

The Penrith Workhouse and Addingham, Cumbria: local children, fostering and the boarding-out policy 1820-1930

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This article draws upon a detailed investigation into illegitimacy in the rural parish of Addingham, east of Penrith, Cumbria; an earlier study, demonstrating that very few local unmarried mothers made use of the workhouse, was published in *The Local Historian* in July 2021. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the workhouse instigated a different type of link with parishes—the official supervision by the Poor Law Guardians of private foster care. A foster child is generally described in the census as a ‘nurse child’ or as adopted. Somewhat later, the Guardians began to ‘board-out’ workhouse children with local women; these children are named in the minutes kept by the Guardians and appear as ‘boarders’ in the census. Inevitably, both fostering and ‘boarding-out’ commonly involved illegitimate children and any young child enumerated as nursed, adopted or boarded called for further investigation.

The 1834 New Poor Law placed all the responsibility to maintain the child upon the mother, and although the law was later modified to make affiliation easier, it was still substantially up to the mother to care for the child. Nevertheless, as one of the Guardians in Fanny Trollope’s novel *Jessie Phillips* told her, ‘If you can’t maintain yourself, it will be born in the workhouse; and if you can’t maintain your child, why then it will be bred in the workhouse’.¹ As the century progressed, there was growing official doubt about the suitability of the workhouse as a place to raise a child, and the Guardians made increasing efforts to find foster homes. Children with no connection to Addingham—orphans and abandoned babies (legitimate or illegitimate) and also legitimate members of ‘in and out’ family groups—became, at some stage in their early life, part of the parish community.²

The official workhouse practice was to allow children under seven to sleep with their mother in the women’s wing and for her to have reasonable access to them, but older children were housed separately, away from what was viewed as the likely pernicious influence of the older inhabitants.³ Indeed, the original supporters of the 1834 reforms had recommended separate buildings for the different classes of pauper and ‘never contemplated having the children under the same roof with the adults’.⁴ However, the realities of life in a workhouse such as Penrith meant that it was impossible to keep adults and children rigorously separated.⁵ The Penrith workhouse was built in 1839 with one building and the only surviving plan does not indicate how such separation might be attempted, although the separate outside yards for boys and girls are clearly marked.⁶ The mothers were considered immoral simply by bearing a child outside wedlock but ‘the bastard itself, in the isolation of the workhouse children’s ward, was not discriminated against’.⁷ Perhaps not—but it was a potentially lonely existence, ‘austere and comfortless’ says Thompson.⁸ In 1872 the inspector complained that the Penrith workhouse children (numbering 31 in 1871) had to share one privy.⁹ There were probably no toys: perhaps ‘the children, like their elders, fought, teased each other, threw stones or, most commonly, sat listlessly about, stupefied with boredom and apathy’.¹⁰

The presence of many other children similarly situated might, in their earlier years, have been some compensation for the isolation from family and the outside world. In 1841 the 91 children made up 59 per cent of the population of the workhouse. Thompson says that almost one-third of workhouse children were illegitimate.¹¹ This seems correct for Penrith in 1851, when the census listing of people in family groups implies that 27 out of 101 children were so. However, this group was much subject to fluctuation, with families coming and going. As the century wore on children formed a diminishing proportion of the workhouse population; by 1901 there were only nine listed on the census (five of them being illegitimate), forming 12 per cent of the total number of inmates. A child who had to spend its entire childhood there would certainly lack young company, and it would have been impossible to establish relationships of any length and depth within the house at any period.

There were, however, some advantages for the child. Despite the limitations of the monotonous diet, Robert Pearson, the medical officer for Penrith workhouse, considered children more healthy after a stint in the house than when they arrived because they were better fed.¹² The food was more nutritious than that of the average labourer, and for children particularly so, since they no longer came second to the family breadwinner.¹³ However, as noted in the earlier article, those brought in and out by their mothers probably did not stay long enough to feel the benefit. Living in a confined environment, full of people too poor or too inadequate to take proper care of themselves, entailed an increased risk of infection and ‘after 1850, and the growing realization of the importance of measures to prevent disease from being introduced into the workhouse, the Penrith workhouse was a notorious exception to the generally correct use of receiving wards’.¹⁴ ‘In and outs’, it was feared, brought ‘disease, dirt and bad habits’.¹⁵ Workhouse doctors were not always the most qualified; the position was not considered prestigious, since they were answerable to the Guardians. However, medical care was probably better than would normally be available to ordinary working people: one child with an ulcer on his face was examined by three different doctors sent by the Guardians.¹⁶ Additionally, the building of the fever hospital in a separate building in 1871 helped to reduce the transmission of infection. Paradoxically, the workhouse might also be a physically safer environment in which to grow up; children outside were faced by the many hazards permitted by a lack of supervision over their daily lives and their freedom to roam, a freedom unavailable in the workhouse.¹⁷

For children who stayed long enough to benefit, the standards of workhouse schools, particularly in the 1850s and 1860s, were often higher, with a broader curriculum, than in the local elementary schools—although Kathryn Morrison argues that ‘the ... teaching in many workhouses was appalling, even by the standards of the time’.¹⁸ Penrith workhouse had a schoolmaster from the beginning, although in the early years he was probably a pauper himself. The Poor Law commissioners were prepared to bring pressure to bear upon Whitehaven to appoint a professional schoolmaster but were less concerned about the smaller and poorer rural Poor Law Unions.¹⁹ In 1849 a new system of payment from central government began and the workhouse school inspectorate was established; schools and teachers were examined and the amount of grant depended on the outcome. Salaries rose as a result and by 1851 Penrith had a young schoolmaster, assisted by a schoolmistress, to educate the 83 pupils recorded in the education census of that year.²⁰ It is perhaps not surprising that the Penrith workhouse school teachers changed frequently—they were expected to live with their charges and to be responsible for their whole day, they had to conform to the workhouse discipline themselves and ask permission to leave the building, and they ate the workhouse diet. Most were young, seeing this merely as a stepping stone to a better position, and marriage would certainly prompt a move, to set up home outside the house.²¹

If the teachers changed often, so did the children; in 1861, 53 ‘scholars’ were listed living in the house, but it was reported in 1863 that, for the six months up to Michaelmas, 107 children had attended school and 91 had not; presumably 198 children had passed through the house at some point in that period.²² As the number of resident children declined, the school must have been increasingly inefficient; and after the 1870 Education Act public schooling became more widely available. The Guardians decided in 1871 to abolish the workhouse school and to send the children to the Nonconformist British School at a cost of 2d per head, which would have gone some way to compensate for the lack of young company resident in the house.²³ This was the closest school, and therefore a convenient choice, but would it have been controversial because of its religious affiliation? Either this change did not happen, or the school did not prove satisfactory, since in 1875 the Guardians appointed Joshua Smith, an inmate, as schoolmaster, and after he left they agreed to accept plans and estimates for a new workhouse school and to appoint a schoolmistress.²⁴ In 1883 they decided that the firmer hand of a schoolmaster was required and by 1884 the inspector was reporting that the school was ‘greatly improved’.²⁵ In December 1890, with fees about to be abolished, the Guardians finally decided to send the children to public elementary schools.²⁶ The schoolmaster was in consequence dispensed with and the care of the children out of school hours devolved upon the porter and the matron.

Attending local schools might have helped to address the social isolation of the children but their workhouse clothing would still have identified them. The extent to which this restricted existence prepared them for life outside is another issue: access to a better education and a higher standard of medical care could not compensate for the many limitations of workhouse life. Generally, girls in east Cumberland would be expected to go into domestic service and could be trained to some extent by helping with the regular tasks of the workhouse; however, their understanding of how an ordinary family household functioned, even among the local rural working classes, must necessarily have been limited, while fitting in socially would have difficult.²⁷ The boys in the workhouse might be expected to help with the gardening and pigs—there appears to be a large garden on the 1867 Ordnance Survey map, and a pigsty on the workhouse plan.²⁸ The minutes of the Board of Guardians record an occasional formal apprenticeship—four are mentioned between 1861 and 1869—but for most boys in east Cumberland work meant being hired into the service of a local farmer as a farm servant.²⁹ In July and August 1880, two boys were hired and one was apprenticed for six years to a tailor.³⁰

To help to compensate for these limitations, the Guardians were keen to provide ‘industrial training’—that is, vocational training with a job in view, although the term ‘Industrial School’ was ‘primarily used for establishments used to house vagrant, destitute and disorderly children who were considered in danger of becoming criminals or who were in contact with prostitutes’.³¹ It would hardly be surprising, considering her life so far, and that of her mother, if worries such as these had not arisen in relation to Mary Jane Fawcett. As described in the previous article, she spent a large part of her childhood in the workhouse and may have felt the benefit of the improved schooling noted in 1884, but in January 1885 the Guardians intervened and sent her, aged nine, to the Maryhill Industrial School in Glasgow, where she was listed on the census in 1891, along with 87 other girls and thirteen teachers.³² She had gained a measure of stability and more company of similar age but whether her life was any more pleasant, or her later prospects improved, we cannot tell. She was still living in an institution, far removed from the sort of life her contemporaries experienced or the life she would have as a domestic servant.³³ She could not be traced after 1891.

Another possible solution was 'boarding-out'; Thompson says that in the 1860s Cumberland and Westmorland, led by the Poor Law Unions in Carlisle, Cockermouth and Whitehaven, were among the first areas in England to adopt the system of boarding-out poor orphan children with local foster mothers: 'in Cumbria it is possible to sense that the initiative for a major reform—the boarding out of pauper children—originated not with the central authority, but with the more progressive boards of guardians'.³⁴ Indeed, as early as July 1837 the Penrith Guardians had arranged for Margaret Holmes, in need of country air, to be discharged without her mother and sent to live with a foster mother in Little Salkeld, while her siblings John and Mary were possibly boarded-out with a foster mother in Dacre in 1841.³⁵ There is a long gap in the extant minutes from 1839 until 1861, but thereafter I found no suggestion that Penrith children should be boarded-out until 1898; Penrith can hardly be counted as one of the more progressive boards in this respect.

Indeed, their early views were decidedly against the idea. After 1870 a child could be fostered outside its own Poor Law Union. There was a long running dispute in the 1880s, when the Carlisle Union boarded-out three children, one of whom was possibly diseased, with foster mothers within the Penrith Union area. In April 1886 the Guardians were not at all happy about this audacious new idea; in their view it was 'still only on trial'. They felt that, as it was cheaper to keep a child in the workhouse, it was 'clear that ... the advantage of getting the children a permanent settlement elsewhere' was the real purpose, and believed it was self-evident that a 'certain percentage of these girls will probably have illegitimate children, who with their mothers will have a settlement in this Union' at a cost to the ratepayers. They feared that 'this Union may hereafter be inundated with objectionable children of a diseased and illegitimate type', spoke of the 'hereditary moral taint', and wished to 'very much question whether the surroundings of these Children are such as will do more for them in this respect than would have been done had they remained in a well conducted establishment such as the Carlisle Workhouse'.³⁶ They felt that the Local Government Board should act by mandating that both Unions should agree to such a crossing of Union boundaries and that diseased children, in particular, should be kept within their own Union.³⁷ The workhouse doctor strongly reprobated them, writing that they had misunderstood the boarding-out system and the 'philanthropic intentions of this great movement which has existed in England for the past fifteen years'. His view was that 'fresh country air and Motherly care' might enable children to avoid the 'depraving atmosphere' of a Union workhouse and that 'the tendency to revert to pauperism and crime may be modified if not wholly outrooted'.³⁸

The Guardians, however, remained reluctant to countenance the idea of official boarding-out. In May 1898 one Guardian proposed that children should be boarded-out and that a small committee be appointed to consider this, but in June the proposal was lost by nine votes to twenty.³⁹ However, in August 1899, when the Local Government Board inspector suggested that they should buy two small cottages convenient for church, school and chapel, and place children there with a foster mother, they somewhat belatedly changed their minds, concluding that boarding-out might, after all, be a good idea. They did not consider scattered cottage homes a practical option and instead suggested the extension of the 1889 'Boarding of Children in Unions Order' to allow them to board-out any child.⁴⁰ It was reported later that year that there were thirteen children living in the workhouse, of whom seven were illegitimate, and seven children were boarded-out, none of them illegitimate but all either orphans or deserted. Had it been harder to place illegitimate children because of the stigma, or did respectable families object to the necessary official scrutiny, even with the prospect of a steady income?⁴¹ Fostering a child made economic sense in the absence of a male

wage earner and there was probably a certain group of people who were willing, for whatever reason and despite inspections, to take in the illegitimate. A number of Addingham people—James Elliott of Unthank, Mary Ann Beatham and Joseph Robert Blenkinship Davidson of Glassonby, Thomas William Nelson of Hunsonby and Alice Chapman of Gamblesby—were inspected so that they could take children ‘for hire or reward’; such private fostering arrangements had long been made between individuals but had been increasingly regulated since the first Infant Life Protection Act in 1872. The mothers involved were probably not totally destitute, since they could afford to pay for their child’s keep, but the children were likely to be illegitimate. A more likely explanation than stigma for the disparity is that the Guardians for many years had no authority to act *in loco parentis*: if a child was living in the workhouse with its mother, her child must remain there also.

The children’s committee appointed by the Guardians was clear that the workhouse was not the place for a child to grow up and again suggested that a cottage home should be provided, but failed to get agreement. Instead, the Guardians supported an extension of boarding-out for ‘any suitable Children in the Workhouse’.⁴² In arranging for the children of Elizabeth Atkinson to live with their grandmother, they acknowledged that ‘it would have been a calamity to these children ... if the cast iron rules of the Local Government Board made it necessary for [them] to be taken from the grandmother and brought to the workhouse’.⁴³ Subsequently, the minutes record the care taken to vet prospective foster parents and the system of regular inspection by local ladies of each home, the medical care they arranged and their reluctance to separate siblings or to remove children from their foster homes without good cause.⁴⁴

The proportion of adult female workhouse inmates was relatively stable but the ratio of adult males increased in inverse proportion to the number of children. The provision of proper hospital accommodation later in the century encouraged able-bodied, but temporarily sick, men to enter for treatment, while at the same time many children were found foster homes outside the workhouse. In 1851 children formed 47 per cent of the workhouse population but by 1901 this had fallen to twelve per cent, and in 1911 fifteen per cent, the majority under the age of seven.

In 1900 the Local Government Board issued a circular urging the removal of all children from the workhouse.⁴⁵ James Slater, born illegitimate in 1897 to a mother from Addingham, was a beneficiary of this new approach. He spent much of his early life coming and going from the workhouse with his mother, Margaret Ann. After 1903, when she was declared a pauper lunatic who could be detained, he was presumably confined with her. However, in 1907, aged nine, he was boarded-out by the Guardians and by the time his mother absconded from the workhouse in 1908, he was living with a foster mother in Greystoke and beyond Margaret Ann’s care.⁴⁶ He was still there in 1911. In January 1912 the Guardians decided that he should continue in Greystoke for the time being, ‘it being considered desirable that he should not leave school until the Spring of 1913’, by which time he would be well over fifteen, unusually old to be leaving school in Cumberland at the time. When he finally left in early 1913, to be employed by Mr H.C. Howard (presumably Henry Howard of Greystoke Castle), he was provided by the Guardians with ‘the proper outfit’.⁴⁷ After serving in the war, his conduct being very good and his ability satisfactory, he became a postman, married and had a family; his life could be accounted a success made possible by the Guardians’ care and concern, aided by the new opportunities for employment offered by organisations such as the Post Office.⁴⁸ The Guardians had come round to the idea of removing children from the workhouse rather late, but this case provides a local example of the ‘surprising flexibility in the face of children’s needs’ found by Ginger Frost in her work

on Cambridge and Cardiff.⁴⁹ Did his early privations lead to his premature death from tuberculosis, aged only 33, in 1931?⁵⁰ His mother lived on until 1939.

James could be helped by the Guardians because his mother was detained in the workhouse as a pauper lunatic. Others had to wait until the Children Act 1908, which further extended the powers of the Guardians, enabling them formally to adopt children whose parents exhibited an unsatisfactory lifestyle, or who had been deserted. Although it has been said that ‘economy-minded guardians rarely adopted this strategy unless children were physically abused or neglected’, there are several examples of such action being taken in Penrith.⁵¹ In 1909 the Guardians resolved to advertise for suitable official foster mothers.⁵² They inspected homes and paid a fee to cover the cost of the child’s care. Single mothers making private fostering arrangements were very liable to default, as shown by Mary Wilson discussed in the earlier article, and the children were likely to be moved frequently.⁵³ The Guardians would not default and the formal system therefore encouraged more stability.

Margaret Ritson was a beneficiary of the new thinking. Her mother, Mary Jane, had Addingham connections; she was visiting her half-brother, Joseph Thompson, at Little Salkeld Railway Cottages at the time of the 1891 census, although when she gave birth to a daughter, Mary Elizabeth, in the workhouse in 1897, she was admitted from the parish of Great Salkeld. She had two more illegitimate children in the workhouse, in 1898 (a child who died at seven months) and Margaret in 1904.⁵⁴ Her two surviving daughters spent a considerable part of their childhood going in and out of the workhouse with their mother before the authorities acted. Mary Elizabeth and her younger sister Margaret were formally adopted by the Guardians in 1909, although their mother was still living and sane. The previous month they had adopted four other children whose mother was alive, and living in the workhouse, ‘by reason of the Mother’s mode of life’; they may well have felt the same way about Mary Jane Ritson.⁵⁵

Mary Elizabeth was still in the workhouse in 1911, perhaps considered too old at thirteen to benefit from the new policies. She left that summer to work in service.⁵⁶ The Guardians arranged for 5-year-old Margaret to have an eye operation at the Cottage Hospital in February 1910 and supplied the necessary spectacles; she was probably much better off cared for by the authorities than living an erratic life with her mother.⁵⁷ A boarding-out committee was established in 1910, whose members visited the children monthly, while schoolteachers were expected to submit quarterly reports on such pupils to the committee. By 1911 Margaret was boarded-out with Mrs Rowe of Greystoke, along with James Slater, whom she probably knew from the workhouse. Somewhat optimistically, the Guardians asked Mary Jane to contribute 2s weekly towards the cost of boarding-out her daughter.⁵⁸

In July 1913 Margaret was returned to the workhouse ‘to be handed over to mother’ and she was then taken out again at her mother’s request by her aunt, Mrs Ellen Thompson of Little Salkeld Station, thus becoming part of the Addingham story.⁵⁹ This was presumably the official procedure for a transfer, as it is clear the Guardians had made and approved all the arrangements, after hearing ‘an excellent report as to Mr Thompson’s character and home’. They were evidently satisfied that Joseph Thompson was unlike his sister.⁶⁰ We have no way of knowing why the extended family was able and willing to help at this point, but had not stepped in to help earlier, when the two children were in the workhouse. Were the Guardians, knowing their communities well, being creative and persuading the family to take responsibility, a local corroboration of Ginger Frost’s comment that ‘Surprisingly ... an illegitimate child sometimes had a better chance of gaining support from family, nuclear or extended, while under the guardian’s supervision’?⁶¹ The allowance paid by the Guardians may have been

welcomed, but it would already have been available for several years; perhaps the fact that Margaret was older, and potentially useful, helped, or her mother had finally agreed. Or was Mary Jane attempting, as was her legal right, to take back control of her child? Frost describes a case where a mother, keen to have her child back but denied her wish, sued to have the child given up to the care of her sister and brother-in-law. Perhaps we are seeing something similar here.⁶² We cannot tell from the official record.

Margaret attended Langwathby School until 1915, when she apparently left the district, returning in 1917 to be admitted to Maughanby School, near Glassonby, but still giving her last school as Langwathby. She left in March 1918 on reaching leaving age, intending to 'work at home',⁶³ which by then was The Druids public house in Little Salkeld; Joseph was still the licensee when he died there in 1924, leaving some furniture and £50 to Margaret.⁶⁴ It seems from the war record of her older sister, Mary Elizabeth, who returned to the Thompsons after war service at the munitions works at Gretna and in France, that they helped both sisters.⁶⁵ Their mother, Mary Jane, had also worked at Gretna—surely she and Mary Elizabeth remained in touch? Mary Jane met her husband there and married in 1918, settling in Scotland. She and her husband died in the Dumfries Poorhouse in the 1920s. Marriage, it seems, had not improved her circumstances. Mary Elizabeth emigrated to Canada in 1920, while in 1928 Margaret married a childless widower twice her age. She was left a widow in 1944, living in Middlesbrough with four young children.⁶⁶

John George Stephenson, unlike James Slater or the Ritson sisters, had no family connection to Addingham, and gained rather less benefit from the efforts of the Guardians than any of them. He was born in 1902 and when admitted to the workhouse on his own, in May 1906, the authorities wrote to his mother Isabella, to remind her of her responsibilities, and also to his unnamed putative father to ask him to contribute. The latter offered 2s weekly but the mother failed to respond, so in August the Guardians decided that they should adopt the boy.⁶⁷ Not until November 1909, however, was he boarded-out in Hunsonby with Mrs Jane Ann Slee.⁶⁸ She was the only official foster mother in the parish, taking in several children over the years, and was herself the mother of an illegitimate child. Possibly she was persuaded by the Guardians to take in a child as a way of receiving support, since she may have forfeited her right to relief as a result of her adulterous relationship?⁶⁹ John George was there for the 1911 census and attended the Methodist Sunday School in 1911-1913, but in October 1913 was returned to the workhouse. Like James Slater and Margaret Ritson a few years before, he was then sent to Mrs Rowe in Greystoke,⁷⁰ but by October 1914 was again in the workhouse.⁷¹ It seems that neither woman could cope with him, although they had fostered others successfully.

Meanwhile, ideas about the care of children had evolved. In 1912, when 22 children were in the care of the Guardians, the idea of a cottage home for children who could not be boarded-out was being reconsidered.⁷² In 1913 the Local Government Board issued an order, prohibiting the care of children over the age of three in a workhouse containing adults for more than six weeks, although war prevented complete implementation of this policy nationally and many rural Guardians resisted.⁷³ However, in 1914 the Penrith Guardians bought a property (Lark Hall) to house a maximum of fifteen children; no child over three was now to be kept in the workhouse unless they were sick. Nevertheless, the preference of some Guardians for a rural foster home was still made clear.⁷⁴

John George, therefore, was transferred to Lark Hall children's home when it opened in 1915, before being sent to service in 1916—he lasted but a week, before being returned to the workhouse, from which he repeatedly absconded. He was sent to the Liscard Sea

Training Home, near Wallasey, an institution which took poor deserving boys with the intention of training them for the Navy. He also escaped from there. On 7 September 1916 he was back in Penrith workhouse, but absconded again the next day and was brought back from the Wigton workhouse on the 11 September. In November 1916, he was sent to the 'C of E Homes, Hedgerley Court Farm Home, W. Farnham Royal, Bucks', a Waifs and Strays Society home for 25 boys which aimed to teach them farming skills.⁷⁵ By 1939 he had returned to Penrith, where he was listed as an unmarried farm labourer, an inmate, rather than a patient, at the workhouse (now known as the Public Assistance Institution).⁷⁶ He had spent so many years just trying to escape but could not manage to live successfully outside an institution. When he was found guilty in 1941 of breaking a shop window in Penrith, he expressed disappointment with the 'light' sentence of six months in prison.⁷⁷ He died in 1968 in the Garlands Mental Asylum in Carlisle.⁷⁸ The full sad details of his life are in his biography on my website.⁷⁹

Even in the early twentieth century, not all workhouse children were boarded-out. The case of William Graham Thompson is a puzzling example. When William Graham was 'admitted' (listed in the admissions register on 4 May 1895, the day of his birth) it was noted that he came from Hunsonby, although his mother, Kate Thompson aged 28, had been admitted from Skelton. However, when they were discharged, both were given as from Skelton.⁸⁰ The birth register records his name as Graham William [Thompson], although the civil registration was as William Graham Thompson, with his mother living at Blencow (part of Greystoke parish), and he was given only William at baptism.⁸¹ His mother was living with her parents and another child, Mabel, aged one, in Blencow in 1891. By 1901 Mabel was living with her widowed grandmother and aunt and by 1911 she was with her aunt alone. It seems that Kate had had two illegitimate children and had either died or deserted them both.

The request in December 1900 from the Wigton Union that Penrith accept the settlement of one of its inmates, William Thompson, aged five years, a 'deserted illegitimate child', would seem to corroborate the latter; nothing more is known of his mother. The *Guardians* queried his settlement in the parish of Greystoke but eventually accepted it and admitted him into the workhouse in March 1901.⁸² And there he still was, on his own, when the 1901 census was taken, and there he remained until September 1910 when he left to go into service.⁸³ The only likely William Thompson I have traced in 1911 was living with a substantial farmer, Thomas Graham Holliday, working as a farm servant and apparently born in Wigton. There might be significance in the middle name of the farmer, who lived at Whitrigg, Hutton in the Forest, which was in the parish of Skelton. William Graham served throughout the First World War; his military records, not surprisingly, are uncertain about his exact date and place of birth but provide the name of his mother's younger sister as next-of-kin. William must, therefore, have known something of his family. This final clue allowed his story to be pieced together, albeit uncertainly, and located his mother firmly in Blencow.⁸⁴

In the late-nineteenth century there were many comments about the unsatisfactory nature of workhouse life for a child; how they were left in the care of other inmates (many of whom were mentally defective), the diseases to which they were exposed, the poor diet and the lack of fresh air which were considered 'wholly unsuited to the healthy rearing of infants'.⁸⁵ We have seen how the *Guardians*, although sometimes dragging their feet, moved to improve provision for children. So why did this child remain there on his own for so many years, when other children were being boarded-out, and why did the *Guardians* minute that an application from J. Watson of Kirkoswald to take in William Thompson, then aged seven, 'upon receiving a small weekly allowance was not entertained'?⁸⁶ Were the motives of the potential foster father doubted, was

William not in good enough health, or was there concern that he could be reclaimed by his mother? Why was one child apparently raised by the extended family but not the other? And where did his mother go? His story is highly unusual and the query about that attribution to Hunsonby remains unresolved.

But was William Graham Thompson worse off living in the workhouse than John George Stephenson living in Hunsonby? In 1911 at least 61 individuals living in Addingham were either themselves illegitimate or were the parent of an illegitimate child; they constituted 9 per cent of the population. Of these, twenty were children living with relatives in a family grouping. Two were privately fostered, leaving only John George Stephenson boarded out by the authorities. His illegitimacy would not have particularly marked him out, but his lack of biological relatives certainly made him distinctive, while his workhouse connection must have been obvious. A sociable childhood surrounded by grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins, or a stepfamily, the illegitimate status perhaps not obvious or much remarked upon, would have been very different from that of the boarded-out child, adapting alone to a strange family environment, an ordinary rural school, and a village culture of childhood freedom. It must have been all so strange after the institutional life to which he was accustomed. Some boarded-out children, like James Slater, apparently thrived; some, like John George Stephenson, patently did not.

Acknowledgments

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 Fanny Trollope, *Jessie Phillips* (Nonsuch Publishing, 2006) 397
- 2 John Martin Hall, a legitimate child, was fostered out with Jane Ann Slee in 1911, along with John George Stephenson, discussed below.
- 3 M.A. Crowther, *The Workhouse System 1834-1929: the history of an English social institution* (Batsford Academic, 1981) 43
- 4 Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *English Poor Law History pt.2, The Last Hundred Years*, vol.1 (Frank Cass, 1963) 129, quoting Nassau Senior.
- 5 *ibid.*, 136
- 6 Cumbria Archive Service (Carlisle) [CAS(C)] SPU/P/333 Ground plan of Penrith Union workhouse, undated
- 7 Frank Crompton, *Workhouse Children* (Sutton, 1997) 43
- 8 R.N. Thompson, *The New Poor Law in Cumberland and Westmorland, 1834-1871* (PhD thesis University of Newcastle, 1976) 407
- 9 CAS(C) SPU/P/4 Penrith PLU Minutes of Guardians, 25 Jun 1872
- 10 Norman Longmate, *The Workhouse* (Pimlico, 2003) 92
- 11 Thompson, *New Poor Law*, 404
- 12 *ibid.*, 365
- 13 Crowther, *Workhouse System*, 215 and 217
- 14 Thompson, *New Poor Law*, 379
- 15 Webb, *Poor Law*, pt.2 vol.1, 278 note 2
- 16 Crowther, *Workhouse System*, 158; CAS(C) SPU/P/13 Penrith PLU Minutes of Guardians, 13 Mar and 23 Oct 1900, re Sidney Bell.
- 17 Crompton, *Workhouse Children*, 102; Jonathan Reinartz and Alistair Ritch, 'Exploring medical care in the nineteenth-century provincial workhouse: a view from Birmingham', ch.7 in Jonathan Reinartz and Leonard Schwarz (eds), *Medicine and the Workhouse* (University of Rochester Press, 2013) 152-153
- 18 Thompson, *New Poor Law*, 412; Kathryn Morrison, *The Workhouse* (English Heritage, 1999) 133

- 19 Thompson, *New Poor Law*, 445-446
- 20 Education Census of England and Wales 1851, report and tables, 198 (accessed via <http://www.histpop.org>)
- 21 See for example, CAS(C) SPU/P/5 Penrith PLU Minutes of Guardians, 29 Jan, 12 Mar, 9 Apr, 2 Jul 1878; Crowther, *Workhouse System*, 130-131.
- 22 CAS(C) SPU/P/2 Penrith PLU Minutes of Guardians, 29 Sep 1863
- 23 CAS(C) SPU/P/4 Penrith PLU Minutes of Guardians, 19 Sep 1871
- 24 CAS(C) SPU/P/4 Penrith PLU Minutes of Guardians, 28 Sep 1875; SPU/P/5, 15 Jan 1878
- 25 CAS(C) SPU/P/6 Penrith PLU Minutes of Guardians, 12 Jun 1883; SPU/P/7, 19 Aug 1884
- 26 CAS(C) SPU/P/9 Penrith PLU Minutes of Guardians, 30 Dec 1890
- 27 See Ginger Frost, 'The Black Lamb of the Black Sheep: illegitimacy in the English working-class, 1850-1939', *Journal of Social History* vol.37 no.2 (Winter, 2003) 300, for a description of how such children were viewed by others; Joanna M. Hill, 'Workhouse girls: what they are and how to help them', *Macmillan's Magazine* vol. 28 (1873) 132-139 is a contemporary description of their limitations and difficulties at work; Longmate, *Workhouse*, 185-186.
- 28 CAS(C) SPU/P/333 Ground plan of Penrith Union Workhouse, undated
- 29 Thompson, *New Poor Law*, 411
- 30 CAS(C) SPU/P/73 Penrith Workhouse Admissions and Discharge Book, 30 Jul, 3 Aug 1880
- 31 See <http://www.workhouses.org.uk/education/workhouse.shtml#Industrial>
- 32 See Lydia Gray, 'Addingham, Cumbria, and the workhouse in Penrith: its use by unmarried mothers, 1820-1920', *The Local Historian [TLH]* vol.51 no.3 (July 2021) 231-243; CAS(C) SPU/P/74 Penrith Workhouse Admissions and Discharge Book, 7 Jan 1885
- 33 Webb, *Poor Law*, pt.2 vol.1, 285
- 34 Thompson, *New Poor Law*, 416, 575
- 35 CAS(C) SPU/P/1 Penrith PLU Minutes of Guardians, 25 Jul 1837
- 36 CAS(C) SPU/P/7 and 8 Penrith PLU Minutes of Guardians, 13 Apr 1886 to 4 Jan 1887
- 37 CAS(C) SPU/P/7 Penrith PLU Minutes of Guardians, 25 May 1886
- 38 *ibid.*
- 39 CAS(C) SPU/P/12 Penrith PLU Minutes of Guardians, 24 May, 7 Jun 1898. *Penrith Herald*, 11 June 1898 has a long account of the heated debate, which clarifies that the proposal would apply only to the orphaned and deserted, not the illegitimate.
- 40 CAS(C) SPU/P/13 Penrith PLU Minutes of Guardians, 1 Aug-15 Aug 1899
- 41 Jenny Keating, *A Child for Keeps: the history of adoption in England, 1918-45* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) 27
- 42 CAS(C) SPU/P/13 Penrith PLU Minutes of Guardians, 24 Oct 1899
- 43 *Penrith Herald*, 18 Mar 1899
- 44 CAS(C) SPU/P/13 Penrith PLU Minutes of Guardians, 27 Feb, 13 Mar, 6 Nov, 20 Nov 1900
- 45 Morrison, *The Workhouse*, 137
- 46 CAS(C) SPU/P/80 Penrith Workhouse Admissions and Discharge Book, 5 Oct 1908
- 47 CAS(C) SPU/P/22 Penrith PLU Boarding-Out of Children Committee Minutes, 30 Jan 1912, 6 May 1913
- 48 The National Archives [TNA] Adm/159/195, image ref. 1165; <https://www.ancestry.co.uk/family-tree/person/tree/63761014/person/38108144600/facts> (a family tree owned by a grandson that I believe to be accurate); David T. Taylor, 'Occupational and social mobility during industrialisation: the experience of a Black Country parish in the nineteenth century', *TLH* vol.48 no.2 (April 2018) 137
- 49 Ginger Frost, 'Under the guardians' supervision: family and the English poor law, 1870-1930', *Journal of Family History* vol.38 no.2 (2013) 136
- 50 <https://www.ancestry.co.uk/family-tree/person/tree/63761014/person/38108144600/facts>
- 51 Crowther, *Workhouse System*, 209; see, for example, CAS(C) SPU/P/15 Penrith PLU Minutes of Guardians, 6 July, 31 Aug 1909, 6 Dec 1910; SPU/P/17 Penrith PLU Minutes of Guardians, 22 May 1923
- 52 CAS(C) SPU/P/15 Penrith PLU Minutes of Guardians, 9 Nov 1909
- 53 See Gray, 'Addingham, Cumbria, and the workhouse in Penrith', 231-243; Ginger Frost, 'The kindness of strangers revisited: fostering, adoption and illegitimacy in England, 1860-1930', ch.7 in Rebecca Probert (ed), *Cohabitation and non-marital births in England and Wales 1600-2012* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) 126-127
- 54 CAS(C) SPU/P/76 Penrith Workhouse Admissions and Discharge Book, 4 Mar 1897; CAS(C) SPU/P/128 Penrith Workhouse Births Register, 7 Aug 1898, 18 Mar 1904
- 55 CAS(C) SPU/P/15 Penrith PLU Minutes of Guardians, 31 Aug, 6 Jul 1909
- 56 CAS(C) SPU/P/81 Penrith Workhouse Admissions and Discharge Book, 15 May 1911
- 57 CAS(C) SPU/P/15 Penrith PLU Minutes of the Guardians, 10 Feb 1910; SPU/P/16 12 May 1910; SPU/P/22 Penrith PLU Boarding-Out of Children Committee Minutes, 12 May 1910
- 58 CAS(C) SPU/P/16 Penrith PLU Minutes of the Guardians, 5 Dec 1911
- 59 CAS(C) SPU/P/81 Penrith Workhouse Admissions and Discharge Book, 22 Jul 1913; CAS(C) SPU/P/16 Penrith PLU Minutes of the Guardians, 29 Jul 1913
- 60 CAS(C) SPU/P/22 Penrith PLU Boarding-Out of Children's Committee Minutes, 15 Jul 1913
- 61 Frost, 'Under the Guardians', 126, 136; she found creative Guardians in Cardiff and Cambridge.
- 62 Frost, 'The Black Lamb of the Black Sheep', 301 also found determined mothers; see also Ginger Frost, "'When is a Parent not a Parent?": Custody and illegitimacy in England, 1860-1930', *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* vol.6 no.2 (Spring, 2013) 236-262; Alison Light, *Common People: the history of an English family* (Penguin, 2014) 156,

- describes how her great-grandmother, Sarah Hill, was born and raised in the Cheltenham workhouse but was reclaimed aged nine by her grandmother and taken to live in Wales.
- 63 CAS(C) DS/113 Langwathby School Admissions Register, 18 Aug 1913; CAS(C) SSR/138/5 Maughanby School Admissions Register, 2 Oct 1917
- 64 CAS(C) PROB/1925/W854, will of Joseph Thompson
- 65 TNA WO 398/188, military record for Mary Elizabeth Ritson
- 66 All the family history details have been researched via ancestry.co.uk and scotlandspople.gov.uk
- 67 CAS(C) SPU/P/15 Penrith PLU Minutes of Guardians, 15 May, 29 May, 21 Aug 1906
- 68 CAS(C) SPU/P/15 Penrith PLU Minutes of Guardians, 9 Nov 1909
- 69 Rebecca Probert, *Divorced, Bigamist, Bereaved? The family historian's guide to marital breakdown, separation, widowhood, and remarriage: from 1600 to the 1970s* (Takeaway, 2015) 84
- 70 CAS(C) DFCM/4/5/33 Hunsonby Wesleyan Methodist Sunday School Admissions; CAS(C) SPU/P/16 Penrith PLU Minutes of Guardians, 7 Oct 1913
- 71 CAS(C) SPU/P/82 Penrith Workhouse Admissions and Discharge Book, 26 Oct 1914.
- 72 CAS(C) SPU/P/16 Penrith PLU Minutes of Guardians, 5 Nov 1912
- 73 Morrison, *The Workhouse*, 137-138
- 74 CAS(C) SPU/P/16 Penrith PLU Minutes of Guardians, 5 Nov 1912, 7 Apr, 21 Apr 1914
- 75 CAS(C) SPU/P/82 Penrith Workhouse Admissions and Discharge Book, 1 Jul 1915, 27 Dec 1915, 1916 various
- 76 TNA 1939 Register, HBEK, Penrith, 511/1, sch. 8/40
- 77 *Penrith Observer*, 2 Sep 1941, 14 Oct 1941
- 78 Information from the death certificate.
- 79 See 'Signposts to Addingham' <https://www.addinghamcumbria.co.uk/>
- 80 CAS(C) SPU/P/76 Penrith Workhouse Admissions and Discharge Book, 17 Apr, 4 May, 3 Jun 1895
- 81 CAS(C) SPU/P/128 Penrith Workhouse Births Register, 4 May 1895; St Andrew's, Penrith, 21 May 1895
- 82 CAS(C) SPU/P/13 Penrith PLU Minutes of Guardians, 4 Dec, 18 Dec 1900, 26 Feb 1901; CAS(C) SPU/P/77 Penrith Workhouse Admissions and Discharge Book, 4 Mar 1901
- 83 CAS(C) SPU/P/80 Penrith Workhouse Admissions and Discharge Book, 12 Sep 1910
- 84 TNA WO 363, WWI Soldiers' Records (searched on Ancestry)
- 85 Webb, *Poor Law*, pt.2 vol.1, 307 passim
- 86 CAS(C) SPU/P/14 Penrith PLU Minutes of the Guardians, 24 Mar 1903

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