
‘Who Do They Think They Are?’ An Analysis of the Boards of Guardians in Hertfordshire

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Abstract

The boards of guardians were an essential part of the machinery of administering the New Poor Law, yet little has been written about who they were or how they operated. This article examines the men who made up the boards of guardians in four Hertfordshire unions during the early years of the New Poor Law, and presents an analysis of their occupational and social status, age, length of service and attendance at board meetings. It concludes that these Hertfordshire boards were regionally and locally diverse in their composition and were not—as is often claimed—constituted of farmers and shopkeepers. However, when the active participation of individual guardians is taken into consideration, this research finds that a small cohort of middle-aged elite men was managing each union.

Introduction

The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, or the New Poor Law, created a new administrative system for the management of poor relief in England and Wales. It was adopted in Hertfordshire at the earliest opportunity and with very little resistance. The county was the first to be fully unionised when the last of its 13 unions: Barnet, Hatfield and Welwyn were declared on 4 July 1835. Unionisation created a new tier of local government throughout England and Wales in the form of the boards of guardians. These boards were fundamental to both the implementation of the New Poor Law and its on-going management, yet historians have given them little attention. Most often, the guardians are regarded as a collective group or a single entity with little consideration of how boards were constituted or who the guardians were.

Poor law guardians did more than just make decisions about whether paupers received relief or not; they recruited staff (including relieving officers, workhouse masters and matrons, medical men, clerks and schoolteachers), they arranged contracts for goods and services, commissioned and managed the building of new workhouses and managed the finances of their unions. The boards were composed of a variety of individuals who all brought their own personality, commitment, interests and capability to the role. This range of skills and experience had the potential to influence how a board operated and how effectively the union was managed.

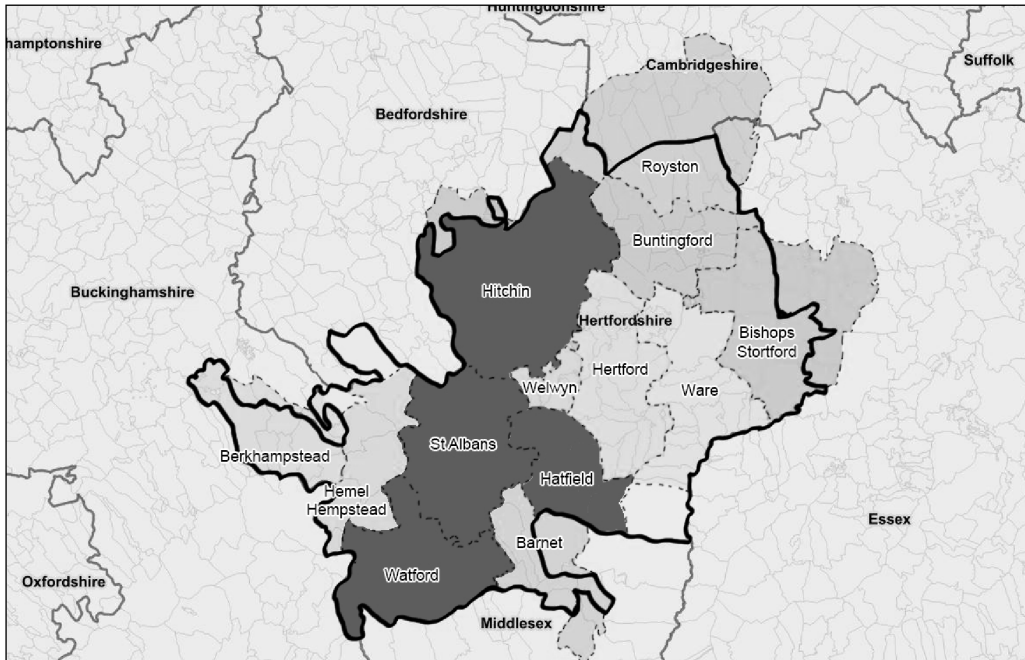
In their substantial history of the poor laws, Sydney and Beatrice Webb reported that ‘the vast proportion of the 25,000 Poor Law Guardians were, at all times, farmers or retail

tradesmen.¹ With the notable exception of Steve King's work on the female guardians in later nineteenth century Lancashire and some local studies found in PhD theses, few works have challenged this statement or studied either the role of the boards or the guardians as individuals.² That there was regional diversity in poor law practice has been established in the historiography, but the importance of personality in driving regional variation in poor law management is under-explored.³ This article provides an analysis of who the guardians were. It is based on data from the county of Hertfordshire. This agricultural county offers a useful platform for a local study of the Poor Law for a number of reasons. First, as a rural county in southern England it was exactly the type of county targeted by the 1834 Act. Second, it was an early adopter of the New Poor Law and as such we see the new administration in its infancy: unrehearsed, testing policy and exploring the boundaries of a new bureaucracy. Third, the survival of poor law records for the county is good (though not complete) in both local and national archives, which allows for intra-county comparisons of data as well as comparative studies with other counties in England and Wales. I do not attempt any comparative analysis with Ireland and Scotland. Although modelled on the English system, the Irish Poor Law of 1838 had significant differences. The Scottish arrangements for poor relief were not revised until 1845 and Scotland did not adopt a union structure but retained a parochial system with local parochial boards to manage relief.⁴

This study looks specifically at the four economically diverse poor law unions of Hatfield, St Albans, Hitchin and Watford (Figure 1), from 1835, when the first boards of guardians were created, to 1847, when the national-level Poor Law Commission was replaced by the Poor Law Board. It will demonstrate that there was a wider occupational base than farmers and shopkeepers and will discuss the age, length of service and attendance rates (both of the boards and individuals) to provide a more comprehensive

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- 1 S. Webb and B. Webb, *English Poor Law History Part II: the Last Hundred Years Vol. I*. (London, 1929), p. 229. Other historians who have identified farmers as the majority include: N.C. Edsall, *The Anti-Poor Law Movement, 1834–44* (Manchester, 1971), p. 66; M.E. Rose, *The English Poor Law, 1780–1930* (Newton Abbot, 1971), p. 136; N. Longmate, *The Workhouse: a Social History* (Pimlico, 2003), p. 65; A. Digby, *Pauper Palaces* (London, 1978), p. 5; G. Hooker, 'Llandilofawr Poor Law Union, 1836 to 1886: "the most difficult union in Wales"' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Leicester, 2013), p. 123.
 - 2 S.A. King, *Women, Welfare and Local Politics 1880–1920: 'We Might be Trusted'* (Eastbourne, 2010); M.E. Rose, 'The administration of the Poor Law in the West Riding of Yorkshire' (unpublished PhD thesis, Oxford University, 1965), pp. 141–47; D. Ashforth, 'The Poor Law in Bradford c. 1834–1871: the study of the relief of poverty in mid-nineteenth century Bradford' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Bradford, 1979), pp. 87–9; P. Tolley, 'The Birmingham, Aston and Kings Norton Boards of Guardians and the politics and administration of the Poor Law, 1836–1912' (unpublished PhD thesis, De Montfort University, 1994), pp. 154–69; K. Thompson, 'The Leicester Poor Law Union, 1836–1871' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Leicester, 1988).
 - 3 Digby, *Pauper Palaces*; F. Driver, *Power and Pauperism: the Workhouse System, 1834–1884* (Cambridge, 1993); L. Hollen Lees, *The Solidarities of Strangers: the English Poor Laws and the People, 1700–1948* (Cambridge, 1998); S.A. King, *Poverty and Welfare in England, 1700–1850: a Regional Perspective* (Manchester, 2000); S.A. King and A. Tomkins (eds), *The Poor in England, 1700–1850: an Economy of Makeshifts* (Manchester, 2003).
 - 4 See the contribution by Peter Jones to this special issue for a discussion of the differences between the New Poor Law in England and Scotland.

Figure 1 Hertfordshire Poor Law Unions



Source: Drawn by Karen Rothery and Lauren Rothery based on R.J.P. Kain and R.R., Oliver, *Historic Parishes of England and Wales: an Electronic Map of Boundaries before 1850 with a Gazetteer and Metadata* [computer file]. Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive [distributor], May 2001. SN: 4348.

profile of who was managing local poor law boards as they became established in the county.

The New Poor Law created two types of guardian: those elected to represent a particular parish and unelected *ex officio* guardians drawn from the local magistracy.⁵ Until 1875, when the first female guardian was elected in Kensington, the guardians were exclusively male.⁶ The number of guardians elected annually to each board varied widely (Table 1). In part this was related to the number of parishes within the union and in part to the size of population within the constituent parishes. Each parish elected at least one representative to the board and the larger parishes elected multiple guardians to the board. Hitchin Union had 36 elected guardians for 28 parishes (including four guardians for the parish of Hitchin) and Welwyn Union had just five guardians representing four parishes. Election was, in theory, by ballot among the parish ratepayers, however in practice few Hertfordshire parishes had contested elections in this early period. The number of *ex officio* guardians

5 Magistrates were allowed to serve as guardians in the union in which they resided.

6 J. Rendall, 'The citizenship of women and the Reform Act of 1867', in C. Hall, K. McClelland, and J. Rendall, *Defining the Victorian Nation: Class, Race, Gender and the British Reform Act of 1867* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 119–78, here at 158–9; Webb and Webb, *English Poor Law History, Part II*, p. 234; P. Hollis, *Ladies Elect. Women in English Local Government, 1865–1914* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 8, 207, 231.

An Analysis of the Boards of Guardians in Hertfordshire

Table 1 Hertfordshire Poor Law Unions: population and number of guardians

Union	Population (1831)	Number of parishes	Number of elected guardians	Number of <i>ex officio</i> guardians
Barnet	12,180	9	14	8
Berkhampstead	9,871	8	16	9
Bishops Stortford	18,012	20	27	9
Buntingford	6,327	16	19	4
Hatfield	5,933	4	8	7
Hemel Hempstead	9,910	6	14	6
Hertford	12,155	18	21	13
Hitchin	20,639	28	36	10
Royston	15,671	29	32	6
St Albans	15,883	8	17	14
Ware	14,654	15	21	14
Watford	15,379	6	16	11
Welwyn	1,970	4	5	4
All Hertfordshire Unions	158,584	171	246	115

Source: Poor Law Amendment Act. *Return, Showing the Size in Square Miles of the Several Unions Formed, with the Population, and Number of Guardians*. British Parliamentary Papers 1837–38 XXXVIII [C. 236] pp. 1–5.

shown in Table 1 represents those eligible to sit on each board although many did not participate at all.

In Hertfordshire, over 200 men sat each year as elected guardians on 13 separate boards and more than 100 others were eligible to sit as *ex officio* guardians.⁷ In the four sample unions, 366 individuals served as guardians between 1835 and 1847. Over 80 per cent were elected guardians, 17 per cent served *ex officio* and 2 per cent served as both elected and *ex officio* guardians at different times. The ratio of elected to *ex officio* guardians varied from union to union. In Hitchin, only 10 per cent of the guardians were *ex officio*, compared with 30 per cent in Hatfield. More often than not, it was the *ex officio* guardians who chaired the boards. The Hatfield Union appointed the second Marquis of Salisbury as its chairman for over 30 years. Appointing a member of the nobility to chair the board was not unusual. An article in the *Edinburgh Review* (purportedly written by Edwin Chadwick, then secretary to the Poor Law Commission) listed three dukes, five marquises, nine earls, two viscounts, four lords and several baronets who were acting as chairman of the first wave of boards to be established.⁸ That the patrician elite dominated the cadre of chairmen and board members is not surprising given that, prior to the 1880s, the landed classes dominated national administration and local government.⁹

7 Poor Law Amendment Act. *Return, Showing the Size in Square Miles of the Several Unions Formed, with the Population, and Number of Guardians*, British Parliamentary Papers, 1837–38 XXXVIII [C. 236], pp. 3–4.

8 ‘An article on the principles and policy of the Poor Law Amendment Act’, *Edinburgh Review*, 1837, cited in Webb and Webb, *English Poor Law History, Part II*, p. 229.

9 D. Cannadine, *The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy* (Harmondsworth, 2005), p. 14.

Committees of guardians had been used in poor law administration previously, most notably under Gilbert's Act, so the concept was not new. However, the introduction of boards of guardians throughout England and Wales created a new tier of administration, which, uniquely among poor law officers, was a body of volunteers. All other poor law personnel from the gatekeeper at the workhouse to the Poor Law Commissioners in London were paid for their services. The voluntary nature of the role was not universally welcome: as *The Reformer* put it: '[w]e believe that this is the only country in the world in which a contest could arise for the honour of discharging a very onerous, and very unpleasant, though very useful duty, without any sort of remuneration attached to it.'¹⁰

However, the voluntary nature of public office was not in itself unique. For example, members of the parish vestry served without payment as did parish constables, night watchmen and members of parliament. It was argued that the latter should serve out of public duty and, although there were several proposals in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to introduce salaries for members of parliament, this did not happen until 1911.¹¹

Occupations of guardians

Noble chairman aside, who were the guardians? Perhaps one of the reasons we know so little about who the guardians were is that rarely do poor law documents give any information other than the name of the guardian. Using a range of sources, however, including census records, trade directories and local and family histories, it is possible to build up biographical profiles of individual guardians.¹² In turn these profiles provide insight into the social structure of the boards and the life experience of individual guardians. Table 2 shows the percentage of guardians represented in seven occupational groups: agriculture, retail, gentry, professional, clergy, trade and manufacturing and others in the four sample unions. A high percentage of guardians in these four boards were associated with the agricultural sector but they were not in the majority except in the most rural union, Hitchin. Those guardians engaged in agriculture were typically farmers on larger properties employing up to 40 men on their land—experienced employers who had personal knowledge of the agricultural labourers most likely to appear before the boards of guardians as a result of the seasonal fluctuations of the agricultural economy. Only 2.2 per cent of guardians came from a retail background at this period: this Hertfordshire sample does not support the Webbs' suggestion that many guardians were shopkeepers.

10 *The Reformer*, 12 April 1836.

11 Factsheet M5, 'Members' pay, pensions and allowances', (House of Commons Information Office, 2009) p. 5. <http://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons-information-office/fymp/m05.pdf> [accessed 2 September 2017].

12 Exceptionally, three printed returns listing the Hitchin guardians and their occupations for 1842–1843, 1843–1844 and 1844–1845 were found in the correspondence files between the Hitchin union and the Poor Law Commissioners (The National Archives (hereafter TNA), MH 12/4614 and MH 12/4615). Two similar returns survive for the St Albans union 1842–1843 and 1843–1844 (TNA, MH 12/4442 and MH 12/4443).

An Analysis of the Boards of Guardians in Hertfordshire

Table 2 Occupational groups represented on the boards of guardians of four Hertfordshire unions, 1835–1847

Occupational group	Hatfield %	Hitchin %	St Albans %	Watford %	Sample total %
Agriculture	27.5	50.7	38.4	23.4	38.3
Retail	2.5	0.7	4.7	2.1	2.2
Gentry	25.0	9.6	16.3	25.5	16.9
Professional	5.0	3.4	11.6	5.3	6.0
Clergy	10.0	8.2	3.5	4.3	6.3
Trade and manufacturing	15.0	11.0	10.5	12.8	11.8
Other	0.0	0.0	1.2	5.3	1.6
Unknown	15.0	16.4	14.0	21.3	16.9
Employed in agriculture and retail	30.0	51.4	43.1	25.5	40.5

Source: K. Rothery, 'The implementation and administration of the New Poor Law in Hertfordshire c. 1830–1847 (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Hertfordshire, 2016), pp. 423–5.

The second largest representation on boards of guardians came from those categorised as gentry. Within this group were those identified as 'gentlemen', 'landed proprietors', and 'of independent means'; this group also included titled members of the nobility. Although this is a loose classification it represents men who were not specifically engaged in any profession or employed by others; men who were more likely to have control over their time and how it was spent. This group was almost certainly educated and literate but their experience of business, budgeting and people management would have varied from individual to individual.

The professional group was one of the smallest occupational subsets of guardians and consisted mainly of those in the legal profession. They were concentrated in the most urban area, St Albans, where the Union also had three bankers on its Board of Guardians at various times. The legal men were among the most educated members of the boards, and were well-placed to challenge policy and process and to understand the requirements of the Poor Law. Noticeable by their absence in this group were land agents and estate managers. Given that Hertfordshire had a significant number of large estates and a higher than average number of aristocratic seats, one might expect to have seen this group representing their employer's interests.¹³ The clergy are sometimes classified as part of the professional group but we have separated them out for independent analysis. Among the 23 clergy who sat on the four boards only one was a non-conformist minister.

The trade and manufacturing sector was a relatively small and diverse group. Brewers and millers formed the two largest sub-groups within this category. St Albans, one of the principal trading centres for straw plait, had two board members connected to that industry. The growing papermaking industry in the Gade valley had representatives on the Watford

¹³ J. Moore, 'The impact of agricultural depression and land ownership change on the county of Hertfordshire, c. 1870–1914' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Hertfordshire, 2010), pp. 71–2.

Board. The remaining guardians represented a variety of crafts and trades including blacksmith, butcher, baker, builder and carpenter. In local studies conducted by Rose in Yorkshire, Ashforth in Bradford and Tolley in Birmingham, shopkeepers, merchants and manufacturers dominated urban boards.¹⁴ By contrast, in Hertfordshire, St Albans and the nascent urban centre of Watford did not show a propensity to be dominated by the retail, trade and manufacturing groups. In both these unions and in the Hatfield Union the occupational composition of the boards was more diverse. Farming guardians were more prevalent in Hitchin Union but not to the extent found by Hooker in his study of Llandilofawr in Wales where, with a handful of exceptions, all the guardians were farmers.¹⁵ When comparing two Midlands unions Tolley also noted that the more rural Kings Norton board returned a sizeable proportion of guardians from a farming background.¹⁶ These findings highlight the local variation in the composition of boards and together suggest that the occupational profile of boards was influenced by the economic profile in the area.

The occupational composition of boards of guardians was not static and Figure 2 shows the changes in the occupational profile of the sample boards between 1835 and 1847. The proportion of those employed in agriculture increased to a peak of 48 per cent in 1844–1845, but had begun to decline in the final two years of this sample. At the same time participation by the gentry and professional men went into decline, falling from a combined representation of 37 per cent to just 25 per cent. Meanwhile participation by the clergy doubled from 6 guardians to 12 in 1846. The number of guardians employed in the retail sector never exceeded three in number in this sample. Those employed in trade and manufacturing fluctuated from a low of 9 (8 per cent) to a high of 15 (17 per cent) across all four boards. The decline in representation by the gentry and professional sector (excluding clergy) left the farming community with a greater voice on the boards. In Hertfordshire, the retail and manufacturing sector were not significantly increasing their representation on boards and the increased clergy numbers did not offset the loss of other educated groups of guardians.

Age profile of the guardians

Just as occupation might suggest a particular skill set a guardian might bring to the board, maturity might also indicate knowledge or experience gained over time. The majority of the sample group first became guardians in their thirties, but the figures are skewed by the high proportion of Hitchin guardians in the sample. Elsewhere, most guardians took office in their forties. The mean age for members of the first boards was 42 years, but by 1846–1847 this had increased to 47 years. Hitchin had the youngest board but over time the average age steadily increased. Watford union had a slightly more mature board than its neighbours, with an average age of 51 years. On the whole, the boards were composed of men aged

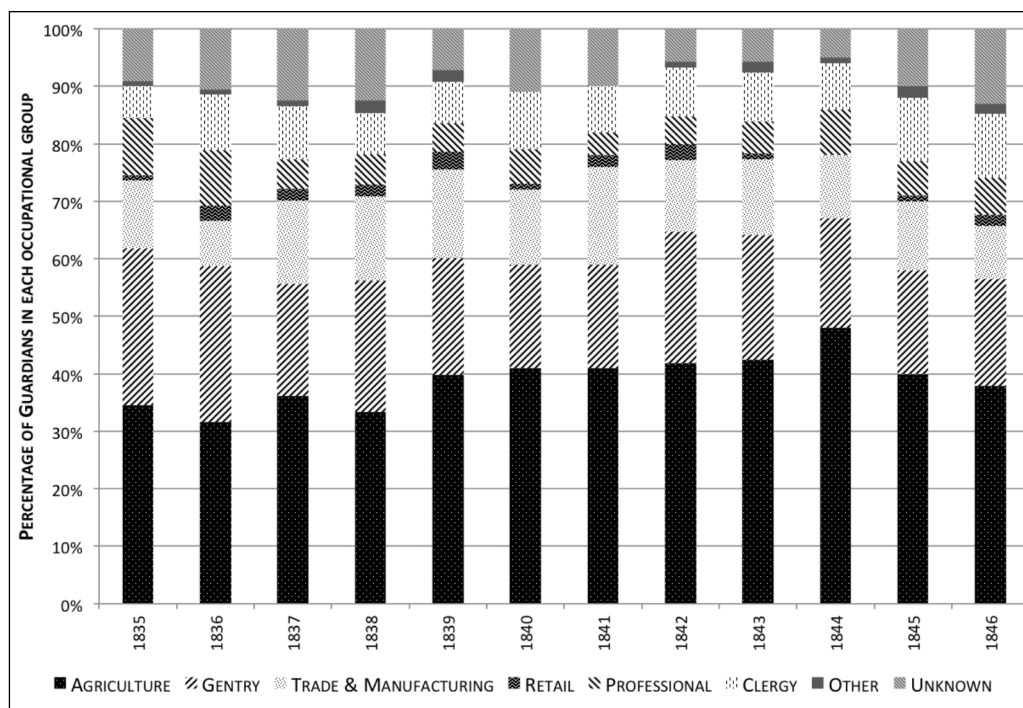
14 Rose, 'Administration of the Poor Law in the West Riding', pp. 141–7; Ashforth, 'Poor Law in Bradford', pp. 87–9; Tolley, 'Birmingham, Aston and Kings Norton Boards of Guardians', pp. 154–69.

15 Hooker, 'Llandilofawr Poor Law Union', p. 117.

16 Tolley, 'Birmingham, Aston and Kings Norton Boards of Guardians', pp. 154–69.

An Analysis of the Boards of Guardians in Hertfordshire

Figure 2 Change in occupational groups: four Hertfordshire unions, 1835–1847



Source: K. Rothery, 'The implementation and administration of the New Poor Law in Hertfordshire c.1830–1847 (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Hertfordshire, 2016), p. 159.

40–59 years. These men were old enough to have witnessed the operation of the Old Poor Law and changing patterns of pauperism in their neighbourhood; they were likely to have been heads of families themselves and to have understood the changing social needs of growing families or the impact of bereavement and illness. Their maturity also suggests that they would have 20 years or more experience in their own field of business and could take any skills they had acquired to the boardroom table. Perhaps with maturity came the social expectation that individuals would participate in managing the local administration? But it should also be noted that it was not the oldest members of the community that were drawn to poor law administration.

Number of terms served and attendance rates

When the boards of guardians were first established they were a new concept and the falling off in attendance rates shown over time may be indicative of a lack of interest in serving as a guardian or a realisation of the commitment required. However, even when viewed through this relatively small window of 12 years, there is evidence of men serving multiple terms as guardians. So as well as the experience of age, many were building up experience as guardians. One third held office for four or more years. However, any

Table 3 Annual attendance rate at union meetings: four Hertfordshire unions, 1835–1847

Union	1835–	1836–	1837–	1838–	1839–	1840–	1841–	1842–	1843–	1844–	1845–	1846–	1847
	1836	1837	1838	1839	1840	1841	1842	1843	1844	1845	1846	1847	
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	
Hatfield	50	40	51	41	39	36	42	37	42	45	40	40	
Hitchin	38	24	31	35	34	30	37	32	30	37	36	33	
St Albans	49	49	54	42	36	46	48	48	35	43	43	46	
Watford	38	33	35	38	30	24	42	34	28	29	38	24	
Overall attendance rate	44	37	43	39	35	34	42	38	34	39	39	36	

Source: K. Rothery, 'The implementation and administration of the New Poor Law in Hertfordshire c. 1830–1847 (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Hertfordshire, 2016), p. 162.

measure which recognises experience gained by serving multiple terms should be considered alongside the frequency with which guardians attended to union business either collectively or individually, for it was one thing being elected to the Board of Guardians, but quite another to contribute actively, every week, to the running and management of the union as an elected but unpaid volunteer. Attendance rates at weekly board meetings in the sample unions were consistently low. This suggests that few guardians were either willing or able to give the required level of commitment to the job.

Overall the guardians' attendance rate was nearly always less than 50 per cent of the meetings per year and in almost two thirds of cases attendance was 40 per cent or less (Table 3). Attendance at the Watford Board meetings fluctuated significantly and it had less than 30 per cent attendance in 4 of the 12 years reviewed. All the unions saw a marked increase in attendance in 1841–1842, a period when there were increased poor relief claims and poor relief spending nationally. Elected guardians were more likely to attend than *ex officio* guardians, although the attendance rate for both groups fell throughout the period.

Seasonal attendance

The number of guardians attending the weekly meetings varied throughout the year. Higher attendance occurred when new staff appointments were being made or when capital expenditure (especially in relation to the costs of building workhouses) was on the agenda. Attendances peaked when a new board was appointed and fell away during the summer months. It was not uncommon for meetings to be postponed because they were inquorate. Even in Hitchin, which had between 36 and 42 board members, a quorum of three could not always be found. Low attendance rates compromised the efficiency of the boards, as decisions were sometimes postponed when attendance was low. The Hatfield and St Albans Boards decided to meet fortnightly rather than weekly soon after they were set up, and had higher attendance rates which suggests a guardian was more likely to be able to take time away from his business if he was only required once every two weeks. The high proportion of gentry on the Hatfield board also suggests a group that was more able to make time to attend to union affairs.

Individual attendance

Individual attendance rates varied greatly. Only 14.5 per cent attended more than three quarters of the meetings in a year and a far greater proportion (36.9 per cent) attended less than a quarter of meetings. Nine men did not attend any meetings and a further 15 who served for more than one year had at least one year when they did not attend.¹⁷ Just three elected guardians achieved 100 per cent attendance in a year. Some of the highest individual attendance rates were found among the chairmen and vice-chairmen of the unions who were also some of the longest serving guardians.¹⁸

When individual attendance rates are viewed alongside the number of years served some interesting patterns emerge. The elected guardians had high attendance rates over shorter terms. This suggests guardians made a commitment for one or two years but then either stepped down or significantly reduced their commitment over time. It may also be indicative of a pattern of rotating the role in much the same way as the job of overseer of the poor had been rotated under the Old Poor Law. Fewer in number, the *ex officio* guardians split into two groups: one group with low level, infrequent attendance and a second, smaller, group with above average attendance over a number of years indicative of a sustained commitment to the role over time. What emerges from this data is that, in terms of continuity and frequency of attendance, fewer than ten per cent of guardians were high contributors, serving for four years or more *and* attending at least half of the meetings in their union. If reflected in other areas, this would place the control of many poor law unions in the hands of just a few individuals. If we drill down further into the data and compare the occupational mix of long-serving/high-attending guardians the high contributors with the occupational mix of the boards overall we find increased participation by the clergy and gentry. Together they accounted for 37.1 per cent of the high contributors more than those from an agrarian background who were only 31.4 per cent of the high contributors despite representing 38.3 per cent of the boards' membership overall. This is not surprising given these men were part of the leisured class with more time available, but it does demonstrate that whilst the occupational mix of the boards on paper might suggest participation by a wider social group, in reality the decision making was concentrated in the hands of the old elite. That said, some of those in trade and manufacturing also featured in this high participation group and it has been argued that ambitious men used the office of guardian as a stepping stone into local politics.¹⁹

The mix of occupations among the high contributors on the four boards was also quite variable. Farmers became more dominant on the Hitchin Board, which lacked any sustained or regular input from the gentry and professional classes. The gentry and clergy dominated

17 These figures exclude the *ex officio* guardians who chose not to attend meetings despite being eligible to do so.

18 On the other hand, we should also mention the case of Lord Salisbury who was repeatedly elected as Chairman of the Hatfield Board but who in 1846–1847 did not attend any meetings.

19 Rose, 'Administration of the Poor Law in the West Riding', p. 138. K. Thompson, 'Leicester Poor Law Union', p. 46.

the Hatfield Board but not the St Albans and Watford Boards, which had no longstanding participation by the clergy. Four tradesmen made up the most active members of the St Albans Board although none of this group took office before 1837 so were not involved in the initial implementation of the New Poor Law in the town.

The low overall and individual attendance levels show that only a small number of elite men were regularly participating in weekly board meetings: in consequence decisions on poor relief and the operation of the union were being made, not by a board, but by a handful of individuals.

Conclusion

The remit of the boards of guardians was to administer poor relief effectively in the newly created poor law unions.²⁰ The New Poor Law relied on a committee of locally elected volunteers and *ex officio* magistrates regularly and frequently to participate in its administration. Those committees or boards were not equal in size, skills, experience or commitment nationally, regionally or locally. They were composed of a variety of individuals each of whom brought his own personality, commitment, interests and capability to the role.²¹ The range of skills and experience of these individuals had the potential to influence how a board operated and how efficiently a union was managed. The conduct of the guardians, whether benevolent, parsimonious or indifferent, set the tone for poor relief in the local area and had a significant impact on how poor relief was administered to, and experienced by, the local poor. Whatever the intentions of the centralised Poor Law Commission, it was the boards of guardians who made decisions locally about poor relief, who recruited staff, who arranged contracts for goods and services, who commissioned and managed the building of new workhouses and who managed the finances of the union. Farmers and shopkeepers did not, as has been claimed, dominate all these boards, which were diverse in their make up. That said, this sample shows that it was a relatively small cohort of middle-aged elite men and clergy who actively participated in the implementation and management of the New Poor Law in Hertfordshire.

20 An Act for the amendment and better administration of the laws relating to the poor in England and Wales. 4 and 5 William IV c. 76 (14 August 1834), para. 38.

21 The first woman guardian was not appointed until 1875.