Self-Help: Pauper and Public Death

‘To be buried on the parish was to bear a lifetime’s stigma’

This quote – from Robert Roberts’ account of growing up in a slum in Edwardian Salford, *The classic slum* (1971) typifies the pauper grave in the cultural imagination of the nineteenth and 20th Centuries. As Ann Crowther noted in her seminal study ‘The Workhouse’, the pauper burial was one of the most familiar aspects of hostility to the workhouse.¹

In the latter decades of the 19th century, historians have argued that the pauper grave signified abject poverty, carried the lowly taint of the workhouse, and stigmatised both the bereaved and the deceased. By the late 19th pauper graves were largely situated in municipal cemeteries rather than the grounds of workhouses and not necessarily reserved exclusively for the use of those interred at the expense of the parish.

Common or public graves were communal (as opposed to family) burial plots owned by the municipal burial board. They were available for parish burials but, also, for interments where the bereaved elected to a nominal interment fee to bury the body without the cost of purchasing a private grave: a space in a grave rather than a grave space. In many cases, both the parish and the poor often utilised the same common grave, rendering the paupers’ grave spatially and, to a point, imaginatively, indistinct from poor burial. Regardless of who paid the burial fee, these graves carried restrictions on memorial ornaments and coffins, the grave (and by implication, the corpse) did not belong to the bereaved and they held no exclusive rights of burial over that space. In some cemeteries, graves would re-used after fourteen years. It is, perhaps, indicative of
the cultural purchase of the word ‘pauper’ and the horror specifically associated with pauper burial that the common interment, which at least granted families uncontested ownership of the corpse until burial, was colloquially and imaginatively often indistinct from the pauper burial.

That many people reviled pauper and public graves is undoubted. This revulsion underpinned one of the most popular forms of thrift and self-help in Victorian working-class culture. The popularity of burial insurance testifies to a determination to avoid the fate of the paupers’ pit. For those without insurance, the pawnbroker, leased graves or graves bought on HP provided an alternative avenue to securing burial without involving the parish. Some families and friends shared the cost of private grave space by selling off individual spaces between themselves. Alternatively, as Violet Butler noted of the Oxford poor, sympathetic friends might rally in a bid to raise money ‘even if all other forms of thrift have been neglected’ by the bereaved.2

In the popular imagination, pauper burial was inextricable from personal degradation and lack of independence. Like the workhouse, the pauper grave was meant to be a last resort and it was meant to confer the stigma and shame of poverty on those associated with it. As such, the pauper grave was the antithesis of the private – or respectable burial. The curtailment of ritual, right down to the prohibition of throwing soil onto the lid of the coffin in some cases, ruptured the catharsis of mourning ritual whilst the mechanism of interment – being laid to rest with other, unknown, paupers deprived the bereaved of the prospect of reunion with the deceased in the family grave. Pauper coffins were notoriously flimsy: cracking when full or failing to accommodate different shapes and sizes. Nameplates were at best cheap, at worst, substituted for numbers or names chalked on. Access to the corpse for the bereaved was often limited when death took place in the
workhouse whilst coffins were conveyed to the burial place as cost efficiently as possible. Burial services were sometimes slapdash and haphazard and some relatives at pauper funerals complained about contemptuous treatment by parish or cemetery staff.³

Pauper burial held other implications too. The inability to pay for burial in a private grave implied a complete absence of thrift to the extent that credit facilities with local shopkeepers might be jeopardised.⁴ Given the perceived correlation between expenditure and feeling, it also suggested insufficient grief. Further, as Thomas Laqueur argued, funerals represented the finished picture of a person’s life – their links with the community, their political, associational and occupational networks, friendships and intimate relationships. The pauper burial, stripped of mourning ritual and paraphernalia, shameful and lonely, depicted social isolation and failure.⁵

The public funeral: adaptation and agency

Whilst the curtailment of mourning rites associated with pauper and public burial could rupture the catharsis of the funeral, rudimentary effects of mourning could adopt extra significance as the locus for representations of loss when other rites were circumscribed. This did not necessarily cancel the indignity of public burial but, rather, allowed for its amelioration. Families tended to invest in cheap, often free, customs to mark their loss. As I have argued elsewhere, laying out, touching and talking to the corpse, displaying the body and opening the house or rooms to neighbours and relatives expressed immediate grief in a language which, for many families, the grave space failed to supply. Working-class life-stories and social surveys suggest that families put ribbons in hair, attached flimsy or homemade nameplates to coffin lids, rested flowers on the corpse or draped rough pieces of fabric over the box. Whilst some families made do with a parish coffin,
others managed to acquire resources for the very cheapest coffin on an undertaker’s sliding scale. Some families even made a coffin for a dead child.

The transport of the coffin to the cemetery also facilitated the expression of identity and loss: walking funerals relied on friends and family to group together to carry the coffin, testifying to the deceased’s multi-faceted identity and social networks. Similarly, although many cemeteries prohibited headstones on public graves until the twentieth century, burial board records indicate a culture of families leaving jars of flowers, makeshift wooden crosses or cards on the grave space.

As Liverpool Workhouse Committee noted in February 1884, where the deceased expired in the workhouse, bereaved families frequently removed bodies from the workhouse claiming their intention to bury them directly. They then performed mourning customs, such as laying out the dead and displaying the corpse to well-wishers, before returning to the parish authorities to request parochial interment. Similarly, those who died at home but were interred at the expense of the parish, often travelled to the cemetery interred from home, facilitating the performance of mourning rites. Bolton Workhouse Committee made similar complaints, expressing anger that families applied to parochial authorities for a coffin and burial but spent burial insurance and/ or savings on new clothes, a hearse and, sometimes, a party.

A more unorthodox approach to securing independence was to inter the corpse in a common grave immediately following expiration whilst family and friends rallied to accumulate resources. Once the necessary finance had been raised, the bereaved could apply to have the cadaver exhumed from the common grave to be re-interred in a newly purchased private grave. Initially, the family would petition the relevant burial authority
(rather than the guardians) for the removal of the cadaver. If the board agreed to the exhumation, they would assist the next of kin in making a formal application to the Home Office for permission to disturb the dead. As Joseph Makin, a labourer, explained to Bolton Burial Board in 1886:

I Joseph Makin not being in circumstances when we buried my son Robert Makin to purches [sic] a new grave but having purched [sic] one since hopes that it lies in your power to get Him removed from common grave to purched [sic] grave... we will be very thankfull [sic] for your kindness. 8

In October 1899 George Argill requested permission from Bolton Burial Board to move his three children, who had all died within one week, from a common to a private grave. Explaining to the board that ‘at the time of the funerals I was sick myself and unable to buy a grave’, George had since saved enough money to purchase a private plot. 9 Most families wishing to exhume their dead applied to the corporation within days of the original burial. Elizabeth Jones died of influenza on 5 March 1906 and was interred three days later in a common grave in Heaton Cemetery in Bolton. By 13 March, her sister had written to the town clerk requesting permission to have the body removed to a private grave:

Sir, my Father wishes to have my sisters [sic] body removed to a new grave in the same cemereatry [sic] as she as [sic] already been laid to rest but we want it so as we can have a headstone and then we can claim our own grave and have it to look upon as our own... we want it removed as soon as possiable [sic].
Jones and her father, Isaac, trusted that their application would be brought forward for consideration ‘at once without delay’. The sense of urgency in their application suggests that the public grave had only ever been perceived as a short-term measure. The licence for removal of the body was finally granted on 6 April.\(^\text{10}\)

In Bolton, applications for exhumation and reburial were made for cadavers of all ages, including very young children, immediate and distant relatives. Burial boards appear to have accepted petitions for exhumation as normative. Records refer to such applications as ‘purely formal’\(^\text{11}\) and note the Burial Board’s ‘sympathetic’ response to the relatives who ‘frequently’ approached them with questions concerning the exhumation of their dead.\(^\text{12}\)

Manoeuvring between graves should not, however, be seen as a viable option for the poor en masse. Applications for disinterment tended to be refused or deferred for a minimum of nine months in circumstances where the deceased had died from infectious disease. More significantly, perhaps, many families and friends found the cost of the private grave beyond their means, even with delaying tactics. Many of the families who approached the Home Office for the exhumation of a body had not actually purchased the grave at the time of their application. Rather, they claimed to have saved enough money to do so, and would purchase the grave if permission for exhumation were granted. Ironically, application for exhumation and re-interment was comparatively expensive. Fees for application to the Home Office and for exhumation of the body were added to the outlay for the new grave and re-interment.\(^\text{13}\)

Several inferences can be drawn from the apparently routine character of applications for exhumations. It suggests a degree of resourcefulness among the poor in initiating
procedures to alter the fate of the dead. It also implied a network of knowledge relating to the potential for the disinterment of cadavers. Significantly, reburial in a private grave testifies to a desire to reclaim ownership of the corpse and to have the choice to install commemorative paraphernalia over the plot. More importantly, it is unclear how the re-interment of the dead in a private grave would reinstate respectability. The initial burial in a common grave advertised to the community the family’s lack of finance at the time of the funeral. They would, therefore, already have suffered the stigma associated with the public grave. In terms of repairing the damage to their reputation, Home Office regulations stipulated that swapping graves be executed ‘with due care and attention to decency’; hygienically and at night. These conditions redefined the exhumed corpse in terms of contagion and prevented the performance of ritual accompanying reinterment.

In undertaking to pay extra costs for re-burial and prolonging the process of laying the dead to rest, families articulated a desire to reclaim the corpse as their own. The application made to Bolton Burial Board for the exhumation of Elizabeth Jones explicitly stated a wish to ‘claim our own grave’, inferring a need to assert kinship beyond death. Indeed, the language of the ‘private’ or ‘family’ grave is loaded with connotations of familiarity, identity and spiritual reunion. In contrast, the terminology of the common or pauper grave drew on notions of anonymity, poverty and bodies whom ‘nobody owned’ (or, by implication, loved). In claiming kinship, the bereaved were affirming the ownership and identity of the dead and ensuring that the cadaver lay in a recognised social space.

**Conclusion**
The agency demonstrated by some of the poor in response to pauper burial is striking yet what is also remarkable, given the legendary stigma of the pauper grave, is the elasticity and, in some cases, the ambiguity, of the pauper grave.

That the common grave catered for parish burials and poorer members of society raises a number of questions concerning the meaning of ‘pauper burial’. The interchangeable use of the terms ‘common’, ‘public’ and ‘pauper’ indicates the insidious stigma attached to all interments in these graves. The terminology of the ‘public grave’ was, in itself, ambiguous: it could refer to the public purse of the ratepayer whilst simultaneously signifying the communal character of grave space. Importantly, the restrictions placed upon interments in common graves made no distinction between corpses interred at the cost of families and those at the expense of the guardians, thus apparently penalising families who actually paid for interment. In this sense, references to interment in a public grave as a ‘pauper’ burial may suggest that it was the condition of poverty rather than institutional pauperism that rendered the graves abhorrent.

The workhouse and guardians were peripheral to many of the common graves and the interments in them – they contained many people who had never been in the workhouse alongside those who had; the municipal burial board rather than the poor law guardians administered the graves. Why, then, would families pay to inter the dead in what was, in the abstract at least, a ‘pauper grave’? Crucially, the payment of costs guaranteed that the bereaved could keep the deceased at home in the interim between death and burial without conditions imposed by the workhouse. Moreover, the gesture of paying a nominal fee for burial rather than turn to the parish enabled families to retain a modicum of personal pride. Within the public spectacle of the funeral and burial space, however, the common grave retained its association with the pauper burial, not least because
byelaws governing interments in common graves dictated the type of coffin used whilst curtailing access to commemorative and mourning rites. This implies a process of decision-making based upon a series of complex needs and desires, a process which cannot be explained through the juxtaposition of the pauper with the private, the rough with the respectable.

Crucially, some people were unaware of the distinctions between private, pauper and public graves, interring the dead in public graves in ignorance that the plot would not belong to them and that commemorative gestures were prohibited or restricted. This would appear to suggest that it was the implications of the common grave for mourning and commemorative rites rather than a fear of social disgrace that motivated the impulse to claim one’s own corpse/ grave. That people were oblivious to the ramifications of interment in the public grave may indicate that the stigma associated with common burial has, to some degree at least, been mythologized. It might also, however, imply that popular associations of anonymous and collective interment were so inextricable from pauperism that bereaved families were misled into believing that the payment of burial fees, however small, secured a grave for private use. In this light, the neatness of the pauper/ respectable burial dichotomy falters. It is only by recognising the fluidity of respectability that we can begin to appreciate attitudes towards the disposal of the dead and the fine distinctions between public and pauper burials.

Finally, the common grave did not command universal revulsion. Walter Greenwood’s father suggested, far better to spend the money on living: ‘A pauper grave wouldn’t trouble me... Come to think of it you can let my burial insurance lapse here and now and let’s be having the pennies every week. If I sup it away in beer it’ll be one in the eye for those insurance robbers [and] the right man will have benefited.’16


3 For fuller discussion of conditions of pauper burial see J.M.Strange, *Death grief and poverty in Britain* (CUP, 2005).

4 Ellen Ross, “‘Not the sort that would sit on the doorstep’: respectability in pre-World War One London neighbourhoods’, *International Labour and Working Class History*, 27 (1985), 35-59

5 Thomas Laqueur, ‘Bodies, death and pauper funerals’, *Representations*, 1, 1 (1983), 109-131

6 See Liverpool Select Vestry Records (Liverpool Archives), 353 SEL 10/11, 7 February 1884. See also *Liverpool Mercury*, 15 February 1884 in 353 SEL 14/3. The issue was raised again in 1887. See 353 SEL 10/12, 17 March 1887.


8 Bolton Archives and Local Studies, ABZ 3/1, 4 December 1886.

9 Bolton Archives and Local Studies, ABZ 3/1, October 1889.

10 Correspondence between family, board and Home Office in Bolton Archives and Local Studies, ABCF 15/18, 13 March 1906.

11 Lancashire Record Office, UDCL7/5, 7 December 1896.

12 Public Record Office, HO45/9768/B1065, November 1895.

13 See for instance, Bolton Archives and Local Studies, ABZ 3/1/4, memo dated 8 July 1904.

14 Bolton Archives and Local Studies, BCF 15/28. Standardised Home Office regulations attached to licence for exhumation.

15 Bolton Archives and Local Studies, ABCF 15/18, correspondence from March and April 1906.

16 W. Greenwood, *There was a Time* (London: Cape, 1967, 23.)