particularly contentious issues such as free elementary education. It reported in full detail all public and local authority meetings, and occasionally the minutes of local government sub-committees, which usually record only the decisions taken, have a copy of the *Examiner's* reports attached. It was the most outspoken advocate of social reform and in this sense probably represented the more progress section of the community regardless of political loyalties.

Obviously a detailed survey of each of these paper over a thirty-year period was not feasible. The research programme has therefore involved an extensive examination of the *Looker On* and the *Examiner* covering the whole period and of the *Mercury* between 1870 and 1888. The remaining papers have been referred to as far as possible in connection with the more important issues and events.

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