

POULTON-LE-FYLDE:
A NINETEENTH-CENTURY MARKET TOWN

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IN 1837 the Reverend W. Thornber, the historian of the western Fylde, described Poulton as 'the metropolis of the Fylde',¹ a character which cannot be ascribed to it today and which would have been disputed by his succeeding generation which witnessed the growth of the coastal resorts. However, its long history and prominence in that region provide some justification for the claim at least before 1850. Soon after the Norman Conquest, its church, dating from c1090, became the centre of an ecclesiastical parish of seven townships totalling almost nineteen thousand acres. Probably on account of its importance as an ecclesiastical centre, Poulton-le-Fylde developed a market function, though the markets held in the nineteenth century were by prescription rather than under charter and therefore of obscure origin. By the last century, markets for cattle and cloth were being held on 3 February, 13 April and 3 November with a weekly fair on Mondays; such was the importance of the weekly market that it was augmented in 1847 by the introduction of a fortnightly cattle fair supplied by Irish dealers operating through the new port of Fleetwood.² It seems likely that the ancient markets of Poulton-le-Fylde were also supplied through the old Wyre ports of Skippool and Wardleys a mile from the centre of the town. Classed as a creek of the port of Chester, the port was thriving in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries based on coastal trade with local ports in Lancashire and Cumbria in agricultural exports and consumer imports, and on an international trade in which the importing of Baltic flax and Scandinavian timber featured strongly.

The experience of the textile, mining and metallurgical areas of the north and midlands in the nineteenth century has been well-documented both by contemporaries and by historians; the impact of industrialization on what is now rural England has

received rather less attention, perhaps because stagnation and decline are less attractive themes than growth. During the process of industrialization in the nineteenth century, many market towns found themselves left behind by places more favourably situated in locational terms. Condemned to a much slower rate of growth, or even to decay, such places had their problems compounded as the railway network, that sinew of the Industrial Revolution, spread its tentacles to the farthest corner of the land and thus undermined the local market status of many centres. Furthermore, the social problems associated with industrialization prompted the gradual reform of local government in which attempts were made to replace chaos with order by substituting regional for local direction. Thus, the process of modernisation presented a twin threat to the economy and society of the nineteenth-century market town, and this article presents Poulton-le-Fylde as a case study of these developments and attempts to explain these trends.

POPULATION AND ECONOMY

The raw material which is provided by a study of population trends is a useful starting point in the economic history of any community. During the first two decades of the nineteenth century the population of Poulton-le-Fylde increased by almost 25 per cent, which represented the average rate of growth for an agricultural region at that time,³ but another sixty years were to pass before there was an increase of a further quarter. The pattern of early growth followed by a lengthy period of quiescence seems clear, but interpretation of the statistics is far less certain, largely on account of inadequate sources. However, the broad picture of the arrest of growth by 1831 and the subsequent stagnation to 1871, when the population increased from 1,065 to 1,161 with a net loss of eight in the decade 1841-51, is clear.⁴ Any explanation of this has to be sought in the failure of Poulton-le-Fylde to respond to the challenge of the new industrial society which is the principal feature of nineteenth-century Britain.

Fundamental to this decline was the inability of the town to establish an industrial base out of the domestic craft work which existed at the beginning the century. The importing of flax at the Wyre ports was essential to the linen industry which was widespread in the Fylde in the eighteenth century and was organized principally by the merchants of Kirkham who had large warehouses on the river banks at Skippool and Wardleys. By the early nineteenth century, there had been some degree of concentration of activity within Poulton-le-Fylde, firstly under James Harrison and later by Thomas Worthington who successfully employed

some thirty to forty hands manufacturing sacking, sailcloth and sheeting. Furthermore, the town also boasted an establishment for flax spinning and dressing, and the general importance of this domestic industry to the economy of the town is attested by the presence of seven weavers, five flax dressers and one twine spinner, representing 15 per cent of all burials, in the registers of St Chad's parish church between 1790 and 1799.⁵ The failure of this craft industry to develop its potential in the nineteenth century is starkly indicated by a short selection of statistics. The local historian notes that flax weaving had become a common method of employing the inhabitants of the town's workhouse before unionisation in the later 1830s; the 1841 enumerators' schedules record only five weavers in the town, all significantly over 55 years of age; the schedules for 1851 record none, and the directory for that year contains no reference to textiles.⁶

The reasons for this rather dramatic decline in the domestic trade of Poulton-le-Fylde are neither obscure nor original, and were experienced in many parts of the county. The mechanisation of industry with its increasing scale of operation and greater demands for labour, its concentration on or near the coalfields which supplied its energy requirements, its proximity to its principal port in the south of the county, and its need for large home markets all combined to undermine the domestic trade in remote areas of the county. However, not only were the natural odds stacked heavily against the town's industrial development, but the will to take advantage of new opportunities may have been absent. Superficially it seems odd that the neighbouring market town of Kirkham should develop a substantial steam-powered, factory-based industry in flax and cotton when it might have shared many of the advantages of Poulton-le-Fylde. The crucial difference between the two towns was the existence of that elusive but crucial quality of entrepreneurship in the one and its absence in the other. In Kirkham a group of merchants, the Langtons, the Hornbys and the Birleys, controlled the flax industry of the eighteenth century and appear to have had sufficient initiative and adequate resources to launch the mechanization of their business when the opportunity came. In Poulton-le-Fylde these qualities were not to be found. It is perhaps a quirk of fate which produced the contrast, for in 1741 John Birley, a Poulton merchant whose family had come from Ireland in the later seventeenth century, married Elizabeth Shepherd, daughter of one of the Kirkham flax merchants, made his home there rather than in Poulton-le-Fylde, and was instrumental in the rise of the Birleys to a position of pre-eminence in Kirkham; by the mid-nineteenth century, this family was the principal employer of

labour in flax and cotton mills.⁷ By a combination of natural disadvantages and fate, Poulton-le-Fylde became one of the communities in Lancashire which suffered from the pains of de-industrialization.

At the same time that the domestic textile industry went into decline, the port of Poulton-le-Fylde suffered a blow from which it never recovered. In retrospect, it is inevitable that the increasing size of shipping and the need of a greater draught of water would lead to the decline of small river ports, but a far more sudden end to Poulton-le-Fylde's maritime interest was brought by the foundation of the new port of Fleetwood at the mouth of the river Wyre. The competition which it offered, with its sheltered deep water harbour and its direct rail link with industrial Lancashire, is indicated by the immediate transfer of the customs post from Poulton-le-Fylde to Fleetwood, though it is not without significance that observers were complaining of the lack of use made of the Wyre's facilities as early as 1824.⁸ However, the direct economic impact of this rival is difficult to assess accurately. On the other hand, Poulton-le-Fylde appears to have enjoyed some status as a local marketing centre in connection with the port until the 1840s, indicated by the regular contact between the agent of the Clifton estate in some fifteen thousand acres in the south-west of the Fylde and the timber merchants operating through the port. During the early 1840s, Thomas Clifton was undertaking considerable rebuilding of his farms, laying down new roads and erecting new field boundaries, all in connection with the improvement of the mossland to the north-east of Lytham, and was importing timber for the purpose through the port at Poulton-le-Fylde. After 1845, a dramatic change occurs with a complete transfer of all business to merchants in Preston and Liverpool, and any marketing function which Poulton-le-Fylde enjoyed in connection with the port went into fairly rapid decline. On the other hand, much of the economic activity associated with the port is indeterminate, and it does seem possible that much of it could have actually by-passed the town. This is certainly the case with the Kirkham flax merchants of the eighteenth century who transported their flax direct from quayside to that town, and it is perhaps significant that the timber merchant with whom the Clifton estate was dealing does not figure in the 1841 census returns. Thus it seems possible that the foundation of Fleetwood may have produced a ripple rather than a wave in Poulton-le-Fylde, though one cannot imagine that the port could have had no effect on the economy of the town or that its decline would go unnoticed.

The combination of the process of de-industrialization and

decline of the port were major factors in transforming growth into stagnation during the first third of the nineteenth century, but these factors do not offer any explanation of the mechanics of population change. Precise explanation is hindered either by the deficiency or the inadequacy of many sources for a single parish study. In the first place, it is impossible to extract township figures from the registrar-general's statistics, which began in 1837, since Poulton-le-Fylde was the centre of a larger area. Secondly, the ecclesiastical registers are unrewarding because of substantial gaps and failure to survive. However, these sources do provide some information from which it is possible to offer some tentative thoughts on the problem, and the various census enumerators' returns are more helpful.

Nationally, there was a population explosion during the nineteenth century, but the figures for Poulton-le-Fylde indicate that it was principally a phenomenon associated with industrial growth. The question arises, therefore, as to whether the town's stagnation was caused by a particular relationship between birth and death rates or by migration, or by a combination of both factors. In so far as any estimate can be made of the situation, the relationship between birth and death rates appears to have been fairly normal, although the figures were rather below the national picture. In England and Wales in 1851, the birth and death rates were 34.3 and 22.0 per thousand respectively whilst in the registration district of Poulton-le-Fylde they were 30.6 and 17.2; a decade later the figures were 34.6 and 21.6 compared to 30.9 and 19.6.⁹ The lower than average birth rate in Poulton-le-Fylde is a reflection of the age-sex structure of the population. In 1851 and 1861 there were rather more females than males, but the real significance lies in the fact that the proportion of the women who came into child-bearing range was slightly less than 25 per cent whereas in the neighbouring new town of Fleetwood it was rather more than one third. A similar contrast is found amongst males of the same age group (21-40), and this is inevitably reflected in the proportion of children under ten in the population—26 per cent in Poulton-le-Fylde, 33 per cent in Fleetwood.¹⁰ Without doubt, the lower birth rate in Poulton-le-Fylde is a reflection of the lack of economic opportunity in the town which accounts for the rather small number of young married people resident there.

However, the death rate in Poulton-le-Fylde registration district is also below the national average, and the net difference between birth and death rates is so similar in 1851 that one might have expected population growth in the western Fylde to have been similar to the national pattern. Since this is not the case, the

population of the Poulton-le-Fylde registration district growing more slowly than the national figure, the difference must be accounted for by migration. However, the problem is not merely one of outward migration. At first sight, there appears to be straightforward, if piecemeal evidence indicating some movement out since the parish registers for St Chad's, though not representing the whole town, show an excess of births over deaths of 39 during the decade 1841-51 when the population actually fell by eight. This small degree of emigration points to the economic attractions of other places, and bearing in mind that much of the mobility which took place during the nineteenth century did so over a short distance, it seems likely that the emerging new towns on the coast would attract the young and adventurous as well as the needy and hopeful sections of Fylde population. Both Blackpool and Fleetwood recruited substantial parts of their initial populations from the neighbouring parishes of the western Fylde,¹¹ and it is likely that those who were prepared to leave the villages and market towns would look to the nearby coastal towns rather than the grimmer centres inland, so seeking to maximise their economic opportunities within easy reach of the family and social networks to which they belonged.

A rather more complex picture of local mobility is suggested, however, by the census returns for the mid century. Examination of the birthplaces of heads of household, an indication of possible mobility rather than a precise guide, reveals that whilst 28.9 per cent were Poultonians, as many as 40.9 per cent were born in the various townships of the Fylde, suggesting considerable localised movement into the town in recent decades from the surrounding rural areas. That such a movement should take place during the period in which large areas of mossland were being reclaimed, both over Wyre and in Lytham, thus providing improved economic opportunities in farming, might at first sight seem contradictory, but one should not overestimate the employment prospects which such improvements created. Of the six rural townships chiefly affected by reclamation, it is noteworthy that the density of housing actually decreased in four and remained identical in one between 1841 and 1861.¹²

More plausible explanations might be found in the social sphere. It is well known that landowners and tenant farmers were able to exercise a substantial degree of social control over their labourers who lived on the farms or in tied cottages, but the Fylde farm worker had a reputation for rather fierce independence.¹³ Many of them must have preferred to escape from the claustrophobic atmosphere of the land on which they worked and live in the more open context of a market centre where society would be

less restrictive, more congenial and more varied. However, this led to a tendency for the larger villages and market towns to collect resident, surplus labour and export it daily to the farms of their regions. In Poulton-le-Fylde in 1851, there were 10 farms offering employment to 15 labourers, in addition to the five who lived in on two separate farms. The remainder, 34 in all, must have travelled daily, probably on foot, to their work on the farms in other parts of the Fylde. Even as late as 1868, R. Hunt, a Bispham tenant farmer, commented on the necessity of hiring labourers from the surrounding villages because these were the only places in the district which had any cottages in which the farm hands could live.¹⁴

One might wonder why there was a shortage of cottages in the rural areas and consider that it was perhaps the responsibility of the farmers to provide them. However, at least until 1862, it was the practice for landlords to prevent or discourage settlement in villages under their control because the poor rate was levied on property in each township according to the amount of relief provided in that place. Since farm workers were the largest single group within the rural labour force and also the most likely to require casual relief, it was in the interests of the landowners, and the large tenant farmers, who often had to pay the poor rate as a term of their leases, to attempt to control population growth. As suggested above, the results of such an attitude may not have been wholly unwelcome to many farm labourers, but it did reinforce the tendency for population to move from the 'close' villages to the 'open' ones where landownership was diversified and there was no effective control over immigration. In the Fylde there are a number of estates where this could have been the practice, though the evidence is at best circumstantial. Certainly there is no direct indication of harassment on the Clifton estate nor on the Hornby property in nearby Singleton and Hardhorn-with-Newton, but it is not without significance that the number of houses declined between 1841 and 1861 in all the Clifton townships, except Lytham which was being developed as a resort, as well as in Singleton, and in the same twenty years only six extra houses built were built in Hardhorn-with-Newton.¹⁵ Even after the transfer of rating to the unions in 1862, it was still far more economical for the farmer to hire his hands each day rather than have to house them, provided that they did not arrive for work exhausted, and there is evidence to suggest that this method of organisation was much preferred in the Fylde in the second half of the nineteenth century, even though some observers advocated the construction of cottages on the farms in order to obtain a more tractable labour force.¹⁶ Thus, population mobility around

Poulton-le-Fylde in the middle of the last century appears to have a wave-like character in which those who moved out in search of prosperity and security in the coastal resorts or industrial towns were replaced by those who came in from the rural areas either by choice or by necessity, and a rough equilibrium was achieved resulting in a period of stagnation in the economic development of the community.

The decay of domestic textiles and the failure to replace them with an expanding industry, together with the loss of whatever prosperity the port may have brought were obviously instrumental in persuading people to emigrate, and this meant that by the middle of the nineteenth century Poulton-le-Fylde was thrust firmly back on its traditional economic base of agriculture and marketing. Even here there was a little room for expansion. The development of Blackpool and Fleetwood was closely tied to the arrival of railways in the Fylde, and the increased mobility which these lines offered proved to be a dual threat to such localised markets. Not only did the railways make it easier for people to travel; they also undermined both the localised status of markets and regional self sufficiency. This was part of the larger process by which the features of the new industrial society made themselves felt in even the remotest parts of rural Britain, and the consequence was a search for a more efficient farming practice to enable local producers to compete with imported products, and the gradual erosion of local markets in the face of competition from those larger and now more accessible centres.

One of the major responses to this dilemma in Poulton-le-Fylde was the concentration of farms into larger units, which, incidentally, led to the decline of the small freeholder who used his property as a partial component in his own economy. The tithe award for 1839 suggests that 16 men could be considered farmers, though there were only 10 holdings over ten acres, with the largest of 155 and 78 both tenanted from Mr T. Fitzherbert-Brockholes of Claughton Hall near Garstang, the largest single landowner in the township. By 1851, the tenant of the larger farm on this estate, R. Singleton, had increased his holding to 275 acres and in the next decade this grew to 326 when there were only two farms over ten acres in the whole township. It seems likely, therefore, that the largest farm on the Fitzherbert-Brockholes estate in 1839 had expanded to take over most of the remaining land into which the property had been divided in that year. The vast majority of the farms, small in size and scattered around the periphery of the town, provided little direct employment for local residents, though it cannot be doubted that they were the mainstay of the economy. This is particularly the case with the craftsmen, repre-

senting 26, 24 and 25 per cent, of the working population in the successive censuses from 1841. The wider impact of this amalgamation into larger units on the farming community was to increase the ranks of the labourers, a tendency clearly indicated by their numbers in relation to all those employed—9.1 per cent in 1841, 12.7 per cent in 1851 and 16.2 per cent in 1861.¹⁷ In contrast to the evidence presented above, government inquiries of the later part of the nineteenth century indicate a labour shortage in the Fylde which was only made up by the employment of seasonal, casual labour, and the annual crop returns for the township in the 1870s are based consistently on 35 returns, which conflicts somewhat with the theory of a depressed smallholding group as indicated above.¹⁸ Without a detailed survey of landownership in the later part of the nineteenth century, it is impossible to be sure of developments, but it does seem possible that whilst the self-styled farmers of the earlier decade were no longer claiming that title, there were still men with smallholdings sufficiently large to subsidise individual economies and to be thought worth inclusion in governmental returns.

The remainder of the occupational structure of the town points to a static community in which the craftsmen were the dominant group. Workers in wood, metal and leather, as well as tailors and builders, were so numerous as to suggest a much wider clientele than could be provided by the township itself, and the presence of a cross section of the basic professions also indicates the service nature of the community to the district. It was this latter group, as well as the diminishing classes of independents (landowners, property owners and annuitants) which chiefly employed the remarkably large and stable servant class. Perhaps the most eloquent comments on social and economic change which the occupational structure of the community makes is the last appearance of an excise officer and the first appearance of a railway employee in the 1841 census returns, both indicative of the harsher climate in which the town had to survive, and the advent of police officers from the county constabulary and relieving officers of the Fylde Poor Law Union at the same time indicate the changes which were beginning to transform society and government in local market centres.

SOCIETY AND GOVERNMENT

Landownership has always been the key to social influence and political power in Britain, whether one thinks of great estates influencing the outcome of parliamentary elections or smallholdings seeking to dominate local vestries. Poulton-le-Fylde was

a community of small landowners and property owners, 112 in all, almost equally divided between absentee landlords and owner-occupiers. Amongst the former group, there was no single dominant figure, though together they owned 81.2 per cent of the township and included the largest single landowner, T. Fitzherbert-Brockholes, who possessed rather more than one fifth of the total acreage. Consequently, the structure of the resident community, which can be broadly conceived of as consisting of four principal groups, was typical of the large open village found throughout England.

TABLE I *Poulton-le-Fylde: Social Groups in 1851*¹⁹

Upper Middle Class:	
i.e. professions; gentlemen farmers; large tenants	14%
Lower Middle Class:	
i.e. small farmers, traders and craftsmen, small tenants	35%
Artisans:	
i.e. journeymen and upper servants	18%
Labourers and lower servants	33%

Social leadership and political authority rested with members of the first two groups. For half a century, from 1819 to 1873, Poulton-le-Fylde was governed under the structure established by the Sturges Bourne Acts of 1818 and 1819 (58 Geo. III c. 69 and 59 Geo. III c. 12) which were chiefly concerned with amending the poor laws, but which also tended to formalise an *ad hoc* system of local government which had been prevalent over much of the country. This legislation required the open vestry, consisting of all those assessed for poor rate, to choose a select vestry and overseers of the poor, both of whom had to be confirmed in office by a local magistrate. The Webbs have pointed to the fact that these select vestries and their officers were to be concerned only with the execution of the poor law, thus producing chaos in those parishes where the vestry had been responsible for all other functions of local administration as well. They further point out that many small rural vestries ignored all the terms of these acts so as to prevent disruption of local government.²⁰ The vestry in Poulton-le-Fylde appears to have steered a middle course between these two extremes. It certainly based its legality and authority on the Act of 1819,²¹ but it is clear from its minute book that it took upon itself a wider responsibility in that it exercised control over the traditional areas of vestry government—supervision of the highways, maintenance of law and order and oversight of public health—as well as the administration of poor relief.

It was through this vestry that the social and political leadership of the town exercised its authority, and the following statistics give a fair indication of the relatively narrow group which controlled local affairs. Membership of the open vestry, which met twice each year was restricted to those assessed for poor rate and an analysis of the tithe award of 1839 indicates that in that year no more than 55, the total number of owner-occupiers of land and property in the town, would be eligible to attend. In choosing its select vestry, the ratepayers naturally looked to the local leadership. In the period 1836-42, when attendance lists are available, 58 separate men served on the select vestry, and more than one third (36.2 per cent) were farmers and landowners; a further quarter were craftsmen, 17.3 per cent were shopkeepers, and the professional men and innkeepers each accounted for 5.2 per cent. Elections to the select vestry took place annually and twenty ratepayers could be chosen to serve. However, although membership of the vestry represented a position of local power and eminence, the average attendance of ten in the years 1842-8 suggests that it may also have been a rather irksome duty.²²

The chief office which the open vestry had to fill was that of overseer of the poor, but the pattern in Poulton-le-Fylde was to send to the local magistrates lists of suitable people, often as many as nine or ten, from whom the two overseers would then be chosen. Analysis of these lists show that over the twenty years from 1842 to 1861, although over 150 nominations were made, only 32 separate individuals were involved, divided between representatives of the upper middle (36 per cent) and lower middle classes (64 per cent). A similar concentration is evident amongst the men who served as supervisor of the highways, with 11 between 1841 and 1848 but only 12 in the subsequent twenty-three years, with some pairs serving for a block of time, such as R. H. Bowness and J. Bleasdale in 1862-7; the social composition of these men was in almost identical proportions as those who acted as overseers. The overseer of taxes was dominated from its first mention in the records in 1841 until 1870 by R. H. Porter, the local schoolmaster who was also clerk to the vestry.²³ Before jumping to any hasty conclusions about the oligarchic nature of local government in Poulton-le-Fylde, one must remember the necessity for men to occupy these offices who were educated and who enjoyed prestige within the community since the tasks demanded not only the keeping and presentation of accounts but also, in a community which was small enough for everyone to know everyone else, involved potentially unpleasant relationships with people, either in the distribution of relief and the identification of poverty, or the collection of rates and taxes. In a small

community such as Poulton-le-Fylde with a substantial base of labourers, it was inevitable and necessary that the political responsibilities would be carried out by those who were best equipped and most respected.

The vestry meetings, as reformed by the legislation of 1818-19, were part of the system of county government which had evolved over the centuries under the general direction of the bench of magistrates which, in Lancashire, met annually in General Sessions under an Act of 1798 (38 Geo. III c. 58), regionally in Quarter Sessions which traditionally adjourned from one hundred to the next, and locally where individual or small groups of justices met in Petty Sessions, often in an alehouse, to deal with the myriad of matters which came under their jurisdiction. It was from this last body that the Poulton-le-Fylde vestry derived its authority, and its extant minutes, from 1836 to 1872, provide considerable insight into the problems and attitudes which pervaded local government at the grass roots level during this period. Two principal impressions emerge. Firstly, the national and regional response to social problems tended to be so haphazard that the powers of the select vestry were removed casually and intermittently, causing the Webbs to write about the unintentional strangulation of the parish vestry as a unit of local government.²⁴ The inevitable consequence was considerable potential for confusion and obstruction between competing authorities with an increase in the very inefficiency which the rising class of professional administrators in Whitehall were anxious to avoid. Secondly, it is instructive to observe the Poulton-le-Fylde leadership in action and recognize its faithful reflection of Victorian attitudes to the problems with which it had to cope.

The Treatment of Poverty

How rapidly Poulton-le-Fylde took advantage of the 1818-19 legislation is not clear, but the select vestry was in full operation in the 1830s, and devoting much of its time to the administration of the poor laws. By the time of the extant minute book, which commences in 1836, the poor laws had been reformed by the famous 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act (4 & 5 Wm. IV c. 76) but the establishment of a board of guardians for the new Fylde Union did not take place immediately, and the Poulton-le-Fylde select vestry continued to exercise its function in this sphere until the early 1840s. Uppermost in the vestry's mind was the need to maintain economy in this field, though it did occasionally display a tendency to temper severity with mercy when coping with specific cases. On the one hand Thomas Ibbitson, who had been

enjoying a weekly outdoor relief to the value of 3s. od., had his payment discontinued whilst the overseer checked the validity of of the rumour that he was 'beneficially interested in a will'; Benjamin Hall, the putative father of the child of Betty Bond, was given the opportunity of 'coming to some arrangement with the mother' in order to 'save the expense of an application to the courts'; and considerable effort was expended to identify William Hartley's parish of residence so that it could pay the bill for his medical treatment.²⁵ On the other hand, Bella Whiteside was allowed 4s. od. per week whilst her husband was in prison, and John Whiteside junior was granted five pounds of mutton and five quarts of ale for ten days during an illness.²⁶ Furthermore, in its administration of outdoor relief the vestry sometimes adopted an educational role in its pursuit of economy by its efforts to inculcate the virtues of self help into the needy of the parish. The treatment of the Eaves family affords an interesting example of this attitude. On Betty Eaves's first application for relief in April 1836 she was granted one load of potatoes, on condition that her husband parted with his dog; five months later she was committed to the workhouse, presumably because the crop had failed or because her husband's dog had had a spring feast. Her stay must have been brief because she was applying, unsuccessfully, for relief again in October and December of the same year. However, this did not mark the end of the vestry's patience with the Eaves family, nor undermine their belief in the virtues of self help. In the late winter and early spring of 1837 Thomas Eaves obtained financial assistance for his wife, after an initial refusal of meal for baking, again in the form of potato sets, this time 'on condition they can find sufficient manure for them'.²⁷ The Eaves's absence from the later records of the vestry might suggest a good crop of potatoes and a successful educational venture on the part of the authorities, but their absence from the 1841 census points either to their demise or their emigration.

The establishment of the Fylde Union in 1837 ended the vestry's responsibility for the treatment of poverty, at least in theory, but the new body, which was part of the system which would reduce the number of paupers and thereby the poor rate throughout the country, did not come into existence without opposition. It is well known that the administration of poor relief in Lancashire before 1834 was neither as grossly inefficient nor as ruinously expensive as the national picture presented by the Poor Law Report of 1834,²⁸ and it was on these grounds of existing efficiency and local pride that the ratepayers of Poulton-le-Fylde objected to the proposal to unionise the region. Before the reform of 1834 there was some interparochial organisation for poor relief

in the western Fylde with seven townships (probably the five in the parish of Poulton-le-Fylde, plus Bispham and Layton-with-Warbreck) acting together and using a workhouse at Poulton. A meeting of ratepayers in 1837, drawn from the seven townships, suggested that they should be augmented by a further three townships (unspecified) in order to divide the proposed Fylde union into two, one based at Poulton-le-Fylde, the other at Kirkham. The move failed, and in 1837 the Fylde union was established, though there was some initial dispute as to the centre of the union, a contest which was settled in favour of Kirkham, doubtless to the chagrin of both Alexander Liddell and Thomas Wilson, two Poulton-le-Fylde solicitors who had begun to canvass for the clerkship to the guardians in anticipation of their township becoming the centre of the union.²⁹ By the early 1840s, therefore, the first and perhaps most significant step had been taken in the process by which the responsibilities of the ancient vestry was to be undermined.

Law and Order

The office of constable was one of the ancient responsibilities of the parish and his function had always been wider than the law and order, though by our period this was his principal concern. In its handling of law and order, the vestry showed the same combination of thrift and economy with an awareness of its responsibilities. Thus we find it directing that constables should be on duty to keep the peace as and when required, but specifying that this should always include Saturday and Sunday evenings, and agreeing to bear the cost provided that it did not exceed £3 10s. od. per annum; if so, the balance would be raised by subscription. Thus if the community was to be protected from weekend revellers, it was given the opportunity to show its gratitude. In contrast, the vestry accepted full responsibility for the leasing of premises to act as a lock-up, a move recommended by the resident magistrate.³⁰ However, as with the handling of poor relief, the select vestry's responsibilities were proscribed by the county Bench's adoption of Rural Constabulary Act (2 & 3 Vict. c. 93) as soon as it was placed on the statute book in 1839. This move was principally a response to the disturbances in the county associated with Chartism, an urban and industrial phenomenon which largely avoided the rural parts of the county, and it is no surprise to find magistrates from these areas, particularly the Lonsdale hundred, seeking unsuccessfully to disband the force in 1841-2, on the ground that the benefits were being enjoyed by some whilst the cost was being borne by all.³¹ As one of the market centres in the Fylde, Poulton-le-Fylde received not

only a resident police constable under the new system, but was also the base for a police inspector who had a wide responsibility.

Public Health

The vestry's responsibility for public health lasted longer into the nineteenth century than any of its other functions because it did not set up a local board of health under the terms of the permissive Public Health Act 1848 (11 & 12 Vict. c. 63). With a death rate of 17.2 per thousand in 1851,³² the whole registration district was significantly below the figure of 23 at which a local board became compulsory, and a petition from ten per cent of the ratepayers, the statutory minimum for the establishment of this body, presumably did not occur. The degree of complacency which this suggests was probably not justified, although a township such as this could hardly become as notorious as the manufacturing towns of the county with their squalid slums and massive overcrowding. However, it would be unkind to suggest that the local ratepayers were unconcerned and inaccurate to indicate that there was no problem, and, in the spirit of the reform of 1848, a public meeting, attended by the remarkably high number of 48, established a committee under the chairmanship of the local doctor, R. H. Bowness 'for the purpose of considering the present state of the inhabitants, the sanitary (sic) condition of the town and any other business'.³³ The committee, with an alacrity uncharacteristic of local government in any period, produced a very detailed report which placed its faith in the contemporary belief that filth caused disease and the removal of the one would vanquish the other. Within three days of its appointment, the committee warned the ratepayers that 'great danger of disease was to be apprehended . . . arising out of the crowded and filthy streets' and produced a catalogue of cesspools, open drains, stagnant water and decaying vegetable matter as well as some very severe strictures on the condition and personal habits of the occupants of the township's slum terrace, hard by the churchyard. Consequently, it is difficult to place much confidence in the conclusion that 'the places which it has been our duty to notice are few in number and may easily be remedied' or in the claim that 'the majority of our population show a disposition cheerfully to work with us in the cause of health and cleanliness'. Nonetheless, the committee was made permanent and extended by the addition of the vicar and six more ratepayers, and a nuisances committee was established in 1857 to carry out the Nuisance Removal Act of 1855 (18 & 19 Vict. c. 121).³⁴

Unfortunately for the record, no further mention of either of these committees is made in the minutes and one can only assume

that the intention was better than the execution. The last chapter in the social and political responsibilities of the vestry was written in 1872 when, under the Public Health Act of that year (35 & 36 Vict. c. 79), the Fylde district was constituted a rural sanitary authority, but local interest and participation was maintained in the field by the new body's appointment of parochial councils to act as its agency in all parishes and townships within its area. Thus, whilst the vestry became an exclusively ecclesiastical body, formal township interest and activity in the sphere of public health continued.

The introduction of this two-tier system of local government for the rural areas of the county, with rather imprecise areas of responsibility, paved the way for numerous disputes between the two. In this scenario, the rural sanitary authority often felt compelled to assume the role of a heavy-handed big brother in order to obtain some response from a wilful and initially obstructive junior partner. The new authority began to tackle its work with enthusiasm and soon appointed a committee of Poultonians to report on its sanitary condition. Under the leadership of the same Dr Bowness who had surveyed the town in 1848, it is not surprising that the four local worthies, no doubt with an anxious eye on the rating powers of the new body, reported that 'the drainage of the town was generally satisfactory'. In contrast, the medical officer of health, a new official of the sanitary authority, made two adverse reports on the water supply and general state of the town during the same year and thus took issue on what was to be a running battle during the early years of the new body's life.³⁵

The formalisation of the parochial council by 1876, to include the Poulton-le-Fylde poor law guardians, the overseers of the poor and the supervisors of the highways, did nothing to ease the conflict between the two bodies, and it was only by a combination of patience and threats that the rural sanitary authority was able to fulfil its conception of its responsibilities. A demand to improve the drainage of one main street was ignored and action was only taken after the rural sanitary authority had carried out its own survey, given the parochial council a second chance, appointed its own surveyor to do the work and, when this offer was spurned, proposed to act in lieu of the parochial council.³⁶ Perhaps this first case ought to be viewed as a trial of strength in which the parochial council flexed its muscles but realised its limitations, for when the second undertaking was proposed in the early 1880s, there seems to have been little conflict and the two bodies worked together amicably. However, this second project demonstrated the inefficiency of the rural sanitary authority, its inconsequential relations with its bureaucratic masters in London, and its tendency

always to seek the cheapest rather than the best solution to the problem. Though the permission of the local government board was sought for the work, it was reported that 'it could not undertake to advise as to any particular scheme to be adopted', and the accepted plan was pruned down so as to carry out the essential parts of the scheme only; in consequence, the authority found itself approaching the local government board to carry out the remaining part of the scheme ten years later, by then both essential and more costly.³⁷

The rural sanitary authority introduced a greater sense of urgency about the provision of adequate arrangements for public health, and the local parochial council felt the weight of its arm. The reports which it issued underlined the complacency of the old vestry and the need for some wider and more dynamic approach to the question. However, after the early skirmishes, relations between the regional and local committees were fairly amicable, though the traditional unwillingness to invest in more than the minimum on public health, for which no immediate or measurable return existed, was manifest even at regional level.

In conclusion, it is obvious that the combination of economic decline leading to stagnation and increasing regional and bureaucratic control of local government undermined the status of Poulton-le-Fylde. A township which had entered the new century in 1800 with a long tradition of local economic importance found its position gradually undermined as it failed to respond to the challenge of a new age, and its failure to grow ensured that its system of local government would be eroded by the appearance of regional bodies which aimed to produce administrative efficiency by the amalgamation of small units. By 1900 Poulton-le-Fylde was another of those small places through which travellers passed on their way to the Fylde coast.

NOTES

- 1 W. Thorber, *An Historical and Descriptive Account of Blackpool and its Neighbourhood* (1837), p. 281.
- 2 *Ibid.* p. 290, and *Preston Pilot* 14 August 1847.
- 3 E. Baines, *History, Directory and Gazetteer of the County Palatine of Lancashire* (1825) II, p. 462.
- 4 See W. J. Farrer and J. Brownbill (eds), *Victoria County History of Lancashire II* (1966 rep.), p. 334, for decennial population figures from 1801 to 1901.
- 5 J. Porter, *History of the Fylde* (1872), pp. 206-7; Poulton-le-Fylde: St Chad's Burial Registers 1790-99. Lancashire Record Office (L.R.O.) 2831/8.
- 6 Porter, *op. cit.* p. 207; 1841 and 1851 enumerators' schedules, Poulton-le-Fylde, Public Record Office, (P.R.O.) HO 107/497 and 107/2269.

- 7 The History of the Kirkham merchant families can be followed in R. Cunliffe Shaw, *Kirkham in Amounderness* (1949), ch. x. and F. J. Singleton, 'The Flax Merchants of Kirkham', *T.H.S.L.C.* 126 (1977).
- 8 Baines, *op. cit.* 463. The remainder of this paragraph is based on references supplied by my colleague, Mr G. Rogers, who is working on the Clifton papers.
- 9 B. R. Mitchell & P. Deane, *Abstract of British Historical Statistics* (1962), pp. 29 and 345; figures for Poulton-le-Fylde kindly supplied by the Registrar-General's Office, Kingsway, London.
- 10 P.R.O. HO 107/2269.
- 11 Sec D. Foster, 'Mobility and Economy in New Towns; the Case of Fleetwood', *Local Population Studies*, no. 14, 1975.
- 12 *Registrar-General's Summary Returns, (R.G.S.R.)* 1841; 1851; 1861.
- 13 *Parliamentary Papers (P.P.)*, 1868-9, XIII, p. 791.
- 14 *Ibid.* p. 792.
- 15 *R.G.S.R.* 1841, 1851, 1861.
- 16 *P.P.* 1868-9, XIII, p. 791.
- 17 *R.G.S.R.* 1841, 1851, 1861; Poulton-le-Fylde Tithe Award 1839, L.R.O. DRB/1/153.
- 18 *P.P.* 1868-9, XIII, pp. 791-3; Annual Crop Returns for Poulton-le-Fylde 1874-76 in P.R.O. MAF/68.
- 19 Classification based on D. Mills, 'English Villages in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries I', *Local Historian* 6, no. 8, (1965).
- 20 S. & B. Webb, *The Parish and the County* (1906), p. 156.
- 21 Poulton-le-Fylde Vestry Minutes (V.M.), L.R.O. PR/2490.
- 22 V.M. 1836-42 and 1842-48—attendance lists; occupations computed from 1841 and 1851 census enumerators' schedules, P.R.O. HO 107/497 and 107/2269.
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 Webbs, *op. cit.* ch. iv.
- 25 V.M. 7 June 1836 and 13 Mar. 1837.
- 26 V.M. 17 Jan. and 6 June 1837.
- 27 V.M. 26 Aug., 27 Sept., 25 Oct., 6 Dec. 1836. 7, 14, 20 Feb. and 25 Apr. 1837.
- 28 Sec E. Midwinter, *Social Administration in Lancashire* (1969), pp. 10-15.
- 29 Clifton Papers, L.R.O. DDC 1 1183/22-3 and 1184/3.
- 30 V. M. 7 November 1837; 7 May 1839; 23 and 25 April 1840.
- 31 See D. Foster, *Public Opinion and the Police in Lancashire 1838-42*, M.A. thesis, Sheffield University 1965, ch. 5.
- 32 See above, p. 95.
- 33 V.M. 22 Aug. 1848.
- 34 V.M. 24 Aug. 1848 and 27 Mar. 1857.
- 35 Rural Sanitary Authority Minutes 28 Jan. and 7 Sept. 1874, L.R.O. SAF 1/1.
- 36 *Ibid.* 26 July, 3 Aug., 20 Sept., 4 and 10 Oct., 13 Dec. 1876. 2 and 16 May, 13 June, 25 July, 1877.
- 37 *Ibid.* 9 May 1882, 9 Apr. 1884, 1 Apr. 1891.