Fragments of Fury: Lunacy, Agency and Contestation in the Great Yarmouth Workhouse, 1890s-1900s

Introduction

Notwithstanding the fact that outdoor relief dominated the welfare landscape at most times and in most places under the New Poor Law, the workhouse maintains a totemic role in both the public imagination and welfare historiography as a symbol of oppression.[1] Even during the later nineteenth-century 'crusade' against outdoor relief, in essence a last (failed) attempt to implement the principles of the 1834 New Poor Law Act as those who framed it had intended, the majority of all poor relief by value and volume was given outside the workhouse context.[2] Nonetheless, and as Peter Higginbottom recently noted, a focus on top-down sources and approaches to understanding the New Poor Law has meant that the grim stain of the workhouse hangs over our perceptions of welfare in the later nineteenth-century.[3]

Against this backdrop we have, since the benchmark work of Anne Crowther in 1981, come to understand increasingly more about the workhouse and its people.[4] It is now clear that workhouses rapidly came to be populated by those – the aged, sick, mad, children and widow(er)s – who were never meant to come within its ambit.[5] The exact age and sex composition of such institutional populations varied by place and over time, but it is indisputable that groups like the sick and aged drove the need for constant investment in and rebuilding of the fabric of workhouses after the first flush of building work in the 1840s.[6] Some of the people at these life-cycle stages were coerced into entering the workhouse, and their residence might be of long duration. Yet the key lesson of most studies from Jean Robin onwards has been that workhouse populations could experience rapid turnover and that some people at least appear to have viewed a sojourn in the institution as part of their makeshift economy.[7] However the spectre of the workhouse fitted into life-cycles of relief, it is now also clear that once the 'crusade' against outdoor relief had failed by the 1880s, a tri-partite

combination of influences began to change perceptions about the operation of workhouses and their place as a holding institution for children, the disabled, aged, and other "deserving" paupers: rising numbers of female poor law guardians who sought to soften institutional regimes; receding beliefs that the poor were largely responsible for their own poverty, of which the Liberal Welfare Reforms of the early twentieth-century were both an embodiment and confirmation; and the development of an international conversation about welfare benefits such as state pensions from the 1880s.[8]

Yet if these broad outlines and chronologies are clear, there have been fewer advances in our understanding of the way that ordinary people experienced the workhouse. An early focus in the New Poor Law historiography on scandals involving workhouse staff, inmates and regimes has continued to develop, bringing the negative aspects of workhouse life, rules and practice into sharp relief.[9] There are reasons to be sceptical of the picture of workhouses sketched out in scandals, and there is no doubt (as Kim Price ably notes) that some at least were manufactured as part of the local politics of the New Poor Law.[10] Indeed, it is possible to be surprised not at how many scandals there were, but how *few*. In part this relative absence reflects the fact that we have begun to understand the poor as having agency within the confines of the rules and walls of workhouses. Riots of the sort analysed by David Green for the early New Poor Law – perhaps the ultimate expression of agency – were not particularly common.[11] On the other hand there is emerging evidence that small everyday acts of resistance - vandalism, absconding, the spreading of rumour, low level complaint and confrontation of those who carried out harsh acts such as punishing children – could gain traction and act as a pressure valve to reduce the temperature of workhouse relations, thus obviating the need for concerted and organised action.[12] Indeed, it could not be any other way: workhouses were almost never well enough staffed to maintain the rules by which they were supposed to be governed. Nor were they free of the external intrusion – newspapers,

enquiries, workhouse visiting committees and the existence of "busybody" advocates and chaplains – which made staff accountable to others than merely elected and paid officials. Moreover, paupers could and did write to the central authorities to contest everyday aspects of relief decisions, a very strong signal that agency existed and was an accepted and expected part of the welfare negotiation process. It is perhaps for this reason that while scandals over the punishment of individual paupers who broke workhouse rules can be found and dissected, what is remarkable is how few offences that could be punished actually were.[13]

These are important observations, but in empirical terms our understanding of the detail of workhouse experiences, particularly for those who spent long periods of time as inmates, is based upon perspectives from a remarkably small collection of poor law data. In this context, our knowledge of one particular group of Victorian inmates – the lunatic poor who were placed into workhouses or returned there from asylums – is particularly flimsy.[14] Given that lunatics were normally amongst the longest resident inmates of workhouses, potentially the most disruptive, and the group most likely to be subject to harsh or neglectful treatment where (as in many workhouses) staffing was inadequate or overcrowding was intense, this is a singular lacunae. Moreover, lunatics were also a significant, and in many places growing, sub-group of paupers. As the County Asylum movement gathered pace in the nineteenth-century the variously constituted central authorities of the New Poor Law, many local guardians, families, doctors, and even newspapers, came to see the asylum as the "best" place for the treatment and containment of a widely defined group of lunatics.[15] In practice, however, a complex confluence of circumstances meant that as the nineteenth-century progressed a growing proportion of the "lunatic population" that can be traced through the census found themselves long-term inmates of workhouses: rising numbers of people defined as lunatic; the fact that it cost families and poor law unions much more to send lunatics to asylums rather than keep them in the workhouse; the rapid development of overcrowding as a

core feature of later nineteenth-century asylums in particular; and the tendency for asylum inmates to be "circulated" when their conditions and family circumstances waxed and waned. This situation was lamented by asylum and lunacy inspectors, doctors and newspapers, who were diligent at pointing to the inadequate medical care available for this group.[16] Balancing perspectives are rare, not least because it has been hard to find and/or contextualise the voices and actions of lunatics in workhouses or indeed any other institutional context.[17] This situation is changing. New work on letters written to the central authorities of the New Poor Law has begun to reveal the words of the lunatic poor, either in their own hand and voice or written for them.[18] They exercised, in other words, some of the same sorts of agency as did other workhouse inmates. Moreover, alternative sources throwing light on the views, experiences and position of the lunatic poor have also begun to emerge, including workhouse visiting books, witness statements, and surviving material culture such as graffiti. Exploring these new avenues, both in and of themselves and in the context of wider attempts to analyse the agency of the poor and reconstruct their detailed experiences of workhouse life, could allow historians to think again about the changing role and purpose of the New Poor Law and the character and symbolism of the workhouse.

In this article, we take up such a challenge by focussing on the experiences of the lunatic poor in the Great Yarmouth workhouse in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries. For reasons outlined below the Great Yarmouth Poor Law Union has an iconic place in poor law history alongside places like Bridgewater, Poplar, Atcham, Andover and Brixworth, though it remains less well-explored than all of these places.[19] It is also notable for the scale of its pauper lunatic population in relation to other workhouse groups, a matter to which we return below. The article runs broadly from the early 1890s, just prior to the coming of democracy in local poor law elections, through the Liberal Welfare Reforms and to the eve of the First World War. This period is deliberately chosen both because it is little

researched across the poor law historiography and because during these years the advent of female guardians, cottage home movements, the arrival of the state pension and drives to professionalise the staffing of unions and their workhouses would have created policy and practice undercurrents that we could expect to ripple through the way people experienced workhouse life. In section two we analyse the workhouse population and regime in Great Yarmouth. Section three uses the remarkable story of a single lunatic - Lorina Bulwer – as a lens to understand the basic features of a lunatic life in the workhouse, while section four re-inserts her story into the wider currents of gossip, enmity, moral treatment of lunatics and letter-writing that we can trace for the Great Yarmouth Union. Ultimately we suggest that the workhouse regime may not have been as harsh, controlling and isolating as much of the wider literature has consistently suggested.

Great Yarmouth Workhouse

Great Yarmouth is an iconic Union. It was for the late-Victorian period a significant supplier of dead pauper bodies to public and private anatomy schools under the terms of the 1832 Anatomy Act, something which clearly suggests a punitive welfare regime.[20] Yarmouth was also (and perhaps not unrelated to the selling of dead bodies) one of the poorest poor law unions in England. It is perhaps this poverty which prevented the Board of Guardians systematically shifting the insane poor into asylums and keeping them there; by the 1890s and early 1900s (see figure 1) the union had a very high concentration of lunatics in workhouse accommodation.[21] In other ways, however, the place was typical. From 1881 to 1911 the gender composition of the workhouse (see figure 2) remained roughly equal, as it did in similar places outside of crisis periods. And while the age distribution of the workhouse population shifted between census years (figure 3), the consistent themes (those 60+ dominated the population; children gradually became less prominent as workhouse

inmates; and those of working age had at best a fleeting presence in any year) mirror those traced by others who have used census data to look at workhouse populations.[22] In these senses Great Yarmouth constitutes an important location through which to explore wider questions of agency, experience and the care and control of lunatics.

[Figures 1-3 here]

The early history of the Great Yarmouth Union was beset with scandals and contestation.[23] This included frequent complaints from the outdoor poor about the character, conduct and attendance of relieving and medical officers who came into contact with them, but the key focus was the workhouse. On 12 May 1850 Benjamin Flowerdew wrote to the Poor Law Board, London. He had been in the workhouse since 3 September 1849 and:

> contrary to the rules of humanity & the laws of liberty to seek work i ham able to do, & willing likewise so to do & although application i have Made, i have not been allowed so to do, during the time of my condfindment my Children have been ill treated … trusting to your kind enquiry i ham Sir yours unfortunate pauper[24]

By 21 October 1850 the Board was enquiring into an allegation that a member of workhouse staff had got a female pauper pregnant. This was followed by allegations that: the workhouse master was cudgelling the inmates (February 1851); there was excessive punishment of children (March 1851); religious dissenters were being abused (June 1851); and the schoolmaster had a habit of thrashing female children (July 1851).[25] A workhouse riot in February 1851 resulted in extensive damage to workhouse property and the committal of seven inmates. In a letter of 21 February 1851 the workhouse master requested the

magistrates ‘to allow two Policemen to attend the Workhouse night and day the Master being in fear of his life and which request was granted’, in turn causing another riot.[26]

That pauper protests and accusations were more than mere rhetoric is evidenced by a letter (3 July 1851) from the inspector in whose district we find Great Yarmouth Union, which noted that he would not wish to interfere with the “present Guardians (who are steadfastly endeavouring to remedy the evil results of the very the loose administration of their predecessors)”.[27] Extensive investigations of Yarmouth do not seem to have resulted in either a change of workhouse regime or the frequency of pauper complaints about their treatment. Thus, Francis Land, one of the most persistent female paupers in our wider sample, wrote on 6 November 1852 that she wished the central authorities would intervene so that “the poor may be suffered to breath without the rod of power being ever [ov]er our head”. [28] We might dismiss this as mere rhetoric or hyperbole, but through the 1860s and 1870s we find persistent claims of short rations, the appropriation of food meant for inmates, coerced sex and rape, and accusation by paupers of malfeasance in public office.[29] By 1880, as Elizabeth Hurren notes, Great Yarmouth found itself once again in substantial trouble, having sold the dead bodies of paupers without first giving relatives a chance to raise the money to bury their kin and thus avoid the dissection table.[30]

Within this broad context, the treatment of the insane and feeble-minded poor seems to have varied on a spectrum from casual to severe. We learn from an enquiry into other pauper complaints in October 1850, that the workhouse had an “idiots room”. Samuel Drury was employed to shave them and to “supply the idiots room with clean things”.[31] A dedicated space for this group places Great Yarmouth at the top end of the quality of union provision at this date.[32] There was, however, also a lunatic ward, which we know (from an enquiry into child punishment on 10 March 1851) was used as a site of punishment. On this date a boy was taken “into the Asylum ward and there was almost chooked whilst the underwardsmen

stripped him and the Governor flogged him in a brutle manner which is contrary to law".[33] Since this was an evening event it is likely that the lunatics would have witnessed it and there is a short imaginative step to see use of the ward for punishment as a form of control by terror for lunatics who might have suspected and feared the same fate. Whatever the intent here, there is significant evidence that throughout the 1850-1880 period the workhouse failed to follow best practice in terms of the treatment of lunatics.[34] Letters and enquiries reveal that when the lunatic and idiot wards were full, the mad poor were placed in the vagrant wards; someone was "confined in a cell in the ward for the insane although in full possession of her senses"; and that Guardians looked to discharge lunatics on any pretext, presumably given the cost and disruption of confining and caring for them.[35]

The union seems to have struggled in particular with what to do about a liminal group of the insane: those where relatives were not poor enough for the insane person to count as a pauper and thus to enter the workhouse or asylum, but at the same time were too poor to pay (or to pay in full) the costs of those insane kin to be cared for at home, in a private asylum or as a paying inmates of the county asylum. Such, for instance, was the case of Joseph Foulsham, who wrote to the Poor Law Board on 3 June 1868 to say that his wife was deemed "unfit to be at Large by one of their [the Union] Medical officers" having been of unsound mind for two years. She had been discharged from a private asylum as incurable and the Great Yarmouth Guardians now refused either to pay for a public asylum or admit her to the workhouse. Foulsham wrote to ask the central authorities: "could not the Guardians make a special case of it. I beg to say that in time she is not fit to be at large as she continually threatening and making attemps at self destruction".[36] In a further letter of 23 June 1868, he returned to the theme noting that the suspicion of the Guardians that he merely wanted to "put my wife solely on the Parish for maintenance" was untrue. Rather, he wanted to "ask the board the favour by allowing my wife to be put in the Lunatic ward of the workhouse for a

few months; by my paying whatever the board thought fit to charge, as they had done in other cases of Lunacy in the town; but as the board considered my wife to be too dangerous, they refused my application". He added a mournful postscript: "Last night we could not get her to bed, and I fell off to sleep and she made an attempt at hanging, but not fatally."[37] The central messages of this letter – the Guardians suspected the relatives of the lunatic poor of not pulling their weight; they considered some lunatics just too problematic to care for in the workhouse context; and that they were unwilling to enter into co-payment relationships – point strongly to a welfare regime with harshness at its core.

By the 1880s, however, an extended public outcry consequent on the accumulated failings in the administration of welfare highlighted here had begun to gain significant local traction.[38] Moreover, this public pressure is broadly co-terminus with the emergence of a dynastic model of workhouse leadership amongst masters and their wives. Thus, James Shuckford was a workhouse master for most of his life and in the 1851 census was recorded as master of the Newton Abbot Union workhouse.[39] His son Thomas had been born in 1834 and clearly grew up enmeshed in the setting of the workhouse. He married Elizabeth Blyth at Chippenham in 1863. Her father James had previously (1841) been a taskmaster at Parkhurst Prison and was the workhouse master at Great Yarmouth at the time his daughter married. Thomas Shuckford Blyth succeeded his father-in-law in this role and his son, William Shuckford Blyth (1866-1937) in turn succeeded his father in the early 1890s when Thomas (who had taken the reins after the body selling scandals noted above) went off to undertake the mastership of Horsham Union. In turn, William's uncle had been the Gaol Master at Great Yarmouth workhouse in the 1850s and his mother-in-law was by 1871 in charge of nursing at the Hungerford Workhouse. In short, the staffing story of the Great Yarmouth workhouse brings together two dynastic lines of workhouse servants who between them could boast more than half a century of experience in running institutions by the early 1890s.

The ad hoc, inadequate and ineffective staffing of the early years of the New Poor Law had thus been replaced with highly experienced and professional staffing by the 1890s.[40]

In other unions, such dynasticism seems to have led to patronage and contempt for workhouse rules, but in Yarmouth the impact seems to have been more positive. Thus, we see the initial consequences of forced and planned change in the outcome of a *British Medical Journal* inspection of the workhouse in 1894. While not uncritical – the workhouse lacked a children's ward and it was overcrowded – the report was largely positive. The lunatic ward, for instance, had been enlarged and relocated to the end of the main building and while lunatics and idiots were gathered together in this space and there was only one night nurse, those with mental impairments had access to "pleasant gardens" and were actively engaged in activities such as needlework or gardening.[41] That the BMJ inspection was not simply staged by the union can perhaps be seen by the rapid dwindling of letters by or for the poor sent to the Local Government Board in the 1890s, even though the poor knew that they had a clear right to send such letters. In short, we see the re-invention of a local poor law regime, a dynamic that is often missing from a literature on the New Poor Law which has taken the broadest brush approach to understanding of union activities or, on the other hand, focussed disproportionately on individual scandals.[42] Yet there is also a wider story for as we saw above this was also a period in which the number of lunatics confined in the Great Yarmouth workhouse was very significant indeed. How a changing regime affected the experiences of this most vulnerable and long-term group of workhouse inmates is something that we know very little about and yet it is fundamental to an understanding of the role, character ad purpose of the later New Poor Law. We are lucky in this sense that the Great Yarmouth data allow us to view these questions through the life of one extraordinary lunatic, Lorina Bulwer.

Lorina Bulwer[43]

Bulwer was born in June 1838 at Wangford in Suffolk. Her parents were Ann Turner (1807-1893) and William John Bulwer (1801-1871) and she was one of three living siblings: brothers Edgar and Walter and a sister, Anna Maria Bulwer, who married the widower George Young (an Inland Revenue Inspector), and appears to have emigrated to New Zealand with his two existing children. Lorina had three paternal uncles who all had business premises in Beccles near that of their brother's (Lorina's father) grocery business in the 1850s.[44] Much of the kinship group seems to have moved to Great Yarmouth and William Bulwer was recorded as a lodging-house keeper there in the Post Office Directory of 1869.[45] In 1861 Lorina was living with her mother, father and two siblings, Edgar (28) and Walter (18). By 1871 she was living with her father and mother (70 and 64 respectively) and was aged 32. William was to die soon thereafter and in the 1881 census Lorina and her widowed mother were living independently on the boundary of the public park, a ten minute walk from the residence of Edgar Bulwer. This co-residence of mother and daughter was of considerable longevity; in the 1891 census they were still living in the same house aged respectively 84 and 53, though Ann Bulwer was to die less than two years later. During this period Lorina was a registered elector in her own right, suggestive of independent property ownership, a mater to which we return below.[46]

What happened to Lorina Bulwer on her mother's death is unclear. A BBC investigation into Bulwer (visited at length below) argued that she was immediately consigned to the workhouse.[47] This seems unlikely since she remained a registered elector even after her mother's death; rather, it is almost certain that she resided temporarily with her brother Edgar. But the death of his own wife in 1894, leaving him a childless widower, seems to have precipitated a rapid change of arrangements. Edgar committed his sister to the workhouse sometime between 1895 and 1900.[48] Some sense of the motivation for this act can be gleaned from the 1901 census where, aged 61 (and wrongly labelled as a widow) Lorina

was recorded as a lunatic. In the 1911 census (and wrongly classified as aged 66) she was given the same label, dying on 5 March 1912 in the workhouse infirmary. Exactly how long Lorina had been of unsound mind and what exactly was wrong with her remains, as so often with these questions during this period, unclear. In the census returns for 1861, 1871, 1881 and 1891 she was not described as lunatic, insane, feeble-minded or "idiot".[49] There were many incentives for respectable families to hide insanity in a census return, especially where it could be contained or controlled through family care in the domestic environment, but equally it is possible that mental illness in this case was progressive or even sudden.[50] There was certainly a family history. A male first cousin died as a lunatic in the Poplar workhouse in 1902, and a female first cousin was confined in a private madhouse in 1901. Lorina's maternal uncle, William Turner, was confined in the Ely (Cambridgeshire) workhouse in 1871, where it was noted that he was an imbecile who played the organ.

However we understand her mental illness, it is important for this article that Lorina Bulwer was an unusual workhouse lunatic in three respects. First, her elder brother Edgar, owner of a drapery business in Great Yarmouth lived close by throughout her residence at the workhouse. He did not die until 1917 and his estate of that year was valued at more than £4,000, suggesting that he could have afforded to commit Lorina to a private or county asylum had he chosen to do so. Second, Lorina Bulwer had independent means in her own right. On her death in 1912, probate to the value of £395 was granted to her brother Edgar. Indeed, in a record left by Lorina herself (of which much more below) we learn that "I Miss Lorina Bulwer had my money a deed of gift from my mother Anncy Nancy Tickle my Fancy when we lived in Geneve terrace crown road we did not rob the treasury for our money". Together, these two observations suggest that earlier resistance from the Great Yarmouth Guardians encountered in the case of Joseph Foulsham above to taking lunatics into the workhouse where the family paid a full or subsidised rate for their care, had passed. Perhaps

in this case the widower Edgar could not entertain the thought of locking his sister into a more distant asylum, preferring instead to enter into an agreement with the union which would allow him regular visitation opportunities. In any event, it would seem that Lorina Bulwer was seen as a so called "harmless" lunatic, since workhouse masters up and down the country continued to resist taking in violent or disruptive patients throughout this period.[51] This was even more important in Great Yarmouth than other places, since the workhouse there did not maintain private cells or quarters for "paying lunatics", suggesting that Lorina would have lived in the general lunatic ward.

But Bulwer is also unusual in a third and crucial respect. During her time as a resident in the workhouse she assembled at least three "samplers" as illustrated in figures 4 and 5.[52] These were long runs of fabric swatches (largely cotton) joined together to form a base quilt, onto which text and pictures were stitched (front to back) in various forms and weights of thread/wool.[53] The largest of these objects runs to fourteen feet long and more than a foot wide, and the text itself takes the form of a familiar letter, starting with an address to 'MAHARAJAH OF KELVEDON BRANDON THETFORD NORFOLK'.[54] For museum curators, arts and crafts commentators, and costume and textile historians these samplers are in and of themselves intrinsically interesting and important.[55] They are, those who have looked at them note, difficult to both read and condense. The words are unpunctuated, stitched in wholly capital letters and heavily underlined with horizontal stitching. Some of the contents are factual, referring to her family (albeit framed in an intricate language of insult and contempt), workhouse inmates or people and places that the curator Ruth Burwood can trace through other documentation.[56] A significant part of the text, however, is fantasy or generalised invective and unattached gossip about families who cannot be identified.[57]

The dates over which the samplers were constructed are uncertain. Factual and self-referential elements of the major text suggest a date around 1901, while in the second

substantial sampler references to workhouse deaths and events might suggest a slightly later date.[58] The latter relies on Bulwer seeing or hearing of workhouse and other events first hand, rather than being told of them or remembering them some time after the event. A detailed consideration of the names of those in the workhouse between 1891 and 1911, however, suggests two things: first that Bulwer assigned the names of workhouse inmates to some of her characters who she then went on the stitch/write about as if they were at large in the outside world, much as a novelist might develop a plot (a matter to which we return below); and second, that the main overlap between the surnames and surnames/forenames recorded in the Bulwer samplers and the residents of the Great Yarmouth workhouse was between 1901 and 1911. In particular, she references the (unusual) names of several lunatics and lunatic nurses in this period, suggesting that the texts were not begun until well after 1901. If Bulwer was, as we suggest above, first lodged in the workhouse further into the 1890s than some commentators have suggested, this broad timing probably makes intuitive sense.

[Figures 4 and 5 here]

As objects, then, these samplers are intriguing. They also, however, provide a window on how a late nineteenth and early twentieth-century workhouse was actually experienced and thus have a rather wider importance for social and welfare historians. A brief flavour of the text of the main sampler provides some insight into its flow, construction and contents.[59] Background themes include a detailed knowledge of royalty and the peerage system; sexual identity (with numerous references to prostitution, eunuchs and hermaphrodites); sexual practice (we find consistent references to oral sex through the nineteenth-century slang term "French tricks"), and snippets of the life of Lorina and her family. In terms of the latter, for instance, we find the claim that "the Bulwer family had an Indian estate and had five branch shops in Essex for the sale of the products of the Indian estate". There are however four recurrent rhetorical threads which have an insistent presence. The first is imposition, fraud

and deception, something which seems to have deeply coloured Lorina Bulwer's conception both of her own situation and the character of almost everyone else. Her brother, we are told, should be asked "if he knew old Anna Maria young [her sister who features prominently in this sampler] was an imposter" and whether he stole his mother's wedding ring which was rightfully hers because "I Miss Lorina Bulwer had my finger measured for a ring". Bulwer's wider acquaintance was equally suspected of fraud: the "notorious old woman Kent" claimed a government pension fraudulently; the son of John Langham and Susan Turner had been "passing as Sir Saville Crossley" and is accused of masquerading as the workhouse master at Great Yarmouth; and more generally people "dressed up with alias's from A to Z". The biggest deception, however, is buried deep in the text: "I am princess Victoria's daughter Lorina Bulwer was taken to the Royal nursery Queen Victoria's in her infancy I passing as Miss Lorina Bulwer" and she regretted the actions of her father because "my genuine name he should have told me I would have found my way to the English government".

A second consistent theme is the underlying subtext of class. Bulwer attacked those who held "republican socialist ideas", "Banaschina [who had] an Italian with a statuette of Napoleon on the front of the shop", and her sister-in-law who was a "damned hell fire socialist". She ended one sampler with an observation that in the workhouse "not one belong to any of my class not one here have anything to do with my party". These observations link to a third regularity which is sustained personal invective. Mr "Seward alias King" was a "Eunich [sic]"; Widows Buck and Catchpole were both "disgusting looking old women"; her own mother was consistently labelled "Miss Ancy-Tickles my fancy"; the Taylor's of Chippenham were variously "sodomite carnalite", "Jack the Ripper Taylor", and "notorious"; Kate Joyce "had a large red plug or bolster dropping down from her behind"; her sister-in-law Ann was the "old faggot wife [who] died and went to hell"; and her sister "Mrs Anna Maria Young" was "the art of bastard mongrel false nose chest expander ears and

hempahrodite [sic] or Eunich [sic]". Finally, and importantly for the final section of this article, the lunacy of others appears frequently in the sampler: Wilfred Weston was "a lunatic from Perrymead" who was "washed in the blood of the lamb"; the Ripley sisters were "hereditary lunatics"; "Old mad Molly Hawes" was committed to "Colney Hatch [asylum] strapped to a cart" and "looked as if the devil had chased her three times through the flames of hellfire". She was a 'vile hemaphrodite old hag'.

It is an easy step from this sort of text to the core assumptions and assertions of those who have looked at the Bulwer samplers. The text is variously constructed as angry, ranting, and visceral, brimming with resentment both against her family and the fact of her incarceration in the workhouse. One commentator saw this and other items at the *Frayed: Textiles on the Edge* exhibition in 2014 as "associated with personal experiences of suffering … framed as the work of outsiders". Bulwer's text has been seen as embodying "anger and frustration" and "working-out of her own identity". The text is "undoubtedly a rant" and we can see a tension between the slow craft of needlework and the "angry, breathless quality of her words". Moreover, Bulwer, according to some accounts, clearly "intended her work to be read", opening it (as we have also observed above) in the form of a familiar letter and making sure the text was always well defined.[60] For some commentators, the cloth and thread for the samplers was drawn from sacking and other abandoned textiles in the workhouse or (a confirmation of lunacy) that Lorina unpicked her own clothing for materials. A BBC investigation of Bulwer's life repeated many of these core tropes, suggesting that she was a "cross woman", committed to the workhouse against her will, ill-treated, and isolated in a place where there were "none of her class" to be found.[61] For these TV presenters, lots of women like Bulwer found themselves locked up, receiving food and clothing but little by way of treatment. Her brother deposited his sister like a package at the workhouse and would not have looked at conditions in the place or monitored her situation. Lunatics they argued,

would have spent their days picking oakum (unlikely as this was an activity for able-bodied men), had little privacy, would always have been under control and "ordered about", housed in oppressive dormitories, and faced a staff for whom the key concern was to keep their charges quiet. Ultimately, Bulwer's stitching was a "cry for help but no one listened".

The disjuncture between the latter assertion and the fact that the final shot in the BBC investigation is of a grave plot and gravestone with Lorina's name on it, seemingly passed notice. Friendless, isolated, and abandoned paupers ended up at death in unmarked graves or, in the particular context of Great Yarmouth, on the dissection table at Cambridge Medical School.[62] This observation points to a wider sense that the samplers – important both for understanding the nature and experience of Great Yarmouth workhouse but also for the wider New Poor Law in its final decades – have been removed from the key contexts that they reflect and embody: the organic nature of the Great Yarmouth (and wider) workhouse regime; changing understandings of the treatment of lunatics in institutional contexts; the nature of contact between workhouse inmates and the outside world; the practice, rhetoric and purpose of writing in and from the workhouse; the nature and traditions of agency and control in institutions; and the nature of personal relationships within and without the institutional context. Exploring these questions in greater depth using the Bulwer samplers as a lens is thus the final task of this article.

Locating Lorina Bulwer

We first turn to the question of how to characterise Lorina Bulwer's treatment in the workhouse and the associated significance of the very existence of her samplers. BBC presenters, bloggers and curators assume implicitly, as we have seen, that she was locked up, that the workhouse environment was harsh and uncaring, the facilitation of her stitching represented merely an attempt at ensuring docility and that Bulwer was isolated. These sorts

of experiences have at the more generalised level, held substantial traction in the popular imagination and much of the published historiography. A careful consideration of the Great Yarmouth evidence, however, urges a more nuanced and sympathetic approach. We have suggested above that by the 1890s, the workhouse regime had improved substantially. Dennis Helsdon's complaint to the Poor Law Board on 9 November 1866 that he was forcibly separated from his wife and that

> It would be an act of charity as well as of justice if some impartial and disinterested person were to examine her as to her state of mind to see if it was right to shut her up in a Lunatic ward with twenty poor creatures in different stages of insanity - under the absolute control of a female keeper and a Pauper Nurse and threttened that if she made any complaints of the treatment of herself or others the[n] she'd be served ten times worse.[63]

is the last substantive complaint that we can find relating to those of unsound mind. This broad timing is consistent with the emergence of a wider therapeutic narrative which emphasised the importance of moral treatment for lunatics as opposed to restraint, drugs and punishment. When set against this backdrop, the facts that Lorina had the sustained time needed to construct her samplers, materials were supplied to her, and that the items were clearly kept dry and free from mould. become easily explicable because this "domestic" work was a familiar signal of moral treatment.[64] This is also, of course, the sub-text of the positive comments made by the BMJ in its published survey of Great Yarmouth workhouse, noted above. Far from the workhouse regime being oppressive, controlling and brutal, the very existence of Lorina Bulwer's stitching testifies exactly the opposite. Nor was she likely to have been isolated. One sampler makes pointed note of the fact that Lorina considered the

workhouse population beneath her, but (even if true) it seems doubtful that she lost contact with those outside its walls. This becomes apparent if we address the thorny question of where Bulwer obtained the cloth and thread to make her samplers. It is unlikely that such materials were supplied by the nurses in the lunatic ward or were, as one blogger suggests, begged or gleaned as scraps from elsewhere in the workhouse. The obvious conclusion is in fact that her brother Edgar, a draper, both supplied the cloth and then collected and cared for the samplers on his sister's death.[65] There is of course evidence that the care of lunatics in some workhouses was poor, both absolutely and compared to that offered in asylums, even by the later nineteenth-century.[66] In Great Yarmouth workhouse, however, moral treatment was clearly firmly ingrained by this period and the existence and preservation of these remarkable samplers should cause us to reconsider blanket assumptions about the stark and harsh nature of workhouse regimes.[67]

A second important context is the letters of record, complaint and contestation outlined earlier in this article. It is tempting to regard Lorina Bulwer's samplers as unique. In fact we know that others of this period and previously used stitched text to leave a material culture of memory, record, conflict and contestation.[68] It is also tempting to make a distinction between stitched and written text, as for instance did one commentator on the Bulwer samplers who noted "had she [Bulwer] written letters rather than embroidered lengthy scrolls, they would no doubt have ended up in the bin". Such conclusions are not supported by the existence and preservation of an extensive central archive of letters from the poor in workhouses and their advocates. Indeed, we can go further. The lack of punctuation, underlining, focus and breathless feel of the Bulwer texts mirror exactly the characteristics of many pauper letters to the central authorities before and during this period.[69] This should be unsurprising. Notwithstanding Bulwer's assertion that there were no people of her class in the Great Yarmouth workhouse, the census returns show this to be patently untrue. We can find

as inmates clerks and others who made their living by writing in considerable numbers, as well as former business owners and ratepayers who would once have been solidly middle-class, much like Bulwer herself.[70] At the broadest level, similarities between written and textile texts are explicable in these terms, and the fact of the tenuous literacy that they convey does much to suggest how fragile literacy was for ordinary people even at this late date.[71]

Micro-analysis, however, reveals something more. Compare, for instance, the subject, flow, texture and emphasis of the words of Lorina Bulwer outlined above with those of Frances Land, who in February 1851 made accusations against the workhouse master:

> Excuse the humble pen of the pauper Oppressed by Tyriany by the Governor of the house who perade the wards armed with a Life preserver and I am informed with pistols secreted about him dealing threats as the husband man seed for the harvest surely this sowing expect a reaping This week six young men committed to Gaol being driven to desperation by the contemptable arrogance of the Govener be good enough Sir to insist apon an enquiry and recommend classification also that all persons may be allowed the means to keep themselves clean who could credit a half pound of soap for 30 sometimes forty persons in the week and to wipe on two Towels if this report prove to your Satisfaction humbly crave that Tyriny may be [re]versed and Mr Johnson be withdrawn and a manly and humane man put in trust of the already over oppressed poor children of the Parish of Great Yarmouth.[72]

Land returned to the contents of this letter on 1 October 1852, asking: "I trust gentlemen you will favour me with an answer as to what Extent the Guardians may crush the individuals committed to their charge".[73] The breathless, accusatory, unstructured words of Frances Land

would not have looked out of place as a piece of sampler stitched by Lorina Bulwer. Land was dead by the period covered in this article, but other serial writers from the 1880s and 1890s were still present (at least one of them in the lunatic ward itself) when Bulwer would have been creating her texts. We cannot know to what extent she picked up influences from those around her, but it is rather easier to see that some of the thematic foundations of Bulwer's text were also common to paper-based letters. These included: sexual identity, practice and exploitation, notably accusations of sexual assault and the fact that the workhouse contained disreputable prostitutes; the conveying of snippets of personal stories, often seemingly random, as part of the core message; personal invective (Samuel Bradshaw for instance objected to his wife being referred to as a "Trumpery Stinking Faggot"[74]); class and natural rights (Thomas Cox could not "believe you [the central authorities] wish to Destroy that freedom which is the boast Englishmen and affix the stigma worse than Monastic Slavery in any of the houses which you have control"[75]); imposition and deception by both workhouse staff and inmates; and the madness of inmates including accusations of violence against the insane or by them and a suspicion that ordinary people were being locked up for lunacy when they were perfectly sane.[76] Whether by accident or design, then, the thematic core, language, temperament and flow of the Bulwer texts share much with the written attempts by other paupers to assert agency and take control of their lives in the workhouse context over many years. Set against this backdrop, Bulwer's texts represent something very much more than the ranting, rambling stitching of a mad woman, but rather an important point on the spectrum of the abilities of workhouse inmates to exercise agency and shape the regime to which they were notionally subject.

A third broad context flows from these observations and particularly the pauper letters with which we have dealt: a deep and ingrained history of enmity and conflict in the workhouse. In so far as these issues have troubled the historiography it is in the context of

conflict between Guardians/staff and paupers viewed through the lens of workhouse riots and punishment regimes.[77] Lower level – "everyday" - conflicts between inmates are partly picked up in the few workhouse punishment books that survive, where instances of inter-personal violence in particular can be found.[78] Letters from across the New Poor Law period, however, reveal that there was a consistent pulsating core of low level but articulated enmity between individuals, some of it situational and transient but other instances lasting over decades or until one of the parties died or left the institution. Like other places we have encountered in our wider study, Great Yarmouth workhouse was alive with complex layers of dislike between inmates, often laid bare in central and local inquiries into complaints of abuse or sexual misconduct.[79] Young female paupers were accused of demeaning old men by stripping and beating them; there were numerous suspicions of theft and fraud; paupers accused each other of feigning illness and disability; and there seem to have been any number of small acts of personal violence between inmates. The fact that the Bulwer samplers contain images of men fighting (figure 6) certainly speaks to her state of mind and probably reflects deep familial and childhood experiences on her part, but considering written and stitched text as one conversation should also lead us to note that Lorina must have seen plenty of everyday violence inside and outside the lunatic ward. More than this it seems unlikely that Bulwer was excluded from wider networks of gossip or (as we observe above) that she was physically isolated. One sampler refers to the fact that "THE HOUSE IS FULL [of] TRICK WOMEN", a reference to loose female morals in the workhouse which was also a wider narrative amongst other paupers. Similarly, we might easily mistake Bulwer's naming of the workhouse as "BELLY VIEW [as opposed to Belle Vue] WORKHOUSE CAISTER ROAD" as a simple spelling error occasioned by rapid mad stitching. In reality it likely reflected local slang for a brothel, where women "got a [pregnant] belly" through their sexual activities.[80] Elsewhere in the samplers we learn that "E. BULWER ESQ [her brother] KNOW / THIS

HOUSE IS FULL OF NORWICH TRAMPS [vagrants]", which is both true and speaks to wider contemporary concerns about late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century vagrancy.

[Figure 6 here]

We could carry on citing instances such as this which speak both to Bulwer's own enmities and her knowledge of wider workhouse currents of gossip. A detailed consideration of the samplers however reveals a more complex relationship between her and the workhouse. That is, we assume that unless people named in her texts were denoted as workhouse paupers, they must have been either fictional or individuals and families that she encountered in her life before either insanity or workhouse residence or both. Indeed, this is a sensible assumption because Bulwer herself often talks about individuals in relation to their location or domestic residences. This is, however, misleading, as we have already hinted above. Thus, Old Mother Buck and Old Mother Catchpole "both of these disgusting looking old women awkward shapes and horrid names" were noted as being "in cambs [Cambridgeshire]" but were likely Widow Buck alias Bugg (aged 62 in the 1911 census and on the lunatic ward with Bulwer) and Sarah Catchpole (79, and a lunatic attendant in the 1911 census). Similarly, Fudee Joey English, one of the named "trick [oral sex] women" is almost certainly Emma English who in the 1911 census was a 78 year old lunatic in the same ward as Lorina. Mrs Ripley of Martham who had given birth to "4 daughters hereditary lunatics" was almost certainly Meriam Ripley, a 1911 lunatic attendant and very probably herself a docile lunatic. Mary Ann Wright "no children she if left handed honest" may have been Mary Wright aged 62 and a widow in the workhouse in both 1901 and 1911. It is rather clearer that Mr Evans's wife, accused of mixing "cyanide potassium" was Mrs Elizabeth Evans, a lunatic on the same ward as Bulwer in 1911. The "notorious Taylors of Chippenham Cambs … the sodomite carnalite Taylors" may well have been Robert and Thomas Taylor, the former a lunatic from birth and on the same ward as Lorina in 1911. Some support for

these observations is to be found on the two occasions when the main sampler text slips into the present tense: Mrs Gooch, who we should note "is" a "decrepid old woman a full red face hair brown" and who "wears long drab Lindsey draws", may well be Elizabeth Goose, a 78 year old lunatic in 1911, while we know that Bessie Bartram, who brought Lorina news of the Langham and Turner families, was the wife of John Bartram a 75 year old Carpenter on the same lunatic ward as Lorina in 1911.[81] In short, it seems likely that the samplers repeat, embody and continue the enmities and gossip of the workhouse. Moreover, while in obscuring the identity of the people she is really talking about Bulwer might be exhibiting the signs of madness, a deeper consideration of the written texts coming out of the Great Yarmouth workhouse also shows a wider culture of concern on the part of paupers to protect or hide their identity when complaining, gossiping or insulting staff and other inmates.[82]

A final and very important element of context is of course Lorina Bulwer's personal history. We have observed that in the censuses prior to her admission as a lunatic to the Great Yarmouth workhouse, she was never defined as having a mental illness even though the census from 1871 had clear rules on the need to identify such people. Whether a combination of her mother's death and the rejection by her sister-in-law that she often refers to in the texts drove Lorina into mental instability must be a moot point. It is much clearer, however, that she was no stranger to lunacy. The samplers record Bulwer seeing two people being dispatched to respectively Colney Hatch asylum and Broadmoor. Yet her real experiences were closer to home. Thus, we have noted that in 1881 the "weak minded" John Robertson was a visitor in the Bulwer household, but he was not there by chance. In directing invective against Dr Meadows, the Great Yarmouth "SO CALLED SURGEON KING STREET SHAM", Bulwer noted that "THE TUBE HE USED UPON THE P…S OF MR J ROBERTSON AT MR + MRS W J BULWER GENEVE TERRACE CROWN ROAD WOULD HAVE PLACED MEADOWS IN A CONVICT PRISON THE REST OF HIS

LIFE". Robertson, then, was almost certainly in Great Yarmouth for radical treatment and attempts to restore his mind, and living at the time with the Bulwer's.[83] The suspicion that the family was running a boarding house catering specifically for those with mental problems is confirmed by a later entry in the sampler regarding Wilfred Weston who:

> HAD APARTMENTS AT MRS BULWERS GB CROWN ROAD E BULWER ESQ TOLD HIS MOTHER NOT TO KEEP HIM IF SHE WAS AFRAID OF HIM HIS ABSURD WAYS THERE AND AT MR LASTS BAKER SOUTH HOWARD STREET PLENTY OF INFORMATION THERE OF THE LUNATIC WILFRED WESTON AND HIS ANTICS MAKING BREAD AT 4 O'CLOCKE IN THE MORNING IN HIS BAKE OFFICE WESTON FELL HEAD FORMOST IN THE DOUGH JUST AS IT WAS MAKING HE WAS TAKEN UNDER THE PUMP OR TAP TO WASH GAVE HIM JAM UPON HIS BREAD FOR BREAK FAST MRS LAST BROUGHT WESTON BACK TO HIS APARTMENT CROWN ROAD HIS FATHER WESTON LIVES AT PERRYMEAD BATH SOMERSETSHIRE TERMED WASHED IN THE BLOOD OF THE LAMB AND DRAW THE WELL DRY WESTON A LUNATIC WHO PUMPS A CERTAIN TIME EVERY MORNING AS A CURE FOR THE RHEUMATIC ALSO KISSING HIS WIFE'S TOES AND TELLING HER WHAT A BARGAIN HE HAD MET WITH

Lorina Bulwer, then, was no stranger to the conduct of lunatics, the language of lunacy and the nature and dynamics of power and control. Her samplers represent not simply the stitching of a mad woman forcibly incarcerated in the workhouse, but the outcome of a later lifetime full of lunatics and a workhouse life and history in which she was deeply enmeshed.

Conclusion

The extraordinary richness of the record left by Lorina Bulwer is important for those studying material culture, textile history and the history of madness. More widely, however, it is possible, even sensible, to locate her and her stitching in the context of wider attempts by inmates to navigate and shape the experiences of workhouse life under the New Poor Law. In this context, Great Yarmouth Union was, by the later nineteenth-century, re-inventing itself after a half century of conflict, strained relations with the central authorities and harsh treatment of the poor. The existence and survival of the Bulwer texts embody and reflect these changes and, as we have seen, there were important thematic, rhetorical and structural regularities between her textile letters and the written forms through which other paupers sought to engage the central and local authorities. Reading all of this material as one canvas and for a period of New Poor Law history in the early twentieth century which has almost completely escaped the detailed attention of welfare historians, suggests a workhouse regime which was not as harsh, controlled or unyielding to pauper sentiment as much of the historiography would allow. Indeed, using textiles as a lens on the workhouse reveals that workhouse inmates, even those deemed mad, could actively navigate institutional rules on the one hand and were enmeshed in complex and multi-layered networks of gossip, enmity, fiction, and contacts, on the other. This is not to argue that the workhouse somehow became a less powerful symbol of oppression after the coming of local democracy in poor law elections after 1895 (though it might have done), but rather to suggest that inmates had by the early 1900s developed a considerable stage on which agency and the shaping of their care could be played out. Lorina Bulwer's stitched text tells us that workhouse regimes could improve rapidly. Putting those texts back into the contexts that generated them, and particularly placing them alongside the tradition of written text emanating from the workhouse, reveals

some of the complex day-to-day feelings, emotions and sentiments that shaped institutional life in Great Yarmouth and which we rarely see in the existing literature. More widely, while the task of discovering pauper texts in a large and crowded paper archive and then fusing them together with surviving material culture and analysis of census material is a complex one, this article begins to suggest the potential of this approach for rethinking the overwhelmingly grim picture of the workhouse in its later incarnations.

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[1] Lynn Hollen-Lees, *The Solidarities of Strangers: The English Poor Laws and the People 1700-1949* (Cambridge, 1998); Elizabeth Hurren, *Protesting about Pauperism* (Woodbridge, 2007); Felix Driver, *Power and Pauperism: The Workhouse System 1834-1884* (Cambridge, 1993).

[2] Hurren, *Protesting*.

[3] Peter Higginbotham, *Voices from the Workhouse* (London, 2012).

[4] Margaret Crowther, *The Workhouse System 1834-1929* (London, 1981).

[5] Nigel Goose, "Workhouse populations in the mid-nineteenth century: The case of Hertfordshire," *Local Population Studies*, 62 (1999), 52-69; Andrew Hinde and Fiona Turnbull, "The population of two Hampshire workhouses, 1851-1861," *Local Population Studies*, 61 (1998), 38-53; David Jackson, "The Medway Union workhouse, 1876-1881: A study based on the admission and discharge registers and the census enumerators books," *Local Population Studies*, 75 (2005), 11-32.

[6] Driver, *Power and Pauperism*; Graham Mooney, "Diagnostic spaces: Workhouse, hospital, and home in mid-Victorian London," *Social Science History*, 33 (2009), 357-90.

[7] Jean Robin, "Family care of the elderly in a nineteenth century Devonshire parish," *Ageing and Society*, 4 (1984), 505-16; Jean Robin, "The relief of poverty in mid-nineteenth century Colyton," *Rural History*, 1 (1990), 193-218; and Jane Humphries, *Childhood and Child Labour in the British Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge, 2010).

[8] King, *Women*; Wolfgang Mommsen, *The Emergence of the Welfare State in Britain and Germany 1880-1950* (Newton Abbott, 1981); Derek Fraser, *The Evolution of the British Welfare State: A History of Social Policy since the Industrial Revolution* (Basingstoke, 2016).

[9] See contributions to Jonathan Reinarz and Leaonard Schwarz (eds.), *Medicine and the Workhouse* (Rochester, 2013), and Jonathan Reinarz and Rebecca Wynter (eds.), *Complaints, Controversies and Grievances in Medicine: Historical and Social Science Perspectives* (London, 2014). Also Samantha Shave, *Pauper Policies: Poor Law Practice in England 1780-1850* (Manchester, 2017).

[10] K. Price, *Medical Negligence in Victorian Britain* (London, 2015).

[11] David Green, "Pauper protests: Power and resistance in early nineteenth-century London workhouses," *Social History*, 31 (2006), 137-59.

[12] Paul Carter and Steven King, "Keeping track: Modern methods, administration and the Victorian poor law, 1834-1871," *Archives*, 60 (2014), 31-52.

[13] Jeff James, "Sophia Heathfield of Hawnes, Bedfordshire: Punishment victim or victor?," *Family and Community History*, 21 (2018), 202-29.

[14] Various degrees of mental illness from feeble mindedness through to pathological lunatics were identified in workhouse admission registers and reliably in the census from 1871. See Ed Miller, "Variations in the official prevalence and disposal of the insane in England under the poor law, 1850-1900," *History of Psychiatry*, 18 (2007), 25-38 and Peter Bartlett, "The asylum, the workhouse and the voice of the insane poor in 19th century England," *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry*, 21 (1998), 421-32. There is of course a much wider literature on paupers in lunatic asylums, which is beyond this article.

[15] Smith, Len '"The keeper must himself be kept': Visitation and the Lunatic Asylum in England, 1750-1850," in Graham Mooney and Jonathan Reinarz (eds.), *Permeable Walls: Historical Perspectives on Hospital and Asylum Visiting* (Amsterdam, 2009), 199-222, and

Cathy Smith, "Living with insanity: Narratives of poverty, pauperism and sickness in asylum records 1840-1876," in Andreas Gestrich, Elizabeth Hurren, and Steve King (eds.), *Poverty and Sickness in Modern Europe* (London, 2012), 117-41.

[16] See contributions to Peter Bartlett and David Wright (eds.), *Outside the Walls of the Asylum: The History of Care in the Community* (London, 1999).

[17] Bartlett, "The asylum".

[18] James, "Sophia Heathfield".

[19] Shave, *Pauper Policies*; Hollen-Lees, *The Solidarities*; Price, *Medical Negligence*.

[20] E. Hurren, *Dying for Victorian Medicine* (Basingstoke, 2011), 175-218, p.210.

[21] The workhouse was also consistently over-capacity in this period.

[22] It is perhaps important that lunatic inmates were consistently older than the wider workhouse population in each year. They were also cared for by an increasingly old set of nurses. In 1911 the average age of the lunatic attendants was 79, and the head lunatics attendants were 86 and 89 respectively.

[23] Census returns and letters suggest that the workhouse was significantly overcrowded from almost its very first. The capacity was only 300 inmates in 1838.

[24] The National Archives (hereafter TNA) MH12/8633/23908.

[25] TNA MH12/8644/9485; MH12/8644/12630; MH12/8634/28231; MH12/8634/47526.

[26] TNA MH12/8634/9766.

[27] TNA MH12/8644/28816.

[28] TNA MH12/8634/41684.

[29] See, for instance, TNA MH12/8634/31922; MH12/8639/1079/1863.

[30] Hurren, *Dying for Victorian Medicine*, 221.

[31] TNA MH12/8633.

[32] On contemporary labels for mental illness and learning difficulty see Mark Jackson, '"A Menace to the Good of Society': Class, Fertility, and the Feeble-Minded in Edwardian England," in Jonathan Andrews and Anne Digby (eds.), *Sex and Seclusion, Class and Custody: Perspectives on Gender and Class in the History of British and Irish Psychiatry* (Amsterdam, 2004), 78-109; Steve Taylor, "Depraved, Deprived, Dangerous and Deviant: Depicting the Insane Child in England's County Asylums, 1845–1907," *History*, 101 (2016), 513-35.

[33] TNA MH12/8644/12630. Underlining in the original.

[34] On this issue see Len Smith, "Lunatic Asylum in the Workhouse: St Peter's Hospital, Bristol, 1698–1861," *Medical History*, 61 (2017), 225-45.

[35] TNA MH12/8634; MH12/8635/7233.

[36] TNA MH12/8641/24506/1868.

[37] TNA MH12/8641/29761/1868.

[38] Hurren, *Dying for Victorian Medicine*, 219.

[39] He had, unfortunately given the scandal there, also been master of the Andover workhouse.

[40] I am grateful to Iain Riddell for tracing this network through Ancestry and other sources.

[41] "Report on the nursing and administration of provincial workhouses and infirmaries," *British Medical Journal* (1894-95).

[42] Steve King, "Thinking and rethinking the New Poor Law," *Local Population Studies*, 99 (2017), 104-18.

[43] I am grateful to Iain Riddell for his extensive work in reconstructing the life history and kinship connections of Lorina Bulwer. His discovery of a grant of probate on her estate in particular rapidly changed the way that we must view Bulwer and other lunatics.

[44] William White, *History, Gazetteer and Directory of Suffolk, 1855* (Sheffield, 1855), 652.

[45] *The Post Office Directory of Cambridge, Norfolk and Suffolk 1869* (London, 1869), 637.

[46] Norfolk Record Office Y/TC 20, Electoral Registers.

[47] Antiques Roadshow Detectives 2015: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T2HTmCSv3So

[48] The Great Yarmouth local poor law archive is remarkably thin both absolutely and compared to other unions for this period, which explains the imprecision of this statement.

[49] A visitor in the house on census day 1881 (John Robertson) was noted as "weak minded".

[50] On the cultural encoding of these labels see Akihito Suzuki, *Madness at Home: The Psychiatrist, the Patient and the Family in England, 1820-1860* (Los Angeles, 2006); Libby Schweber, *Disciplining Statistics: Demography and Vital Statistics in France and England, 1830-1885* (Durham, 2006); and contributions Bartlett and Wright, *Outside the Walls*.

[51] Cara Dobbing, "The circulation of the insane: The pauper experiences of the Garland's asylum 1862-1910," (Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Leicester, 2018).

[52] Located at the Norfolk County Museum, these artefacts have also featured in exhibitions at the Gressenhall Workhouse Museum and (2014) Great Yarmouth: "Frayed: Textiles on the Edge".

[53] The fact that isolated squares have been found might suggest that the full run of the text was written as fragments and then only stitched together at the end. https://frayedtextilesontheedge.wordpress.com/2013/08/28/looking-for-lorina/

[54] On familiar letters see T. Sokoll, *Essex Pauper Letters 1731-1837* (Oxford, 2001).

[55] For coverage of Bulwer see Sue Pritchard, *Quits: Hidden Histories, Untold Stories* (London, 2012); Sara Impey, *Text in Textile Art* (London, 2013), 17. See also Naya Contreras: https://ar.pinterest.com/pin/78672324727431440/; Marieke Gobel: https://nl.pinterest.com/pin/367254544610941616/; Kitty Campanile: https://medium.com/@BeautyInLonely/unravelled-women-b5f0fc90163f; and Suzanne Breeze: https://nl.pinterest.com/pin/413346072023918654.

[56] https://frayedtextilesontheedge.wordpress.com/2013/08/28/looking-for-lorina/

[57] Bulwer mentions having her genitalia examined by a Dr Pinching of Walthamstow, a real figure who was variously accused of sexual intentions towards his patients and manipulating the dying for financial gain. See https://theknittinggenie.com/2014/04/11/lorina-bulwer-a-properly-shaped-female/.

[58] Ruth Burwood notes that the supposed earlier text refers to the birth of Lorina's nephew forty years before, which would locate a construction date of about 1900. Other commentators have variously ascribed dates between 1897 and 1902.

[59] The sampler texts were transcribed by Ruth Fleming in 2005 and are available here: https://frayedtextilesontheedge.files.wordpress.com/2013/06/transcription-of-lorina-bulwer-2004-824-1_2.pdf. In what follows I have mostly removed capitalisation and underlining.

[60] Lucy Razzall blog: https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/cmt/?p=4042. In one panel Bulwer asks the addressee to forward her "scroll" to the intended recipient.

[61] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T2HTmCSv3So

[62] Elizabeth Hurren and Steve King, "Begging for a burial: Death and the poor law in eighteenth and nineteenth century England," *Social History*, 30 (2005), 321-341.

[63] TNA MH12/8640/45950/1866.

[64] On moral treatment and its methods and spaces see Barry Edginton, "A space for moral management: The York Retreat's influence on asylum design," in Leslie Topp, James Moran and Jonathan Andrews (eds.), *Madness, Architecture and the Built Environment* (London, 2007), 85-104, and Len Smith, "*Cure, Comfort and Safe Custody": Public Lunatic Asylums in Early Nineteenth-Century England* (Leicester, 1999).

[65] This speculation fits with recent observations that relatives tried hard to retain contact with kin committed to asylums, interspersing personal visits with letters, gifts and mementos of home. See Louise Wannell, "Patients' Relatives and Psychiatric Doctors: Letter Writing in the York Retreat, 1875-1910," *Social History of Medicine*, 20 (2007), 297-314.

[66] Most recently Cara Dobbing, "The circulation", has pointed to concerns expressed by those running the Garland's Asylum in Cumbria that overcrowding was forcing them to decant pauper patients to inadequate local workhouses.

[67] Bulwer was a "paying" resident, but she was on an open ward and there is no evidence that her care differed to that afforded to pauper lunatics proper.

[68] See Martyn Lyons, *The Writing Culture of Ordinary People in Europe c.1860-1920* (Cambridge, 2013) Sasha Handley, "Objects, emotions and an early modern bed-sheet," *History Workshop Journal*, 85 (2018), 169-94. The lunatic Arthur Nichols passed through several asylums and was a near contemporary of Bulwer both in terms of chronology and class. His chosen medium for recording experiences was painting, though he also wrote letters and kept a diary. See http://www.glensidemuseum.org.uk/letters-from-bristol-lunatic-asylum-1884-1889/

[69] Steve King, *Writing the Lives of the English Poor, 1750s-1830s* (Montreal, 2019).

[70] On the so called "shame-faced poor", see Peter Wessel Hansen, "Grief, sickness, and emotions in the narratives of the shamefaced poor in late eighteenth century Copenhagen," in Gestrich, Hurren and King, *Poverty and Sickness*.

[71] David Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture: England 1750-1914* (Cambridge, 1989), and Martyn Lyons, *A History of Reading and Writing in the Western World* (Basingstoke, 2010).

[72] TNA MH12/8644/9485.

[73] TNA MH12/8634/36988.

[74] TNA MH12/8630.

[75] TNA MH12/8644/28816.

[76] A former nurse appealed for compensation on 26 September 1858 for two heads wounds given to her by the female lunatic, Sophie Aldred: TNA MH12//8637/36523/1858.

[77] See David Green, *Pauper Capital: London and the Poor Law 1790-1870* (Aldershot, 2010), and Samantha Williams, *Unmarried Motherhood in the Metropolis, 1700-1850* (Basingstoke, 2018), 207-30.

[78] James, "Sophia Heathfield".

[79] Footnote removed for anonymity.

[80] See norfolkdialect.com.

[81] The letters 'ch and 'se' are episodically interchangeable in Suffolk dialect.

[82] Footnote removed for anonymity.

[83] Contemporary treatment for habitual masturbators included beating, binding or cauterising of the genitals.