

Conflict in the Workhouse Boardroom, Wednesday 17 June 1868

Richard Jefferies

In his obituary to Richard Jefferies, that was published in the *Swindon Advertiser* on 20 August 1887, William Morris¹ remembers walking across the fields with him after a meeting of the Board of Guardians of the Stratton St Margaret workhouse.² Jefferies was there in his capacity as a news reporter, Morris as a Board member. In the last chapter of *Hodge and His Masters* Jefferies records that the meetings of the Board of Guardians were often stormy affairs, for under the tranquil surface of rural life there were often strong feelings, long-standing animosities.

The following report, undoubtedly penned by Jefferies, was published in the *Wilts. & Glos Standard* on Saturday, 20 June 1868 and in the *North Wilts Herald* and the *Swindon Advertiser* on 22 June.



(c) www.workhouses.org.uk

Highworth and Swindon from the west, c.1910.

© Peter Higginbotham.

SWINDON. HIGHWORTH AND SWINDON UNION.

The usual weekly meeting of the Board of Guardians was held on Wednesday, at Stratton Workhouse, David Archer, Esq.,³ in the chair, the Rev. H.G. Baily,⁴ vice-chairman; and present, Messrs. C. Edmonds, J. Williams, Pedley, Nash,

¹ William Morris (1826–91) was the editor of the *Swindon Advertiser*—a liberal newspaper. He was frequently involved in heated and, on occasion, violent disputes with the Swindon Conservative powers-that-be.

² The Highworth and Swindon Union.

³ David Archer was a Justice of the Peace, landowner and farmer.

⁴ Henry George Baily (1815–1900) was the vicar of Swindon for 38 years.

Spiers, and Morris. A letter was read from Mr. John Arkell, in reference to taking on trial from the Workhouse a boy named Hunter, preparatory to permanent employment if he suited. The Board determined to allow the boy 1s. a-week out-relief during the month he would be on trial. This was done in order to meet some difficulty which seemed to arise out of Consolidated Orders.

MR. MORRIS AND MR. HAYNES.

The clerk said Mr. Haynes,⁵ the Assistant Relieving Officer, wished to speak to the Board. Mr. Haynes, on being ushered into the room, said he wished to ask the Board what right Mr. Morris had as a Guardian to interfere with him in the execution of his duty as relieving officer. Mr. Morris (to himself): This is getting very amusing. Mr. Haynes said Mr. Morris had been to his house on two occasions, and he was sorry he did not happen to be at home at the time. Mr. Archer: Let us know just what took place. Mr. Haynes said Mr. Morris, it appeared, came to his house last Sunday evening, in his (Mr. Haynes's) absence, and ordered his inspector to relieve certain paupers whom he had refused in the afternoon. He wished to know if Mr. Morris had any authority to do that? Mr. Archer: Do you mean as a Guardian? Mr. Haynes: Yes. He insisted upon it, and my Inspector gave way to it. Mr. Bailly: They were men you had refused in the afternoon? Mr. Haynes: Men I did not consider entitled to relief, one of them had only walked 12 miles. I ordered him to walk on. A Guardian: How many miles do you expect them to walk? Mr. Haynes: 20 miles. Mr. Spiers: And not have any relief? Mr. Haynes said he had asked a question. The Chairman said a Guardian had no power out of the house as a Guardian, any more than anyone else had. Mr. Haynes said that was all right. The Clerk said he had no power out of the Board-room. Mr. Haynes said that was all he wanted to know. The Chairman said the law was very clear upon the point; the Guardians met as a corporate body, and out of the Board-room a Guardian had no right to interfere as a Guardian. Mr. Haynes: That's all I wish to know. Mr. Whiteman said he got lots of these tramps coming to him for relief, and he always referred them to Mr. Haynes. Mr. Haynes said Mr. Whiteman was quite right in doing that. Mr. Pedley said any rate-payer would have the same privilege. Mr. Haynes said he was the best judge how to deal with these sort of men; he had had so many thousands passing through his hands. The Chairman here read the section of the Act of Parliament relating to the power of Guardians, which entirely coincided with the previous statement he made. Mr. Morris: Quite so. Mr. Pedley said it would have been better if instead of going and dictating to Mr. Haynes, Mr. Morris had reported the matter. Mr. J. Edmonds said he should like

⁵ Henry Haynes (born c.1816) was a superintendant of rural police based at the police station in Old Swindon and the assistant in charge of giving out relief to the poor, who were not inmates at the workhouse, for which he was paid £15 a year. By August 1868, Haynes resigned as a policeman and as the assistant relief officer, but this might have had nothing to do with the case.

to ask one question. He understood Mr. Haynes to say that one of the men had walked 12 miles before coming to Swindon, and then Mr. Haynes ordered him on without giving him anything. Mr. Haynes: Certainly. Mr. Edmonds: On what grounds did you order him on? Mr. Haynes: Because he was a strong able-bodied fellow, and had no business asking for relief at all. Mr. Whiteman said he thought a man who had walked 12 miles and was destitute ought to have had some food. Mr. Haynes repeated his statement, that no able-bodied man ought to apply for relief, and in reply to a question put to him, said the man was certainly able-bodied. Mr. Pedley repeated, if Mr. Morris had thought Mr. Haynes did not do his duty, it would have been better if he had reported it to the Board. Mr. Haynes: just so. Mr. Morris: And leave these people out in the fields until now, I preferred another course. Mr. Pedley: That you can do as you please about. Mr. Morris: I do please myself. Mr. Pedley made a remark which was partially lost, but was to the effect that Mr. Morris had domineered or dictated. Mr. Morris: I did nothing of the kind, Mr. Pedley. In his absence—The Chairman: Have you any other question to ask the Board? Mr. Haynes: No, I caution Mr. Morris against coming to my house again. Mr. Morris: You will have the same occur again; you'll have me there. Mr. Haynes: And you'll walk away a great deal quicker than you come. Mr. Morris: I am not here to wrangle with you, Mr. Haynes. Mr. Haynes having retired, Mr. Morris wished to address the Board on the facts of the case, but Mr. Baily said if it was intended to re-open the case he should object to it. Mr. Morris: I am not going to mention one word with which Mr. Haynes is connected. I have not seen Mr. Haynes respecting the matter. Mr. Baily: If this is to be gone into, I shall move that we have Mr. Haynes back into the room. Mr. Morris: I am going to make— Mr. Pedley: Let us go on with the business of the day. Mr. Morris: I shall simply make my statement to the Poor Law Board, which I am entitled to do. Mr. Morris persisted in wishing to speak upon the merits of the case, but Mr. Baily contended that Mr. Haynes ought to be in the room, and he should move to that effect. The Chairman said it seemed to him that Mr. Morris has acted in the character of a private individual, at any rate he supposed so; that had nothing to do with them as a Board, therefore he would rather not hear anything about it. Mr. Morris: I was not going— A Guardian: Go on with the business. Mr. Morris: I beg for a moment to be allowed to speak. I was not going to make any allusion to Mr. Haynes, nor anything that took place in his presence. Therefore anything I may have to say would have no effect upon him. The Chairman ruled that he did not think they could hear the statement, and Mr. Morris said: I shall make it to the Poor Law Board. Mr. Whiteman said Mr. Morris was going to explain how the thing happened, and Mr. Baily said just so; that was what could not be done at present. Mr. Pedley said Mr. Haynes came to ask a question, Mr. Archer had solved the problem, and that was all they had to do with it. He advised them to let the matter drop, he considering that it was a matter between Mr. Morris and

Mr. Haynes, and it was no use interfering with them. The matter then dropped for the time, but at a subsequent stage of the proceedings the question was raised again. The chairman said he hoped he would not be understood to mean that a guardian, if he thought an officer was not performing his duty, had no right to make that known to, and bring it before the board. A plain question was asked by Mr. Haynes, and he gave him a plain answer, but he would say that any guardian was at perfect liberty to make any remark about the conduct of any officer, whether it be Mr. Haynes, Mr. Morse, or Mr. Avenell, if either of them had not properly performed his duty; that was a far matter to be brought before the board and discussed. He hoped Mr. Morris would not think he stopped him on any other ground than that named. Mr. Morris said the complaint brought against him by Mr. Haynes was founded upon circumstances which took place more than two years ago. Mr. Baily said he understood there was no complaint at all. Mr. Morris said there might not have been any actual complaint; he asked if they could consider it anything but a piece of presumption for Mr. Haynes to come and charge him with doing that as a guardian which he did as a private individual. The chairman then again explained his meaning as to the powers of a guardian, and Mr. Morris then said: I give you notice that next week I will prefer a complain: against Mr. Haynes, the assistant relieving officer, for neglecting his duty. Mr. Baily said that was a better plan. Mr. Morris said he would make his statement next week. He had never for one single instant attempted to exercise out of the board room the rights he possessed when sitting at that table; and in bringing his complaint he wished to know whether he should do it as a private individual or as a guardian. If however they wished him to bring it as a private individual he would do so. A guardian: You could do it as a rate-payer. The chairman said he was against the idea of bringing charges against officers, because it made a regular job of it. If a guardian said or had reason to believe that an officer had not done his duty properly, he (the chairman) must say, so far as he understood it, it was within his province to name it to the board. Mr. Morris said he was prepared to take that course. The chairman said that bringing a charge would possibly necessitate the Poor Law Commissioners coming down her, and it would the understandable for this to take place. Mr. Morris said that he wished to place himself in the hands of the board as to how he should proceed. He considered as a rate-payer that on Sunday evening last the relieving officer had refused and neglected to perform his duty. He wished to ask whether he might state either now or at a future time the reason how and why he refused and neglected to perform his duty; or he would make a charge just as the board might think. He was not there for the purpose of kicking up a row or anything of the kind, they were as objectionable to him as they could be. He wished to act in a proper and friendly spirit. The chairman pointed out that the course—and he said Mr. Baily, Mr. Edmonds, Mr. Nash, and others would no doubt bear him out in

it—which had been taken was this, that if an officer exceeded his duty they called the officer before them, and told him that he must be more careful in future, but he quite thought that it was within the province of a guardian to name the matter to the board if he thought there had been some excess of duty. Mr. Baily said the unfortunate part of the case was that Mr. Morris did not bring the thing in a proper way before them, and instead of preferring a complaint he should have asked the opinion of the board about the matter. Mr. Haynes simply came to ask a question, and it seemed to him that the case had gone beyond the remedy. The Chairman said they would remember he administered a caution to the matron in respect for something she had done, and told her what would be the consequence if she persisted in it: and that she must be more particular. Mr. Morris said he agreed with Mr. Baily's remarks, and if he understood him his point was this, that it would be much better to prefer a complaint than a charge, but he would say supposing a man was lying at the point of death, in the roadway, and it turned out to be an ailment which he could allay. However, instead of doing that, he said 'No, I shan't help you. I won't save your life, stay till next week and see if the Board will do it.' Would not that be preposterous? Now on Sunday night— The Chairman said he thought the public had a right to say to the relieving officer, I hope you will relieve this poor man, but he did it on his own responsibility, and he ran risk in doing so. Mr. Morris said he was going to tell them that on Monday night about seven o'clock— Mr. Baily said the case did not come before them, because no complaint had been made about Mr. Morris. Mr. Haynes had simply asked a question, to which an answer had been given, but now Mr. Morris said he preferred a complaint. The Chairman: But he withdrew it. Mr. Baily: He prefers it either as a private person or a guardian. Mr. Morris wished to place himself in a friendly position. The Chairman pointed out how Mr. Morris might proceed, and that gentleman said he only wished to state simply and plainly what took place. Mr. Whiteman: We have heard Mr. Haynes' statement (voices: No, no.) Mr. Morris was proceeding with his narrative when Mr. Baily said he was sorry to interrupt Mr. Morris. Mr. Whiteman said Mr. Baily seemed to come there as opposition. Mr. Baily requested to be allowed to speak. If Mr. Morris was going to make a charge. Mr. Morris (warmly): I am not going to make a charge. Mr. Haynes was not present when I was there; I did not see him, therefore I can make no charge against Mr. Haynes. Mr. Baily: We ought to hear no statement unless Mr. Haynes is before the Board. Mr. Morris was again about to proceed with his story when there was some dissent, and he said the statement might so well be heard now, as it would have to be heard sometime. The Chairman said that any statement a guardian might make to the Board would be with this view, that if the Board should take the same view as the guardian naming it, the Board might fairly say 'let us have the officer before us at some stated time and ask him to give some explanation about the matter.' The Chairman further

explained his meaning conveyed in former passages. Mr. Morris said that he thought it would be nothing but fair to the Board that his statement should be heard. The Chairman said if he would lay the statement before them properly there might be no objection to the course. Mr. Morris said he placed himself in the hands of the Board, and wished to do everything in a friendly and business-like spirit. Mr. Morris requested to make the statement now, and entered into a long statement the pith of which is this: On Sunday evening he saw in front of the police-station two or three men, a woman, and child. He crossed to them, as they were tramps, and asked why they were staying there, telling them that it was not a proper place for them at that time of night, about seven o'clock. The child was five or six years old. The woman replied that they were waiting for an order, they had made an application for one but did not know on what ground it had been refused. He went again at ten o'clock and almost the same conversation took place again. He asked them if they were destitute and they said they were without the means of paying for a night's lodging. He told them that it was the duty of the assistant relieving officer to assist destitute people, and he advised them to go again and make another application. They did so, but were refused. He then went and saw Inspector Pitney. He asked for Mr. Haynes, but he was not at home, and told him that the people were destitute. In reply to the question why he refused Mr. Pitney said, 'because Mr. Haynes had given instructions that no orders should be given in the summer time,' or something of that sort. Ultimately the people were searched by Mr. Pitney, who gave them an order. He considered it incumbent on the Inspector to discover whether the men had the means of paying for their lodging, and if on finding they had no means he refused to give an order, he (Mr. Morris) insisted upon their having an order. Mr. Morris went on to state the case of one of the men who had left the Royal Engineers with a good conduct badge after serving 15 years, and who had only twopence in his pocket at the time. Mr. Bailly: What hours did you see them there? Mr. Morris: At about half-past seven and ten o'clock. Mr. Whiteman: I consider that Mr. Morris has done his duty. Mr. Bailly said they could not have that; it was just what they wanted to guard against. Mr. Morris: But he made himself a party to it by coming here today. Mr. Edmonds: Does Mr. Morris make any charge against Mr. Haynes? After some further conversation, as it might be to him satisfactorily proved that he had done his duty, Mr J. Edmonds moved and Mr. Spiers seconded that Mr. Haynes appear next week to give the required explanation.⁶

⁶ There is a follow-up report, no doubt written by Jefferies, in the *Wilts & Glos Standard* 27 June 1868 that gave Mr. Haynes an opportunity to explain his action. In essence he considered tramps as professional vagrants and that the best way to stop them was to deny relief. Despite the fact that he could provide little proof whether a vagrant was or was not destitute, Mr. Pedley moved: 'That in the opinion of this Board, Mr. Haynes has up to this present time, acquitted himself very well in that arduous duty he has had to perform.' This was seconded by Mr. Walker. Mr. Spiers proposed and William Morris seconded an amendment to the effect that Mr. Haynes had not done his duty

WHITEWASHING THE HOUSE—THE LUNATION.

Mr. East said he had to suggest that this was the usual time for whitewashing those parts of the house which had been used. —The Chairman said he would suggest that it be done as had usually been the case. —Mr. Morris said that from the entries in the visitor's book he had to state that the places wanted not only whitewashing but painting, and the floors were very bad and defective. The floors he might say were dangerous to the children. Mr. Morris proceeded to explain more particularly the peculiar danger which would arise from the children going over the floors, some of the tiles in the infant's rooms being worn completely away, making a hollow as it were. —Mr. Baily said that on several occasions that particular matter had been looked at. About a fortnight ago he had talked with Mr. Walker about it, and it was thought that something ought to be done. —Mr. Morris moved that a committee be appointed to consider the subject, and observed that another thing they noticed in going round the house was that certain of the paupers who were pointed out as dangerous lunatics were put with paupers; this he considered objectionable. The master pointed out one pauper as a dangerous lunatic, and yet there were one or more paupers in the same compartment. —The Master: No sir. —Mr. Morris: At all events he was a lunatic. You may have that. That was considered objectionable. Mr. J. Edmonds said the question was what was to be done as to the lunatics. The clerk said the lunacy inspector had a weekly return of the lunatics, and he would call his attention to the matter if desired. In answer to Mr. Pedley, the master said the Inspector had inspected the lunation. Mr. Edmonds said he thought it was very bad. Mr. Morris said it was bad, and the only way to get a remedy was to complain of it. Mr. Baily said this very topic had been mentioned a hundred times at the Board, but it would never do to put harmless lunatics in a room shut up by themselves. After some discussion, as to the precise mode of bringing the matter before the Poor Law Commissioners, Mr. Morris said if there was a defect in the law they must try and make it perfect by agitating. The clerk said he would call the Inspector's attention to the fact that it was desirable that some proper place be provided. Mr. C. Edmonds suggested that they should take the question and answer as it the visitor's book,

but this was lost by a vote of 7 to 4. In his editorial comment in the *Swindon Advertiser*, dated 29 June 1868, William Morris made comment about how vagrants should be treated. He wrote: 'The principle of the English Poor Law first laid down in the 43rd of Elizabeth, and recognised in all subsequent Acts of legislature, that no man, woman, or child, however idle, however bad, should be allowed to starve. But there are times when both the feeling and the principle are thrown on one side, and a ruthless extermination, by starvation or other convenient means, is unblushingly advocated as the one remedy for vagrancy. Some members of the Guildford Board of Guardians recently obstinately persisted in a course but little, if any different from this, and some of the members of the Highworth and Swindon Union seem desirous of following in their footsteps, for on Wednesday last the assertion that all vagrants—that is, all our casual and migratory poor—are rogues and vagabonds, appeared to meet with special favour.'

but the Chairman asked whether they intended it to go as the wish of the Board. There was a large amount of discussion as to how the matter should be suggested, and Mr. Morris said he wished it to go not as the opinion of the Board but as coming from two private individuals, and ultimately Mr. Baily said the question resolved itself into this, would the Board have separate places for the imbecile lunatics of both sexes. Mr. Morris: Can we entertain that with the co-operation of the lunacy inspector? It was the unanimous opinion of the Board that something ought to be done, but the difficulty was what. Mr. Pedley said for his own part he was willing to abide by the decision of the lunacy inspector as it appeared in the books, and by which it appeared he had examined the lunatics and found them harmless or rather of a treatable disposition. They were better separate, distributed about the house than put together. Mr. Morris: But we have also to consider those who are not lunatics. He suggested that the clerk be instructed to forward the entry in the visitors book signed by two guardians to the lunacy inspector, but Mr. J. Edmonds said he did not think that could be done. and Mr. Baily said it made it look like the opinion of the Board, which it was not. Mr. J. Edmonds said the best thing would be to take it into consideration that day fortnight. Mr. Morris differed from him. Mr. Edmonds said he did not wish to dictate to the Board what they must do. Mr. Morris: We certainly do not. After some more discussion it was understood that Mr. Edmonds proposed that the matter be taken into consideration that day fortnight, and the matter then dropped. At a subsequent stage it was proposed that the entire house in the interior be whitewashed, and the resolution was carried.

APPLICATION TO LEAVE THE HOUSE.

An old woman named Alice Legg wished to leave the house saying she was going to live at Highworth, and the Board considered the case very carefully. Mr. Morris moved and Mr. Whiteman seconded that the woman be allowed to go out, and that out door relief be afforded her. An amendment was proposed by Mr. Pedley and seconded by Mr. C. Edmonds, both of whom were well acquainted with the case, and the amendment on being put to the vote was carried five to two. There was no other business of importance.

RELIEF REPORT.

The following is a return of relief:— Indoor: not able bodied, 38; last week, 36; corresponding week last year, 32; able bodied 30, 32, 24 respectively: children, 63, 63, 68 respectively. At school: boys 19, girls 39, total 58; imbeciles 4, lunatics 28. Outdoor: 1st district, not able bodied, 186; able bodied 74, children 143; total 403; at a cost of £47 18s 2½d. Total number in and out door, 853.