The image shows the front cover of an antique book. The cover is decorated with a complex marbled paper pattern, often referred to as a 'stone' or 'shell' pattern, featuring swirling, organic shapes in shades of brown, tan, and black. A central rectangular label, likely made of dark leather or cloth, is affixed to the cover. This label is framed by a decorative border of small, repeating floral or leaf motifs. The word 'JOURNEYS' is printed on the label in a classic, serif, all-caps font. The overall appearance is that of a well-used, historical volume.

JOURNEYS

John Curry, Overseer for the Poor for the parish of Walcot, Bath, 1811-31.¹

Jan Chivers

Introduction

When, in May 1811, John Curry was appointed assistant overseer for the Parish of Walcot, he wasted no time in getting to grips in dealing with the presence of paupers in the parish. In June, he accompanied Ann Davis and her child to Bristol, thereby beginning their journey to Waterford where Ann had a legal settlement.

June 1st 1811. Went to Bristol with Ann Davis & Child Pr Coach to Send them to Waterford. Returned the Same day - 24 Miles.²

The above excerpt is the first entry in the diary of the journeys Curry undertook in the course of his duties, arguably a unique document that gives an insight into the breadth of the work undertaken by an overseer in a city parish.

Parish officers and justices were particularly concerned with three aspects of the administration of the Poor Laws - bastardy, settlement and removal. These three elements in the day-to-day working of the parish become apparent from the diary of John Curry, who served the parish of Walcot for twenty years as a paid official and whose diary throws light on the lives of the poor in Bath. A close reading shows the time, money and effort expended by the parish on the administration of the poor laws for the period. The cost of transport, mode of travel, the difficulty in finding putative fathers and the cost of establishing settlements and removing paupers, sometimes over long distances, all posed challenges and indicate where the vestry priorities lay.

This article examines the diary in order to highlight the lengths to which Curry, under the direction of the parish vestry, was prepared to go to rid the parish of unwanted and potentially expensive paupers. Space here does not allow for a discussion of illegitimacy or the pursuit of putative fathers, nor is there room for an in-depth analysis of the costs of the poor law, but Curry's dealings with one family in particular will be used to demonstrate his determination to save the ratepayers from the potential drain on resources in having to support generations of paupers.

The Old Poor Law

When Curry was working in Bath, he was operating under what is often referred to as the Old Poor Law, that is, the law in operation before the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834.³ The Old Poor Law, consolidated in 1601, stipulated that every parish must provide for those parishioners who, through no fault of their own, found themselves unable to make ends meet.

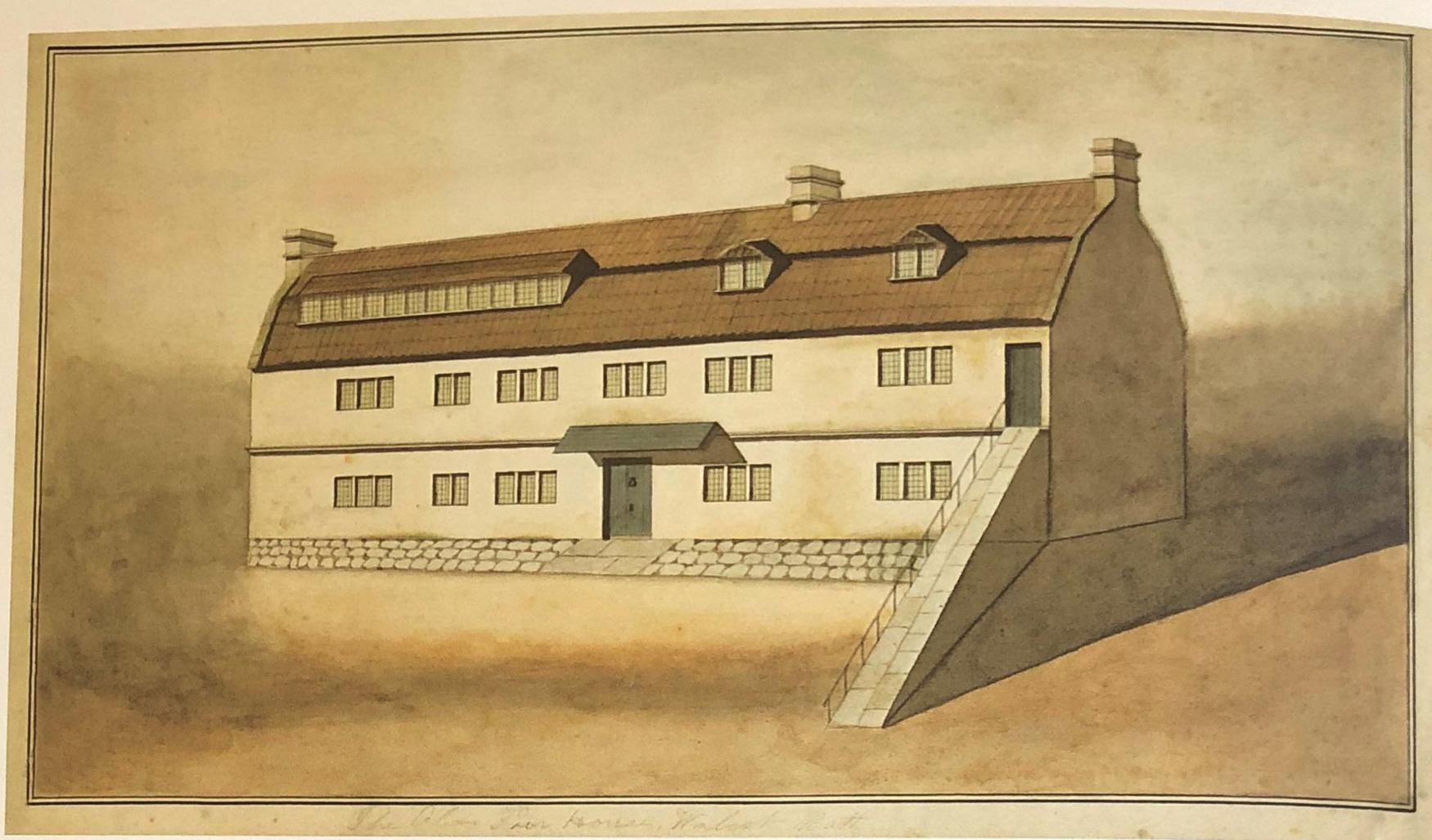


fig 1: The Old Walcot Poor House, London Road, Bath, c.1820

Bath in Time - Bath Central Library Collection

Those who should be helped were defined as the impotent - the aged, the very young and the infirm - and the able-bodied who should be provided with work or the means to work in the form of materials or tools. This latter group were, controversially, sometimes given grants to supplement low wages. A poor rate was to be raised locally based on property and administered through the parish by an overseer, usually elected annually at the Easter vestry meeting [fig. 1].

A later Act of 1662, known as the Settlement Act, assigned every man, woman and child to a specific parish for poor relief purposes, usually their parish of birth. This second act was necessary as it had become too easy for those requiring poor relief to move into a parish with more liberal relief than their own. One of the features of the old poor law was the patchiness of provision.⁴ As S.G. Checkland wrote in his introduction to *The Poor Law Report of 1834*, the pre-1834 poor laws depended on the intentions of legislators at the centre and the actions of implementers in the parishes.⁵

The Settlement Act made possible the removal of paupers from the parish in which they were claiming poor relief to their parish of legal settlement. Establishing where a pauper was, by law, settled was not always easy as paupers, faced with possible removal, may have been, on occasion, 'economical with the truth'.⁶ It can be seen from the diary that a great deal of time and effort was spent by Curry in establishing paupers' settlements, by examining parish records or by meeting with other parish officers, and in escorting paupers who were being removed from Bath.

Some contemporaries saw the settlement laws as restricting the movement of labour and, therefore, counterproductive to the development of the economy.⁷ A modern parallel can

be seen in the 'move-to-work' schemes of successive twenty-first century governments. The easy movement of labour was important for Bath throughout the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, as building work required skilled and unskilled workers, visitors and residents required domestic servants, and the clothing trade required seamstresses, milliners and other workers. David Eastwood has suggested that there was a tendency for labour to be drawn into the town and then removed back to rural parishes when no longer needed.⁸ As R.S. Neale has written, 'without the work of this largely immigrant and geographically mobile labouring population, Bath could not have been built. Nor could it have been serviced.'⁹ This meant the city needed a flow of migrants from the surrounding countryside, and evidence from Bath poor law records suggests that labour moved freely despite the constraints of the settlement laws.¹⁰ A present day parallel can also be seen in the conflicting needs of employers and the concerns of taxpayers regarding foreign migrant workers.¹¹

Overseers

In 1811, when John Curry was appointed, the function of the overseer was to collect the poor rate, as set by the parish vestry, and to distribute relief to those applicants deemed 'deserving' and with an appropriate settlement. The position of overseer was usually unpaid and could be time consuming and particularly onerous for men who were concerned with running their own businesses.

Overseers were selected annually from 'substantial householders' and were usually tradesmen in the parish.¹² When, in March 1788, the Trustees of the Casualty Hospital met with officers of several Bath parishes, the overseers were variously described as a grocer, a shoemaker, a perukemaker, a cheesemonger, a builder and a carpenter.¹³ Overseers were not universally popular. Collecting the poor rate could cause problems, particularly in areas of the parish where many of the parishioners were already on the verge of pauperism, and some parishioners would undoubtedly have been neighbours or trade customers of the overseer, in which case denying poor relief may have been difficult.

Assistant Overseers

All parishioners were entitled to attend an open vestry but open vestry meetings could be large and noisy and difficult to manage, and voting was on the basis of one vote to each parishioner. Two Acts of Parliament, known as the Sturges-Bourne Acts, 1818-9, enabled parishes to choose a select vestry and to elect paid overseers, known as assistant overseers.¹⁴ A select vestry was far more manageable and productive, but the voting was weighted in favour of the propertied. Select vestries can, therefore, be seen as tending to be oligarchic rather than democratic.¹⁵ Walcot can, therefore, be viewed as reflecting the oligarchic city corporation. John Curry was working as an assistant overseer before the passing of these enabling acts made law what was already in practice in some parishes.

Anthony Brundage had suggested that the appointment of assistant overseers represented a growing professionalism in the administration of the poor laws.¹⁶ Overseers who were only in office for a year meant the system lacked continuity, whereas paid officials

were more effective. Assistant overseers, still appointed annually but paid a salary, were, possibly, not only willing but anxious to work for the parish for more than one year. They were often drawn from outside the parish thereby avoiding some of the problems experienced by parish overseers in allowing or denying poor relief to their neighbours, kin and customers.

The Parish of Walcot

The parish of Walcot was the largest of the central Bath parishes and covered a wide social range of housing including both some of the 'best' addresses, Royal Crescent and The Circus, and some of the worst overcrowded courts and alleys adjoining Avon Street. R.S. Neale claimed that by the 1780s the parish of Walcot was the second wealthiest parish in the country.¹⁷ [fig. 2]

From a note written in the same hand as the diary, and pasted into the back of the book, we are given a brief history of the overseers for the parish. We are told that Mr. John Hooper had been overseer for many years with a salary of £70 per annum until his death in 1792.¹⁸ There follow details of a succession of overseers, most of whom appear to have been owed large sums of money by the parish on their resignation or death. At the time of Curry's appointment, Walcot

separated the function of rate collector from that of distributor of poor relief.¹⁹

The vestry minutes reveal that, when Curry resigned in 1830, there were 25 applicants for the position of overseer. The select vestry interviewed all the applicants and selected Luke Harrington. His appointment was confirmed on December 23rd 1830 as assistant overseer and master of the workhouse. His salary was to be £150 with an apartment at the workhouse, coal and candles. The note in the back of the diary finishes with 'Luke Harrington Absconded April 25th 1836, minus £779. 3s. 8d'.²⁰ Walcot was unlucky in its choice of Harrington and he absconded with a significant amount of money. As the average weekly earnings for labourers employed by the highway surveyors in the parish of Walcot in May 1836 was 7s 9d, the nearly £800 taken by Harrington represents poor relief for a considerable number of paupers.²¹



fig 2: View from Guinea Lane towards St Swithin's Church, Walcot, c.1833

Bath in Time - Bath Central Library Collection

It is apparent from the note attached to John Curry's diary that Walcot was paying overseers from the 1780s, nearly forty years before the Sturges-Bourne Acts of 1818 and

1819. The parish would appear to have taken steps to avoid corruption and to secure a more efficient administration, although they were less successful in their appointment of Luke Harrington.

Not only was there a great deal of concern about the cost of poor relief but the early decades of the nineteenth century, were a time when corruption was being attacked in the press by radical journalists, and when the national government was legislating to effect some reform of the system of sinecures, pensions and reversions.²² This was in response to calls from radicals alarmed at the rise in taxation and the growth of state bureaucracy as a result of the highly expensive wars with France. Rosemary Sweet has drawn attention to the importance of civic pride and has suggested that this was equally important 'in movements to revive and strengthen accountable government and the existing institutions of urban administration'.²³ It was in this national and local political climate that Walcot was attempting to inject a degree of professionalism and decency into parish affairs and Curry represented the growing trend for professionalism.

John Curry

John Curry was born in 1774 and died in 1850.²⁴ [fig. 3] There is no record of a John Curry in the 1831 census for Walcot, but the 1833 Silverthorne Bath Directory lists a John Curry living at Vineyard Cottage, Tiney Lane, Walcot.²⁵ The census suggests that the name Curry was not common in Bath at this time.²⁶

When Curry was first appointed in 1811 [fig. 4], his salary was £150 per annum and this was increased, in 1824, to £200. This gave Curry an income of £3 to £4 per week, a significant amount in the 1820s. He was 37 when he was appointed and whatever his way of earning a living before his appointment, he had some education, and, judging by his diary, appears to have been a punctilious record keeper.

Curry was careful to ensure that he showed an interest in retaining his position. On March 30th 1829, he travelled to Taunton for the Assizes in order to prosecute William Smith and his wife for cruelty to their son, but he left Taunton in the evening of April 1st in order to return overnight to Bath to attend the annual Easter vestry meeting at 11 am on April 2nd. After the meeting, he left Bath at 1 o'clock and arrived back in Taunton at 11 pm. His efforts were successful on two counts. William Smith and his wife were found guilty and remained in Taunton awaiting sentence, and Curry was again appointed assistant overseer.



fig 3: Miniature of John Curry by A. Charles
The reverse contains a lock of his hair.
Victoria Art Gallery, Bath & North East Somerset Council

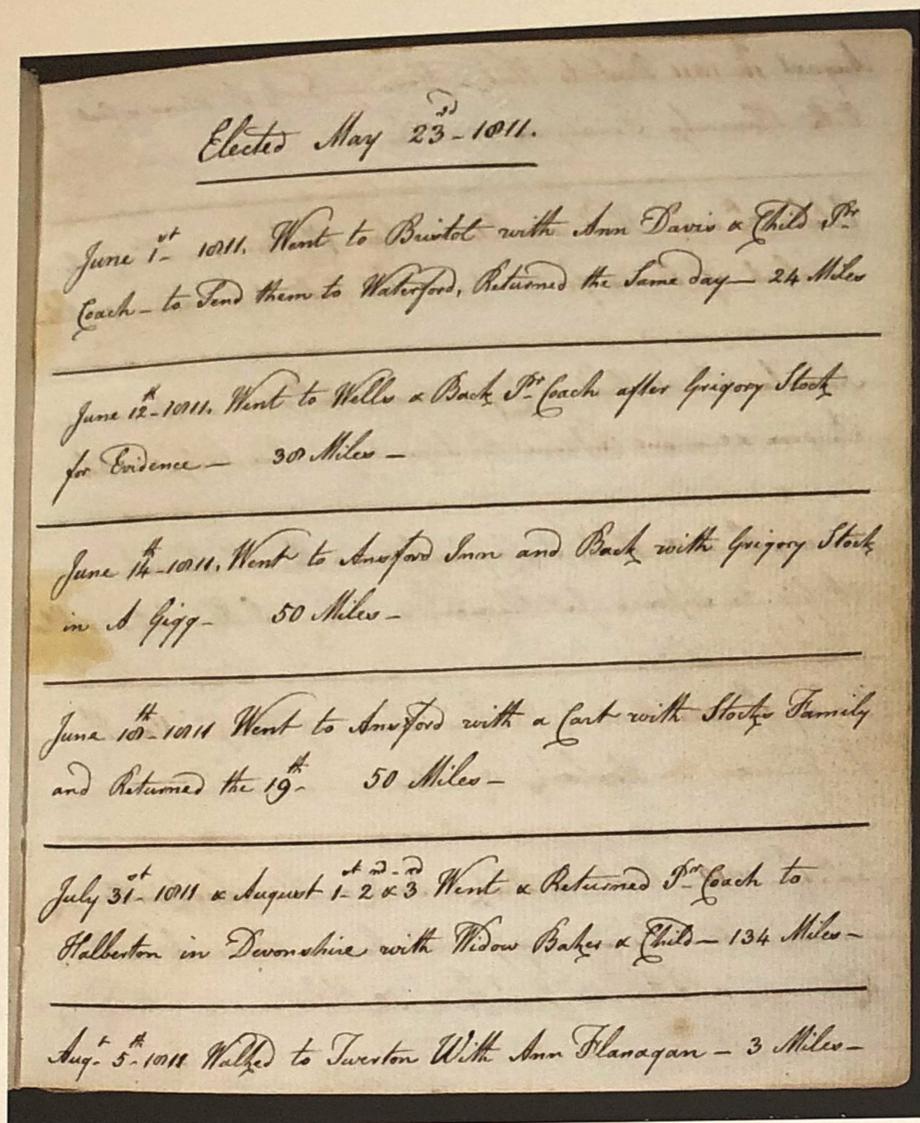


fig 4: The first entry in the journey log of John Curry, June 1811

Bath in Time - Bath Central Library Collection

The few occasions when Curry recorded celebrations are, therefore, all the more remarkable and show us a human face so often missing from the records. He was in Trowbridge on February 8th 1820, when King George IV was proclaimed, and, ten years later, was in Lewes in Sussex and witnessed the visit of King William IV and Queen Adelaide. He recorded that the town was much decorated and that their Majesties were greeted 'with Joyful Acclamation'.²⁷ On November 5th 1828, he was in Wells and recorded in his diary-

'Annually on this Day they have a Custom of Driving a Bull through the streets of the City held in a Long Rope held by several men who Pull in the Bull at times, and when the Mob is thickest in the Street let it out all at once, so that the enraged Animal may make a Spring among them. This Diversion is Continued for three or four hours, and then the Bull is brought to the Marketplace tied to an Iron Ring, (fixed in the Ground for the Purpose) and Worried with Dogs, at the same time Squibs, Crackers etc are thrown about the streets in Abundance to the great annoyance of every Peaceably Disposed Person, So much for Amusements!'²⁸

In September 1829, Curry was in Liverpool where he recorded travelling through a tunnel under the town on 'the Rail Road in the making'. He went for six miles and travelled at 25 mph. He was greatly impressed 'and never before saw such an undertaking'.²⁹ This was the Liverpool

Although it is difficult to gain any sense of Curry as a person or of his attitude to the poor, this incident suggests that he was a dedicated administrator, perhaps with a healthy degree of self-interest.

Curry kept meticulous details of the mileages he covered and the number of days he was away from home. As far as we know, he kept no similar details of parish business conducted within the city, so his use of a diary for journeys away from Bath suggests that he was aware of the unusual extent of his travelling. It is possible that Curry was paid expenses on mileages and nights spent away from home and that the diary was kept for this purpose. After working in the area for twenty years, his local knowledge and his knowledge of the poor laws must have been extensive, and his experience would have been invaluable to the parishioners of Walcot.

What the diary does not give us is any indication of Curry's response to the situations with which he was dealing.

to Manchester Railway, opened in September 1830. The post coach at this time made the London to Bristol journey in sixteen hours, an average speed of seven to eight miles per hour, so the railway must have seemed, literally, breath-taking.³⁰

On two occasions he records travels combining business with pleasure. The first journey involved a visit to the Isle of Wight.³¹ An entry for April 30th 1821 gives details of a period of nine days during which he attended Wells Sessions followed by Salisbury Sessions. Curry then took a day trip on the steam packet to the Isle of Wight where he visited Carisbrook Castle. The next day, he travelled back to Salisbury through the New Forest 'where we saw the Stone that Marks the Spot on Which grew the Oak, where the Arrow glanced against and Killed Wm Rufus while he was Hunting'. This had been a long trip but had involved a number of pauper families, potentially a considerable drain on the poor rates.

In August 1829, he travelled with his wife to London.³² After checking the settlement of Elizabeth Webber and dining at the Lambeth Workhouse, Mr. and Mrs. Curry visited Vauxhall, the famous pleasure gardens but, unfortunately, left us no idea of their impressions.

The details of his travels show that he was prepared to undertake long journeys in the cheapest, rather than the most comfortable, manner. He frequently travelled on foot. In June 1813, for example, he took 'the Pleasure Boat' to Trowbridge and then walked back to Bath in the evening via Freshford.³³ On separate occasions, he walked from Devizes, Trowbridge and Bradford on Avon back to Bath. [fig. 5]

His constant recording of weather conditions is understandable from a man who spent many of his working hours travelling outside a stagecoach. On August 11th, 1817, he travelled overnight to London to enquire into the settlement of Louisa Howell.³⁴ He travelled back to Bath, again overnight, arriving on the morning of the August 13th. He recorded, perhaps rather testily, that he had been absent from home for 42 hours - 36 hours of which had been spent travelling on the roof of the coach for two successive nights. He recorded that it had rained all the way from Pickwick to Reading on the outward journey, and from Reading to Bath on the return. On the last day of 1820, he was returning from London, this time on 'a exceeding cold frosty night.'³⁵ He was sufficiently concerned with the weather in April 1828 that he added a note to the entry for April 21st - 'NB It rained nearly all the time I was Absent, there was not 6 hours of Dry Weather by Day during the whole time,

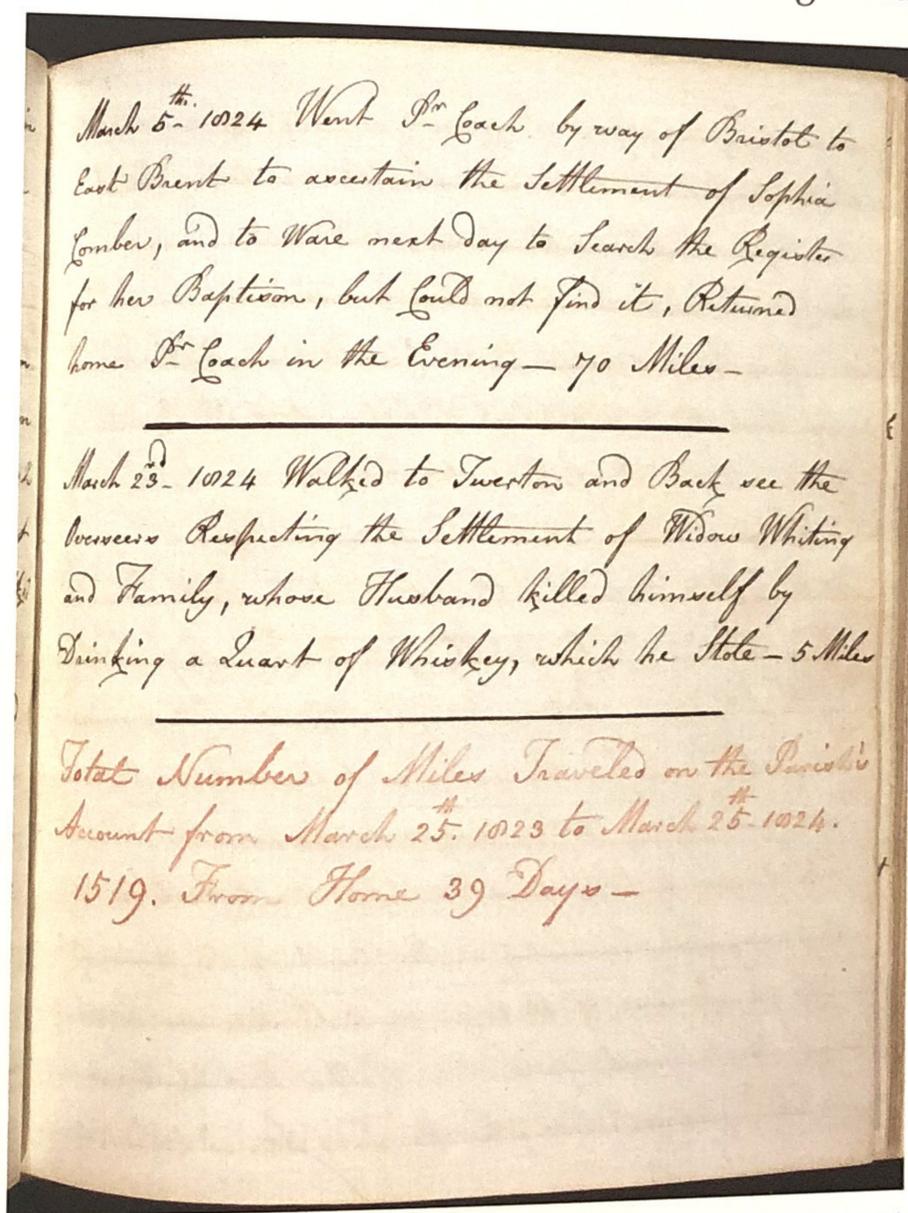


fig 5: Entry in the journey log of John Curry, March 1824 showing 1,519 miles travelled in the last twelve months and 39 days away from home

Bath in Time - Bath Central Library Collection



fig 6: A coach and horses crossing the Old Bridge and leaving Bath c.1800, similar to the mode of transport used by Curry

Bath in Time - Bath Central Library Collection

and as I travelled outside of the coach, I was well Soaked.' [fig. 6] Towards the end of his time as overseer on September 6th 1829, he spent two very cold days in London.³⁶ He travelled on to Manchester and Liverpool, returning to Bath via Congleton. His diary shows that he had been away from Bath '7 days and 3½ hours exactly. Travelled 554 miles outside the coach mostly in the rain'. He regularly travelled outside, and sometimes overnight, on coaches for economy. He would, therefore, appear to have been acting as thriftily as possible with little regard for his own comfort.

He resigned his position in October 1830, but was persuaded to continue until January 1831. The last entry in his diary is for January 6th 1831. He had been to Whitaker Burgh, near Bungay, travelling through Chelmsford, Colchester and Ipswich. He was away for eight days and 'never suffered so much with Cold in the time of my life'.³⁷

After his resignation from Walcot, Curry was chairman of the combined Abbey and St. James poorhouse committee, and the minutes of a meeting on May 19th 1834 indicate the parishes' response to the Poor Law Amendment Bill then before Parliament.³⁸ They found the bill 'highly objectionable' and found it their 'bounden duty to oppose (*sic*) the same'. Meetings involving all the city parishes were proposed to 'adopt such methods as shall be considered necessary to prevent the same passing into Law'. The minute was signed by John Curry. A resolution was then passed thanking Curry for 'his efficient conduct of the Chair'. That the committee deemed the Bill unnecessary shows the attitude of the central Bath parishes to their work as administrators of the old poor laws. It also suggests that the city parishes were prepared

to act together rather than parochially when necessary. The passing of the Poor Law Amendment Act meant that parishes lost control of much of the administrative function of the poor law so they were not, of course, unbiased.

The Diary

The diary, comprising one volume of closely written manuscript, gives us many insights into the work of an eighteenth-century assistant overseer. We cannot be sure that it was written by Curry himself but, if it was, we can see that he had a clear bold hand.

A good part of his travelling seems to have been incurred in establishing paupers' parishes of settlement: the establishment of poor relief applicants' settlement outside Walcot was of great importance to the ratepayers. It is understandable, therefore, that pauper families with young children claiming a settlement in Walcot were not viewed with enthusiasm by parish officers.³⁹ This, perhaps, explains John Curry's concern, one might almost say obsession, with the Simms family.

John Curry and the Simms Family

The records of Hampshire Quarter Sessions record that in October, 1812, an Elizabeth Sims [*sic*], described as the wife of William Sims, a soldier in the Gloucestershire militia, and her four children, Eliza, aged eight, Caroline, five, Henry, four, and Jane, two weeks, were subject to an appeal by the parish officers in St. James against their removal to that parish. The parish of St. James prevailed and Carisbrooke was ordered to pay to St. James £8. 11s. 6d, relief already given to the family, who were then sent back to Carisbrooke.⁴⁰

The Simms family are first mentioned in the diary on December 9th 1812, when Curry went to Plymouth Dock to examine William Simms, a soldier in the South Gloucester Militia, as to his settlement and, therefore, that of his family.⁴¹ Simms' wife and four children must have been removed from Carisbrooke to Bath, presumably for a second time, sometime between October and early December 1812.

That William Simms was in the militia is significant. Soldiers in the militia were notoriously badly paid (eight pence a day with numerous deductions), and it is unlikely that he would have been able to support his growing family. Joining the army may have been a form of desertion with the knowledge that his family would obtain poor relief. The wives of military men were entitled to poor relief and, as the militia moved around a great deal, William Simms may have assumed that the authorities were unlikely to catch up with him, as indeed proved to be the case.⁴² There is an element of conflict here as if Simms was, in fact, in the militia, his family was entitled to poor relief. The only question was which parish was to bear the expense of supporting Mrs. Simms and her four children.

Curry returned to Bath on December 14th, and three days later travelled to Southampton, and thence to the Isle of Wight, to serve notices of appeal against the removal of the family to Bath. It is not clear, at this point, whether the family were in St. James or Walcot. Curry returned to Bath on December 20th having travelled 436 miles and having spent twelve days trying to establish which parish was responsible for the Simms family.

Over the New Year period, 1812 to 1813, Curry went to Brighton via London in order to find a witness for the appeal to be tried at Winchester. By January 10th 1813, Curry was in Winchester appealing against the removal of the family to Walcot. He was accompanied by Mrs. Simms and her youngest child, Jane, and as Walcot was successful, Mrs. Simms and Jane returned to Carisbrooke. On January 29th, Curry, enlisting the help of his wife, travelled from Bath to Carisbrooke with the remaining three Simms children who must have been kept in Bath, presumably in the poorhouse, while the appeal was tried.

This was not the end of the ordeal for the Simms family as we learn, from the Hampshire records, that on February 6th 1813, they were in Brightelmstone (Brighton, Sussex) having been removed again a bare week after their return to Carisbrooke.⁴³ This time Carisbrooke was ordered to pay £9 1s. 6d, plus forty shillings in expenses to Brightelmstone, and to take back the unfortunate family.

It is obvious that the parish of Carisbrooke was anxious to rid itself of the Simms family, and no other parish was keen to take them. Mrs. Simms was of child-bearing years and could have produced several more children, all of whom could have become a burden on the

rates. Alannah Tomkins in *Women and Poverty* suggested that in the period 1700-1850 a disproportionate section of the poor were women.⁴⁴ Timothy Hitchcock and John Black also found that widows, single mothers and deserted wives were particularly vulnerable to economic conditions.⁴⁵ Research in Bath confirms these assertions, as out of a total of 284 individuals examined in the city as to their settlement, 69 per cent was female.⁴⁶ The Simms children would have been expensive in terms of poor relief for a number of years and, later, apprenticeship fees and, perhaps more importantly, they might have gained a settlement in Bath.⁴⁷ Neither Mrs. Simms nor any of her children would have been able to join the labour pool in Bath. All-in-all, the Simms family would not have been seen as an asset to any parish and, as a result, they were moved around the country despite the fact that, in October 1812, Elizabeth Simms' youngest child, Jane, was only two weeks old.

Curry had travelled something in excess of 1,000 miles, mostly by

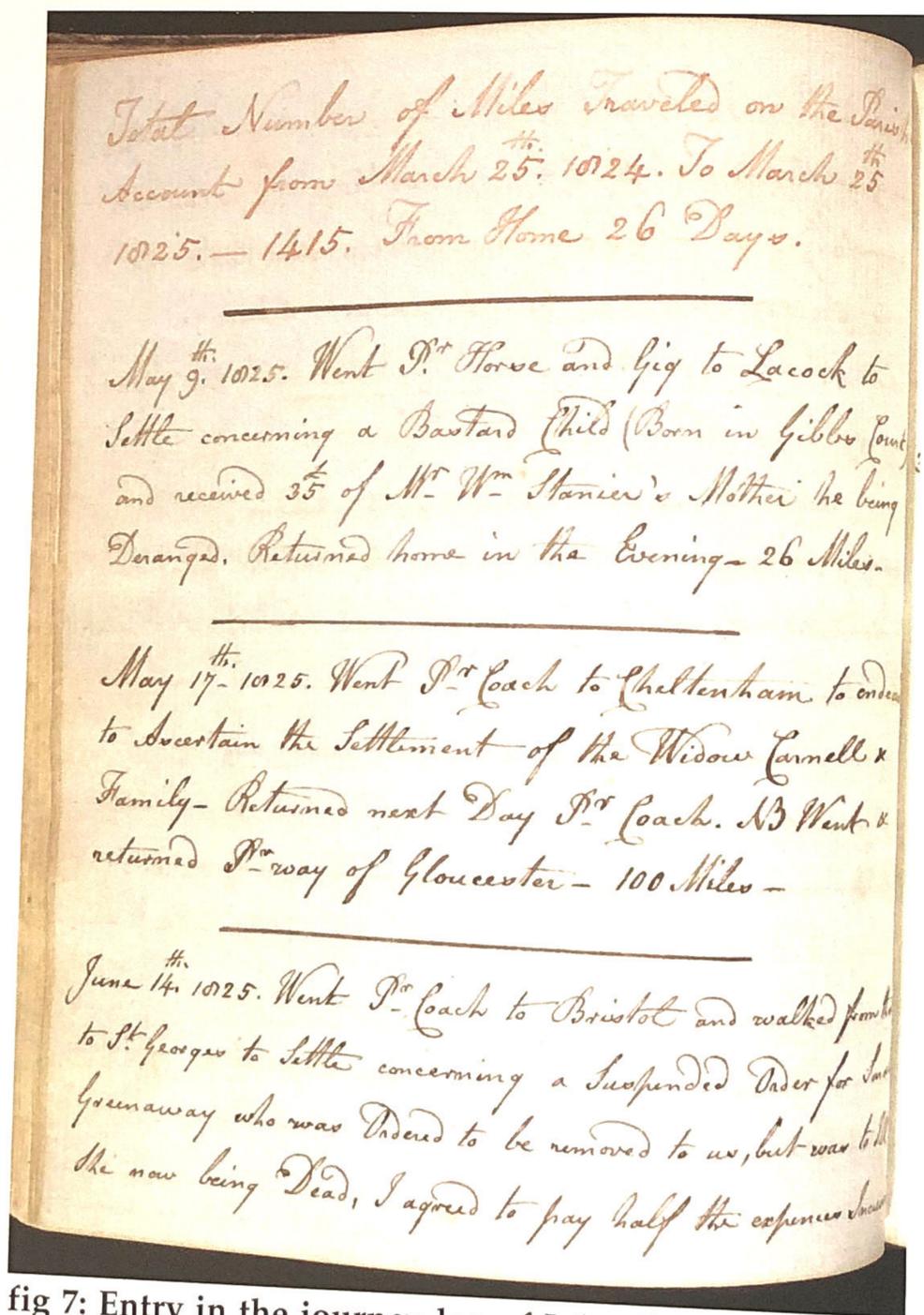


fig 7: Entry in the journey log of John Curry, May 1825 detailing trips to Lacock, Cheltenham and Bristol
Bath in Time - Bath Central Library Collection

coach, and had spent approximately twenty-seven working days on the matter. As Curry travelled a total of 2,164 miles between Easter 1812 and Easter 1813, this represents almost half of the total mileage.⁴⁸ [fig. 7] Presumably, he, and the ratepayers of Walcot, felt that this was time and money well-spent, the alternative being to support the Simms family for several years. Whether in fact this was, to use a modern term, cost effective is open to question. Current concerns around the issue of the cost of benefits, and who should be supported by the state, clearly have a long history.

In the light of the above narrative it would appear that those contemporary pamphleteers who wrote deploring the cost of removals had a point. William Bleamire was particularly critical of the cost of administering the poor laws. He made the point that the amount spent on settlement disputes and removals 'would have kept the wretched creatures in ease and comfort for years'.⁴⁹ The story of the Simms family demonstrates the lengths to which the authorities in all the parishes concerned were prepared to go to avoid having paupers settled in the parish, particularly involving a woman with four young children.

This is not the last we hear of the Simms family, as in March and April 1815, Curry travelled to Bristol to serve notices of appeal against an order removing the family to Walcot. He went to Bristol again in April 1816. Then on May 7th 1816, he travelled to Bristol in an attempt to examine William Simms but found the militia had moved to Gloucester. Two days later, he followed the militia to Gloucester but failed to find Simms. Later, on the May 26th, he travelled to London, and the next day to Brighton to take Simms' wife and children back to Sussex. He took two trips in July on the matter, one to Brighton to serve notice of appeal and then to Bridgwater Sessions when the appeal failed due to defects in the notices. He was still attempting to interview William Simms in Bristol in October 1816, and two days after this abortive trip he was at Taunton Sessions when an appeal failed again. It would seem that by the autumn of 1816 Curry and Walcot were defeated in their attempt to keep the Simms family out of the parish.

The New Poor Law

Contemporary pamphleteers were critical of both the cost and the administration of the poor laws.⁵⁰ They saw the cost of relief rising but no discernible diminution in the number of poor. Parish officers were perceived as incompetent at best and at worst corrupt. In 1832 a Royal Commission was appointed in an attempt by Parliament to understand the condition of the poor and to formulate a policy of poor relief. The Commission produced its Report in 1834. It was highly critical of the existing poor laws, mentioning in particular the lack of competent accounting by often illiterate and corrupt annual overseers. The report was less critical of select vestries and assistant overseers. Walcot had a select vestry and John Curry was an assistant overseer, and viewed in the context of the report, which came out after Curry had been in parish employment for over twenty years, Walcot can be seen as forward-looking and efficient.

The Poor Law Report led to the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 that changed the provision of poor relief in England and Wales. Parishes were grouped together to form unions with one central workhouse. In Bath, this was built on the outskirts of the city where St. Martin's Hospital is now located. An unpaid Board of Governors was appointed and overseers were replaced by paid relieving officers who worked in a number of parishes and were unlikely to be known to applicants. The intention was that outdoor relief, that is relief paid to paupers

outside the workhouse, was to be abolished and the concept of 'less eligibility' introduced. In practice, local guardians found that outdoor relief was cheaper than the cost of maintaining all paupers in the workhouse. Nevertheless, this meant that conditions in the workhouse were to be worse than those experienced by workers in the lowest paid jobs. Paupers on entering the workhouse were segregated by age and gender, meaning that families, including those with young children and elderly couples, were split up. By the time the new act came into being John Curry had retired.

Conclusion

John Curry resigned in October 1830, but was persuaded to stay in post until January 1831. Possibly the constant travelling, often in discomfort, the stays away from home and the rigours of an English climate had taken their toll. It is a relief to see that he lived for another nineteen years. The register of deaths shows that a John Curry of Bath died in the April-May-June quarter of 1850.⁵¹ His remarkable diary shows us something of the extent of the work of an early-nineteenth century overseer, although John Curry, as a paid officer, working in a large urban parish, was probably not typical of overseers. He was literate and kept meticulous records, particularly of the mileages he covered and the number of days he was away from home. We can see from his diary that a good deal of his time was spent in seeking information about settlements and in escorting paupers to their parishes of settlement. He was prepared to appeal against orders removing paupers to Walcot and pursued every avenue to ensure that the ratepayers of Walcot were not disadvantaged.

John Curry's diary gives us some indication of the administration of the poor laws in Bath and their importance in parish life. The saga of the Simms family shows the lengths to which parishes, not only Walcot, were prepared to go to push the poor laws as far as they could. Because they were not part of a productive labour force, nor were they likely to be for some years, the family was removed again and again.

There is a danger that from a reading of the diary we develop a narrow view of the administration of the poor laws in Walcot as inhumane and for a more balanced view the diary should be read in conjunction, where possible, with other poor law records, for example, details of payments to paupers, churchwardens' accounts and workhouse minutes. This, however, is beyond the remit of this article. What we can see is that Walcot was ahead of the game in many respects. The diary also confirms some of the fears of contemporaries regarding the time, money and effort expended in removals.

Although it is difficult to gain anything other than an impression from his diary, John Curry would appear to have been a dedicated, efficient and honest official, no doubt exactly what the select vestry of Walcot was looking for. In John Curry they would appear to have found just the man.

Notes

1. The research for this article is part of an on-going project and is, therefore, 'work in progress'.
2. John Curry Overseer of the Parish of Walcot Bath, Diary of the journeys undertaken in the course of his duties by John Curry 1811-1830. Bath City Library, Acc.No. 1243. (Hereafter 'Diary'.) R.S. Neale shows that long distance immigration from Ireland increased rapidly the Irish population in Bath, and the suspicion aroused by the presence of Irish the city in 1798 is described by Graham Davis and Penny Bonsall. Repatriation was an emotive issue. R.S. Neale, *Bath 1680-1850: A Social History or A Valley of Pleasure yet a Sink of Iniquity* (London, 1981), p.71/2; Graham Davis and Penny Bonsall, *A History of Bath: Image and Reality*, (Lancaster, 2006), p.147. Davis has also written elsewhere of the poor reputation suffered by the Irish in Bath. Although Davis is writing of a later period than that covered by the diary, it is reasonable to assume that the presence of Irish in the city was always a sensitive issue. Graham Davis, *Bath as Spa and Bath as Slum: The Social History of a Victorian City*, (Lampeter, 2009), pp.101-2.
3. For the Old Poor Law see Anthony Brundage, *The English Poor Law, 1700-1930* (Basingstoke, 2002); Martin Daunton, *Progress and Poverty: An Economic and Social History of Britain, 1700-1850* (Oxford, 1992); Steven King, *Poverty and Welfare in England, 1700-1850: A Regional Perspective* (Manchester, 2000); Steven King and Alannah Tomkins, *The Poor in England 1700-1850: An Economy of Makeshifts*, (Manchester, 2003); J.D. Marshall, *The Old Poor Law, 1795-1834* (London, 1968); Dorothy Marshall, *The English Poor in the Eighteenth Century - A Study in Social and Administrative History* (London, 1926); Geoffrey Oxley, *Poor Relief in England and Wales, 1601-1834* (Newton Abbot, 1974); J.R. Poynter, *Society and Pauperism: English Ideas on Poor Relief, 1775-1834* (London, 1989); Paul Slack, *From Reformation to Improvement: Public Welfare in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1999); K.D.M. Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor: Social Change and Agrarian England 1660-1900*, (Cambridge, 1985); K.D.M. Snell, 'Pauper Settlement and the right to poor relief in England and Wales', *Continuity and Change*, 6 (1991); Peter Solar, 'Poor relief and English economic development before the Industrial Revolution,' *Economic History Review*, Vol.48, 1995; Sydney Webb and Beatrice Webb, *English Local Government: Part 1, The Old Poor Law* (London, 1927).
4. See in particular King, *Poverty and Welfare in England*, and Snell, *Annals*.
5. S.G. and E.O.A. Checkland, eds., *The Poor Law Report of 1834*, (Harmondsworth, 1973), p.11.
6. Curry, 'Diary', Aug 10th 1829. Elizabeth Webber attempted to claim a settlement in Bath but was found to be settled in Lambeth. See also Penelope Lane 'Work on the margins; poor women and the informal economy of eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Leicestershire', *Midland History*, (GB), Vol.22, 1997, p.73.
7. Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, first published 1776 (reprinted London, 1999), Bk.1, p.245; Arthur Young, *Political Arithmetic. Containing observations on the present state of Great Britain; and the principles of her policy in the encouragement of agriculture. ... By Arthur Young, ...*, London, 1774. Based on information from *English Short Title Catalogue. Eighteenth Century Collections Online*. Gale Group. <http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/ECCO> Accessed 19 July 2006.
8. David Eastwood, *Government and Community in the English Provinces 1700-1870*, (London, 1997), p.62.
9. Neale, *Bath: A Social History*, p.79.
10. On June 8th 1770, Elizabeth Lee, singlewoman, was examined by the authorities as to her settlement. She had been born in Compton in Dorset, but had then moved to Melcombe Regis as a servant. She then moved to Bath and had been employed as a servant for some years. 'City

- of Bath pauper examinations, 1770-74,' Book 4. On January 27th 1821, Henry Stevens was in Walcot. Born in Minchinhampton, Glos, he had been apprenticed to a stonemason in Stroud. He then came to Bath and worked for some time as a stonemason in the city. 'Pauper Examinations for the parish of Walcot, 1821-24'.
11. In May 2005 Spain granted an amnesty to approximately 700,000 migrant workers mostly employed in agriculture and tourism. Closer to home, one of the strands in the Liberal-Democrat Manifesto for the recent (2010) election proposed a similar amnesty.
 12. James Barry Bird, *The Laws Respecting Parish Matters. Containing the several offices and duties of churchwardens, Overseers of the poor, constables, watchmen, ...* London, 1799, from ECCO, p.26. Accessed July 13th 2006.
 13. 'The Casualty Hospital, Bath, Rules and Orders', Welcome Library for the History and Understanding of Medicine, Manuscript No. 1094.
 14. These two acts (58 Geo.III c.69 and 59 Geo.III c.12) were brought in by William Sturges-Bourne, Chairman of the committee to reform the Poor Laws.
 15. Rosemary Sweet, *The English Town, 1680-1840: Government, Society and Culture* Harlow, 1999), p.31.
 16. Brundage, *The English Poor Law*, p.52.
 17. Neale, *Bath: A Social History*, p.80.
 18. Curry, 'Diary' undated unsigned note pasted in back of book.
 19. 'The Parish of Walcot Churchwardens' Accounts and Vestry Minutes, 1819-1835', Somerset Record Office, D/P/wal.sw 9/1/1.
 20. Curry, 'Diary' attached note.
 21. Neale, *Bath: A Social History*, Appendix E, p.416.
 22. Thomas Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population, as it affects the future improvement of society. With remarks on the speculation of Mr. Godwin, M. Condorcet, and other writers*, London 1798, ECCO, accessed 31 July 2006; Philip Harling, 'Rethinking "Old Corruption"' in *Past and Present*. 147, (May, 1995), pp.127-158.
 23. Rosemary Sweet, 'Freemen and independence in English borough politics c.1770-1830', in *Past and Present*, No.161, Nov. 1998, pp.84-115, p.111.
 24. Curry, 'Diary', note.
 25. Census details are available at Bath Central Library; 1833 *Silverthorne Bath Directory*, Bath Central Library; Bath Record Office has a name index for Walcot for the 1841 census.
 26. The 2005/6 telephone directory for Bath listed five people in Bath named Curry/Currie.
 27. Curry 'Diary', Feb 8th 1820; Oct 9th 1830.
 28. Curry, 'Diary', Nov 5th 1828.
 29. Curry, 'Diary', Sept 6th 1829.
 30. John Palmer of Bath proposed a new system of mail delivery and the first regular mail coach was established from Bristol to London, via Bath, on August 2nd 1784. The British Postal Museum and Archive, <http://postalheritage.org.uk>, accessed June 7th 2010.
 31. In view of Curry's associations with the Isle of Wight in 1812-13, (detailed later in this article) why he was visiting Carisbrooke in 1821 is intriguing.
 32. Curry, 'Diary', Aug 10th 1827.
 33. Curry, 'Diary', June 8th 1813.
 34. Curry, 'Diary', Aug 11th 1817.
 35. Curry, 'Diary', Dec 31st 1820.
 36. Curry, 'Diary', Sept 6th 1829.
 37. Curry, 'Diary', January 6th 1831.

38. 'Abbey and St. James poorhouse committee accounts, 1828-1836'. Bath Record Office.
39. Curry, 'Diary', on Mar 27th 1827 Curry travelled to Warwickshire, Leicestershire, Rutland and Northamptonshire with Elizabeth Spriggs and her four bastard children each of whom belonged in a different county.
40. 'Order books of the Hampshire quarter sessions', Q1/29 (Midsummer 1812-Easter 1814), Hampshire Record Office, Winchester, (hereafter Hampshire quarter sessions records).
41. Kirsten Olson, *Daily Life in 18th-Century England*, (London, 1999), p.131.
42. Ann Kussmaul, *The Autobiography of Joseph Mayett of Quainton 1783-1839*, (Buckinghamshire Record Society, 1986).
43. Hampshire quarter sessions records.
44. Alannah Tomkins, 'Women and Poverty', in Hannah Barker and Elaine Chalus, *Women's History: Britain, 1700-1850: An Introduction*, (Abingdon, 2005), p.153.
45. Timothy Hitchcock and John Black, *Chelsea Settlements and Bastardy Examinations, 1733-66*, (London, 1999), p.xx.
46. Jan Chivers, ' "A Resonating Void": Strategies and Responses to Poverty, Bath, 1770-1835', unpublished PhD Thesis, University of the West of England, 2006, p.41.
47. The cost of apprenticeship indentures varied according to the trade but was often somewhere between £3 and £6. Jan Chivers, ' "A Resonating Void"', p.107.
48. Curry, 'Diary', note between Mar 16th and April 18th 1813.
49. William Bleamire, *Remarks on the Poor Laws, and the Maintainence of the Poor. By William Bleamire, ... London, 1800. p.21. ECCO, accessed July 31st 2006. See also Thomas Malthus, An Essay on the Principle of Population; Thomas Ruggles, The History of the Poor: their Rights, Duties, and the laws respecting them; in a series of letters. A new edition corrected, and continued in the present time. By Tho. Ruggles, ... London, 1797, letter xiii, p.88, ECCO, accessed August 15th 2006; Arthur Young, Political Arithmetic. Containing observation on the present state of Great Britain; and the principles of her policy in the encouragement of agriculture. ... By Arthur Young. ..., London, 1774. ECCO, accessed July 19th 2006.*
50. Probably the most influential critic was Thomas Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*.
51. Accessed via the family history site www.ancestry.com on Mar 31st 2010.