

A very English institution? Foreign influences and the poor law, 1832-1905.

David Green
Department of Geography
King's College London
Email: david.r.green@kcl.ac.uk

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The uniqueness of the system of poor relief in nineteenth century England in relation to its continental counterparts is well known. Although most, if not all, states operated what we now know as a 'mixed economy of welfare', where private and public support for the needy operated in conjunction to greater or lesser extent, nowhere was the state of such importance in regulating and administering the provision of poor relief. Despite the British love affair with laissez faire government, as Jose Harris has noted, the English poor law after 1834 developed into 'the most centralized, professionalized, and regulated system in Europe'.¹

The English poor law was a peculiarly English system but it was not necessarily insulated from external experiences and foreign influences. From the initial Royal Commission into the administration and practical operation of the poor laws in 1832 that led to the creation of the new poor law, the principles of which guided policy for the rest of the century, through to the Royal Commission of 1905-09 in which the break-up of the poor law was seriously considered, the government and the various bodies charged with administering the poor law commissioned and sought advice on foreign approaches to poor relief. Whether they chose to act on them – the focus of this paper – was a different matter but throughout this period official enquiries often included detailed accounts of experiences in foreign countries. Added to this list of government enquiries were the innumerable visits by individual social reformers who brought back their personal experiences of relief in European and other places and reciprocal visits to Britain by foreign officials keen to discuss both their own efforts as well as explore the English system. And as the century wore on, and as western countries began to experience similar kinds of social and economic transformations that fundamentally altered attitudes towards poverty and impacted on methods of providing relief, so the exchange of knowledge became more prominent, helped by improved communications, the proliferation of international conferences and the professionalization of social work.

In this paper I ask the question: what impact did these foreign influences have on poor law practice in England between the implementation of the new poor law in 1834 and the Royal Commission of 1905-9? First, I review the broad pattern of foreign influences during this period; next I explore two

¹ Harris, 419

iconic examples of foreign schemes that were widely discussed in the context of poor relief – the Mettray system and the Elberfeld system; and finally I explore some of the broader questions raised about how and these schemes were received in England.

Foreign Experiences: an overview.

In 1832 the new Whig government appointed a Royal Commission to enquire into the administration and practical operation of the poor law. The Commission sought to gather evidence from the 15,500 parishes in England and Wales that were each responsible for the provision of poor relief. It sent out questionnaires to both rural and urban parishes, and although only around 10 per cent replied, nevertheless the number of responses and amount of information that flooded back taxed the capacity of the commissioners to the full. Nevertheless, by early 1833 they (mainly Nassau Senior and Edwin Chadwick) had drafted a preliminary version of their final report. However, overwhelmed by the volume of evidence, printing was delayed and it was not until the end of the year that the appendices of evidence appeared. In the meantime, however, at a relatively late stage of the enquiry, the commissioners decided to seek advice on foreign experiences and in August 1833 they sent out lengthy questionnaires via the Foreign Service to a large number of countries in Europe and the Americas. Information on foreign poor relief began to trickle back towards the end of that year, and continued to do so as late as March 1834 – a month after the final report had eventually been submitted. In total, when the final report and full appendices of evidence were published they ran to over 8300 pages – of which the last 860 or so contained the responses and reports from foreign countries. Both the amount and late arrival of the overseas information, however, meant that virtually nothing was made of it: only one recommendation of the twenty one produced (relating to relief for mothers of illegitimate children) made any reference to foreign experience.

The next few years of the Poor Law Commission were taken up largely with establishing the new poor law in England, and from 1837 in Ireland, and very little attention was paid to any foreign experiences of relief. Senior himself, who had been responsible for collating the foreign responses to the Royal Commission, was fully engaged in setting up the poor law in Ireland. There was hardly any further official interest in foreign approaches to poor relief, though in the 1840s and 1850s individuals and groups of social reformers began to become more aware of developments on the continent, especially relating to the treatment of pauper children and juvenile delinquency.² The 1860s were similarly devoid of any mention of foreign poor laws as attention focussed on the effects of the Lancashire cotton famine and the unsatisfactory medical and sanitary arrangements in workhouses, particularly those in the capital. The near collapse of East End London unions in 1866 and 1867 further added a sense of crisis to the activities of the Poor Law Board, and it was replaced in 1871 by the Local Government Board, a much wider and better resourced administrative body with a much stronger interest in gathering information on different approaches to relief, including those from overseas.³

² See for example the report on Mettray by Rev W Mitchell in 1851 [1357] [1358] *Minutes of the Committee of Council on Education; correspondence, financial statements, &c.; and reports by Her Majesty's inspectors of schools. 1850-51. Vol. I*; 1852 (515) *Report from the Select Committee on Criminal and Destitute Juveniles; together with the proceedings of the committee, minutes of evidence, appendix and index*;

³ See Christine Bellamy, *Administering Central-Local Relations, 1871-1919: the Local Government Board in its fiscal and cultural context* (1988, Manchester University Press, Manchester).

The first president, Sir James Stansfield, who had been the outgoing president of the Poor Law Board, had avowed international sympathies, particularly regarding Italian unification, and in the first years of his administration (which lasted until 1874) he commissioned several reports on foreign poor laws. Stansfield had already sent Andrew Doyle, one of the most senior poor law inspectors, on a fact finding mission to France and Germany in 1870 in the final year of the Poor Law Board and his report on the Elberfeld system appeared in the first annual report of the Local Government Board.⁴ In 1874, again following instructions from Stansfield, Doyle reported on the poor laws in foreign countries. This publication was a much more substantial affair compiled from an extensive set of reports on foreign poor relief, amounting to some 500 pages of evidence and covering most European countries, with a supplementary volume on Holland.⁵ The only comparisons that Doyle was prepared to make, however, related to whether or not a special tax existed for the relief of pauperism or whether the bulk of support came from voluntary contributions assisted by grants from local administration or the state. This was the fundamental difference, he argued, rather than the different schemes for the distribution of relief. Doyle was also cautious in jumping to any hasty conclusions about the merits or otherwise of other systems compared to the English experience, noting that "...from no two countries can it be said that similar classes of facts are reported and therefore the points upon which it is possible to institute comparison are few and not of the first importance".⁶

Doyle's reports coming at a time when others were also beginning to write about European poor law systems, appeared to make little impact on any discussions in England.⁷ The main focus of poor law policy was on the crusade against outdoor relief and as long as this was proving to be successful, there appeared little incentive to consider changes to the deterrent principles enshrined in that approach. The mid-1880s, however, brought a renewed concern with foreign practices, particularly in relation to how to deal with able bodied paupers, arising largely because of the problems associated with providing relief during the widespread unemployment following the economic downturn in the mid-1880s. A report on the Elberfeld system commissioned by the Local Government Board was published in 1888 containing three reports by J S Davy, the poor law inspector who had assisted Doyle's earlier efforts, Charles Loch, secretary to the Charity Organisation Society, and A F Hanewinkel, from the Liverpool committee of the Charity Organisation Society.⁸ Interest in overseas experiences also came from other quarters. Louisa Twining, for example, who had recently been elected as a poor law guardian, was keen to inform other female guardians of foreign experiences. Twining was one of the very first female guardians elected but many more were to follow after the reduction in the franchise for poor law guardians introduced by the Liberal Government in 1894. In 1887 there had been only fifty female guardian but by 1909 the number had risen to 1289.⁹ In her book on *Poor Relief in Foreign Countries and Out-Door relief in England*, published in 1889, she

⁴ British Parliamentary Paper, 1872 [C.516] Local Government Report (LGB), *First Annual Report (1871-2)*, The Poor Law System of Elberfeld – report from Andrew Doyle, Esq, 244-656.

⁵ See BPP 1875 [C.1255] Poor laws in foreign countries. Reports communicated to the Local Government Board, by Her Majesty's secretary of state for Foreign Affairs; with introductory remarks by Andrew Doyle, Esq., local government board inspector; BPP 1876 [C.1620] Poor laws in foreign countries. Report prepared by Walder J Sendall, Esq., (Local Government Board inspector) on the laws relating to the relief of the poor in Holland, being a supplement to the reports on poor laws in foreign countries communicated to the Local Government Board by Her Majesty's secretary of state for Foreign Affairs;

⁶ See BPP 1875 [C.1255] Poor laws in foreign countries, 70

⁷ See Anwed Emminghaus, *Poor relief in different parts of Europe : being a selection of essays translated from the German work, "Das Armenwesen und die Armengesetzgebung in Europäischen Staaten"* (1873, E Stanford, London).

⁸ 1888 [C.5341] **Elberfeld Poor Law system. Reports on the Elberfeld Poor Law system and German workmen's colonies.**

⁹ Anthony Brundage, *The English Poor Laws, 1700-1930* (Palgrave, Houndmills, 2002), 128.

outlined the systems across Europe drawing on the Local Government Board reports of 1875-76 noting how: "Not only is little effort made to acquire the benefit of the wider experience of other countries, but most of us are ignorant of what is done in our own country, even in our own Metropolis, for there is no intercourse of exchange of ideas between one Board of Guardians and another, and practice is hopelessly various even with in a limited area".¹⁰

But in addition to informing fellow guardians, Twining was also motivated by other concerns. First, she too, was very aware of the growing issues surrounding able bodied outdoor relief, and was keen to point to the virtues of the Elberfeld system, as others had done before her, as a way of dealing with relief for the unemployed. And secondly, by the mid-1880s working class men had begun to get the vote in much larger numbers and had begun to exert political pressure for social reform. Lowering the franchise for boards of guardians in 1894 had also made it possible for working-class men to be elected onto the poor law and this, in particular, caused considerable concern because of the fear that it would undermine the crusade against outrelief which had operated since the early 1870s and which had been particularly effective in reducing the number of able bodied paupers in receipt of relief, notably in London. It was in this context that alternative ways of addressing the growing problems of unemployment and outdoor relief began to be discussed, of which the Elberfeld system was the most prominent, though by no means the sole solution proposed. The focus of poor law policy during this period, however, remained the crusade against outdoor relief and as long as this continued to result in lower levels of outdoor pauperism, few saw the need for change.

The late 1880s and 1890s, however, also witnessed another significant change which encouraged explorations of alternative approaches to the relief of poverty and which persuaded others to look elsewhere for advice. Investigations into poverty by Charles Booth and Seebohm Rowntree had pointed to the fact that unemployment and underemployment were the primary causes of poverty rather than any moral failings on the part of workers. This set of beliefs arose in parallel with a willingness to question the efficacy of the market associated with the emergence of neo-classical theory and the writings of Alfred Marshall. If poverty was the result of market failure to provide sufficient employment, rather than the worker's reluctance to work, then the implication was that deterrence had little or no place in poor relief policy other than for the small number of loafers and vagrants that remained. Booth's survey of poverty in London had shown that this group was very much a residual element of the poor and that the vast bulk of poverty was associated with structural factors relating to the labour market rather than any moral failings. The deterrent workhouse, as conceived by the 1834 new poor law, was therefore an ineffective mechanism with which to address the problem of able bodied pauperism since it punished the unemployed as much as it did the workshy. New remedies were therefore explored, part of the new liberalism that ushered in a diverse range of social reforms to address the structural problems of poverty and unemployment, including state sponsored public works, labour exchanges, national insurance and old age pensions – an entire raft of welfare policies that increasingly meant that the principles of 1834 were no longer appropriate.¹¹ It was in this context that the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws of 1905-09 was established – the end point of this paper.

Foreign Examples of Poor Law Practice: Mettray and Elberfeld

¹⁰ Louisa Twining, *Poor Relief in Foreign Countries and Out-Door relief in England* (1889, Cassell and Co, London), 3.

¹¹ See Bernard Harris, *The Origins of the British Welfare State: social welfare in England and Wales, 1800-1945* (2004, Palgrave, Houndmills)150-65.

Throughout the nineteenth century two iconic approaches to the reform of paupers and provision of poor relief were discussed: the Mettray reformatory in France and the Elberfeld system in Germany. Their reception in England is interesting for the light it can shed on how foreign approaches were discussed and incorporated into poor law practices.

i. The Mettray System

The Mettray juvenile reformatory system of cottage schools for pauper children, founded in France in 1839, was first noted in the British press in a report of a visit published in the *Belfast News* of 18 February 1840. The report commented favourably on the arrangements based on an account of a visit by Dr Harrison Black.¹² Further articles appeared in the 1840s including an account of the Redhill Farm School established by the Philanthropic Society for the Reform of Juvenile Offenders in Surrey modelled along similar lines, which was still in existence in the 1920s.¹³ But with this exception the special correspondent of the *Morning Chronicle* newspaper noted in 1850 that nothing resembling the Mettray system had been adopted in England.¹⁴ Interest was stirred in 1855 following a visit to England by Dr Frederic Metz, Mettray's founder, instigated by the prominent Bristol social reformer and Unitarian, Matthew Davenport Hill. The visit was widely reported in the press and elicited a request to *The Times* from William Gladstone to publish a letter from Dr Metz describing how the system operated.¹⁵ Davenport Hill's account of his visit to Mettray system – the first full account in English – was published in the same year.¹⁶ Despite this flurry of interest, reports of the Mettray system were few and far between in the 1860s, comprising mostly the records of visits by individuals on the grand tour. The death of Dr Metz in 1873 sparked a further flurry of reports but interest rapidly waned and little more was heard of the system in the British press. The last article, published in *The Times* reported on a second visit to Mettray by the social reformer, Florence Davenport Hill, Matthew's daughter, who had long been a strong advocate of moral reform of pauper children in homelike settings.¹⁷

¹² "THE COLONY OF METTRAY." *Belfast News-Letter* [Belfast, Ireland] 18 Feb. 1840: n.p. *19th Century British Newspapers*. Web. 6 Jan. 2016.

¹³ "Spirit of the Press." *Manchester Times* [Manchester, England] 29 May 1849: n.p. *19th Century British Newspapers*. Web. 6 Jan. 2016. For Turner's life see Michelle Cale, 'Turner, Sydney (1814–1879)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/27867, accessed 6 Jan 2016]

¹⁴ "AGRICULTURE AND THE RURAL POPULATION ABROAD." *Morning Chronicle* [London, England] 26 Oct. 1850: n.p. *19th Century British Newspapers*. Web. 6 Jan. 2016.

¹⁵ WILLIAM GLADSTONE. "Reformatory Schools." *Times* [London, England] 29 Mar. 1856: 5. *The Times Digital Archive*. Web. 6 Jan. 2016. Reports appeared in newspapers published in Bristol, Ipswich, Leeds, Newcastle, London, Manchester, York, Aberdeen, Dublin and Oxford. See also Mettray; and M. Demetz in England.. (1855). Mettray; and M. Demetz in England.. *Knowsley Pamphlet Collection*. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/601004351> Mettray: from 1839 to 1856.. (1856). Mettray: from 1839 to 1856.. *Knowsley Pamphlet Collection*. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/60101125>.

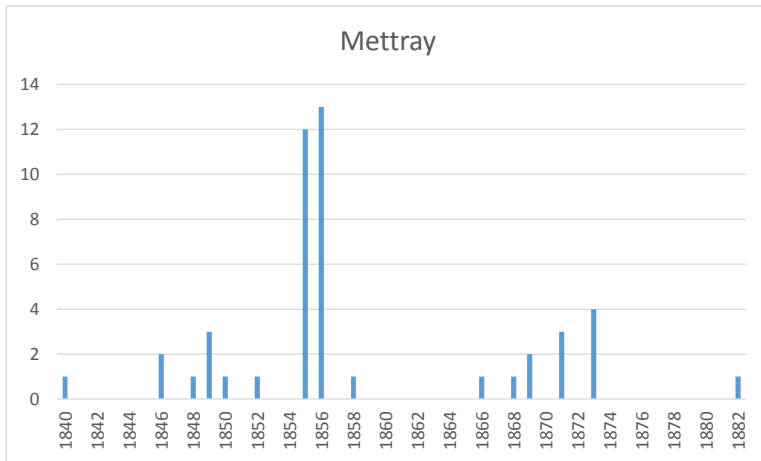
¹⁶ Matthew Davenport Hill, *Mettray: a letter from the Recorder of Birmingham to Charles Bowyer Adderley, esq, M.P.* (1855, Cash, London)

¹⁷ FLORENCE DAVENPORT-HILL. "Mettray." *Times* [London, England] 14 Jan. 1882: 10. *The Times Digital Archive*. Web. 6 Jan. 2016. The Davenport Hill family was interested and active in social reform. See Deborah Sara Gorham, 'Hill, Rosamond Davenport (1825–1902)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, May 2007 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/33875, accessed 6 Jan 2016]

Rosamond Davenport Hill (1825–1902): doi:10.1093/ref:odnb/33875

Florence Davenport Hill (1828/9–1919): doi:10.1093/ref:odnb/38756

Joanna Margaret Hill (1836/7–1901): doi:10.1093/ref:odnb/56689



Note: Mentions of the Mettray system in British newspapers, 1800-1900

Reports in the press and other publications frequently stemmed from personal visits to Mettray and a procession of English visitors made their way there, either as part of a genuine concern for the reform of juvenile offenders, or as part of a wider education associated with the grand tour. Thomas Paynter, Sydney Turner (founder of the Redhill Farm colony, chaplain to the Philanthropic Society for the Reformation of Juvenile Offenders and the first government inspector of schools); Andrew Doyle, poor law inspector for Wales and the Local Government Board, Matthew Davenport Hill and his daughter, Florence, from the notable social reforming family and William Henry Leigh (second baron Leigh of Stoneleigh), all visited Mettray in the early years of its operation. Others, like Matilda Betham Edwards, took it in as part of a more leisurely interest in travel and the Grand Tour.¹⁸

Interest in juvenile delinquency and the reformatory movement gained momentum in the 1850s, prompted by the formation of the National Reformatory Union in 1856 that had been preceded by two reformatory conferences in 1851 and 1853 in Birmingham, which has brought together a range of social reformers. The second conference, in particular, gained public attention with three thousand people attending its opening meeting.¹⁹ But despite the interest, and a handful of pioneering attempts to develop reformatories along the lines proposed by the Mettray system, such as that at Redhill in 1849, few efforts were made to construct them within the poor law until relatively late in the century.²⁰ Florence Davenport Hill's second edition of *Children of the State*, published in 1889, over 20 years after the first edition was printed, listed only a handful of schemes, including the one in the Swansea Union promoted by Andrew Doyle who was a strong advocate of the system and who reported on its adoption in the early 1870s but its rejection elsewhere in his region.²¹ Other cottage style homes for pauper children appeared to have been built in Neath (1878) and Bridgend (1879) in Wales, and in Birmingham (1879) and Kensington (1880), the latter

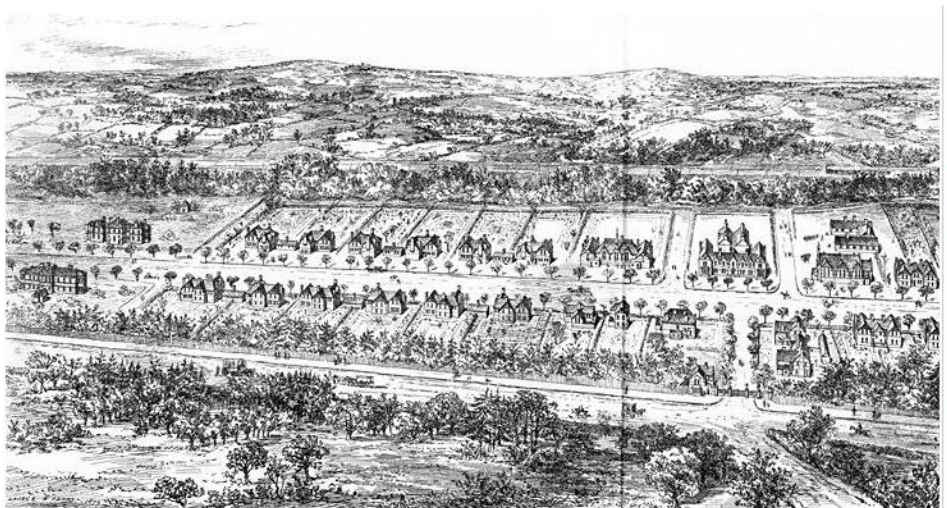
¹⁸ Matilda Betham Edwards, *Through Spain to the Sahara* (1868, Hurst and Blackett, London), 4-8

¹⁹ Laurence Goldman, *Science, Reform and Politics in Victorian Britain: the Social Science Association* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002), 40-45.-

²⁰ It was located near Dorking in Surrey and by the 1870s occupied about 300 acres of farmland, where boys were taught agricultural skills and lived in communal houses run along lines recommended by the Mettray system. See PHILANTHROPIC SOCIETY'S HARVEST HOME." *Morning Post* [London, England] 22 Sept. 1892: 5. *19th Century British Newspapers*. Web. 6 Jan. 2016.

²¹ "PHILANTHROPIC SOCIETY'S HARVEST HOME." *Morning Post* [London, England] 22 Sept. 1892: 5. *19th Century British Newspapers*. Web. 6 Jan. 2016.

associated with the campaigning presence of Louisa Twining, who became one of the first female guardians in 1884.²² In 1903, a parliamentary report listed 25 cottage homes in operation though by 1914 the number had jumped to 115 although a much larger number had been authorised.²³



Kensington and Chelsea School Board, Banstead Cottage Homes (1879); source:

<http://www.workhouses.org.uk/KensingtonAndChelseaSD/>

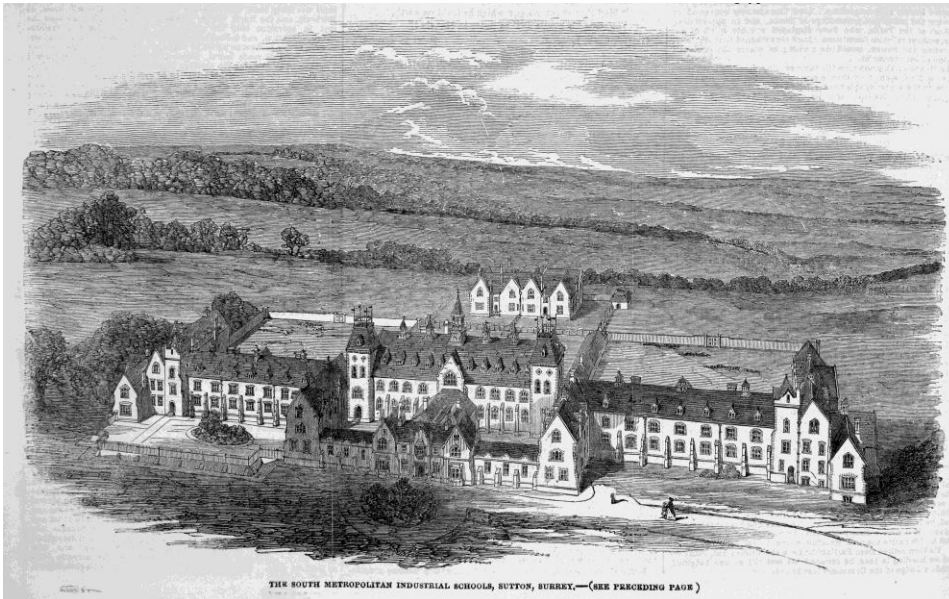
The slow adoption of the cottage home system stemmed from several causes. In the first place, there was a level of institutional inertia, particularly in London where the new school districts created in 1844 by the poor law had built large industrial schools on the barrack principle. These large institutions, located in the surrounding rural areas, reflected a considerable financial investment not to say institutional will, and supporters of the system were hardly likely to welcome change at such an early stage of their development. With the formation of the Local Government Board in 1871, however, new opportunities arose to influence how children were to be treated by the poor law and a report by Jane Senior, (Nassau Senior's daughter) commissioned by the Board, was published in 1873 that recommended the 'family system' of cottage homes as both morally superior to the barrack homes or boarding out of children in foster homes, and as medically preferable on account of the lower risk of infection, particularly of ophthalmia, that was so prevalent in the large district schools that had been built.²⁴ Senior's report, together with pressure from supporters of the 'family system' such as Louisa Twining, Mary Carpenter and Florence Davenport Hill, persuaded the Local Government Board of its virtues and from 1878 it became official policy for the education and housing of pauper children. Even so, progress remained slow and a more rapid

²² <http://www.workhouses.org.uk/cottagehomes/>

²³ <http://www.workhouses.org.uk/cottagehomes/>; see also William Chance, *Children under the Poor Law: their education, training and after-care* 1897, vol 1) 139-67. See Brundage, (2002), 122.

²⁴ Anthony Brundage, *The English Poor Laws, 1700-1930* (Palgrave, Houndmills, 2002), 121-22. See 1874 [Cd1071] Third annual report of the Local Government Board, 1873-74, Appendix 22: Report of Mrs Nassau Senior as to the effect on girls of the system of education at pauper schools, 311-94

implementation of cottage homes waited until the democratization of the franchise for poor law guardians in 1894 which had encouraged more female guardians to be elected. In 1887 there were no more than 50 female guardians but by 1909 the number had risen to 1289, with some very prominent campaigners for cottage homes, such as Louise Twining in Kensington (elected 1884) and Emmeline Pankhurst at Chorlton (elected 1894) elected. It was these individuals who were often instrumental in pursuing changes in the way that children were treated under the poor law.



South Metropolitan Industrial School 1855

ii. The Elberfeld System

One of the main areas of interest in the later nineteenth century focussed on the Elberfeld system, which had been introduced in German towns and cities from the 1850s. Drawing its name from the town where it had first been introduced, the system recognised two types of poverty: that stemming from incapacity and that from unemployment. The town was divided into separate districts and each district was then subdivided into circuits with a superintendent and citizen almoner each of whom was responsible for the welfare of a handful of families. The workhouse was reserved only for those who refused to accept work provided for them – a relatively small minority of tramps and vagrants. Detailed case work determined the kinds and levels of support that each needy family required. The service, though voluntary, was also obligatory and relied on mutual expectations of service based on a shared sense of civic duty. The entire system was overseen by a board consisting of a President and equal numbers of the town council and reputable citizens.

The Elberfeld system attracted considerable attention in England from the 1870s. Following representation by the Liverpool M.P., William Rathbone, in 1870, the Local Government Board, which has only just assumed responsibility for the poor law, commissioned one of its most senior inspectors, Andrew Doyle, to undertake a visit to Elberfeld and his report was published in the

Commentaire [DG1]: Add definition and brief history

Board's first annual report.²⁵ In the report, Doyle noted the origins of the system and the way in which status was conferred on those selected for civic duty, He commented favourably on how the meetings to determine relief demonstrated minute knowledge of individual circumstances, their efficiency and lack of 'speeches, wrangling, or irrelevant talking' – a nod, perhaps, to some of the unfavourable ways in which English Boards of Guardians conducted their own business. Doyle also noted other differences including the significance attached to family responsibility to support needy relatives and the absence of virtually any form of indoor relief as a test of destitution. Given that the workhouse test was one of the key principles upon which the English poor law depended, Doyle raised the question as to how pauperism could be held at bay without the threat of deterrence. His conclusion rested on the searching examination that the needy were subjected to, arguing that "no man who could possibly escape from it would submit to it."²⁶ Those in need were legally bound to answer the questions put to him by the district almoner for the district before receiving any form of relief. Only in rare occasions did it appear necessary for to the town to find work for the unemployed, for 'the conditions of relief are found to be sufficiently stringent to induce a man, if he can work and if work is to be found, to find it for himself, if not in Elberfeld, elsewhere..."²⁷. The result of the application of these principles, concluded Doyle, was that able-bodied relief was virtually unknown; that the numbers of paupers and cost of relief has fallen by over 30 per cent and that habits of self-help and thrift had become more prominent as evidenced by rising membership of benefit societies.

Although Doyle has been asked merely to report on the system, he could not resist words of caution in relation to England. The Elberfeld system, he noted, had not met with similar levels of success in other places, though he blamed that on administrative failings rather than any point of principle. Nor did it necessarily lead to lower costs per pauper. Although the numbers of poor receiving relief had fallen, the relative cost per pauper had not. Indeed, in his subsequent report on foreign poor law systems in 1875, he noted that since his first visit, the numbers in receipt of relief in Elberfeld had risen. His greatest concern, however, focussed on the detailed investigation of private domestic life by large numbers of voluntary visitors. In particular, he thought that difficulties in recruiting sufficient numbers of suitable visitors would be likely: "... In England it might be less difficult to reconcile the poor to such a system that it would be to find amongst the well-to-do middle classes fit and willing agents for its administration."²⁸

Doyle's report was accompanied by a brief flurry of interest in the press with letters to *The Times* and reports in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, and in the next few years others visited and commented on the Elberfeld system and other similar schemes in Germany and elsewhere. In St Marylebone, Octavia Hill had been instrumental in helping to promote a similar system of district visitors to the poor modelled along the Elberfeld system, although none were charged with distributing relief but rather administering advice to and advocating for the poor in their charge.²⁹ The Charity Organisation Society itself initially sought to promote the system more widely. With encouragement from Charles Bosanquet, secretary of the Charity Organisation Society, Anwed Eminghaus' study on poor relief in different parts of Europe was published in English in 1873, including chapters on Elberfeld, Berlin

²⁵ British Parliamentary Paper, 1872 [C.516] Local Government Report (LGB), *First Annual Report (1871-2)*, The Poor Law System of Elberfeld – report from Andrew Doyle, Esq, 244-656.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 253

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 254

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 256.

²⁹ See 1874 [C.1071] Third annual report of the Local Government Board, Appendix 12: Relief – official and volunteer agencies in administering; report by Miss Octavia Hill, 126-30

and Bremen, as well as on several countries.³⁰ Support also came from other quarters, including the Local Government Board. Further reports on European and other foreign systems of poor relief were commissioned by the Local Government Board under the auspices of Andrew Doyle, who made reference to Eminghaus' work, and other poor law inspectors, based on the responses to a series of questions posed through the foreign and consular service.³¹ Private individuals also wrote in praise of the Elberfeld system. In 1876 the Reverend Richard Hibbs – a somewhat feisty evangelical clergyman - reported favourably on the system, though his main purpose was really to criticise the cruelties of the English poor law, its overpaid administrators and the 'false teaching of ... political economists'.³²

The activities of the Charity Organisation Society in the 1870s and 1880s probably came closest to the kinds of detailed investigation of poverty that was the basis of the Elberfeld system but its weak metropolitan and provincial structure and, more importantly, a lack of willing middle-class volunteers prevented it being an effective mechanism with which to implement the detailed case work on which the system depended.³³ When the Local Government Board sent three representatives to explore the Elberfeld system in 1888, as it currently operated in different German towns, their conclusion was that the system had little to recommend it in an English context for precisely that reason.³⁴ Although John Davy, one of the Poor Law Inspectors who had earlier assisted Andrew Doyle in the first report on the Elberfeld system, had considerable sympathy with the principles, his view was that the Charity Organisation Society, which was the closest body that could have performed the duties of district visitors, was ineffective and that in his experience its local committees too often degenerated into dole offices.³⁵ 'In my judgement the attempt to introduce the machinery of unpaid visitors alone into the constitution of an English union, except perhaps as subsidiary to the investigations of the relieving officers, would almost certainly fail'.³⁶ And even if it would have been possible to recruit visitors, he continued, it was doubtful whether the standard of citizenship would have been adequate for the task. "Outrelief without this", he noted,

³⁰ Anwed Eminghaus, *Poor relief in different parts of Europe : being a selection of essays translated from the German work, "Das Armenwesen und die Armengesetzgebung in Europäischen Staaten"* (1873,

³¹ See BPP 1875 [C.1255] *Poor laws in foreign countries*. Reports communicated to the Local Government Board, by Her Majesty's secretary of state for Foreign Affairs; with introductory remarks by Andrew Doyle, Esq., local government board inspector; BPP 1876 [C.1620] *Poor laws in foreign countries*. Report prepared by Walder J Sendall, Esq., (Local Government Board inspector) on the laws relating to the relief of the poor in Holland, being a supplement to the reports on poor laws in foreign countries communicated to the Local Government Board by Her Majesty's secretary of state for Foreign Affairs; BPP 1877 [C.1868] *Report on the poor laws of certain of the United States, and on the combination there of private charity with official relief*. Oddly, no mention was made of these reports in the annual reports of the Local Government Board.

³² Richard Hibbs, *Prussia and the Poor, Or, Observations Upon the Systematized Relief of the Poor at Elberfeld, in Contrast with That of England: Founded Upon a Visit and Personal Inquiry, with an Appendix*. (1876, Williams and Norgate, London). The deterrent aspect of the poor law, he argued, arose because of the antagonistic relationships between rich and poor – a necessary outcome of a belief in the wage fund theory which stated that any money spent on relief of the poor would detract from the amount of capital available for wages and investment.

³³ For the COS see Robert Humphreys, *Sin, organised charity and the Poor Law in Victorian England* (Macmillan, Houndmills, 1995).

³⁴ "Only a short time ago the German Government sent a Commissioner to this country to report on the English poor-law system, and we have recently returned the compliment by despatching three experts to investigate the relief organisation which was first established at Elberfeld, and has since been extended to Dusseldorf, Bremen, and a few other large German towns." *Morning Post* [London, England] 30 Apr. 1888: 5. *19th Century British Newspapers*. Web. 6 Jan. 2016.

³⁵ House of Lords, S. C on Poor Law Relief, 1888 q. 1031-1033

³⁶ Davy, 1888, 42 [get BPPreference]House of Lords, S. C on Poor Law Relief, 1888 q. 4107

“would degenerate into official dole-giving”.³⁷ Charles Loch, secretary to the Society, concurred and noted in his evidence to the House of Lords Select Committee on Poor Relief of 1888 that “I cannot see how we can introduce such a system as that of Elberfeld into London, until we have, if I may say so, a development of citizenship.”³⁸

And herein lay the crux of the matter. . The problem for Loch and others was a lack of citizenship rather than any flaw in the system itself. In Berlin and other large towns, he noted, the “disintegration of society” made it “still more difficult ... to keep alive in the administration the energy and self-control which alone can make an out-relief system at the same time charitable in intent and restrictive in result.”³⁹ But difficulty did not mean impossibility. Although English life was considered to be ‘less disciplined and more irregular’ than that in Germany, nevertheless the possibility of introducing the charitable elements of the Elberfeld system remained. But in London, where class separation had progressed furthest, the possibility of the successful introduction of the Elberfeld system was more limited. For Charles Loch ‘in towns which contain a stationary industrial population, in which there is no great severance of the rich and poor, and where there is a good burgher spirit, it might succeed’ but in London “we have not to deal with a stationary industrial population; the rich and poor live apart; the natural intercourse between them is much broken; and there is all the civic irresponsibility natural to a town that is rather a province of houses than a city.... We cannot have an out-relief policy in London – the German experience shows. We have not citizenship enough to administer it”.⁴⁰

Yet a lack of citizenship was only one of several reasons for the absence of enthusiasm for the system. William Chance, writing in 1897, suggested that the Elberfeld system offered little that could not be achieved under a stricter administration of outdoor relief that weeded out undeserving cases. Comparing Dresden to Birmingham, he noted how in the latter a stricter investigation of outdoor applicants had resulted in a decline in the total number of indoor paupers – evidence that much pauperism was the result of lax administration and a failure to adhere to the principles of 1834. He claimed that in Dresden, where the Elberfeld system had been introduced, the rate of pauperism was higher than in Birmingham, though comparisons were judged to be difficult because of differences in the way in which statistics were collected. Nevertheless, Chance saw little virtue in advocating the introduction of an Elberfeld type system to Britain, not just because he considered it to be ineffective in reducing pauperism but also because “the system can only be properly worked in towns of moderate size, and not at all in country districts; and last, but not least, that England is not Germany.”⁴¹

There were several reasons for the enthusiasm to discover but not to implement what was apparently a successful system of European poor relief. First was the question of necessity. With the crusade against outdoor relief showing obvious signs of reducing the number of outdoor poor in the 1870s and 1880s, the kind of detailed investigations advocated by the Elberfeld system and its supporters in the Charity Organisation Society were deemed unnecessary. The Poor Law in conjunction with the Charity Organisation Society between them appeared to be successful in reducing outdoor able bodied pauperism through a combination of deterrence and individual case work. Between 1871 and 1876 – the first few years of the crusade - the number of outdoor paupers in England and Wales fell from 843,000 to 567,000. In London, where the crusade achieved most

³⁷ Loch, 1888, 64.

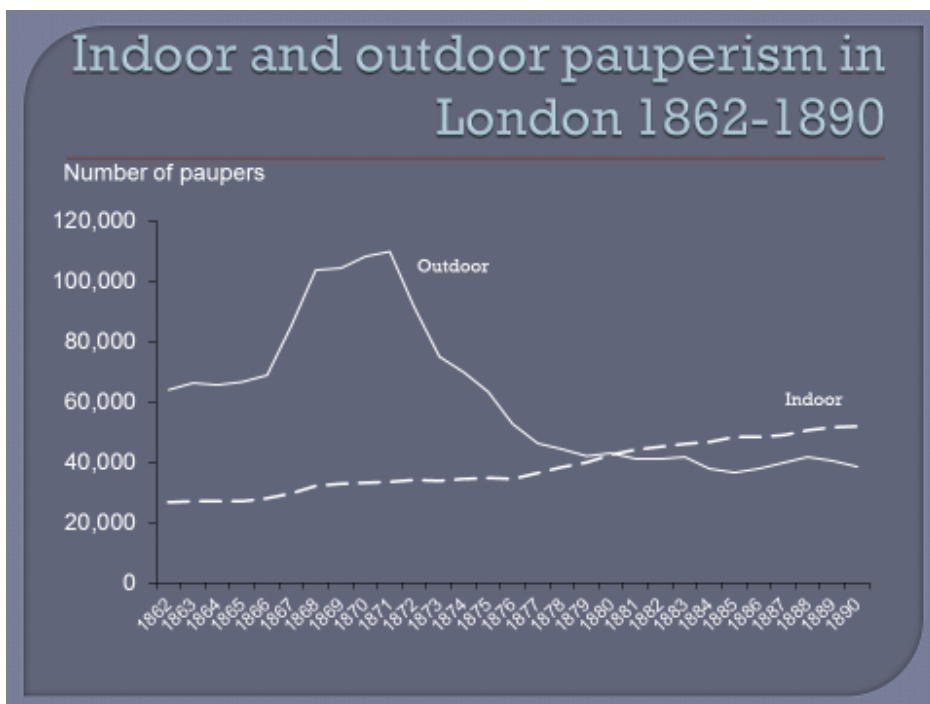
³⁸ House of Lords Select Committee on Poor Law Relief, 1888, q. 4107

³⁹ Loch, 1888, 67.

⁴⁰ Loch, 1888, 88.

⁴¹ William Chance, ‘The Elberfeld and English Poor Law Systems: A Comparison’, *Economic Journal* (1897), 7, 332.

success, the majority of poor law unions managed to reduce the proportion of outdoor paupers to around 30 per cent of the total, compared to a national average of about 73 per cent.⁴²



Source: annual reports of the Poor Law Board and Local Government Board.

Secondly was the issue of effectiveness. Although the cost of pauperism and numbers of poor had initially been compared unfavourably with German towns and cities, even William Chance, a supporter of COS policies, had to admit that the evidence was not entirely convincing: "...whatever other advantages the Elberfeld system may have over ours, it cannot claim either to reduce pauperism and expenditure on relief, or to replace charity".⁴³

Thirdly, and most significantly, was the question of civic engagement. England was not Germany and in many ways this distinction was crucial, not because of any chauvinistic claims to the superiority of English institutions – though that undoubtedly existed in some quarters – but because the role of the state and the latitude allowed to its citizens in relation to poor relief differed and from this stemmed the apparent lack of citizenship so lamented by Loch and other supporters of the COS. As Jose Harris has perceptibly remarked, the room for exercising citizenship in the English poor law was far more circumscribed than on the continent. As she notes, although numerous instances existed of local practices, 'Nevertheless, by comparison with arrangements in other countries, the British (and particularly the English) central poor law authorities enjoyed unusual powers not just of inspection and financial control, but of policy-making and legislation'.⁴⁴ Nearly all the important characteristics of the poor law throughout the nineteenth century came from powers delegated by Parliament to

⁴² Anthony Brundage, *The English Poor Laws, 1700-1930* (2002, Palgrave, Houndmills), 116.

⁴³ Chance, 334.

⁴⁴ Harris, 420.

the central authority, and transmitted by circulars and minutes. Even national policy, such as the crusade against outdoor relief, launched in the 1870s, took place with hardly any discussion in Parliament let alone formal legislation. As Harris comments: "Thus by a strange parody of reality, an administrative structure often denounced by critics as 'Bonapartist' or 'Prussian' or even 'Turkish' in character, involved a degree of centralized bureaucratic control largely unknown in the poor law systems of mainland Europe before the end of the nineteenth century.'⁴⁵

Citizen Ratepayers?

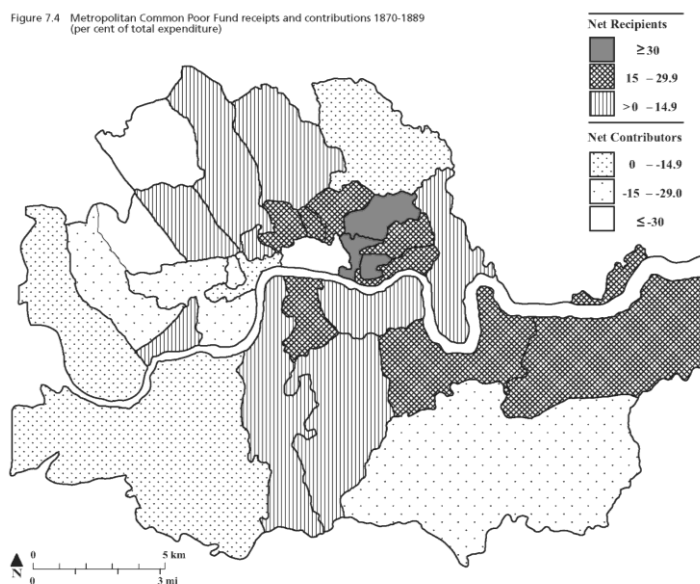
The lack of citizenship, however, that so concerned Davy, Loch and others, was more than just the result of the limited action space allowed to individuals involved in relief. Rather it was also the outcome of the system of taxation that increasingly removed the individual ratepayer from the actual implementation of relief and in doing so removed the immediate tie between those who financed the system and those who administered it. In Europe, funds tended to be administered by the commune or civic authority, based on local charitable endowments, income from communal property (e.g. in Germany the *Allmend* or common property of the mediaeval village); supplemented by private donations, contributions from general rates and by other ad hoc systems of taxation. These forms of finance were relatively inflexible – not necessarily a problem in a relatively stable and static economy but not particularly well suited to one in which large scale growth and cyclical economic fluctuations occurred. In England, on the other hand, the costs of relief were borne by a tax on property, entirely local at first but gradually extended throughout the nineteenth century and particularly from the 1870s to include inter-union, municipal as well as national loans and grants in aid of relief.⁴⁶

This divorce between direct fiscal responsibility for local relief was most advanced in London, a city in which experiences increasingly drove national poor law policy. In London, the tendency to widen the area of rating had long been argued for, particularly by poorer eastern districts, but had been resisted by those who were nervous about divorcing the payment of rates from the actual provision of relief. If poorer districts could call on their wealthier metropolitan neighbours to fund relief, it was argued, how could they be prevented from merely distributing outrelief to whoever asked for it? Matters changed, however, with the economic crisis of 1866-67 which led to the creation of the Metropolitan Common Poor Fund. This system redistributed money from richer to poorer unions for the purposes of indoor relief based on rateable value – a system that had been initially introduced in 1864 to pay for the construction of casual wards for the homeless poor and subsequently made the basis for all poor law expenditure under the Union Chargeability Act of 1865. The virtual collapse of the East End unions in 1866-67, arising out of a severe economic downturn, encouraged the wider application of the principle of redistribution and in 1867 the Metropolitan Poor Act was introduced setting out the basis for a common fund for the city as a whole. Unions were reimbursed for expenses associated with lunatics outside the workhouse, patients with fever or smallpox in asylums; medical and surgical appliances; salaries of officers employed by the guardians, in district schools, dispensaries, compensation to medical officers, fees for registration, vaccination and costs of children in district schools – all of which in amounting to about one third of the total expenditure for relief of the poor. In 1869, financial support was also provided for the indoor poor at 5d a day. In London, as a proportion the contributions from the MCPF increased from 32.9% total expenditure

⁴⁵ Harris, 420

⁴⁶ Harris, 2002, 418

for relief in 1871 to 42.3% by 1880.⁴⁷ The effects of this redistributive mechanism are evident in the ways in which districts were net contributors or beneficiaries of the fund, shown below:



Source: David Green, *Pauper Capital* (2010)

Whilst this system and its subsequent extensions had the virtues of ensuring that in theory at least there were no fixed limitations on the ability to raise taxation for the poor, it also meant that individual ratepayers – those very same respectable middle class residents who in Germany acted as almoners in the Elberfeld system – were in England increasingly distanced from decisions about the provision of relief. The difference was important, not least because where local funds remained the basis for provision, citizenship amongst neighbours was likely to remain strong. Where funding occurred through more general taxation, the ties between citizenship and local service were weaker,

⁴⁷ The additional funds made available through the redistributive mechanism of the Metropolitan Common Poor Fund allowed a considerable amount of new workhouse construction including specialist institutions that catered for specific categories of the poor. Without an expansion in the capacity to offer space in the workhouse as a deterrent, it would have been impossible to have enforced restrictions on the provision of outdoor relief – and such expansion was predicated on the ability to widen the area of contributions. Indeed, as Gathorne Hardy, president of the Poor Law Board argued in 1869, “The workhouse ought to be a place of discipline – not an infirmary – not a place where fever patients are harboured – not a species of almshouses, where age and infirmity call for kindness and indulgence. The wilful pauper must be discouraged, while the afflicted are treated tenderly. Classification is best managed where the area is wide, and therefore naturally leads to grouping and amalgamation” *London Standard*, 15 June 1869

particularly as the state became increasingly involved in relation to redistribution and centrally funded provision. The absence or weakness of citizenship, therefore, that was blamed by supporters of the Elberfeld system or variants thereof, was less cause than effect of the unique nature of the English poor law system which rested on compulsory taxation on property. This had been there from the start and on it the entire poor law system rested. Taxation based on property rates not any lack of citizenship was the real culprit.

Conclusion: some tentative thoughts

For much of the nineteenth century British social reformers and poor law officials were aware of the different ways in which poor relief operated in European countries and elsewhere. The Mettray reformatory and the Elberfeld system were well known in both official and unofficial capacities. Although isolated examples of Mettray-like reformatories were established they were the result of Victorian philanthropy rather than any poor law policy. It took more than 25 years for official poor law policy to embrace the principles of the Mettray scheme through the construction of cottage homes for pauper children from the late 1870s. The Elberfeld system, again also well known almost from its inception and through repeated personal visits and official reports, was never adopted in Britain, though the case work approach of the Charity Organisation Society in the 1870s and 1880s came closest to emulating the principles of investigation upon which the system rested.

Why, given the existence of so much information about these foreign experiments, did it take so long for these ideas to generate a presence in England? Explaining failure is never easy but we can turn to several factors that could account for the lack of foreign influences on the English poor law.

First, social conditions and context. England was the country that first experienced large scale industrialisation and urbanisation and experiences of poverty under these conditions differed considerably from those in more traditional agricultural economies and rural societies. Systems that relied largely on voluntary contributions or state endowments had much more limited capacity to respond to need. In rural economies, this might have worked but in ones characterised by urban growth and industrialisation in which cyclical fluctuations occurred, it was much more problematic. The capacity of the English poor law to expand its fiscal capacity to supply a fluctuating demand rested on its unique tax basis and as urbanisation and industrialisation proceeded, European states were more likely to move towards a more English model of support, or to develop entirely new methods based on various forms of social insurance, than vice versa.

This fiscal uniqueness was important in another and more subtle way, namely the impact it had on the notion of citizenship and civic responsibility for poor relief. The tendency in Britain was for the widening of spatial units of taxation – amalgamating parishes into unions under the new poor law; extending union chargeability in 1865; the principle of municipal redistribution in London after 1867 and other measures helped to distance ratepayers from the actual administration of relief. Under these circumstances, individual civic responsibility for poor relief was in practice difficult to achieve. In London, and other large towns and cities, class separation further hindered any implementation of district visiting. Under these circumstances, replicating the close personal supervision along Elberfeld lines proved impossible: there was just not enough civic good will to make it possible. But it

was not a failure of national character that was the cause but rather the distancing of individuals from the actions of the state arising from the nature of local taxation that was at fault.⁴⁸

Secondly, there was also a question of path dependency, particularly relating to the treatment of pauper children. Educating the pauper child had, from the 1840s, taken a different route to that in France. Large industrial schools located in rural surroundings had been the initial approach taken in London, and from that example others followed. Scale was important and the argument of those who supported these large institutions was that it would allow a higher calibre of provision than smaller establishments. Indeed, the whole emphasis in the English poor law system was the need to develop better forms of classification and to design effective institutional responses for each group of poor – and this depended always on enlarging the area of operation and rating. Changing and more progressive approaches to children's education from the 1870s – the first education act making primary schooling compulsory was passed in 1870 – coupled with different administrative arrangements for poor relief and the election of larger numbers of female guardians encouraged new ideas about educating pauper children. These ideas, coupled with the growth in the number of female guardians from the 1880s and 1890s, in turn provided a sufficiently strong counterweight to the supporters of industrial schools to allow alternative models to be tried in the form of cottage homes for pauper children.

Thirdly, paradigmatic shift in the understanding of poverty. Ideological commitment to the idea of deterrence was one of the guiding principles of the new poor law from 1834 and continued to underpin official policy throughout the decades up to the 1880s. Such deterrence had little in common with systems on the continent. Only with the new liberalism of the latter years of the century and changing economic orthodoxy that questioned the efficacy of market mechanisms did new approaches to the alleviation of poverty emerge – labour exchanges, national unemployment insurance, old age pensions, state sponsored public works all hinted at a shift away from a deterrent poor law policy towards ways in which the labour market could be improved and workers insulated from the effects of unemployment. This new understanding, in turn, encouraged a more open set of discussions about experiences of poor relief elsewhere. Helped by better communications and the greater interchange of ideas, social reformers and government officials were far more able and likely to be able to gain first hand experience of relief in other countries. Shifts in the ideological landscape coupled with better flows of information encouraged discussion of a wider set of alternatives than had hitherto been possible.

Looking ahead to the 20th century, foreign influences and new ideas about poverty helped create a more open set of debates about poor relief. Abandoning the fundamental tenets that had guided poor law policy for over 60 years took longer to achieve. The Local Government Board Inspectors, many of which had grown up in the poor law era, continued to emphasise the importance of the 1834 principles. However, other voices were also becoming more prominent in the construction of poor law policy: the new guardians elected after the 1894 franchise reform, social reformers, and working-class politicians provided an alternative counterweight to a relatively conservative inspectorate. These more dissident voices came to prominence in the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws of 1905-09, which although failing to agree on recommendations for significant change, included a minority report written by Beatrice Webb that advocated the break up of the poor law. As part of that report there was a separate volume on foreign and colonial systems of poor relief – just

⁴⁸ The most comprehensive comparison of the English and German welfare states is E. P. Hennock, *The Origin of the Welfare State in England and Germany, 1850-1914* (2007, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge).

like there had been in the 1832 Royal Commission. On this occasion, however, there were stronger grounds for listening to alternatives. Apart from the very different political landscape, in which organised labour and a resurgent liberalism were prominent, other factors hinted at a growing convergence between Britain and other European nations. From the late nineteenth century, urbanisation and industrialisation had led to a convergence of poor law systems across Europe and greater attention was paid to experiences elsewhere, aided by the debates that took place in a growing number of international and national conferences on social reform. Convergent experiences, new theoretical understanding of the nature of poverty, and a political landscape at both local and national level that encouraged alternative approaches to poor relief associated less with deterrence and Benthamite individualism and more with welfarist and collectivist attempts to alleviate poverty. Although the English poor law remained a peculiarly English institution, by the start of the 20th century it had begun to change in very significant ways. Other national systems of relief moved closer to the British model – but that movement was by no means only in one direction.