

## THE ADMISSION OF CHILDREN TO THE MILTON UNION WORKHOUSE, KENT, 1835–1885

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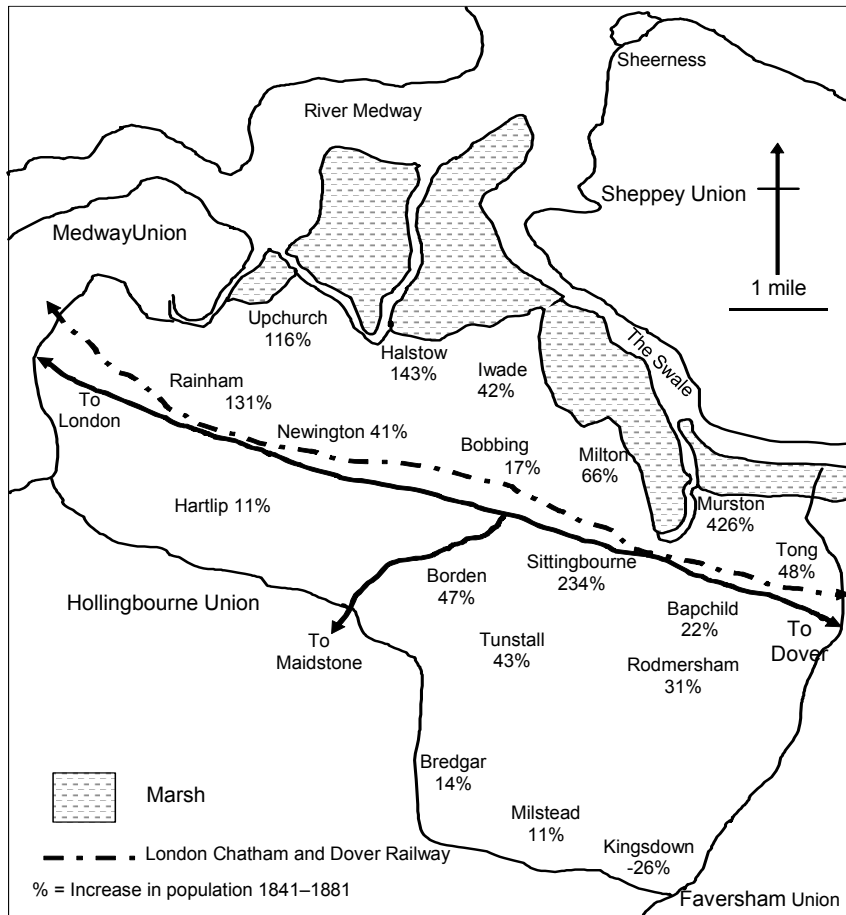
### Introduction

A number of recent articles in *Local Population Studies* have analysed the demographic profile of workhouse occupants for particular localities in the later nineteenth century, but none have focused specifically upon children.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this article is to analyse the circumstances in which children were admitted to the workhouse of the Milton Poor Law Union, in the context of national laws and attitudes for the half-century after the passage of the Poor Law Amendment Act in 1834. This Act was preoccupied with two matters: the establishment of a new administrative system of poor relief based on unions of parishes and a central authority, and the elimination of outdoor relief to able-bodied men, who were to be offered as alternatives either self-sufficiency or a workhouse where their condition would be 'less eligible' than that of the lowliest man living independently. The Act recognised the existence of children at only three points: it changed the laws on parish apprenticeships and on illegitimacy; and it stated that relief to children should be regarded as relief to their fathers (or mothers if widowed).<sup>2</sup> But if the application of the principle of less eligibility to able-bodied fathers reflected the belief that able-bodied men seeking relief were morally culpable, it was obviously absurd to blame children for their situation. Nevertheless, as we will see, they entered the workhouse in considerable numbers. While policy makers wanted to separate them from the infection of pauperism, through education and a policy of segregation in workhouses, in practice this proved difficult to achieve, and the general mixed workhouse quickly became the norm.

### The Milton Union

The Milton Union was a very small one, of 18 parishes, and a very early one, coming into existence on 25 March 1835. The Board of Guardians held their first meeting three days later, most of them full of enthusiasm for the New Poor Law and confident that the end of pauperism would follow shortly. They came largely from among the minor landowners of their parishes (the area had no large-scale resident landowners), plus the occasional businessman from the more urbanised area round Milton itself.

Figure 1 Milton Poor Law Union



In 1835 the economy of the union was almost entirely agricultural, plus fishing and shipping interests in the northern areas near the rivers. Communication both by river and road (the Dover road ran through the area) had always ensured that this was less of a rural backwater than some other agricultural areas, and the Kentish system of landholding, with a free market in land, had favoured entrepreneurial activities. Fertile soil in the northern half had encouraged production, especially of wheat, fruit and hops. The southern part of the union was less fertile.

During the half-century after 1835 a dramatic change occurred in the economy and demography of the area. The population of the union increased by 103 per

cent between 1841 and 1881. The rapid growth of London created a huge demand both for horticultural produce and, more especially, for the building materials, both bricks and cement, which the brick earth and blue clay of the area near the river could supply. The remarkable population increases in Upchurch and Murston, for example, are entirely due to these industries.<sup>3</sup> Transport also developed, with a big increase in barge and boat building. The railway arrived late (1859) but it revolutionised the carriage of passengers, mail and perishable goods. The newly industrialised areas generally remained as villages. The only urbanised area was at the east end of the union. Milton, the ancient capital of the hundred which became the union, was particularly important for its coastal trade and fishing, but remained unplanned and insanitary. Nearby Sittingbourne was much more go-ahead in adopting changes in government and sanitation.<sup>4</sup> The southern part of the union remained an agricultural backwater and did not see a similar increase in population. This evolving economic climate was to create difficulties for the Milton guardians as it made the area more vulnerable to periodic recessions, and in the winters of 1869 and 1870 they requested permission to adopt an Outdoor Labour Test Order rather than insisting on the workhouse test for the large numbers suddenly thrown out of work.<sup>5</sup>

In Milton the original plan to use old workhouses for different categories of pauper soon gave way to the cheaper alternative of a general mixed workhouse. The building, like others designed by Sir Francis Head, was constantly criticised in later decades for its failure to allow for the effective separation of different categories of inmates and for various building defects. Its site also came in for later criticism, particularly for its proximity to the marshes. In 1872, the Medical Officer wrote a damning indictment of the site: 'cholera and smallpox select it as their habitat ... fever, ague and malaria are always present'. He particularly pointed to the toll this took on the staff: two masters had died, and other officers had had to resign because of sickness or to take leave for convalescence. Among the inmates, the young and the old suffered particularly. But epidemics were becoming fewer and the incidence of malaria was declining with the gradual draining of the marshes. The Medical Officer reluctantly accepted the minor alterations recommended, but the water supply remained unsatisfactory until an analysis of samples in 1881 led to a decision to contract with the public authority to supply water from the mains.<sup>6</sup>

### **Sources and methodology**

The major source for identifying children in the workhouse is the series of Admission and Discharge Registers for the period 1835-85.<sup>7</sup> Although the quality of these is variable, the records were generally kept efficiently and legibly, especially after 1842. The earliest records contain the most detailed information. Later the detail varies, capriciously. Sometimes an admission has no corresponding discharge, or vice versa. Ages (or birth years) were usually recorded in the 1830s and after 1870, sometimes in the 1840s and 1860s but very rarely in the 1850s. Parishes were not given between 1848 and 1867. Marital status and reasons for admission are not often given after the early

years, but can often be inferred from other information. The computer files finally compiled for this exercise have eliminated all duplicate entries (as far as these can be ascertained); have ascribed page numbers to the books for ease of reference; have identified each individual with a unique number; have linked admission and discharge records for individuals; and have attempted to ascribe a family number to each appropriate group. The earlier total reconstitution of families in the five western parishes of the union has provided additional information about some inmates.<sup>8</sup> Official categories for gender and age group changed over the years, but have been standardised for these files, children being defined as those under 16. Additional fields have been created for familial status and size of family group, and the number of days between admission and discharge and the decade of first admission.<sup>9</sup>

The other main sources require less explanation. The Annual Reports, General Orders and inspectors' reports of the three successive central Poor Law authorities have been used both for statistical information and as a standard by which to judge policies and practices. The Minutes Books of the Board of Guardians, meticulously kept, have provided information supplementary to the Registers about individuals, as well as indications of policy. Finally, the correspondence between the Milton Union and the central authority, though unfortunately lost for 1842-67 and 1878-80, has proved invaluable in fleshing out the bare bones of the minutes. Particularly interesting are the letters sent by individuals and sometimes the debates in rough notes between members of the central authority, which explain how they arrived at their ultimate response.

#### **Age profile of the workhouse population**

Table 1 presents a breakdown of the Milton Union workhouse population by age for each quinquennium. The first panel of the table shows that of the 20,098 workhouse admissions between 1835 and 1885, 6,388 were of children—an average of 128 each year. Starting in the period 1845-50, the number of admissions of children declined considerably, as indeed it did for the workhouse population as a whole, stabilising after 1850 around short-term fluctuations. Across the years 1835-85 children made up almost 32 per cent of admissions, and although their proportional significance fell back slightly from the 42 per cent found in the first quinquennium they formed close to, or slightly in excess of, 30 per cent in every five year period.

The second panel of Table 1 includes first admissions only, and thus reflects the number of discrete individuals in each age category who entered the workhouse during the various quinquennia. The number of children is now roughly halved, falling to an average of 61 per annum, but their proportional significance is increased, to nearly 38 per cent of the total, reflecting the fact that more multiple admissions occurred among the adult population than among children. The only significant change in age structure shown in Table 1 came in the 1870s and early 1880s, when the elderly started to form a far higher proportion of admissions, though even then the proportion who were children was largely maintained.

**Table 1 Age profile of Milton Union workhouse admissions, 1835-85**

All Admissions									
Number					Percentage				
Year	<16	16-59	>59	Total	Year	<16	16-59	>59	Total
1835-40	1,085	1,123	405	2,613	1835-40	41.5	43.0	15.5	100.0
1840-45	1,247	2,405	506	4,158	1840-45	30.0	57.8	12.2	100.0
1845-50	642	1,033	338	2,013	1845-50	31.9	51.3	16.8	100.0
1850-55	480	634	246	1,360	1850-55	35.3	46.6	18.1	100.0
1855-60	517	855	227	1,599	1855-60	32.3	53.5	14.2	100.0
1860-65	415	759	261	1,435	1860-65	28.9	52.9	18.2	100.0
1865-70	590	1,267	324	2,181	1865-70	27.1	58.1	14.9	100.0
1870-75	461	699	274	1,434	1870-75	32.1	48.7	19.1	100.0
1875-80	411	643	380	1,434	1875-80	28.7	44.8	26.5	100.0
1880-85	540	716	615	1,871	1880-85	28.9	38.3	32.9	100.0
Total	6,388	10,134	3,576	20,098	Total	31.8	50.4	17.8	100.0

First admissions									
Number					Percentage				
Year	<16	16-59	>59	Total	Year	<16	16-59	>59	Total
1835-40	472	423	132	1,027	1835-40	46.0	41.2	12.9	100.0
1840-45	278	332	83	693	1840-45	40.1	47.9	12.0	100.0
1845-50	288	320	90	698	1845-50	41.3	45.8	12.9	100.0
1850-55	266	285	92	643	1850-55	41.4	44.3	14.3	100.0
1855-60	321	409	75	805	1855-60	39.9	50.8	9.3	100.0
1860-65	234	344	66	644	1860-65	36.3	53.4	10.2	100.0
1865-70	344	647	107	1,098	1865-70	31.3	58.9	9.7	100.0
1870-75	262	358	111	731	1870-75	35.8	49.0	15.2	100.0
1875-80	247	387	127	761	1875-80	32.5	50.9	16.7	100.0
1880-85	356	439	217	1,012	1880-85	35.2	43.4	21.4	100.0
Total	3,068	3,944	1,100	8,112	Total	37.8	48.6	13.6	100.0

**Source:** Milton Union Admissions and Discharges Registers

**Note:** First admissions counts individuals rather than admissions, and hence excludes all return visits.

### Familial status and reasons for admission of children

A national survey by the Poor Law Board dated 15 March 1849 classified children in workhouses into a multiplicity of categories, and a simplified version of this classification has been used in Table 2. While illegitimacy dominated among those aged under six, the most common reason for the presence of all over the age of six was the death of both parents. The figure for Kent is not significantly different from that for England and Wales; the figures for Milton are given in this table, but numbers are too small to be significant. These data nonetheless indicate the major reasons why children were admitted: illegitimacy, the loss of one or both parents and desertion (usually by the father). All those with two parents present are included within the 'other' class.

Familial status on admission can be divided into five categories: with both parents, with mother, father, siblings or alone. The numbers in each category

**Table 2 Classification of children in workhouses, 15 March 1849 (%)**

Place and age group	Illegitimate	Widowed parent	Orphan	Deserted	Other	Total	Nos.
Kent <3	45.3	7.5	2.0	9.7	35.5	100.0	453
Kent 3–6	24.4	16.2	16.9	12.6	29.9	100.0	722
Kent >6	11.6	19.4	30.2	14.7	24.2	100.0	1,978
Milton <3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0	100.0	6
Milton 3–6	17.6	35.3	23.5	0.0	23.5	100.0	17
Milton >6	6.3	25.0	54.2	4.2	10.4	100.0	48
E & W <3	56.2	6.2	3.4	12.0	22.3	100.0	8,078
E & W 3–6	29.2	14.6	14.0	18.6	23.6	100.0	12,823
E & W >6	15.5	18.8	28.2	17.2	20.4	100.0	35,422

**Source:** British Parliamentary Papers 1849, Vol. XLVII, Accounts and Papers, 11.

**Table 3 All child admissions: familial status by quinquennia (%)**

	1835– 1840	1840– 1845	1845– 1850	1850– 1855	1855– 1860	1860– 1865	1865– 1870	1870– 1875	1875– 1880	1880– 1885	No.
Both parents	25.25	37.69	34.11	23.96	20.12	9.88	18.31	15.40	13.14	9.26	1,506
Mother	39.54	43.14	28.35	43.96	48.74	48.19	48.98	51.41	58.64	45.74	2,826
Father	2.58	6.17	13.24	4.38	5.42	8.67	5.59	8.03	2.92	7.78	399
Siblings	14.10	5.05	12.93	8.13	9.86	10.12	8.14	12.36	12.17	20.37	696
Alone	18.53	7.94	11.37	19.58	15.86	23.13	18.98	12.80	13.14	16.85	961
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	
No.	1,085	1,247	642	480	517	415	590	461	411	540	6,388
%	16.98	19.52	10.05	7.51	8.09	6.50	9.24	7.22	6.43	8.45	100.00

**Source:** Milton Union Admissions and Discharges Register.

can be seen in Table 3: most were with mothers, fewest with fathers. The numbers confirm Goose's findings that far more single-parent families were admitted than families with two parents.<sup>10</sup> After 1850 the number admitted with both parents declined significantly, from approximately one-third of all child admissions in the first 15 years of the life of the workhouse to approximately one-sixth in the last 15 years covered by this study.

There are three possible reasons for this decline: multiple admissions, economic circumstances and union policy. The impact of multiple admissions is demonstrated by the data for adults of working age (16–59) shown in Table 1. The number of admissions of adults was particularly high in the first three quinquennia, and the much lower figures for first admissions indicate that a greater tendency to return took place in these years. Table 4 shows that the reason for admission of the vast majority of two parent families was unemployment. Definitive figures are impossible to ascertain because reasons for admission were rarely given in the later decades, but even if all those for

**Table 4 Reasons for admission of children to the Milton Union workhouse, 1835-1885 (%)**

	With both parents	With mother	With father	With siblings or alone	Total
Accident/illness	22.4	10.3	34.1	10.9	14.8
Mother pregnant	2.1	12.0	0.0	0.0	5.8
Deserted	0.1	15.7	0.0	16.6	11.4
Family reasons	5.7	25.9	13.7	26.7	20.7
Destitute	13.8	26.3	17.2	27.8	23.2
Removed	1.2	2.2	1.9	1.5	1.8
Unemployed	54.2	4.7	29.2	3.2	17.2
Returned	0.1	0.3	0.9	8.5	2.4
Miscellaneous	0.1	0.7	0.0	3.8	1.3
No reason given	0.2	1.9	3.0	1.1	1.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
No.	1,538	3,005	431	1,746	6,720

**Notes:** Family reasons include children of single parents (illegitimate or orphans), some from dysfunctional families, and children of new stepfathers.  
Returned includes returns from service, from being boarded out in epidemics, from leave, from hospital or asylum, from removal to settlement, from gaol and from absconding.  
Miscellaneous includes transfers to a new age classification or a new parish, those in by order of board/magistrates/master/police/overseer, those sent in for bad conduct, those found wandering or absconding from boarding school, and those in just for a meal.

**Source:** Milton Union Admissions and Discharges Register

whom the reason for admission is unknown in the later period are assumed to be due to unemployment, the proportion drops from 74 per cent in the period 1835–51 to 9 per cent in the 1870s. From the 1850s the demographic and economic vitality of the area increased employment opportunities, despite temporary setbacks in the harsh winters of 1869 and 1870. The fall in numbers of children entering the workhouse with both parents must be related to this. But policy may have played a part too. The determination of the guardians to implement the policy of prohibiting out-relief to able-bodied males meant, in the early years of the New Poor Law, a choice between starvation and the workhouse.<sup>11</sup> Although in 1869 and 1870 the guardians applied for an Outdoor Labour Test Order, tough policies were soon resumed with the enthusiastic adoption of the ‘crusade’ against outdoor relief in the 1870s.<sup>12</sup> It is impossible to quantify the relative importance of policy and economic factors, but it seems likely that the generally strict imposition of the workhouse test was successful in encouraging men to be self-reliant, at the same time as employment opportunities were generally improving.

Some families, in various combinations of their membership, were repeatedly in and out of the workhouse. Their numbers declined over the period, from 112 in 1835–41 to 5 in 1881–5. The father is usually categorised as unemployed on first entry, but is often later shown to have been disabled in some way. Two examples of the circumstances in which children came in with both parents will illustrate these phenomena. The Sattin family first entered in January 1840

**Table 5 Milton Union workhouse children by age and sex: all admissions, 1835-85 (%)**

Age group	All children: proportion of age groups					Total
	Under 2	Boys 2-9	Girls 2-9	Boys 10-15	Girls 10-15	
	20.5	22.8	22.8	17.9	15.9	100.0
All children: proportion of familial category						
With both parents	21.3	28.9	29.7	15.4	19.3	23.6
With mother	75.1	41.5	45.4	26.6	26.7	44.2
With father	0.5	8.0	5.1	11.1	7.4	6.2
With siblings	0.7	13.2	12.2	14.4	15.0	10.9
Alone	2.5	8.5	7.7	32.5	31.6	15.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
No.	1,311	1,459	1,459	1,146	1,013	6,388

**Source:** Milton Union Admissions and Discharges Register

with four children, father unwell. They frequently returned, the father usually unemployed, though later described as lame or partially disabled. Altogether seven siblings appear; the mother died in 1841 and the siblings were often in thereafter, with the father, with each other or alone. Together this family clocked up 11,674 days in the workhouse over 41 years. The Anderson family, known from family reconstitution, had 12 children, of whom five died in infancy and both parents died in their forties; when the whole family first came into the workhouse on Christmas Eve 1839 the youngest was a baby and age at burial shows that he must have been born as recently as October. The fact that the youngest sibling was often a small baby in families who came in with both parents suggests that its arrival might have been the last straw, possibly by depriving the family of some of the mother's contribution to their income, which would have been especially hard in the winter months.

A large family was no justification for out-relief. In April 1838 the Poor Law Commissioners, in reply to a query from the Milton guardians, wrote, 'In the case of large families the Commissioners are sensible that pressure and occasional hardship must be felt, while the children are growing up to an age when they can support themselves, but this seems inevitable for a time, although it will find a corrective, if left to itself, by inducing greater providence and skill. If, however, the union authorities step in and authorise relief in such cases, those virtues will inevitably be undermined'.<sup>13</sup>

The age categories of children by sex can be seen in Table 5. Over the 50 years there is exactly the same number of boys and girls aged 2-9, but there are slightly more boys than girls aged 10-15, possibly because it was easier to find employment for girls of this age group, especially in the earlier years, as is shown by Tufnell's 1869 report on education.<sup>14</sup> Unsurprisingly, over 97 per cent of very small children are admitted with a parent, usually the mother. Otherwise there is a remarkable similarity in familial status across all age categories.



### Single parent families and unaccompanied children

The declining proportions of two-parent families was mirrored by the increased proportions of children with mothers, or unaccompanied. In this respect there was no change in the circumstances forcing them into the workhouse, the main reasons being given as 'family reasons' and 'destitution', these descriptions indicating illegitimacy and/or the loss of one or both parents. Most of the children born in the workhouse were illegitimate. The numbers of births are remarkably consistent over the five decades, averaging 66. Over 70 per cent of these children never returned to the workhouse, and over 70 per cent stayed in for less than one month after birth, including 45 who died there. The pattern is similar for the admission of their mothers: 74 per cent were admitted only once or twice before the birth, and 60 per cent only once or twice ever. For many who came in twice before the birth, the first occasion seems to have been when the discovery of pregnancy might have resulted in unemployment.

The marital status of 28 per cent of mothers giving birth is unrecorded. Of the total of 329 births, only 8 per cent were to married women (of whom nearly half were deserted) and 4 per cent to widows. Midwifery services were available to deserving outdoor paupers, but single women and widows with illegitimate children were offered only the workhouse. There were a few women who were frequently in and out and had more than one child born in the workhouse, but they were in a minority. Over the half century, ten had two illegitimate children born in the workhouse, two had three and only one had four. In addition two married women each gave birth to three children there, and three to two children. It would appear, therefore, that the workhouse was used a lying-in hospital for mothers of illegitimate children, but their number was dominated by first-time mothers, not multiple bastard-bearers.

The marital status of 50 per cent of mothers admitted with children was not recorded but in over half of these cases it is possible to infer that status from other evidence. Of the mothers admitted with children, including those born in the workhouse, 33 per cent were single, 25 per cent married and 19 per cent widowed; the status of 23 per cent remains unknown.

Under regulations issued subsequent to the 1834 Act it was accepted that widows should receive out-relief for the first six months of their widowhood, or longer if they had dependent children and were unable to work. Those who had an illegitimate child or were considered disreputable were offered the workhouse.<sup>15</sup> In February 1841 parish officials and inhabitants were prepared to swear an affidavit that widow Clackett was receiving suspicious visits from 'an individual', and that the children were left unclean when she went out nursing; the guardians decided that the children would benefit if the family were removed to the workhouse and voted in favour of removing their out-relief.<sup>16</sup> Tougher policies were encouraged after 1870: out-relief was to be refused to widows with only one child, and widows with more than one child should be offered the workhouse for some of their children. The Annual Report

of the Local Government Board in 1874 justified this attitude by publishing anecdotal evidence of fraud.<sup>17</sup>

While the problems of widows occupy a good deal of space in the Annual Reports of the central authority, the plight of widowers is ignored. In six Hertfordshire workhouses 9 out of 25 widowed inmates heading families in 1851 were male.<sup>18</sup> Of the 102 fathers who entered the Milton workhouse with children, 36 are known to have been widowers and another 20 probably were (they appear to have sole care of their children)—a total of at least 55 per cent. The unsympathetic attitude of the Poor Law Commissioners to the plight of large families is demonstrated by their response to a plea from the Milton guardians to be allowed to pay out-relief to John Hughes. His wife had just died in childbed, and he had eight children aged from two weeks to 13 years. He earned 12s. per week, the eldest boy earned 3s., and the eldest girl 1s. 6d. The Commissioners would not sanction the 2s. 6d. out-relief that the guardians wanted to give because it constituted relief to an able-bodied male. They suggested that the guardians might, without reference to the Commissioners, order any one of the widows to whom they were giving out-relief, without exacting any work in return, to housekeep for him. Since these children did not appear in the workhouse registers, it is probable that this solution was adopted.

Deserted children were more likely to be admitted with mothers than unaccompanied. In total 443 individual children were deserted, belonging to 184 families. The admission of 248 were with mothers, 149 with siblings, 63 alone and one with a grandfather. Of these 443 children 225 were also admitted when not deserted, on 330 occasions: 63 with both parents, 136 with mothers, 24 with fathers, 45 with siblings and 62 alone.

Deserted wives with children were in an analogous situation to widows, with two exceptions: first the assumption was made from the start that their claim to out-relief would be fraudulent (again the central authority reports furnish anecdotal but not statistical evidence); secondly their legal position was different. A married woman was not liable to maintain her children during her husband's lifetime, and consequently she was not subject to the workhouse test if deserted, nor to prosecution if she deserted her children. If she required relief for her children, the guardians could compel those children who were above the age of nurture to enter the workhouse, with or without her, but children below the age of nurture could not be separated from their mother so had to be given out-relief if she refused the workhouse.<sup>19</sup> A feeling developed that deserted wives should not be in a more beneficial position than widows. Legislation in 1844 and 1868 moved towards this, and allowed guardians to recover maintenance costs instead of sending husbands to prison.<sup>20</sup>

The guardians regularly proceeded to prosecution for desertion. The minutes contain records of an intention to prosecute in the case of 68 families involving 174 children. It was not only fathers who were held responsible: stepfathers were charged for their wives' illegitimate children, grandfathers when their daughters deserted their children, employers when a child suffered an accident at work. A letter from the guardians to the Commissioners in 1838 had no doubt about James Hart's responsibility for his wife's illegitimate children, nor

that he was unable to meet them, but needed guidance on whether the mother's parish or his should bear the costs: the reply was 'his'.<sup>21</sup> As the Poor Law system developed, co-operation increased among unions. John Rickwood, who had deserted his family, was advertised in the *Unions Gazette*, with a £1 reward and reasonable expenses for his apprehension. The police traced James Fletcher to Nottingham and then to Liverpool and had instituted enquiries about expenses when the family ceased to be chargeable and the case was dropped. When fathers were in the forces the War Office was approached for attachment of pay. As far as illegitimate children were concerned the law was preoccupied with financial considerations, not with the welfare of mother or child.<sup>22</sup> In practice there was rarely any alternative to the workhouse for them, unless families could house them.

The desertion of a child by a single parent often seems to have been the last resort of desperation. The big problem was how to work and to bring up children at the same time, especially for women whose wages were often inadequate. The attitude of the guardians was ambivalent. Relief in aid of wages was the ultimate taboo; it was seen as leading to a general depression of wages. On the other hand it seemed unreasonable for ratepayers to meet the maintenance costs in the workhouse of a woman who was willing to work. In 1854 they arranged for Mary Pepper to work as a servant for the Medical Officer, who would transfer 3s. a week from her wages for the maintenance of her illegitimate daughter in the workhouse.<sup>23</sup> Proceedings were begun against Ellen Spearman for unlawfully deserting her illegitimate child, but these were suspended as a result of an arrangement with her employer, a victualler of Sittingbourne, to pay 1s. a week out of her wages of 3s. for the upkeep of her daughter. When this was reported to the Poor Law Board they sanctioned it for one month only.<sup>24</sup> Both Lees and Thane show that desertion was often caused by husbands looking for work.<sup>25</sup> The Milton guardians always distinguished between the deserving and undeserving. In 1849 they asked permission to give out-relief for two weeks to the wife and children of William Pateman, an able-bodied man suddenly unemployed as a consequence of a large employer closing down; he was of good character and had gone away to seek work. Unfortunately the reply is among the lost correspondence.<sup>26</sup>

The central authority was rarely sympathetic to pleas for leniency, though guardians could often wear them down with repeated correspondence. Jane Luckhurst gave birth to an illegitimate daughter in the workhouse in September 1869. In October she was engaged as a wet nurse in Brixton. By November she was no longer required in this capacity but her employer wanted to keep her on as a nursemaid. However, the reduced wages would prevent her from finding the 5s. a week she needed for her daughter to be looked after. She asked the board of guardians to take her daughter into the workhouse and offered to pay 1s. a week 'so that I may be able to regain my character and keep in respectable service'. Her mistress was willing to answer questions about her conduct. The guardians consulted the Poor Law Board, who responded that they could detect no special circumstances in this case. A mother who could not maintain her illegitimate child without aid must go into the workhouse; if the child was destitute as a result of the mother's inability to

support it they were bound to relieve it and should consider proceedings against the mother. The guardians were, however, eventually able to persuade the Board that the case came within the exceptions of the General Prohibition Order.<sup>27</sup>

On other occasions the guardians were totally unsympathetic to the plight of a single-parent family, especially in cases of desertion, and they showed no mercy to anyone who had the effrontery to complain about them in public or to the central authority, even if vicariously through a sympathetic patron. The doom-laden tale of the Floyds is worthy of Thomas Hardy. Elizabeth Floyd was a prosperous grocer's daughter who was deserted by her husband and struggled for years to bring up their seven children. The accidental drowning of the eldest boy just as he became old enough to start supporting the family, the suicide of the husband in the United States when his attempt at bigamy was revealed and the blockage in a case in Chancery of a legacy from her brother finally defeated her. She begged the guardians for out-relief for her children to tide her over; they offered the workhouse. An angry rejection of this offer was followed by the deliberate desertion of the four youngest children in an inn in Milton. She was prosecuted and imprisoned. The details of her story are known from the correspondence of her eldest daughter's employer, a naval captain, with the Poor Law Commissioners, who replied that they had no power to intervene in individual cases, but nevertheless asked the guardians for their observations. The guardians were unrepentant. The minutes show them in touch with the British consul in America to claim maintenance costs from the husband's estate.<sup>28</sup>

Many of the unaccompanied children, whether admitted as siblings or alone, were orphans. Of the 1,007 unaccompanied children, 438 (43 per cent) were certainly or probably orphans. The experience of suddenly finding themselves in the workhouse immediately after the death of parents must have been traumatic. The reconstitution of families in five parishes makes it possible to trace the history of some of these cases. Four Anderson children, aged ten, eight, five and about nine months, had witnessed their father's death in April 1856 and their mother's in May, and were admitted to the workhouse the day after her funeral. They were not, however, unfamiliar with the idea of the workhouse: three of their mother's Williamson siblings had been in the workhouse as sick adults. There must have been many other such family connections, which the registers cannot reveal.

Assistant Commissioners and Inspectors, commenting in the Annual Reports of the central authority, make much of the distinction between orphans (or the long deserted), who were separated from the evil influence of their parents, and those who were frequently in and out with parents. The first chaplain of the workhouse comments similarly in 1839 in support of his plea for District Schools: 'I am myself convinced, from the observations I have frequently made, that . . . the cruelty to the children consists, not in taking them away from their parents, but in allowing them to have any intercourse with them'.<sup>29</sup>

Eleven per cent of all unaccompanied admissions were caused by illness or accident. Most are simply described as sick or ill without specification.

Accidents are mostly fractures, burns and injuries to feet and hands, one child being injured in a gun explosion. A small number were chronically sick or disabled, usually described as 'lame' or 'crippled' or 'bad legs'. Only four children were described as mentally ill, usually as 'imbeciles'; one with epilepsy was sent to the asylum. The acute and infectious or contagious diseases specified include ague (malaria), typhoid (fever), cholera, itch (scabies), smallpox, scarlet fever, and measles.

From the 1870s, as concern for public health developed, the incidence of infectious disease was more likely to send children, including non-paupers, into the workhouse. The new infectious hospital built in the 1870s was of little use for controlling the spread of infection without full co-operation in detecting and notifying disease. The local sanitary authorities in the union were able to persuade all doctors but one to notify them of infections and to get cases quickly transferred to the isolation hospital, with effective results.<sup>30</sup> The one who refused, who practised in the Rainham and Upchurch areas, was probably motivated by the stigma still attached to any building associated with the workhouse. Infection spread quickly in his area among non-paupers. Mr Ray, the Medical Officer of Health for the Milton RSA (who was also the workhouse Medical Officer) found 200 cases of scarlet fever in Dr Penfold's area in 1876, which could have been prevented. His report for 1876 shows the circumstances which took children into the workhouse hospital elsewhere in the union.

I have just returned from a spectacle, which ought to be impossible in any civilized country . . . In the house of one Edward Hart . . . a death has occurred from scarlet fever; the body, four days a corpse, and still unburied, was, as expressed by a neighbour, already turning black from the virulence of the disease; a child running about the house . . . was full out with the rash, which symptomises the malady. Other children who had not had the disorder, were freely mixing with the infected child. The mother and father of the youngster, full as they must be of the morbid poison, were going about their respective avocations, and were not to be seen. . . This is simply monstrous . . . In both Sittingbourne and Milton the carrying out of the measures as to the immediate removal of infectious cases has resulted in the immediate cessation of the disease.<sup>31</sup>

From 1875 the Milton guardians were begging the Local Government Board to promote legislation making the notification of infectious and contagious disease compulsory, but they insisted that the time was not yet ripe; Parliament would not be willing to coerce private practitioners. By the 1880s some large towns had bye-laws to this effect and notification became compulsory in London in 1889.<sup>32</sup>

Families facing sickness had a double problem: first how to pay for medical attention and secondly how to cope if the breadwinner or the mother was ill. The first of these does not belong properly to the subject of this article, though anyone accepting medical relief was pauperised. The Annual Reports of the central authority recognised the uneasiness which many local boards felt about

severity towards the sick but combined this with lectures on the need for such severity to encourage self-help and avoid demoralisation. The Chiel family were admitted to the workhouse in November 1846, the father being ill, but the parents, together with the two youngest children, were discharged after a month, having been granted out-relief, so they were obviously regarded as deserving; the other three children were taken out one by one as circumstances permitted. Policy became tougher after 1870. The Annual Report of 1872 insists that relief to a husband to care for children while his wife is in hospital should be considered relief in aid of wages if he could not afford to pay for it.<sup>33</sup> The minutes of the Milton board give details of a debate about the Gambell family as to whether they should charge him 6s. or 12s. a week to keep his wife (who had consumption) and three children in the workhouse. The vote was 9:8 in favour of 12s., but as the family do not appear in the admission registers they must have decided to manage by other means.<sup>34</sup>

Some children admitted were returning to take the place of a sibling allowed to leave. It has already been seen that there were circumstances in which parts of families could be left in the workhouse, often with arrangements for payment for their maintenance. In the case of the Chiel family mentioned above, the child who was taken out earliest returned when a sibling left. There are several instances of siblings sharing the unenviable duty of accepting incarceration in the workhouse so that others could leave. Single mothers who came in during an emergency, either sickness or imminent confinement, who had no choice but to bring their children with them, were often able to get a relation, most commonly an aunt or grandmother, to take the children out. Generally, relations seem to have been more willing to take girls than boys. William Goodwin, almost certainly a widower, had to take his three children in with him when he was ill in October 1866. He was sent to hospital in February 1867, an aunt took his daughter out in November, but the two boys had to stay in until their father could take them out with him in May. Many taken out by relations in such circumstances were soon back: they were granted only a temporary respite, though families seem to have done their best to help. Some children came in late to join parents and siblings already in, both the young who must have been cared for by friends or relations and also the eldest, who seem sometimes to have tried to avoid the fate of the rest of the family but eventually had to succumb.

#### **Illegitimacy and deaths of parents in the five reconstituted parishes**

The data from the reconstituted families in the five western parishes can throw some light on the situation of families with illegitimate children and those who lost parent(s).

A total of 303 illegitimate children can be identified from registers, censuses and/or workhouse records as belonging to the five parishes and born between 1820 and 1881. Table 6 shows their situation at their next appearance in one of these records. Over 50 per cent had died or disappeared. Of those surviving as residents, 38 per cent were stepchildren after their mother had married and 32 per cent were with their mother's parents, half of these without their mothers

**Table 6 Illegitimate children born 1820-81 in five reconstituted parishes: situation at next recorded appearance**

	All		Survivors	
	No.	%	No.	%
Dead	62	20.5		
Child and mother disappeared	88	29.0		
Child disappeared, mother not	13	4.3		
With mother's parents, mother away	23	7.6	23	16.4
With mother's parents, mother married	2	0.7	2	1.4
Stepchild in mother's new household	53	17.5	53	37.9
With mother and mother's parents	22	7.3	22	15.7
In employment	1	0.3	1	0.7
In census, relationship not known	2	0.7	2	1.4
Married with own family	9	3.0	9	6.4
With relation other than grandparent	3	1.0	3	2.1
With mother elsewhere	8	2.6	8	5.7
Male head of household with illegitimate child(ren)	12	4.0	12	8.6
In workhouse	3	1.0	3	2.1
Not known	2	0.7	2	1.4
Total	303	100.0	140	100.0

**Note:** The five parishes are Hartlip, Lower Halstow, Newington, Rainham and Upchurch.

**Table 7 Situation at next census of children born 1820-81 in five reconstituted parishes who were <16 when parent(s) died (%)**

	All at next census				Still under 16 at next census			
	Second parent died				Second parent died			
	Father d.	Mother d.	Father d.	Mother d.	Father d.	Mother d.	Father d.	Mother d.
Alone or lodging	0.7	1.2	1.6	3.6	0.5	0.3	4.0	0.0
Dead	5.0	8.4	4.8	12.7	6.1	10.9	12.0	20.7
Disappeared	32.0	30.5	46.0	25.5	22.3	22.3	24.0	10.3
Stepchild	13.3	12.1	3.2	3.6	17.5	16.0	8.0	6.9
Married	1.5	2.2	3.2	5.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
With parent	33.6	29.9	0.0	0.0	43.0	37.3	0.0	0.0
With relation	5.1	8.1	19.0	20.0	3.9	6.1	16.0	17.2
In service	5.7	5.0	9.5	7.3	2.3	3.0	8.0	3.4
Workhouse	3.1	2.7	12.7	21.8	4.5	4.1	28.0	41.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
No.	684	596	63	55	440	394	25	29

**Note:** The five parishes are Hartlip, Lower Halstow, Newington, Rainham and Upchurch.

being present. Seventy-four (24 per cent) were ever in the workhouse: of these 54 per cent were born there and 46 per cent entered with their mothers. Thirty-five per cent never returned after their birth, 14 returned frequently and 17, including these, were in for a long time. Of the mothers, three were widows who did not enter the workhouse until they had an illegitimate child, and 13 had themselves been in the workhouse as children for a long period.

A total of 1,280 children were identified who were born between 1820 and 1881 and who lost one or both parents while they were under 16. Table 7 shows that approximately 37 per cent had died or disappeared before the next census after the death. Of resident survivors the majority were living with the surviving parent (53 per cent with mothers and 49 per cent with fathers). Far more orphans were likely to be in the workhouse when the mother was the second parent to die, and this is balanced by the greater numbers who disappeared after the father's death, presumably because they had relatives away from the area. Far more male than female children were with relatives, and more females were at work, especially of those still under 16. Similar numbers of those with relatives are with grandparents, siblings and other relatives. More went into the workhouse immediately after the death of the mother than of the father, but far more were in the workhouse later after the death of the father, with or without their mothers.

The main problems for single-parent families with female heads was income, while for male heads it was housekeeping. In 36 of the 241 families where the father had died, the mother had remarried and the children appear as stepchildren. In the 85 households headed by widows and with resident children, 42 had children at work, 48 had mothers at work and two had lodgers; only seven had no visible means of support. Only the 1851 census mentions 'parish' relief, and 12 widowed mothers with children are listed as receiving it, but the full numbers are not necessarily recorded. Eighteen of these widowed households were probably quite well-off, often with the widow continuing her late husband's trade, mostly farmers, but in one case a widow was running a family building business, with one elder son as a bricklayer. In many cases where children under 16 suffered the loss of a parent they were the youngest of several siblings and the elder ones were working. There is a good deal of evidence of family solidarity in these circumstances.

The same applies to widowers' children. Of the 72 households headed by a widower and including children under 16 when their mother died, 11 have a daughter named as housekeeper (ages ranging from 12 to 26) and 23 more have a daughter probably acting in this capacity but not named as such (ages 10 to 24). Fifteen employ housekeepers, eight have a relation as housekeeper, and seven are a discrete unit either lodging or in a multiple occupation house. Only four have no discernible arrangements for housekeeping. There were several cases where widows acted as housekeepers to widowers, thus solving both problems. Whether or not this was at the behest of the guardians is not known, but a number of illegitimate children resulted from these permanent partnerships. The disaster of widowhood and orphan status did not necessarily lead to the workhouse.

### **Conclusion**

Children thus constituted a substantial proportion of workhouse inmates in the Milton Union throughout the first 50 years of the New Poor Law. Illegitimacy, the loss of one or both parents and desertion were the main reasons for them to



be taken in. The number found there with both parents declined considerably across the period, partly as a result of improved economic circumstances and partly due to the policy of the Milton guardians. Repeated reliance upon the workhouse among particular families also fell considerably. Increasingly, therefore, children were taken in to the workhouse with just one parent, predominantly their mothers, and the large number who were born there suggests that workhouse was used a lying-in hospital for mothers of illegitimate children, who were predominantly first-time mothers. Deserted families comprising a mother and one or more children were also found in the workhouse in substantial numbers, although the Milton guardians did pursue deserted fathers with some vigour. Approaching half of those children who entered the workhouse unaccompanied were orphans. Infectious illness was an increasing reason for children to be brought to the workhouse, but the board of guardians was not necessarily sympathetic to the plight of sick parents, any more than they were to those burdened with large families. In such circumstances there are many examples that testify to the support provided by other family members, and this is further underlined in the five parishes where it was possible to track children across time, for parental support for illegitimate or deserted children was supplemented by help from the wider family, particularly grandparents.

The policy of the Milton guardians over the period reflects that of the central poor law authority. Milton was always a very strict union, banning out-relief so enthusiastically at first that riots were provoked (and crushed) and the chairman, Sir Matthew Tilden, subsequently conspired with the Poor Law Commissioners to pack the bench with JPs more sympathetic towards the new law, since the *ex officio* JP on the board was too soft. He confidently expected the imminent elimination of pauperism, but as this seemed to be indefinitely postponed the board settled down into comparative complacency, dealing with problems more pragmatically. They were startled out of this by the influx in the 1860s of a large alien population whom they did not know and by the sort of trade depression that had resulted in the adoption of a policy of total prohibition of out-relief in the industrial areas of the north. In these circumstances the proportion of the poor rate spent on out-relief increased significantly in the late 1860s. The 'crusade' of the 1870s was just what was needed to put them back on their customary track, and they embraced it with enthusiasm. Karel Williams lists Milton as one of the seven rural parishes keenest to restrict out-relief.<sup>35</sup>

The most consistent aspect of their policy was with regard to the moral character of claimants. After the initial period of extreme severity, they were prepared to try to claim support in special cases for mothers of illegitimate children or able-bodied fathers suddenly made unemployed through no fault of their own if they knew them to be deserving and unlucky, but widows who had illegitimate children or were reputed not to be respectable or who squandered their late husbands' meagre savings were offered only the workhouse. In their dealings with the central authority they were outwardly deferential, but also stubborn, and during the two periods of the imposition of an Outdoor Labour Test Order they showed themselves to be experts in the

tactics of evasion, as they resisted the suggestions of the central authority to convert the chapel to provide extra workhouse accommodation until the crisis was over. They were also consistently hostile to anyone who complained over their heads to the central authority. Their policy never purported to be inhuman, but it was always defended as beneficial to the 'lower orders', and intended to restore and promote self-respect.

They were also very careful with the ratepayers' money and uttered homilies about the poor who were little better off than claimants but nevertheless paying rates. Lees suggested that rural unions paid 1s. to 2s. a week per person for out-relief. The occasional references to out-relief in the Milton minutes suggest that payments were about the middle of this range. For instance in the crises of 1870 and 1872 they paid on a scale ranging from 7s. 6d. for parents with one child to 12s. for those with six.<sup>36</sup>

Their policies and the changing economic situation combined to reduce the numbers of able-bodied men applying for relief, and this inevitably affected their children, but the situation of groups other than able-bodied men did not change significantly and their continuing problems continued to bring them into the workhouse in considerable numbers. But the irony can be seen in this union, as in others, that the very people whom the new law was intended for were no longer numerically dominant in the workhouse by the end of the period. Instead, it was full of the people whom the 1834 Act had ignored.

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### NOTES

1. A. Hinde and F. Turnbull, 'The populations of two Hampshire workhouses. 1851–1861', *Local Population Studies*, 61 (1998), 38–53; N. Goose, 'Workhouse populations in the mid-nineteenth century: the case of Hertfordshire', *Local Population Studies*, 62 (1999), 52–69; D.G. Jackson, 'Kent workhouse populations in 1881: a study based on the census enumerators' books', *Local Population Studies*, 69 (2002), 51–66; D.G. Jackson, 'The Medway Union workhouse, 1876–1881: a study based on admission and discharge registers and the census enumerators' books', *Local Population Studies*, 75 (2005), 51–66.
2. For the terms and implementation of the Act see D. Englander, *Poverty and poor law reform in 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain, 1834–1914* (London, 1998), 9–30; A. Kidd, *State, society and the poor in nineteenth-century England* (Basingstoke, 1999), 24–45; L. Hollen Lees, *The solidarities of strangers. The English poor laws and the people, 1700–1948* (Cambridge, 1998), 115–229; K.D.M. Snell, "'A cruel kindness': parish out-door relief and the new poor law', in K.D.M. Snell, *Parish and belonging: community, identity and welfare in England and Wales 1700–1950* (Cambridge, 2006), 207–338.
3. Between the censuses of 1851 and 1881 the proportion of males over 20 engaged in agriculture fell from 44 per cent to 30 per cent, while the proportion in industry rose from 25 per cent to 36 per cent.
4. E. Hasted, *The history and topographical survey of the county of Kent* (Rochester, 1798), VI, 164. Correspondence from the Local Government Board in 1871 asked if anything had yet been done about 'the unwholesome conditions' an earlier inspection had found in Milton: The National Archives (hereafter TNA), MH 12/5282.
5. This modifies the opinion of J.M. Preston, *Industrial Medway* (Rochester, 1977), 92, that because

many brickmakers had a supplementary occupation there was little in the way of recession before the 1890s.

6. Centre for Kentish Studies (hereafter CKS), Minutes of the Board of Guardians, G/Mi Am, Book VI, 489–90, Book XIV, 629–32; TNA, MH 12/5285.
7. CKS, G/Mi WIA, Books 1–18.
8. For the methodology of the reconstitution of families in these parishes see A. Perkyms, 'Migration and mobility: six Kentish parishes 1851–1881', *Local Population Studies*, **63** (1999), 36–9. The five parishes in the Milton Union were Hartlip, Lower Halstow, Newington, Rainham and Upchurch.
9. The decades are defined by Lady Day in each census year, since this allows for better comparison with the census returns and other material.
10. Goose, 'Workhouse populations', 58, 62.
11. For a discussion of the workhouse alternative being accepted see M. MacKinnon, 'English poor law policy and the crusade against outrelief', *Journal of Economic History*, **47** (1987), 603–25; Lees, *Solidarities*, 150–1.
12. For the 'crusade against out-relief' see Englander, *Poverty and poor law reform*, 22–4; Kidd, *State, society and the poor*, 48–52.
13. TNA, MH 12/5280.
14. Poor Law Board, *21<sup>st</sup> Annual Report*, British Parliamentary Papers (hereafter BPP) 1869, **XXVIII**, 16–18.
15. S. and B. Webb, *English poor law policy* (London, 1910), 37; Poor Law Commission, *7<sup>th</sup> Annual Report*, BPP 1841, **XL**, 63; Lees, *Solidarities*, 142; Hinde and Turnbull, 'Hampshire workhouses', 38; Snell, *Parish and belonging*, 236–7.
16. CKS, G/Mi Am, Book II, 204.
17. Local Government Board, *1<sup>st</sup> Annual Report*, BPP 1872, **XXVIII**, 67; *3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Report*, BPP 1874, **XXV**, 171.
18. Goose, 'Workhouse populations', 58.
19. Poor Law Commission, *7<sup>th</sup> Annual Report*, BPP 1841, **XI**, 10–11.
20. Poor Law Commission, *11<sup>th</sup> Annual Report*, BPP 1845, **XXVII**, 12–13; Poor Law Board, *21<sup>st</sup> Annual Report*, BPP 1869, **XXVIII**, 14.
21. TNA, MH 12/5280.
22. A. Digby, *Pauper palaces* (London, 1978), 153–4; Poor Law Commission, *11<sup>th</sup> Annual Report*, BPP 1845, **XXVII**, 4–5; Poor Law Board, *21<sup>st</sup> Annual Report*, BPP 1869, **XXVIII**, 14.
23. CKS, G/Mi AM, Book XIX, 70.
24. CKS, G/Mi AM, Book XXXII, 122–35.
25. Lees, *Solidarities*, 215–16; P. Thane, 'Women and the poor law in Victorian and Edwardian England', *History Workshop Journal*, **6** (1978), 33.
26. CKS, G/Mi Am, Book IV, 464.
27. TNA, MH 12/5281.
28. CKS, G/Mi Am, Book III, 590, Book IV, 693; TNA, MH 12/5280.
29. TNA, MH 12/5280. Two examples among many from the annual reports are: Poor Law Board, *20<sup>th</sup> Annual Report*, BPP 1868, **XXXIII**, 134; Local Government Board, *2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Report*, BPP 1873, **XXIX**, 103.
30. These were the Milton Rural Sanitary Authority, the Milton Urban Sanitary Authority and the Sittingbourne Urban Sanitary Authority.
31. TNA, MH 12/5284.
32. A. Wohl, *Endangered lives: public health in Victorian Britain* (London, 1983), 136–7.
33. Local Government Board, *1<sup>st</sup> Annual Report*, BPP 1872, **XXVIII**, 99.
34. CKS, G/Mi Am, Book XLIII, 329.
35. K. Williams, *From pauperism to poverty* (London, 1981), 105.
36. CKS, G/Mi Am, Book XI, 60, 238.