

The Baldisaro Porri "Workhouse Scandal" 1871

By Ian Lockwood



The Skipton Workhouse. Baldisaro Porri was on the Board



In 1871 the Skipton Poor Law Union was caught up in a scandal when one of the Poor Law Guardians, Baldisaro Porri, queried the amount of money being spent on drink at the workhouse, much of it at the instigation of the medical officer, Mr Grainger. It all started innocently enough when questions were asked about the doctor drinking port on the premises in the course of his duties. At the January 1871 meeting of the Board of Guardians it emerged that, in a three month period, the medical officer had supervised sick inmates drinking 2,932 pints of ale and 262 pints of port worth £17 3s 8d while a further £24 7s worth of wine and spirits had been drunk. In addition the officers had consumed 594 pints of beer and 246 pints of porter. Mr Porri also claimed that he would see workmen drinking beer when visiting the workhouse to carry out repairs. Only the sick should be consuming alcohol he claimed. For his pains he was criticised by other guardians for making remarks which were being reported in the press and would upset rate payers.

Mr Porri was undaunted. At the next fortnightly meeting he asked for an official inspection by the Poor Law Board into the accounts and made allegations that some bills were being tampered with. His request was refused and instead a general request was made to Mr Grainger to cut back

wherever he could on the beer and port he prescribed for the sick. The Pioneer said that without a precise breakdown of who drank what "we cannot decide whether or not the union doctor prescribes alcoholic stimulants as recklessly and unscientifically as medical men in general are in the habit of doing".

But the next edition of the Pioneer, on February 18, turned up the heat. It published a letter leaked to them by Porri, from the Burnley workhouse guardians. It showed that despite Burnley workhouse having around 160 inmates to Skipton's 130 on an average week, the Burnley guardians spent less on alcohol in a whole year than Skipton had in three months. Similar comparisons were later made with Keighley. Mr Grainger apologised to the next meeting of the board of guardians if he had caused offence but said he had been acting with the best medical care for the workhouse inmates.

By now the amount of beer wines and spirits being supped at the workhouse was the talk of the town and Porri was being praised for bringing it to light. On February 28 1871 the Pioneer informed its readers of the latest development. A vote of confidence in the workhouse master, Mr Kidd, was passed but some guardians wanted a teetotal regime at the institution. It was pointed out that the medical officer, Grainger, was appointed by the Poor Law Board, based in London and the guardians could not countermand his prescriptions without special dispensation from the board. It was decided to seek clarification about the high level of consumption. But Porri repeated his demand for an inspection. One supplier, he now claimed, had been asked to present his bill at a later date, the inference being that it would not show up until later after the spotlight had turned away from alcohol consumption at the workhouse. Pressed, Porri refused to give more details except to an inspector but without revealing more about his evidence his peers refused to back him.

The next meeting, on March 4, reported that the amount of alcohol consumed had fallen by £10 in the last quarter before Porri dropped his latest bombshell. He claimed he had been asked to account for his actions by the assistant workhouse master, something which no other guardian would accept, and he walked out of the meeting. On his way down the stairs a female inmate shouted at him that he wanted to deprive them of a drop of beer – unfairly the Herald claimed as Porri was not against the principle of alcohol being consumed but questioned the amounts and wanted it restricted to those who needed it.

The Poor Law Board in London ruled on the Skipton wish for an alcohol-free workhouse in a letter from assistant secretary Francis Fletcher dated March 17 1871. He said that the distribution of alcohol to healthy workhouse inmates was against the rules but if the medical officer prescribed it for sick persons then there could be no justification in denying it.

Porri had an ally called Bland on the board of guardians and he took up the cudgels at the next meeting which descended into a slanging match. Bland refused to shut up and allow business to move on and the meeting ended in uproar when the chairman, W Wilkinson, told Bland: "Will you keep quiet? I will hear more at the Red Lion but not here for it is nothing more than a public house brawl. This is nonsense"¹.

¹ CP April 8 1871.

The whole affair was dividing the town and in April 1871 elections were due for three places for Skipton guardians on the board. Porri was up for re-election and pamphlets were circulated calling on support for him and two like-minded candidates. Porri topped the poll with 646 votes, with his allies second and third, more than double the rest of the field – yet there was another twist in the scandal to come. When Porri turned up at the next meeting the clerk to the board, called Brown, who was also returning officer for the election, announced that Porri was disqualified. Porri, who ran a jewellery and pottery shop on Caroline Square, had left the property in the hands of his son, Charles, who, in what the paper termed an “unauthorised alteration” was now the name of the ratepayer for the property. Baldisarro, the clerk coldly asserted, was not eligible to stand or vote as he was not registered as having a property worth £25 in rateable value in Skipton. No matter that Baldisarro was the owner of the premises and the business and paid the rates on them, it was Christopher whose name was on the record. Porri went – but not quietly. He appealed to the London Poor Law Board who discovered that the clerk was wrong to say that people needed to own property worth £25 to stand or vote for the board. In fact the figure was £20 and so others might have been denied their right to vote and indeed stand. They ordered the Skipton election to be re-run.

The whole affair had become very bitter. The Pioneer of June 10 reported on an extraordinary row at the next meeting of the Board of Guardians (Porri, of course, did not attend). After approving spending money on the baths at the workhouse, one of the guardians called Binns stood up and said that had heard the reporter from the Pioneer talking to men gathered round a poster in the town announcing the new elections. The reporter had said the whole board need sweeping away and men like Porri should replace them. Binns called for the journalist to be banned from reporting on the proceedings in future. The reporter, called Hazard, was in the room and was asked if he had made such comments. His response was a withering attack on Binns. It was an attempt to deny free speech said Hazard and admitted he had responded to comments made by Binns, but only because of “unfriendly remarks” about Mr Porri “reproaching him for his nationality” (Porri was an immigrant from Italy). Porri’s supporters in the boardroom joined in with Bland, accusing Binns of being indiscreet. The meeting broke up in confusion.

For a while the affair was dropped awaiting the new elections. In July it was noted that despite appeals to Mr Grainger, the alcohol bill was not falling, if anything it was slightly higher than normal. The election, at the end of August, was contested by only four contestants – Porri and his two supporters and a local farmer called Parkinson, who was bitterly opposed to him and who had in previous correspondence declared himself to believe that the proceedings of the board should not be subject to public scrutiny. Porri topped the poll again, this time with 677 votes, while Parkinson was last with 324. It might have been thought that Porri would take up the battle once more but in fact he was remarkably quiet. This may have been that the board was coming round to a consensus that the problem was down to the medical officer Mr Grainger.

In December 1871 the board was presented with an inspection report from the Poor Law Board. The inspector found the medical officer’s weekly reports were not up-to-date and those that had been completed were unsatisfactory. A Guardian called Boothman reported there was general dissatisfaction with Grainger and his resolution that the medical officer should present himself

immediately to explain himself to the board was passed – but Grainger refused to drop everything and appear before the board. Somewhat flummoxed, the board could do nothing except write to the Poor Law Board about what action they could now take. The problem almost relieved itself. Grainger reported sick and no doubt with some relief, the board granted him six months leave of absence to recover. It seems as though the letter to headquarters was never sent – the thorough newspaper reports make no mention of it.

By 1872, the affair had largely fizzled out, although it was to flare up on occasions. Grainger was off the scene and so too was Baldisarro Porri. He was dying and seems to have attended only one meeting between his election and his death in May 1872 at the age of 69. The Pioneer paid tribute to “a cheerful robust little man, an Italian jeweller who won everyone’s respect and erected for the advantage and adornment of the town a handsome block of buildings in one of the most public thoroughfares”.²

² CP May 11 1872