THE RUPERT STREET REVOLT
LEICESTER’S JOBLESS CRISIS OF 1921
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PREFACE

This story is set against the hardships faced by Leicester’s unemployed in the years following World War One. In many respects it is a story of the conflict between the hopes of those who came back from the war and the reality of the 19th century Poor Law. Although the war had changed many social attitudes, the benefits of victory were not immediately apparent to ordinary people. Ex-soldiers and civilians alike had hoped that all the suffering they had endured during war years had not been in vain. Though Britain had been victorious, it had come at a terrible human and economic cost: the British economy was now amongst the walking wounded. 1921 was a year of depression, and deflation.

Leicester’s economy was built on hosiery and footwear and if people could not afford to buy its goods in the shops, then jobs were cut in the local factories. The difficulties at home were aggravated by a depressed export trade affected by countries which had had established their own industries when they had been cut off from the supply of British goods. With the onset of the trade depression, those who had been so needed in 1914, found that in peacetime they were no longer wanted.

In 1921, disillusionment was rife. Although Lloyd George's Insurance Act had established a tentative safety net in 1911, it was put to the test by the recession and was found wanting. It was this failure of social policy which was the major cause of discontent amongst the unemployed; but there were other factors too. The promised ‘homes for heroes’ were very slow to materialise. Despite a small number of tenants being able to move into the Council houses built on the Coleman Road Estate, many thousands remained in the overcrowded slums.

This depressing situation was the backdrop to the riotous scenes that happened in Rupert Street. It was just one of the many skirmishes that ultimately led towards the Welfare State. The affair reveals the chasm between prevailing social attitudes of the time. On one side there were those who believed that society had a responsibility to those thrown out of work through no fault of their own. On the other there were those who believed that poverty was simply the consequence of indolence and drunkenness.

Although much of this study was written during 1989 -92, It was too long for an article and too short for a book and in the absence of a publisher has lain dormant for years. Unfortunately, many of the shibboleths of the 19th century Poor Law have been reawakened in the 21st century. The lambasting of 'dolemania' and the demonisation of paying benefits is now as much part of the political debate as it was in 1921.

During the 1980s, I was fortunate enough to be able talk to Thomas Redfern, who was one of the participants in the events I describe. I hope that recounting some of his experiences may prove instructive.

Ned Newitt - September 2016
CHAPTER ONE

DISTRESS IN LEICESTER

Thomas ‘Little’ Redfern served as a mechanic in the Royal Flying Corps on the Western Front. On his return to Leicester from the war he found neither a home ‘fit for a hero’ nor a job. As his unemployment benefit ran out, he found himself on the edge of starvation and at the mercy of the Victorian Poor Laws. For him, and for many others, there was no alternative but to take to the streets and demand food or work. One Friday morning in September 1921, he joined a demonstration which marched on Leicester’s Poor Law office, in Rupert Street, to seek justice for the unemployed. But in a matter of moments, police wielding truncheons had ruthlessly put down the demonstration and left many of the unemployed bleeding in the roadway with broken heads. Fortunately, Little Redfern escaped from Rupert Street with no injury, but many were sickened by what they saw as an unprovoked attack on the unemployed. Popular anger at the behaviour of the police brought crowds out into the centre of Leicester, there were calls for a local general strike and suddenly the police found themselves under attack. For a time, the police station came under siege as crowds hurled stones and other missiles. For many, it was a day they were not to forget. For others it was an incident best forgotten.¹

Despite the city’s reputation for prosperity, unemployment was no stranger to Leicester. During the nineteenth and early twentieth century, periods of sharp recession had often brought hardship as workers were laid off and the misfortune of unemployment was made worse by the indignities of the Poor Law. For over a century, the people’s reaction to the severity of the Poor Law had been a key factor in the development of working class movements in Leicester. Agitation against the harshness of the Poor Laws had accompanied the growth of Chartism in Leicester during the late 1830’s and 1840’s.² During this time there were at least three local riots provoked by the Poor Law. The most serious, known as the ‘Bastille Riots,’ lasted for three days in May 1848 and was only put down by the arrival of a company of troops from the 87th Foot.

¹ Leicester Oral History Archive (OHA), 7th December 1983 and correspondence with the author 1989.
² A. Temple Patterson, Radical Leicester, Leicester, 1954.
Although there were no riots or public disorder during the 1900s, the newly established Independent Labour Party was bolstered by the growing concern over poverty and unemployment. The I.L.P.’s campaigns against the injustices of the Poor Law helped it to gain seats on the Board of Guardians and the Town Council.³ Boards of Guardians were the elected bodies which oversaw the administration of workhouses, poor relief and cottage homes for orphaned children. In 1929, the Guardians were replaced by Public Assistance Committees which paid relief financed from taxes instead of from a locally levied poor rate.⁴

In June 1905, around 450 unemployed men from Leicester had marched to London with a petition for the King. It was the first protest march of its kind by the unemployed and was also to set the pattern for the Hunger Marches of the 1920’s and 1930’s, which passed through the Leicester. Like the Chartists before, Labour’s attitude to this issue was not only in harmony with popular sentiment, but served to distinguish the new party from the Liberals.⁵

**Unemployment Insurance**

The 1905 march highlighted the debate over the Unemployed Workmen’s Bill which came before parliament during the summer of 1905. This Act enabled local ‘Distress Committees’ to be formed. These were brought into being for the investigation of need, they could provide work, establish labour exchanges and, in suitable cases, could arrange for emigration. Their funds were partly voluntary and partly raised from the rates. Unlike the Poor Law, those it helped were not disenfranchised.⁶ Although the Act was inadequate, it recognised the right of men to expect work, even though it did little to provide it. It was described by Lloyd George as being like “a motor car without petrol or only such petrol it could beg on the road.”

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⁴ Both the Majority and Minority Reports of the Poor Law Commission of 1905-1909 had agreed that the Poor Law was obsolete and that Boards of Guardians should be abolished and their functions handed over to local councils.

⁵ Lancaster, ibid pp 175-178.

⁶ Electoral disqualification for those receiving poor relief was not ended until 1918.
The 1905 march was part of a larger campaign led by Labour and the Trade Unions for a complete system of provision based on the ‘right to work.’ This demand was voiced in the Minority Report of the Poor Law Commission in 1909. Lloyd George’s National Insurance Act of 1911 was an essentially conservative answer to these demands. Instead of disbanding the Boards of Guardians and handing their powers over to local authorities, it left the institutions of the nineteenth century Poor Law intact. The demand for a non-contributory scheme of public maintenance for the unemployed was adroitly side-stepped. By giving trade unions, as well as insurance companies and friendly societies, powers to administer unemployment insurance, Lloyd George successfully secured the support of the Trade Union leaders. They saw the Insurance Bill as recognition of trade unionism by the state and as a means of increasing their membership and influence. Thus, with the exception of a few convinced Socialists, the Labour Party gave the Bill its full support.

In reality, Lloyd George’s Act only covered a small group of trades numbering some 2,250,000 men. In 1916, the scheme was extended to munitions workers. In 1920, at the height of the post-war boom, a new Act extended the insurance scheme to eleven million workers. This scheme covered all workers except those on the land, in domestic service or in the civil service. Although the intention was to reduce reliance on the Poor Laws, no new attempt was made to amend their operation. By the time the new insurance scheme came into operation, the post-war boom had fizzled out and the rate of unemployment had risen to 6 per cent. There had been no time to build up any reserves and as Lloyd George’s contributory insurance scheme ran out of funds, thousands of workers found themselves with no means of support. To protect the unemployed from the Poor Law, ‘extended benefits,’ commonly known as the dole were initiated. But the assumptions on which the whole framework of new benefits and relief had been built had collapsed. Even in the brave new post war world of 1921, the idea of giving money to people for not working was still anathema. The Liberals had hoped that unemployment insurance would allow the Poor Law to concentrate on the ‘dependent classes’ and get out of the business of relieving distress caused by recessions. This was not to be.
In the early 1920s, unemployment was no longer a temporary phenomenon. For many it had begun to run into months and would soon stretch into years. Those in such a position had a last resort: they could apply to the local Poor Law Guardians for relief. However, the Boards of Guardians were still expected to enforce the principle of 'less eligibility.' This doctrine had been laid down in 1834 and meant that in no circumstances should the situation of anyone on relief be as good as the lowest labourer. Moreover, no able-bodied person should be given relief without having first to work for it. This work was expected to be as hard as that of any labourer, but less well paid. Any other state of affairs would interfere with the free play of supply and demand in the labour market. In practice, 'less eligibility' acted as a harsh deterrent. It offered conditions so degrading that few would go near the Guardians unless they were starving and, in many cases, not even then. Being forced to go cap in hand to the local Guardians was a humiliating experience and most working class people associated it with disgrace. This view was encouraged by orthodox opinion and the attitude of many relieving officers whose sole business in life was, in George Lansbury's words: "only to relieve distress where it was quite impossible to him to find out any reasons why he should not." In reality, the Poor Law was one of the most sustained attempts to impose an ideological dogma in complete defiance of the evidence of human need.

The Poor Law had abolished the system of outdoor relief and decreed that relief should only be given in the workhouse. This was disliked as much in 1921 as in the 1840s. 'Out-relief' was relief given in cash or kind to people living in their own homes whilst 'in-door' relief was that given in an institution, usually the workhouse. However, at times of depression it was considerably cheaper to pay outdoor relief than to bear the full cost of maintenance of an applicant and his family in the workhouse. In Leicester, during the early years of the century, temporary out-relief was granted only in urgent and necessitous cases. Nevertheless by 1906, the amounts granted were the second highest outside of London. This was generally provided half in cash and half in kind: generally in the form of loaves of bread.

The workhouse test was also modified to the outdoor labour test, which proclaimed that able-bodied men were not to receive relief unless they performed a task of work set by the Board of Guardians in specially created labour yards. From the 1890s, the Leicester Board of Guardians set the able-bodied to work on the land for 1s 3d a day. For this purpose, it had acquired farms at Gilroes and North Evington where no more than about 100 men were put on the 'labour test.' A Labour Yard had also been run for a time. These schemes were seen as serving for the deserving poor, rather the the feckless who were consigned to the cells in the workhouse.

In January 1921, a letter from the Ministry reminded the Leicester Board of Guardians that "certain unions had been granting relief or high scale of relief in money or kind without attaching any conditions." The Guardians were reminded that if these policies were pursued, relief would be

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7 The argument in 1834 had been that: "Every penny bestowed that tends to render the condition of the pauper more eligible than that of the independent labourer is a bounty on indolence and vice."

8 Royal Commission on the Poor Laws. Report from the Commissioners, Inspectors and Others, Vol. IV (Cd 4848)

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debased and the Guardians’ expenditure would exceed the rate on which their expenditure was based. The Ministry told local Guardians that Article 12 of the Poor Law Relief Regulations Order 1911 did not authorise the wholesale granting of outdoor relief, but required the Guardians to give special consideration to each case and report each case to the Ministry.

An attempt by Labour Guardian Amos Martin to get the Guardians to ask the Ministry of Health to vary Outdoor Relief regulations for three months, so as to make it permissible to give relief in money as well as kind to applicants who were destitute, was thrown out by 21 votes to 12. All Labour members voted in favour, with the exception of Joseph L. Harrison, who abstained.

¹⁰ It was the determination of the Liberal/Conservative majority on the local Board of Guardians to adhere to this position that was to cause such misery among local unemployed. Such was the opposition from the Guardians to the idea of providing relief in money, that even the very moderate demands of Leicester’s unemployed were tenaciously resisted.

Workhouse Conditions

Just as outdoor relief in money was frowned on, so the regime that prevailed inside the workhouse was designed to discourage all but the most desperate from seeking help. Although, from 1913, workhouses had been renamed ‘poor-law institutions,’ they had changed little in character. Apart from the elderly, married couples were segregated into male and female quarters and the degrading conditions and work were designed to ‘test’ whether the claimants actually needed assistance. At Swain Street the cells allotted in the casual wards for sleeping were smaller than prison cells at Welford Road and closely resembled, according to one observer, an average coal-house minus the coal. ¹¹

Inmates were woken at 6.30 am and treated to a breakfast of eight ounces of bread, an ounce of dripping, porridge and hot water to drink. (Tea was thought to disagree with the digestion when meat was taken) The mid-day meal consisted of bread, cheese and jacket potatoes. For supper, bread, dripping and porridge was served yet again. ¹² The working cells at the workhouse were some six feet by four feet and smaller than the sleeping cells. Here vagrants would be locked in from early

¹⁰ Minutes of the Board of Guardians (B.O.G.), 4ᵗ January 1921.
¹¹ Leicester Pioneer (L.P.), 27ᵗ May 1921.
¹² Leicester Daily Mercury (L.D.M.), 21ˢᵗ May 1921, L.P., August 19ᵗʰ 1921.
morning until four in the afternoon. They would be provided with two and a half hundredweight of granite and a hammer. The bench in the cell had a hole in it, some two and a half inches in diameter, through which the granite stones would have to be pushed so that they fell into the yard below. ¹³

In May 1921, local public attention was focused on the conditions in Leicester’s workhouse: the Swain Street Institution. This followed a court case where a man of 69 was sentenced to ‘such hard labour as he could do,’ for stabbing the Superintendent of Vagrants in the face with a pen knife. His defence was that he was provoked by an order to do stone breaking, which was too much for a man of his age.

The case was used by Labour’s Guardians to bring the conditions inside the workhouse to public attention and to press for changes. In June, on the chair’s casting vote, the Guardians rejected a move from the Labour Guardians to abolish stone breaking and oakum picking in the workhouse. (Oakum picking was the unravelling of old and twisted ropes.) They also rejected a motion which would have stopped casuals (vagrants) being detained for two days against their will. However, the Tory and Liberal majority did agree that men over the age of 60 should not be required to break stones. ¹⁴

Local Politics

Several of the participants in the 1905 unemployed march were still active locally. Its leader, Amos Sherriff was now a councillor and Chairman of the Distress Committee. Another leader, George ‘Sticky’ White, was its clerk. George Banton, who had been active in local politics since 1896, was now an alderman and was later to become an MP for Leicester East. ¹⁵ At the end of the war, the Liberals were in alliance with the Conservatives and in November 1920, the Liberal/Tory coalition had held its own in the local council elections. This alliance, which continued for many years, was depicted in the Labour’s Leicester Pioneer as:

_The Nonconformist arm-in-arm with the man about town, the temperance reformer embracing the brewer, the parson with the profiteer, the slum owner escorting the lady of fashion, the deacon shedding his respectability upon the bookmaker and the publican supporting the Sunday School teacher all in the grand holy alliance have succeeded in preventing Labour from increasing its representation on the City Council”_ ¹⁶

¹³ L.D.M., June 22nd 1921.
¹⁴ B.O.G. 21st June 1921
¹⁵ Amos Sherriff, 1856-1945. He did not go to school and started work at the age of six and a half years. He worked in a brickyard for the first twenty-five years, spending his spare time learning to read and write. He was elected to the council in 1908 for West Humberstone and his opposition to the First World War had cost him Mayoral office in 1919. He became Mayor in 1922. Banton was elected MP for Leicester East in 1922 and 1923. He became Mayor in 1925.
¹⁶ L.P., 5th November 1920.
Anti-coalition liberals like Arthur Wakerley were not happy with this state of affairs:

It is impossible for the Leicester Liberal Association to continue half slave, half free. The history of the coalition had put in a most humiliating position. They were yoked to Labour for the purpose of putting Mr. Macdonald in; and in the fullness of time, because they could not stand on their own two legs, they were yoked to the Tories to cast him out. ¹⁷

Early in October 1920, on the initiative of George Lansbury, a number of London Labour mayors had demanded an interview with the Prime Minister, Lloyd George, to discuss the growth of unemployment in the boroughs. Ten thousand marched from all over London to support the Mayors and were met with a heavy attack from the police in the battle of Downing Street. This demonstration spurred on the movement in London and on the initiative of Wal Hannington, the London District Council of the Unemployed was formed in October 1920. This adopted the simple but radical demand of ‘Work or Full Maintenance.’ ¹⁸ The L.D.C.U. refused to accept such legal restrictions on the provision of outdoor relief and organised a campaign under to slogan of ‘Go to the Guardians.’ All over the London the unemployed marched to the poor law offices to demand unconditional relief. Frequently the guardians’ boardrooms were occupied until they were compelled to grant, quite illegally, the relief demanded or until the unemployed were expelled by the police. Many London boroughs met the demands of the demonstrators, but where they did not, the unemployed attempted to take over civic premises. These invasions and mass campaigns in the London Boroughs eventually had their effect. In November 1920, the Government raised the rate of unemployment benefit to fifteen shillings for men and twelve shillings for women. As yet there were no allowances for wives, children or dependants.

A Worse ning Situa tion

By January 1921, the employment situation in Leicester had become serious. Some 14,000 people were registered as unemployed. ¹⁹ It was estimated in April that some 25,578 people were drawing unemployment pay. ²⁰ The local trade unions, which had been paying benefit to their unemployed members were beginning to run out of funds. The Boot and Shoe Union was paying out several thousand pounds a week in unemployment pay. The worsening situation led the City Council to introduce the provision of mid-day meals for ‘necessitous children.’ ²¹ These were supplied every day except Sunday through four centres in the City, staffed by teachers who had volunteered their services without pay. The Distress Committee which channelled charitable donations into grocery tickets and work schemes for the unemployed was now under considerable pressure. The 1905 Unemployed Workmen’s Act allowed local Distress Committees to help unemployed workers with small cash handouts or temporary work during times of widespread unemployment. This helped many workers avoid entering the Union workhouses. This legislation was inherited from the Conservatives and enacted by the Liberal government. ²² The affairs of the Distress Committee were thrown further into chaos

¹⁷ L.D.M. 19th March 1921.
¹⁹ L.P., 7th January 1921
²⁰ Leicester Evening Mail (L.E.M.) 20th April 1921
²¹ City Council Minutes (C.C.) 7th December 1920. This system, which attracted a 50% Government grant and replaced a system in which meals had been delivered directly to the child’s home.
²²
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by the suicide of its secretary George 'Sticky' White, who cut his throat on the steps of the offices of the Distress Committee in Belgrave Gate in January 1921.

The Labour Exchange was unable to cope with the numbers of unemployed. According to T. Rowland Hill, secretary of the Trades Council, thousands of people were being compelled to stand for hours in all weathers several times a week outside to get a miserable and inadequate dole. There were also hundreds who had to walk from the villages several times a week. Towards the end of January a big meeting of the town's unemployed was held in the Market Place chaired by Jack Binns, an unemployed engineer from Ireland.²³

The meeting formed a committee with John Minto as secretary, and Binns as chairman.

John Minto was a 33 year old Scot who had been a shipyard worker on the Clyde and had served with the Royal Engineers during the War. He had been active as a propagandist for the I.L.P. since the age of 19 and was an able speaker; he had come to Leicester in search of work. In 1922, he was elected to the City Council for Newton Ward and became Lord Mayor in 1944. Jack Binns had come to Leicester in 1920 also in search of work and Little Redfern remembered him as a 'very straightforward man who was a good worker for the Communist Party.' Binns was active in the National Unemployed Workers' Movement well into the 1930's.

The purpose of the new Unemployed Committee was to carry on propaganda on behalf of the unemployed and to draw attention to necessitous cases that needed immediate relief or as one member put it: ginger up the Distress Committee. At meetings, Minto spoke of the sinister use of unemployment to reduce wages and called for the need to trade with Russia. He appealed to the men not to be provoked into violence and to do nothing that could be construed as a transgression of the law.

A few days later Binns presided over another meeting in the Haymarket in which he submitted a resolution which called on the Government to institute a scheme of maintenance of £2 per week for householders and 25/- to

²² Distress Committees were abolished along with the Boards of Guardians in 1929.
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every single man or woman and for 4/- for each dependent child. Minto spoke in support saying “Every individual has the right to work and when his right to work is challenged, his right to live is challenged at the same time.”

The activities of Leicester’s Unemployed Worker’s Committee were proceeding apace. Rousing meetings were being held on a daily basis in the Market Place with secretarial and other work being carried out in premises of the Workers’ Union on Belgrave Gate and for a time a bulletin was published on a weekly basis.

Thomas Redfern remembered that Binns and Minto hired a barrel organ and would go round the Market Place and surrounding streets appealing for funds. There was support for the unemployed from the Independent Labour Party, which gave up its platform in the Market Place on Sunday to the Unemployed Committee.

Many of the speakers at the meetings of the unemployed were I.L.P. activists. Speaking in February 1921, Alderman George Banton urged the unemployed to go to the Guardians; he gave that advice as a magistrate of the town and as a justice of the peace. The unemployed would:

“never have their position alleviated until they made a real demand. The workers had been robbed of the land and of the tools of production and things would not go well in England until the possession of these was recovered by the people.”

During March 1921, the Leicester Pioneer reported that the N.D.P. speakers in the Market Place faced heckling from the unemployed and the loss of their audience to the unemployed platform. Despite the involvement of the Independent Labour Party locally in the unemployed movement, the Labour Party’s national leadership was reluctant to be involved in any agitation. This led to the formation of a national unemployed body in April 1921. A national conference, representing seventy to eighty committees, established the National Unemployed Workers’ Committee Movement. It too adopted the slogan of ‘Work or Full Maintenance at Trade Union Rates of Wages.’ Full maintenance meant thirty-six shillings per week for a man and wife; five shillings for each child under eighteen with a weekly allowance for rent of up to fifteen shillings, plus one hundred weight of coal or its equivalent in gas. The movement pressed for thirty shillings a week for single people over eighteen and fifteen shillings for single persons between sixteen and eighteen. At the end of March 1921, the Government had raised unemployment benefit from 15/- to 20/- for men, and from 12/- to 16/- for women. But at the end of June, it was once again reduced. The N.D.P.’s standing with the unemployed diminished still further when

24 L.P. 28th January 1921.  
25 L.P. 4th & 18th February 1921.  
26 ibid  
27 L.P., 11th February 1921.  
28 The National Democratic Party, supported by the Liberals and Conservatives, had been responsible for ousting Ramsay MacDonald in the 1918 General Election.
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J.F. Green MP., who had defeated Ramsay MacDonald in 1919, voted to cut the dole from £1 to 15/- in July 1921.²⁹

During the summer of 1921, there was a period of tremendous agitation. A deputation, backed by a demonstration of tens of thousands of unemployed, went to the Minister of Labour, but received little satisfaction beyond a statement that the insurance fund was now insolvent. A national campaign to restore the cuts was launched and continued throughout the summer and autumn of 1921. In July, the Wandsworth Workhouse was completely taken over by the unemployed and their families and was then run by an elected committee with a red flag flying from its rooftop. In Bristol demonstrations persuaded the guardians to offer improved scales of relief which were not less than unemployment benefit. In Poplar, the Borough Council became embroiled in a dispute over the level of relief which resulted in thirty members of the Council being sent to prison for contempt of court.³⁰

The demand for relief simply overwhelmed many boards of guardians. Where unemployment was heavy, the guardians had a problem of massive expenditure, sandwiched as they were between harassed ratepayers and tight control by the Government. In Leicester, the Guardians’ sympathies were more with the ratepayers than the unemployed and their niggardly attitude was to give rise to much hardship. Although in the early years of the century, Labour and Liberal Guardians had, in practice, worked in co-operation, in the post-war years Liberal and Conservative Guardians had combined to vote out many of Labour’s proposals. Despite the severe distress being experienced in the City, the number of people in receipt of out-relief from the Board of Guardians was little more than it had been in 1914.

By July 1921, the Distress Committee in Leicester had run out of funds and decided to temporarily close down. Since December, 1,100 families had been helped. Between January and March 1,671 full weeks work had been given and between April and July 474 half a weeks work had been given out. The Committee had tried to give priority to those families with the largest numbers of children. Every day the Distress Committee was besieged with requests for help and

²⁹ L.P., July 1921.
was now unable to do anything. In August, the Trades Council formed a committee to organise factory collections for the Distress Committee and a major appeal for funds was made. ³¹ This was opposed by the more radical elements on the Trades Council, like Jack Binns. He thought that trades unions should not be discussing charity and appealing for subscriptions, but instead putting pressure on the government. Councillor Perkins said he was sick and tired of the system, but were they to “wait and see people starve, to sit still and wait for the revolution?” ³² Alderman Chaplin saw the position as “alarmingly serious, but they as a Committee could not discuss a remedy but only palliatives. It is either a case of helping over the stile or into the grave.” ³³ A description of the plight of the unemployed was provided by a contributor to the Leicester Pioneer:

“Excuse me, sir, do you think it possible for me to get any money this week? To tell you the truth, we are starving. This question occurred so often during the day that I felt quite miserable at the end. There was the lady who came with her dumb son and explained she had pawned the tablecloth to buy food. One young ex-serviceman, 24 years old, appealed earnestly for money to get milk for his two young children. He had received no money for the last three weeks and when he had received his arrears of unemployment pay, it would be inadequate to meet his debts. One ex-serviceman was asked what evidence he could produce to convince the committee that he was genuinely seeking work—he promptly turned up his shoes, showing the soles nearly worn out and said ‘I wore these out seeking work!’” - A Day on the Unemployment Committee, Leicester Pioneer. ³⁴

**Work or Maintenance**

On 1st September, the thirty Labour members of Poplar Council, led by George Lansbury, were sent to prison for contempt of court. This arose from their refusal to pay a precept due to the London County Council in protest at their borough having to bear an unfair burden of relief payments. With poor localities having most to pay, the Poplar Council levied a rate just for its own needs, ignoring what was due to the London County Council. In Poplar, the Labour controlled Board of Guardians gave in the region of 29/- a week out-door relief to a couple with no children. These payments were viewed with disdain by the Leicester Daily Mercury. On the day the Labour councillors were arrested, its comments reflect the general press hostility shown to what became known as ‘Poplarism:’

“A cry has gone up from ‘advanced’ men in the socialist movement that persons should either have work or maintenance at trade union rates at the public expense and certain London Boroughs,

³¹ L.P. 15ᵗ July, August 19th, September 9th 1921.
³² L.P. 30ᵗ September 1921
³³ L.D.M., 9ᵗ September 1921.
³⁴ L.P. 12ᵗ August 1921.
dominated by Labour majorities, are acting upon the axiom, regardless of public policy or finance or the interests of the ratepayers. The effect is to change the political system by a side wind, and without consulting the nation as a whole. But surely that is the “Red” method. Persons with whom work is not in favour will be confirmed in idleness if they can get as much without working as they can by personal effort and the number of these people will increase rather than decline…. Relief for destitution is one thing, full wages for no work is another.”

But even the Mercury was not immune to the unpleasant reality which many people faced. A week later, whilst the editorial writer was suggesting that paying people to do nothing was denoting a moral decline rapidly descending into ruin, it was also calling for the Distress Committee to have sufficient funds to ensure that it could provide work for the unemployed. “Better to pay wages for honest work than out-relief for nothing.”

By September, 3,000 people had registered with the Trades Council Distress Committee. Many had pawned everything possible even selling furniture in order to buy food. With no safety net to fall back on, the unemployed in Leicester were faced with a desperate situation. The City Council debated the problem and adopted a motion, initiated by Labour, calling on the Government to take urgent action to solve a problem which was now beyond the powers of local authorities. It supported the provision of schemes of employment or failing that, maintenance outside the scope of Poor Law relief. The Conservatives unsuccessfully attempted to remove the reference to providing maintenance.

Despite the promising start made by the local unemployed committee, it seems to have faded out of existence during the summer months. Although distress in the city was steadily worsening, the press report no public meetings and the local guardians were not bothered by deputations or demonstrations. One can only guess at the reasons. It may have been that support for the striking miners may have been a stronger imperative for local radicals. It could also be due to the fact that this may have been the time that Jack Binns was sent to Moscow; whilst John Minto found a job at the Co-op. (a position which he kept until he retired) Suddenly, as the crisis got worse, Leicester’s unemployed had lost its two best leaders and all seemed quiet. In contrast, the Leicester Mail reported a 5,000 strong march of the unemployed in Coventry, an unemployed riot in Dundee, an invasion of the workhouse in Sunderland and other demonstrations in Derby, Bristol, Nottingham, Dudley, Gateshead, Huddersfield, Liverpool, Oldham, and Woking. According to the Mail, there were no exceptional difficulties in administering the Poor-Law in Leicester.

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³⁵ L.D.M. 1st Sept 1921 The Poplar Board agreed to a scale of payment of £2 for a man & wife. However, it could not be financed and, to the delight of the press, had to climb down. See Noreen Branson p128

³⁶ L.D.M., 8th September 1921

³⁷ L.P., 9th September 1921.

³⁸ L.E.M. 7th September 1921.
CHAPTER TWO

Friday 16th September 1921

The Demands of the Unemployed

It was the unlikely figure of Charles Edward Keene who now emerged as the leader and spokesman of the local unemployed. ¹ Keene was a fifty-three year old businessman who had come to Leicester from Bradford. He said that he arrived with 6/- in his pocket and had gone on to establish several successful businesses in the town. They included the Mutual Clothing and Supply Company, box manufacturing and die stamping. He was an ardent speaker on behalf of the Leicester Temperance Society and attended the Belgrave Hall Wesleyan Church. Thomas Redfern recalled that Keene was a good speaker, in the ‘Methodist style,’ who generally spoke in a conciliatory manner. ² He held various positions in the I.L.P. and had been an unsuccessful Labour candidate six times in local council elections. Apparently Keene had been approached by some of the unemployed and asked to act on their behalf.

On Thursday September 15th 1921, the Leicester Mail, reported, with ill-concealed pleasure, that local women who a year or two ago would have scorned the idea of domestic service, were now no longer averse to it and were anxiously looking for such situations. ³ That same Thursday afternoon, a meeting of the unemployed decided to march to the Board of Guardians the next day to present them with a scale of relief of payments for the unemployed. A deputation of twelve was to meet with the Guardians and their spokesman was to be Charles Keene. ⁴

Late on Friday afternoon, about 3,000 of Leicester’s unemployed assembled in Humberstone Gate for a meeting. They heard speeches from Charles Keene and boot and shoe union official George Parbury and J.T. Austin, a former president of the Trades Council. The platform urged the unemployed to ‘keep to constitutional methods.’ They then set off to march to the Guardians offices in Pocklington’s Walk. The long line of men was described as an impressive

¹ Not to be confused with his son, Charles Robert Keene, (1891-1977) a City Councillor from 1926 and mayor in 1953.
² Interview by author on O.H.A. tape, 1984
³ L.E.M.. 15th September 1921
⁴ L.D.M. 17th September 1921.
spectacle and was as orderly as a May-day procession. The deputation of twelve led by Charles Keene then went to the Guardians to demand maintenance according to a scale of payments which they had drawn up which included a proposed that 5/- should be paid for each child under 14 years of age.

They also asked that unemployed men over 18 should be paid at a rate of £1 per week and single women at the lower rate of 15/-. This drew criticism from Miss Mackintosh, one of the Labour members of the Board of Guardians, because it gave different rates to men and women.

The scale proposed by the unemployed was very modest. Earlier in the year, the unemployed in Leicester had asked for £2 for a man and wife, whilst the N.U.W.C.M. made a demand for 35/-. At that time, the Poplar Guardians were paying about 29/-. Three months later, Sir Alfred Mond, Minister of Health, sent out an outdoor relief scale which allowed Guardians to pay 28/- for a man and wife and 6/- for the first child. Presenting the demands, Keene told the Guardians that the march and the deputation were the result of a spontaneous meeting:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>£</th>
<th>s</th>
<th>d</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Man and wife</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three Children</td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two pints of milk per day</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Assistance with rent</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>One cwt of coal</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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5 L.P., 23rd September 1921.
6 L.P. Ibid Mary Ann Mackintosh was elected to the Guardians in June 1919. She had formerly held the post of Foster Mother within a cottage children’s home run by the Guardians.
7 In 1922, the Poplar Guardians attempted to pay £2 per week, but were unable to raise the finance.
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“I think outside you will find there is not less than 3,000 people. There is an enormous amount of unemployment and destitution. The position is getting worse because many of the men and women are ceasing to draw their benefit from the State and they feel something must be done to alleviate the sufferings of their families… I feel confident that not only the Guardians, but also our Council are sympathetic towards the aspirations of the unemployed. Sympathy is all right when expressed in words, but it is much better when it is expressed in deeds.”

Amos Martin moved that the request from the unemployed should be met in full. The proposal was voted down by the Conservative/Liberal majority. Earlier in the meeting, Amos Sherriff had asked the Guardians for £10,000 to fund various work schemes to be organised by the Distress Committee. The possibility of linking work schemes and outdoor relief was a good way of avoiding the immediate payment of relief in money. The Clerk to the Guardians, Mr Mansfield, suggested that it was hardly possible to come to a decision that night and the meeting was adjourned until Tuesday when they could hear Cllr. Sherriff’s proposals. This was of little satisfaction to the unemployed and their delegation. C.E Keene told the Guardians that:

“If you gentlemen had undergone the experience of having nothing to eat, you might have more sympathy in a practical form with the starving men outside. Can you not enable me to tell the men that when you meet next Tuesday the scale will be substantially accepted.”

After some debate the Chairman of the Guardians told Charles Keene he might tell the men that it was probable that a substantial amount of their programme would be agreed on Tuesday. Although all of the Guardians had accepted that the proposed scale was a very moderate demand, they still could not bring themselves to pay it. The deputation then left the Board room and Charles Keene addressed the crowd in the street outside. The Mercury reported that the men took a favourable view of the Board’s deliberations and the promise held out. They dispersed quietly and raised cheers for the police. In the meantime, relief was to be only available in kind to those who showed themselves to be destitute.

Tuesday 20th September 1921
Dolemania!

The Leicester Mail described Thursday’s demonstration and march under the headline: ‘Dolemania’!

“There is a new creed rapidly being absorbed by the people of this country… that the scale of assistance to be provided… is to be fixed by the applicants. This is not only a highly dangerous doctrine.. This new policy of government by the out-of-works must be firmly suppressed… Men and women who five years ago would have scorned the suggestion of receiving relief from public funds in any form, have now, as a result of the way in which public funds have been dissipated, become quite accustomed to the idea of depending on the whole community. Worse than that, there has grown up the conviction that the community must maintain its individual members beyond the limit of actual destitution, but must seek to preserve to themselves the condition of life to which they are accustomed in full employment. This extra-ordinary state of things has wrecked

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⁸ L.P., 23rd September 1921.
⁹ L.D.M., 17th September 1921.
When the Guardians met on the following Tuesday, they turned their back on their promise to the unemployed. On the table before the Guardians was a new scheme devised by the semi detached Labour guardian J.L. Harrison and supported by the Liberals. Horrified at the idea of giving out a few shillings for doing nothing, in case it should ‘demoralise’ the unemployed, the Guardians proposed to apply to the Ministry of Health for authority to grant £10,000 to the Distress Committee for work to be offered under certain conditions. The Board could raise money but had no work to give, whilst the Distress Committee was in the opposite situation, having work but no money. The payment proposed was to be at a rate below that set for Corporation labourers and was to be provided half in kind and half in money. All earnings of children under 16 were to be counted as income, whilst two thirds of the income from children over 16 was to be taken into account.

The scheme did not provide for single men or women unless they had a dependent parent or child. However, Illegitimacy was to be penalised; if a child was illegitimate, it would be disqualified from the scheme and no provision would be made. This proposal effectively rejected the proposals from the unemployed. Labour Guardian, Archibald Gorrie, wanted to know what was going to be done for those who were out of work and were destitute and were waiting to get on the scheme. He urged that application be made to the Ministry to relieve men and women according to the scheme put before them by the unemployed. But Labour’s support for the unemployed was rejected by the Conservative/Liberal majority.¹¹

Harrison’s proposal of a scheme, of public works linked to relief, was a convenient compromise for the Guardians. Harrison, ostensibly a Labour guardian (he was later to become a Tory Councillor) resented the remarks, made by Charles Keene and the deputation that people were starving. He believed that the maintenance by the Guardians was sufficient. Labour’s Leicester Pioneer was critical:

“whilst two or three members fought hard, the Labour Guardians as a group might have been more vigorous. It was a clear case-when the moderation of the demand had been admitted on all hands in which the Labour members might have taken drastic action to compel the Guardians to face up to their responsibilities.” ¹²

¹⁰ L.E.M., 17th September 1921
¹² ibid
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Wednesday 21st September 1921

Reaction to the Guardians’ Scheme

It was not surprising that the meeting of the unemployed in the Haymarket on Wednesday morning found the new scheme to be inadequate and unsatisfactory. Speaking from a board placed across a water trough in the Haymarket, Charles Keene informed a crowd of 2,000 unemployed of the Guardians’ decision. When he asked them what they thought of the scheme there were cries of ‘Rot’ and ‘Send it back.’ Miss Mackintosh then spoke. Although she supported Councillor Sherriff’s scheme, she believed it to be too late, it should have been introduced eight or nine months earlier:

“How long was the Guardians’ scheme going to take to get into operation? In the meantime, men and women were starving. It’s simply another broken pledge, they want to put you off a little longer. My suggestion is that you should march to Pocklington’s walk and demand relief. You are entitled to it. Go in an orderly manner and demand what you were promised last Friday.”

J.L. Harrison also spoke but his attempt to defend the guardians’ attitude was manifestly unpopular with the crowd. The meeting passed a resolution reaffirming its demand for payment according to its proposed scale of relief and it asked the Guardians to hold another meeting to consider implementing it. The meeting also agreed that there should be no discrimination between legitimate and illegitimate children. When Charles Keene remounted the trough, he took a more conciliatory line. He thought the scheme was

“the best they could get at the present time, they must hope to get more later on. The Guardians ought to be allowed more time to go further into the matter.”

He urged that they should meet in the Market Place on Friday when: “they would get a definite answer to their request. If they marched to Pocklington’s Walk today, what would they do?” But, despite being told by one man that he favoured a waiting policy because he was getting three meals a day, Charles Keene was successful in persuading the crowd not to follow Miss Mackintosh’s advice. They should wait a little longer and so the meeting agreed to adjourn until Friday.

Friday 23rd September 1921

Boiled Rain and Wind at Rupert Street

At Friday’s meeting of the unemployed, there were clear signs that the men’s patience was becoming exhausted. From one section of the crowd, mainly composed of single men who were not provided for in the Guardians’ scheme, there came fiery suggestions to take possession of the Guardians’ premises. Keene rejected any lawless acts, but the meeting unanimously decided to march in a body to the Guardians’ offices and demand immediate relief. Keene then led a march across town to the Poor Law Offices on Pocklington’s Walk where the unemployed lined up outside. Charles Keene went inside and came out to announce that the special forms for the application of immediate relief would be ready at 5.00pm - all relieving officers at present being out on their duties. This announcement caused pandemonium. There were cries of “We are starving now… let us go to the workhouse.” At this point Keene was interrupted by the loud yells of those who said they had had enough of meetings. Many young men at the back of the crowd surged forward once or twice in an endeavour to create a rush on the premises and a stone was thrown at one of the windows. “Give us our dinner” was shouted from all directions and,
according to the press, for a time matters looked as if they were taking a serious turn, but a humorous touch was added by a man who suggested that they should all go home to dinner of “boiled rain and wind.”

At this point Superintendent Choyce intervened. He was present with the Deputy Chief Constable and a posse of police. He said that the police had no grievance against any of those present but “if you have lost confidence in your leaders appoint someone else.” The overwhelming majority were in favour of Keene remaining as leader. He then appealed to those who upheld his authority to disperse and a large number did so. After a certain amount of discussion, the rest went to the Market Place where, according to the press, several ‘inflammatory’ speeches were made.¹³

At five o’clock the unemployed returned to the Rupert Street entrance of the Poor-Law offices to the collect the promised forms. Those who were expecting relief there and then were bitterly disappointed. A circular letter given out with the form told the applicants that once the form had been filled in and returned their case would just be registered. They were told that:

“The relieving officer has power to deal with certain cases under present regulations-others would have to be referred to the Guardians. Immediately our employment scheme is sanctioned all cases registered will be dealt with forthwith.”

Once again the men had been fobbed off and the waiting crowd became angry. It was not long before several forms were torn up and set fire to on the roadway and fed with a constant supply of fuel, the fire blazed merrily for some minutes, the unemployed meanwhile singing, ‘Keep the home fires burning.’ The enquiry: ‘Are we down-hearted?’ Met with the emphatic reply ‘No’ and the more pertinent enquiry, ‘Do we want money?’ with an even more emphatic ‘yes.’

A deputation meanwhile went into the office to fetch Charles Keene who appeared after some delay. Recognising that the temper of the crowd was not exactly cordial, he told them that he was far from well and begged them to give him a few more days (uproar). He told them they were up against rules that he could not break down… Nothing could be done until the Guardians met and gave instructions. He had it from Mr Mansfield that everything was being done to get the scheme sanction by Wednesday morning. This drew cries of “We want some relief now.” Keene said he had pressed Mr Mansfield on this point and he had said that he had no power to give anything of the sort. This announcement caused much disturbance. One of the unemployed mounted a chair, which served as a platform and said that if Mr Keene were wise, he would resign. This job was one that needed a young man. He added:

“I suggest we fetch the Guardians now. Let us get their addresses. (Applause) We will go to their houses and get them here. If they won’t come, we will .......... fetch them. “ (Loud applause and the singing of ‘For he’s a jolly good fellow.’)

Charles Keene then said the Guardians themselves had no power to do anything and he was supported by Miss Mackintosh, who told them that until they had sanction of the Ministry they were helpless. It was a terrible thing to say: “Go back and keep quiet, but they must say it.”

¹³ Who spoke and what was said was not reported in the press, except to say that the crowd was eventually dispersed by the police. L.E.M., L.D.M., 23rd September 1921
However, the same unidentified unemployed man appeared with a list of the addresses of the Guardians, and numerous volunteers at once came forward to go and fetch the seven Guardians who, he stated, were necessary for a quorum. With the crowd refusing to disperse from Rupert Street and the police threatening to intervene, the situation looked serious. However the suggestion from Mr Poynton, of the Boot and Shoe Union, to march to the workhouse and formally demanded admittance found popular approval. The matron, who was in charge, said they could only be admitted as casuals, unless they presented special notices from the relieving officers. As casuals they would be kept in the institution for a couple of days - except for ex-servicemen who would be free to leave the next day. They were also told that the night meal would consist of bread and gruel. Loud boos greeted these remarks and after a parade around the town, only six ex-servicemen decided to accept the inhospitality of the workhouse. The march to the workhouse had deflected the anger of many of the unemployed. Even so, according to the press, Charles Keene, who was described as being of frail build, was forced to seek the protection of the police from from four men, described as hot-heads, who accused him of bluffing the unemployed in the interests of the Guardians.¹⁴

Saturday 24th September 1921

**Oh What A Pal Was Keeney!**

On Saturday morning a 1,000 strong mass meeting was held in the Haymarket. Eleven of the Guardians (eight of them Labour) turned up in response to the postcards dispatched by the unemployed the night before. Mr Charles Ley, who had now been elected Chairman of the Unemployed Executive, urged that the unemployed go to Rupert Street and demand that credit be issued straight away, since there were enough Guardians present to form a quorum and to deal with the matter. (Cheers)¹⁵ Ley had worked at the Caxton Works as engineer until January when he had lost his job. His former employer later testified that Ley had been an industrious and skilled worker and had lost his job because there was no work.¹⁶

Ley was supported by Mrs Annie Stretton, a Labour Guardian, who thought it right that they should go to the Guardians and demand food for their starving children.¹⁷ Charles Keene now made his appearance, and to applause, announced that the Leicester City directors had decided to offer 1,500 tickets for the City vs Bristol match that afternoon. The unemployed eventually marched on the Poor-Law offices. On arrival in Rupert Street there was a long wait while discussion ensued between the leaders of the unemployed, the Guardians and the officials inside. The crowd was tightly packed in the street and there were calls for sardine boxes. The ennui of waiting was relieved by a running fire of humorous comments and several announced they could smell the steak and

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¹⁴ L.E.M. 23rd September 1921
¹⁵ Miss Mackintosh is reported to have questioned whether Bert Ley really represented the unemployed. “I have seen him at meetings when he was turned down time after time.” L..M.. 28th September 1921
¹⁶ L.D.M. 5th October 1921
¹⁷ Grandmother of former Councillor and Lord Mayor Mrs Janet Setchfield (1927-2008)
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chips being prepared inside. The Mercury described it as a film of gaiety over depths of bitterness, as one man explained: “If I hadn’t kept smiling, I would have gone under long ago.” This came from a young ex-serviceman who had been disabled by war wounds and had lost his job as a pressman. He had also lost his lodgings, since his 15/- a week war pension was not enough to pay his keep. He had been sleeping out on Victoria Park for a week or more. Another man told of how his three kiddies had gone to school for the last fortnight on meals consisting of a small piece of bread and lard.

The crowd eventually resorted to music to while away the tedium and an impromptu glee party sang: ‘Oh What a Pal was Keeney,’ until they were told to put on a fresh record. When Keene emerged from the offices, there were cheers when it was seen he wore a smiling face. He told the waiting crowd that they had had a very hard struggle, but that if every person who was prepared to fill in a form declaring that they were destitute, they would get 5/- relief in kind. “It wasn’t much, but they had broken down a principle.” The Mercury’s Editorial that day told its readers that:

“the unemployed in Leicester have earned public sympathy…. but no good purpose can be served by merely theatrical displays in the street, burning papers and making demands it is legally and physically impossible to meet.” ¹⁸

Two days later, on Monday 26th September, T.E. Hassell, the Chairman of the Board, J.L. Harrison and Mr Mansfield went to Whitehall to discuss the Guardians’ scheme. Official approval was promptly given for the scheme to be started. Meanwhile, a 1,000 strong crowd of men went to Municipal Square (Town Hall Square) to press the Mayor to help. ¹⁹ That same day about twelve of the unemployed visited two restaurants and demanded food without payment. The police were sent for and three men were arrested, but subsequently released with a caution. ²⁰

Tuesday 27th September 1921

Provision for Everyone?

The next day, whilst the results of the London meeting were reported to the Guardians, a dense crowd waited outside in Rupert Street. To while away the tedium, the men sang music hall and war-time songs. The ‘Red Flag,’ too, was rendered with spirit. The local press reported that the massed singing, by the waiting men and women, was especially impressive and seemed to be controlled by an invisible conductor. Meanwhile inside a deputation of twenty, led by Charles Keene and Bert Ley unsuccessfully asked the Guardians to reconsider the scheme which the unemployed had submitted eleven days ago. Ley reported that the unemployed committee had decided to stand or fall by their own scheme. “We don’t want any half measures.” They opposed the Guardians’ scheme since it had no provision for able bodied single men and women.

¹⁸ L.D.M. 24th September 1921
¹⁹ L.D.M., 26th September 1921.
²⁰ PRO CAB 24/128
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Miss Leeson, a Liberal guardian, thought the Guardians’ scheme erred on the side of generosity. She asked what was going to happen to the whole body politic if they were going to swamp the employed with increased taxes to help the unemployed. She accused Charles Keene of holding a pistol to the heads of the guardians. Amos Martin then pressed the Guardians to provide relief in money and in kind for those who could not find work. It was not the duty of the Guardians to find work.

The minute of the Board of Guardians records Martin’s resolution as calling on the Ministry to vary the conditions of outdoor relief to enable it to give relief in money and kind.²² The Leicester Daily Mercury reports differently, that the motion was that outdoor relief should be given right away without representation to the Ministry and this was how it was represented to the waiting unemployed.²³

Outside, in the street, the unemployed had nearly exhausted their repertoire of songs and when Charles Keene appeared he was greeted with loud cheers. He gave the impression that a compromise had been reached. He told the waiting crowd that the Guardians’ system would be in operation on Thursday through the Distress Committee and that provision was being made for everybody. They had achieved success and he was relinquishing his leadership for the moment. Ley pointed out that it was the Guardians’ scheme, not theirs that was being adopted. He asked the crowd to give the Unemployed Committee a few minutes to consider the position. In less than a minute he returned, with the news that the committee had decided to accept the situation since there was only 1s 5d difference between the two schemes. Although there were

²¹ Harriett Leeson JP was the privately educated daughter of the shoe manufacturer Joesph Leeson. She worked as a nurse in France during WW1. Clara Leeson JP, was also a member of the Guardians and was well known for her ‘social work amongst the industrial classes.’

²² B.O.G., 27th September 1921

²³ L.M., 28th September 1921.
some who shouted that they wanted their original demands, the Mercury reported that the crowd was mostly in favour of giving the Guardians’ scheme a trial. ²⁴

It is not possible to say whether Keene falsely led the unemployed to believe that relief for all would soon be provided, or whether he and the other members of the delegation misunderstood, as the Leicester Mercury had, the terms of Martin’s resolution.

Wednesday 28th September 1921

According to the Leicester Daily Mercury a crowd of 500 unemployed assembled in the Haymarket only to find that the weekly sales of hay were taking place. Having moved to some waste ground in Bread Street, Charles Ley addressed the meeting saying that they went to the Guardians determined to ask for their original demands and he told the crowd that it is up to you to decide what to do next. Several speakers blamed the Guardians for not adopting their scheme, but the tone of the crowd was mostly in favour of giving the Guardian’s scheme a trial.²⁵ A different picture of the meeting is painted in files of the Directorate of Intelligence at the Home Office. According to their informant, both Ley and Dennis Jennett made ‘inflammatory’ speeches. ²⁶

²⁵ L.D.M. 29th September 1921
²⁶ Directorate of Intelligence (Home Office) Special Report No 23, marked ‘Secret,’ 10th October 1921.
CHAPTER THREE

Thursday 29th September 1921
"All a bogey"

It seemed that a solution was at hand to the plight of the unemployed. The Ministry had given its blessing to the Guardians’ scheme and the unemployed had been assured by Charles Keene that no one would be left out. It was by no means a perfect solution, but at least it appeared as if the unemployed would be spared the indignity of having to go to the workhouse. According to the Leicester Pioneer, the wheels were, at last, slowly moving and that the Guardians had been jolted into activity.¹ There was now an expectation that those people who could not get on a work scheme would now be granted outdoor relief. Unfortunately, it was an expectation which the Clerk to the Guardians seemed reluctant to meet.

On Thursday 29th September, about 400 men assembled in Rupert Street to seek the funds that they believed had been promised to them on Tuesday. Many of them had no breakfast that morning and some had had no food for 48 hours. However the expected relief was not forthcoming and the clerk, Mr Mansfield, refused to see a deputation of the unemployed. Now that the respectable figure of Charles Keene had stepped down as negotiator, Mr Mansfield was not prepared to be so amenable to his successors. Eventually, one spokesman, accompanied by a police inspector, was allowed in to see the Clerk to the Guardians. The crowd had now grown and when the unidentified spokesman came out of the Poor-Law Office, he told the crowd that the statement made after Tuesday’s meeting was “All a bogey.” There was no relief. What had to happen was this: a relief committee was to sit tomorrow (Friday) and the men could fill in their applications and relief would be granted on Saturday and, if necessary, on Sunday. If they came to the office in the meantime, all they could be told was that they could go to the workhouse. At this there were loud cries of “We are not paupers, we don’t want parish relief, we want work or money.” Eventually, the crowd went to the Market Place.² Later, on the same day, some unemployed entered a coffee-house and demanded food, but were removed by the police.³

Dennis Jennett

It is probable that the unidentified spokesman for the unemployed was 39 year old Dennis Jennett who had been first involved protests over unemployment in 1908. Jennett was born in Leicester and started work as a 'sprigging lad' in the boot and shoe trade, then in 1897, aged 15, he had enlisted in the Royal Navy. He served for five years aboard ships such as HMS Impregnable and HMS Royal Sovereign. His rebellious character is reflected in his service history which records that he was put in the cells on more than one occasion once for refusing duty and another time for desertion. On his return to Leicester and marriage, he emerged as a spokesman for the unemployed in 1908 and as one of the leaders of the Leicester ‘Land Grabbers.’ These were a group of unemployed men who took possession of a vacant plot of land in Walnut street under the slogan ‘The Land is For All.’ They set up camp and tried to

¹ L.D.M., 29th September 1921.
² L.E.M., 6th October 1921
³ PRO CAB 24/128.
support themselves from the land. Jennett described the labour test as an abominable and degrading system and said that the Land Grabbers would boycott the Distress Committee and workhouse and instead try and solve the unemployment problem themselves.⁴ Although the I.L.P. had been heavily involved in the 1905 Unemployed March, they played no obvious part in the land occupation. What happened next is a mystery, but in 1911 Jennett was in Leicester prison.⁵

Jennett served in the First World War and actively participated in unrest in the army. This may explain his relatively early demobilisation. He settled in Islington where he sought work as a shoemaker. By early 1919, Jennett was heavily involved in the Federation of Discharged and Demobilised Sailors and Soldiers (FDDSS) and in May 1919 he was one of those arrested at a demonstration at Constitution Hill after it was baton charged by the police.⁶ He went on to become one of the most prominent figures in the Islington Unemployed Council, becoming chairman of the committee. He also became secretary of the London District of Unemployed Associations and was involved in disrupting the 1920 Labour Party conference in Westminster. During the conference discussion on unemployment, he ran into the gallery and addressed the delegates in stentorian voice, asking for the recognition of the Russian Soviet Government. He was constantly interrupted, and shouted: "You are a crowd of dirty, lazy fakers."⁷

Jennett had played a leading part in the seven week occupation of the Essex Road public library Islington in the autumn of 1920. Following its recapture by the police, in January 1921, he led a raiding party which intended to seize Islington Town Hall. The attempt came to grief when they were met by the police, who had been tipped off, and were lying in wait. There was an affray, nineteen unemployed were arrested and thirteen police injured. According to the police, one of those arrested had a letter of detailed instructions signed by ‘Jennett of Islington.’ Jennett was subsequently arrested and charged with breaching the peace. In court, he challenged the police to prove that he had written the note. Much was made in the press that his military medical records noted ‘mental instability.’⁸ He was ordered to prison for three months or to give two sureties of £25 each: however, the magistrate refused sureties from the chairman of the board of guardians and a fellow guardian.⁹

Late in August, he had negotiated with the Islington Guardians and obtained their agreement to pay 25/- a week for a man and wife. This compromise was in excess of what the Leicester unemployed had asked for. This deal was widely reported in the press and criticised for giving many families larger income weekly than they would have if the head of the family were fully

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⁴ Cynthia Brown, 'This land belongs to all of us' – unemployment and the Leicester Landgrabbers, 1909, Leicester Historian, Autumn 2015, Leicester Chronicle, 4th July 1908, Nottingham Evening Post, 6th November 1909, Leicester Chronicle, 13th November 1909

⁵ The 1911 census records his occupation as a ship’s stoker in the merchant services. His young daughters are listed as being patients in the North Evington Poor Law Infirmary

⁶ The FDDSS wanted better pensions for ex-servicemen and later combined with others to form the Royal British Legion.

⁷ Dundee Courier, 30th December 1920

⁸ Exeter and Plymouth Gazette, 25th Jan 1921

⁹ See Kingsford op cit, pp 20 and 24.
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employed. ¹⁰ By September, Jennett had moved back to Leicester and was living at 6 Willow Cottages, Taylor Street, in the heart of Leicester’s slums.

The police believed that Jennett had come, with others from the newly formed National Unemployed Workers’ Committee Movement (N.U.W.C.M.) in London to give help to Leicester’s unemployed. Jennett maintained that he had come to Leicester to set up as a market trader since his children were living in the district. Although he claimed he had been asked to take the leadership of the Leicester unemployed, for various reasons, he had declined. ¹¹ Rowland Walton remembered Jennett as a very forceful individual. ¹² It is not known precisely where his political sympathies lay, but it is likely that he was was close to the sectarian Socialist Labour Party, a faction of which had just helped found the Communist Party of Great Britain. However, Jennett had all the hallmarks of a maverick.

Friday 30th September 1921

Black Friday

On Friday morning a crowd of unemployed gathered outside the Trades Hall, just off Humberstone Gate. This was the building used for Trades Council meetings and was owned by the Boot and Shoe Union. A bill had been printed and distributed announcing a meeting of the unemployed in the hall. No meeting had been booked and George Parbury, Secretary of the No. 1 branch of the Boot and Shoe Union had to refuse the use of the hall. In the ensuing row, which took place on the steps of the Trades Hall, the trade union officials were made scapegoats for the failure of the meeting. The Mercury reported that Councillor Adnitt and Alderman Hill had addressed the crowd and met with a good deal of booing. ¹³ Bert Ley, chairman of the Unemployed Executive claimed later in court that the source of these handbills had never been found. Dennis Jennett, who also spoke to the crowd, denied responsibility too. It nevertheless had the affect of causing some antagonism between the full-time trade unionists and the unemployed outside. N.U.B.S.O. later condemned the action of the men responsible for the attack on the Trades Hall and criticised the printing of the bills as deceiving the genuine unemployed in the ‘most scandalous manner.’

¹⁰ Evening Telegraph, 30th August 1921
¹¹ L.P., 30th September 1921
¹² Interview with the author, 1981
¹³ L.D.M., 30th September 1921
In a story given to the Mercury later in the day, the Chief Constable claimed that he was aware of a plan of the unemployed to seize the hall and set it on fire if the police attempted to eject them. As a result, the police had turned up in force to protect the hall. This story seems somewhat embroidered and it was not repeated at the subsequent trial of the unemployed leaders or in the Home Office intelligence reports. ¹⁴ Although many public buildings had been occupied in London and other towns, the Trades Hall, a centre of local trade union activity, does not seem the most obvious target for an occupation in protest against the poor law. However, given Jennett’s previous activity, it remains a possibility.

After failing to hold the meeting in the Trades Hall, Ley led a crowd of about 500-600 unemployed from St. James Street to Humberstone Gate where he chaired a meeting from on top of the horse trough. According to the Leicester Mail, Jennett told the crowd that the Guardians on Tuesday had promised assistance within 48 hours and it had not been given. He urged that they should go to the Poor Law offices and demand that a scheme be put into operation, telling the crowd that he did not want to give the police a chance of cracking them on the head. ¹⁵

The demonstration, now about 1,000 strong and led by Ley and Jennett, now marched on Rupert Street.¹⁶ Meanwhile, the body of police which had been placed in St. James Street also set off for the Poor-Law Offices by way of Rutland Street, the Wholesale Market and Halford Street. The unemployed took a different route via Humberstone Gate and Gallowtree Gate and reached Messrs Dunne's (now Cafe Nero) shop on the corner of Halford Street at the same time as the police were entering Horsefair Street. On seeing the police, there were ironical cheers and some booing. The police continued along Horsefair Street and entered the Poor Law offices via Rupert Street some minutes before the unemployed, who were coming by way of Granby Street and Belvoir Street. It is not clear why the police chose to enter the Poor Law offices rather than stand outside.

**Friday 30th September 1921**

**The Baton Charge**

There were a few unemployed men waiting quietly outside the offices in Rupert Street and as soon as the march entered Rupert Street there were vociferous cheers which were kept up until the men reached the rear entrance of the office. The door was closed and a policeman stood on the step. According to one witness, the crowd waited quietly in an orderly fashion for some 20 minutes, whilst Bert Ley and Dennis Jennett unsuccessfully tried to seek an interview with the clerk, Mr. Mansfield. ¹⁷ Another account says that when they were refused admission, Ley turned to the crowd and put his hand up and said “Comrades, they won’t let us in. What shall we do?” The crowd at the back started pushing and someone at the back of the crowd shouted out “Let’s rush the doors.” It must have been at this moment that a large stone flew over the heads of the crowd in the direction of the offices. It smashed a fanlight above the door to the office. Almost immediately, about 40-50 police rushed out of the Guardians offices with drawn

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¹⁴ PRO CAB 24/128


¹⁶ Directorate of Intelligence (Home Office) op cit. gives the figure as 1,500

¹⁷ L.P., 7th October 1921.
Chapter Three

There was no hesitation; they dashed among the people right and left, striking indiscriminately anyone who came in their way. People went down right and left and wild pandemonium ensued. Some men were felled before the blows of the baton, others were ‘hurled to the ground with the force of their dispersal; others were trampled on by the feet of their comrades and crushed beneath the hoofs of the horses.’ Many of the crowd escaped through entries and houses, over walls - anywhere. In a matter of moments Rupert Street had been cleared of the demonstrators, with the exception of the unfortunate men, who bruised, bleeding and apparently senseless lay in the roadway. William Holland provided this statement to the Leicester Pioneer:

When I was standing on the end of Rupert Street a cheer went up and before the sound had died away, out of the building emerged a number of police with their superiors behind.

At once they drew their sticks and without a word of warning smashed the heads of all within their reach. Not satisfied with knocking a man down, they hit him when he was down.

I shall never forget the sight. The police did not want the public to see their handiwork and everyone was driven from Rupert Street and Millstone Lane.....

One young fellow came up to me; he was wearing ribbons on his waistcoat. “By God, by God,” he said. I said “You are hurt.” He lifted his cap and the blood ran down his neck. He said “This is what I fought for. This is what I got.”

In another statement, Charles Russell, who was not connected with the demonstration, described what he saw:

I saw police chasing men along Horsefair Street after leaving Rupert Street and strike at them with their batons as they were running. I stood horror strick. I saw Dennis Jennett on the corner of Hotel Street and Horsefair Street; he was on his own gesticulating wildly, dishevelled and hatless. He was looking in the direction of Rupert Street and was shouting out: ‘Come along, boys; we will now show the dirty dogs what to do; come along with me to the (Corn) Exchange and I will show you what to do.’
Chapter Three

This man could have easily been arrested; a mounted policeman jostled him along with his horse. The man then turned and proceeded to walk away towards the Market Place past Morgan Squires. As he was walking away a policeman walked up behind him and struck him with his baton. He lifted his baton for a second blow, but it was not necessary; the man was down and out.

Jennett was then arrested and taken, bleeding from a wound in his head, to the Central Police Station. Thirteen men were taken away by ambulance to the infirmary with severely cut heads and first aid was given to others. There were patches of blood on the pavement and nearly 20 caps lying in the street. The Chief Constable Herbert Allen told the Mercury that:

the trouble was due to a few firebrands, supported by three or four hundred men who for the most part were not anxious to find work, but whose object was to get as much money out of the community as they could without having to do anything for it.

He went on to say that the unemployed wanted to set fire to the Trades Hall and his account suggested the unemployed marched straight into Rupert Street with the intention of rushing the Poor Law offices. This account contradicts that of the witnesses who spoke of the crowd waiting in the street outside the offices.

¹⁸ L.P., 30th September 1921

Dennis Jennett being escorted along Horsefair Street holding his bleeding head after being struck by a truncheon near the City Rooms. The caption on the back of this press photo reads ‘Leicester Unemployed attempt a raid on the Guardians.’ (Ned Newitt)
During the afternoon four men were charged in the magistrates court. Both Ley and Jennett were charged with assaulting the police and there is good reason to believe that Ley was beaten up whilst in custody. Witnesses testified that before he was arrested in the Market Place, his appearance was quite tidy. When appeared some hours later in the magistrate’s court, he was dishevelled and a doctor testified that he had been punched on the nose and kicked. Ley later testified that he was assaulted in the charge room in the presence of Chief Superintendent Judd.

In the evening the Guardians met once again and decided to grant single men two days work for £1 1s 8d and single women two days work at 5/- per day. All 1,800 registered relief cases, not given work, were to be given a 7/6 ticket for groceries on Saturday morning. Following the baton charge, the Guardians had granted a rate for single men that was 1/8 more than the unemployed had actually asked for. (Though 10/- for women was 5/- less.) It could only have been the events of the morning that could have suddenly precipitated the inclusion of the single unemployed into the Guardians’ scheme. The Guardians also seem to have relented on the issue of out relief, in a week the number of people receiving out-relief nearly doubled. (3,804 on

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19 L.M, 30th September 1921.
20 L.D.M., 5th October 1921, L.P., 7th October 1921.
21 B.O.G., 30th September 1921
Chapter Three

October 1st to 5,094 on October 8th) However, the Guardians’ change of heart came too late to prevent further trouble.

Friday 30th September 1921
The Police Under Siege

During the day, the bush telegraph had conveyed the news of the police baton charge into the factories and in the evening a series of demonstrations took place. According to the Daily Mercury, “Not since the Mafeking celebrations, have such scenes been witnessed locally.” At about seven o’clock, there was a large meeting in the Haymarket which decided to go to the police station, which was at that time in the Town Hall, to petition for the release of Ley and Jennett.

The march formed up and it met a posse of police near the Palace Theatre. There were loud groans and hisses. Being a shopping night, the streets were thronged with women and children, and thousands of people followed in the train of the men. When the 3,000 strong crowd reached the Town Hall Square, the police on duty in the Charge Office turned the lights off, leaving the Town Hall was in complete darkness. The men marched straight to the door of the police station. The side of the square, next to the police station, was packed with a solid wedge of people, trapping the police inside. About 200 of the more active men, supported by a great number of women, clamoured for the release of Jennett and three other men who had been arrested earlier. Accidentally the crowd pushed the front row of their comrades into the station where they were promptly arrested.

It was then that the missiles began to fly. A glass bottle shattered on the floor inside the entrance and a volley of stones, bricks and granite sets followed, hitting two policemen. The police then emerged from the station, many with batons drawn, whilst reinforcements in the shape of mounted police arrived at the rear. The demonstration promptly scattered. Mounted police patrolled Horsefair Street and a protective cordon was thrown around the Market Place.

Friday 30th September 1921
Scenes at the Clock Tower

However the day was not over. At 10.15pm, a crowd estimated at several thousand strong congregated near the Clock Tower. According to the Mercury, the crowd led by someone flourishing what looked like a broken spade, began to look ugly. Stones and missiles were thrown at the police who then drew their truncheons for the third time that day and charged into the crowd who seemed prepared to put up a fight. Several of the police were hit by stones and fragments of glass. Several people who were queuing for trams for the Melton Road found themselves in the centre of the affray. Just near the queue stand a ‘big negro’ lay unconscious in the road. He was attended to by a number of women and his head and jaws were bandaged with a blood soaked handkerchief. Subsequently, rumours circulated the town that ‘Darky’ Barton, as he was known, had died. Although the press printed statements saying he was recovering in hospital, the legend of his death lived on.

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22 L.D.M., Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer, 1st October 1921
23 The police station was situated in the Town Hall where the Municipal Box Office is today.
24 The Leicester Mail suggests the crowd had surged forward with the intention of rushing the building and releasing Ley and Jennett.
A party of police who had arrested two men were chased by the crowd. They escaped by commandeering a tramcar which had just come in from the West End. As soon as they got on, a great piece of granite was thrown through one of the car's windows. Some provincial newspapers report that this stone injured a woman. They quoted the Chief Constable Herbert Allen as saying that the woman is likely to lose her sight under the headline woman loses her sight.

²⁶ There is no mention of the injured woman in the Leicester press.

Shortly before 11 p.m., a section of the crowd moved into Churchgate, where from a vantage point, they subjected the charging constables to a volley of stones. Other sections of the crowd contented themselves with hurling abuse at the police, whilst a crowd continued to congregate outside the Central Police station. A man who had had his bowler hat battered in during the baton charge, stood in the middle of the road near Horsefair Street, surveying the ruins of his headgear. About 11 o'clock, the police had gained control of the Clock Tower vicinity though booeing could be heard in the distance. In the course of the melee at the Clock Tower two large plate glass windows were broken. ²⁷ Although the police had eventually regained control of the City Centre, their action against the unemployed had lost them a good deal of goodwill.

The next day, the press coverage in the national press was largely about the unemployed “rushing the Guardians' office” and the police batoning a mob of “aggressive unemployed.” Some papers reported that the police had only used their truncheons only after the unemployed showed fight, some claimed that one of those arrested was the leader of the local Communist party.

²⁵ In the 1970’s, an executive member of the Hosiery Union, Norman Bordoli, told the author that a black worker had been killed by the police in Rupert Street and the whole matter hushed up.

²⁶ Derby Daily Telegraph, 1st October 1921

²⁷ L.D.M., L.E.M., 1st October 1921.
CHAPTER FOUR

Saturday 1st October 1921
The Aftermath

On Saturday, a letter was issued in the name of the Leicester Labour Party and Leicester Trades Council. It was an emphatic protest at the violent action of the police in Rupert Street:

“We cannot see any justification for the brutal assault made upon the crowd of unemployed. The police appear to have grown nery after the demonstrations (quite peaceful) of the last week or two and on Friday morning were in a panic. The most serious feature of the affair is that the crowd were given no warning of any kind and no opportunity to disperse peaceably. They were caught in a trap...

Up until Friday, the police had handled the situation with commendable tact and patience, but we cannot resist the conclusion that on Friday morning, someone in control blundered badly and created bad feeling which found expression in renewed trouble the same night. Doubtless, the violence was dictated by the official conviction that a show of force would prevent disorder, but all experience shows that the surest way of provoking the riotous spirit is unnecessarily to attack and injure demonstrators.”

The full text of the letter was not printed by the Mercury, which claimed it was sub judice, however it was carried in the Leicester Mail and in a special edition of the Leicester Pioneer which also called for a full public enquiry. Meanwhile, the public indignation, which had shown itself in Friday night’s demonstrations, still continued on Saturday. Small crowds gathered in Humberstone Gate. The police were on patrol in pairs and dispersed the groups at closing time. When the police attempted to take a drunk into custody, they were met with boos and catcalls from a hostile crowd who supposed he was one of the unemployed. On Saturday, whether by coincidence or design, the Overseers of the Parish of Leicester met to set a new poor rate. They responded to the events of the previous day by increasing the poor rate by a record 6d in the pound.

On Sunday morning the unemployed met in the Market Place. There was a large audience and an appeal for funds met with a good response, 2/6, 2/- and 1/- being thrown to collectors on the platform. During another meeting in the evening, the police were voted ‘dirty dogs.’

28 L.D.M., 3rd October 1921.
afternoon, the Independent Labour Party had held its annual Harvest Festival at De Montfort Hall with over 1,000 people attending. Moving a resolution, which condemned the action of the police in Rupert Street, to be sent to the Town Clerk and Watch Committee, Councillor J.K. Kelly said that:

“when the wounds were in the main part on the back of the head, it was natural that feelings of anger would be provoked and deeds of resentment would be committed.”

Other speakers wanted to know why the police had been secreted in the building, rather than being stationed, as a disciplined body, outside the Poor-Law offices. ³⁰ On Monday night there was another big meeting of the unemployed. Despite a heavy downpour of rain, good humour never waned. However, there was a great roar of indignation when a boy, whose head was swathed in bandages as a result of injuries received on Friday, was called to the platform. A defence committee had been formed, but was finding difficulty in getting advocates for the prisoners: “the lawyers, wise men, demand spondulicks first.” A report on Saturday in the Mercury, quoted an unnamed local communist who suggested that because they had nobody locally who could make a good speech and offer leadership, speakers were being sent for. However, the platform of the unemployed meeting was at pains to deny that Communist agitators were being imported into the City. ³¹

**Wednesday 5th October 1921**

**Jennett and Ley on trial**

On Wednesday, the trial of Ley and Jennett took place. Jennett was charged with assaulting police officers. Supt. Choyce, who gave the order to clear the street by force, provided evidence of behalf of the police. He stated that, unable to gain admittance to the’ Trade Union Hall, where number of the officials had locked themselves in state of terror, the crowd of 600 marched to the Poor Law offices. The police, took a short cut and got there before them. They took up positions inside the building. The prosecution suggested that Jennet and Ley had led a ‘disorderly mob’ which had attempted in a rush to force the doors of the Poor Law office. The crowd were said to have overpowered the constables guarding the doors and Jennett was alleged to have said: “Come on boys let’s rush the office.” A statement which he denied in court. When asked if he thought the police had told any untruths, Jennett replied: ”the police are very far removed from George Washington.” Ley was accused of kicking a police inspector Keene on the knee and

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29 L.D.M., 3rd October 1921.
30 L.D.M., 3rd October 1921.
31 L.D.M. 4th October 1921. Home Office files report the presence of R.V. Hardy, a Birmingham communist.
Chapter Four

Jennett accused of attacking a police sergeant Allen. The sequence of events described by the police is very different to the several independent eye witness reports published at the time. None of these describe the crowd as attempting to rush the building, they all say that about 30 police rushed out of the building following the throwing of a stone.

Ley’s late employer gave evidence to his good character and industriousness. One of Ley’s character witnesses was F.L. Rimmington who was a prominent member of the Socialist Labour Party. A number of witnesses also testified, that prior to his arrest in the Market Place, Ley had not been injured. The prosecution portrayed Jennett as the ring leader and told the court:

“this man is the whole cause of this trouble. I really believe that if he had not been here, we should have not had any bother. He is never happy unless he is fermenting trouble.”

The court was also told that Jennett had been to prison for a month for deserting his wife and family and had been bound over for stealing two loaves from Poor Law offices. He had been sentenced for six months for warehouse breaking and had been arrested twice as a deserter from the army. He was connected with the attempt of a crowd to force its way into the House of Commons and the attempt to occupy Islington Town Hall. On February 23rd 1921, in Hyde Park, he had proposed a raid on Lyons’ Corner House, but this did not materialise. Worse, he had been “associated with a Jewess on the Clyde in preaching Bolshevist ideas.”

Ley was bound over for six months, but Jennett was sent to prison for one month in the second division. This meant he was to be treated as a common criminal rather than being sent to the first division which was reserved for those who broke the law for political motives. Jennett is reported to have replied to the sentence with the comment: “Roll on the revolution.”  

The Leicester Pioneer was very critical of the conduct of the trial. “Much ado was made about nothing in order to get the men jailed.”  

Mr J. L. Ward, the presiding magistrate, was criticised for his partiality. Apparently, he consistently interrupted the defence witnesses and lawyers, whilst listening to the prosecution case in silence. Later that week, seven other men were charged and bound over for breaching the peace in Town Hall Square.

New relief schemes

Despite the view of the Special Branch that further disturbances were likely in the City, further demonstrations remained peaceful. In the week following the trial, the City Council brought forward a scheme to spend £101,250 on relief schemes. This included the building of sewers and culverts, the widening of the Willow and Evington Brooks, as well providing new sedimentation tanks at the Beaumont Leys sewage works and tennis courts off Uppingham Road. There was general support of the Sherriff’s plan for a working relationship between the

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32 L.D.M., 6th October 1921, Western Daily Press, 6th October 1921
33 L.P., 7th October.
34 L.D.M. 12th October 1921.
Guardians and the Distress and the Council’s decision meant that it was financially viable. However, there were some serious arguments about the detail of the scheme itself. The unemployed, led again by Jack Binns, continued to make representations to the Guardians to improve the scheme. The central area of disagreement was over payments half in kind and half in cash. Binns argued that by paying half in money and half in grocery or food tickets, the Guardians were trying to make them paupers, even though they were working. Another member of the unemployed committee, M. Galbraith, told the Guardians that:

> paying half in kind did not give the men who had run into debt a chance. He had been out of work for twelve months and had run a little into debt, he had not paid his landlady for nine weeks. ³⁵

George Parbury was against the principle of paying half in kind and half in cash.

> There were many who would never go to the Guardians through pride, what was to happen to them?

However on this issue the Guardians would not concede. There were other reservations expressed. Labour’s T.R. Hill believed it wrong that they should enquire into the moral character of any man before they gave him work:

> If a man was living in adultery he might just as much have responsibility for his family as any other man.”

³⁵ L.D.M., ibid.
Harrison’s view was that men who “would not take up the full responsibility of citizenship, should not ask their fellow citizens to take over on their responsibilities.” This was also the view promulgated by Edward (Teddy) Hincks, the secretary of the Charity Organisations Society.

In a public debate at the Secular Hall, the editor of the Leicester Pioneer, Clement Bundock, criticised the taking into account of the earnings of children over 16 and the fact that work for the Council was to be done on the cheap and not at trade union rates of pay. He argued that

> Men whom a stupid society had forced into starvation should be dealt with in the most humane, generous and unobtrusive way. The actions of the Guardians displayed too greater tendency to take the view of what for brevity’s sake could be termed the Charity Organisation standpoint. He would not defend people whose applications were not genuine, but he would rather run the risk of making mistakes in two, three or even four score cases than impose all the humiliations of investigations on the majority...The Guardians’ scheme represented the searching inquisitorial viewpoint.

The whole scheme was very nearly torpedoed by the the Ministry of Health. It asked the Guardians to reduce the wages being paid to 75% of the rate paid by the Corporation to unskilled labourers. This meant that the hourly rate would have to be reduced from 1s 4d to 1s 0d per hour. This demand came as something of a bombshell and according to George Banton, it was adding insult to injury: *Men who had followed constitutional lines had no ground to stand on: here was incitement to take extreme action.* The matter was debated by the City Council who recommended that the wages paid to the unemployed should not be cut. The Council’s lead was followed by the Guardians who also decided, by a majority, not to cut the rates of pay. Rather than risk further disturbances, they politely decided to ignore the advice of the Ministry. However, the Guardians were still adamant in their refusal to treat unemployed men and women equally. They rejected Miss Mackintosh’s motion for equal pay by 19 votes to 10.

### The Leicester Work Scheme

After some considerable debate, a work scheme for the unemployed was eventually adopted. Amos Sherriff must take the credit for what became known as the ‘Leicester Work Scheme.’ Although it did not meet the demands of the N.U.W.M., the scheme was a practical compromise. It improved the lot of the unemployed, without offending the sensibilities of those who objected to the paying ‘doles’ for no work. It was strongly supported by veteran I.L.P. Member, W.A. Larrad, who was now Secretary of the Distress Committee.

If you were unemployed, after filling in a form at the Relief Office, you were then referred to the Distress Committee. After an interview, the applicant would be awarded a number of hours work according to the scale adopted on 28th September and given a work card, stating the number of hours awarded and where you were to work the next morning. When the work was

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36 L.D.M. 13th October 1921.
37 L.D.M., 19th October 1921
38 L.P., 21st October 1921.
40 In the 1890s, W.A. Larrad had been a member of the I.L.P. and took photos for the Leicester Pioneer. & possibly took the well known photos of the 1905 Unemployed March. See Chas Howes, (ed) *Leicester Civic, Industrial, Social Life* 1927.
finished, you would be paid half in cash, half in kind in the form of tickets. These could be taken to any grocer which displayed the sign “Tickets from the Distress Committee Honoured Here.”

The scheme was financed through a fund supported by the Mayor and the Trades Council. Weekly collections were made in the factories, supported by the Trade Unions. It was agreed that youths and girls earning £1 a week should give one penny and those earning over £1, should give twopence weekly. In many cases employers doubled the amount so contributed. Private individuals also subscribed. However, the scheme did not benefit from the rates or taxation. It depended on sufficient people being in work to be able to make a donation. It put much of the finances of the scheme on the shoulders of ordinary workers rather than the well off. It could only operate in a town where the level of unemployment remained comparatively low.

Initially the scheme was resisted by the unemployed because it was not an immediate distribution of cash or kind and some refused to fill in the forms. However, the Guardians refused to make any more concessions and within a week the scheme got into operation. In the week of November 3rd 1921, 2,113 men were given work through the Guardians and the Distress Committee. Although this figure declined as the local economy improved, the partnership of the Board of Guardians and the Distress Committee continued until 1929.

Local councillors were to claim, in 1924, that this scheme had cleared the streets of Leicester of processions of the unemployed and had brought the whole problem under the control of the authorities. This view was shared by the Mercury which believed that Leicester now had a reputation for dealing with unemployment. Apparently the scheme had also attracted the
interest of other local authorities and many deputations had come to see its operation. ⁴¹ Despite the opposition of the local N.U.W.M., the system of payment half in kind and half in money continued throughout the 1920’s and 30’s. By the mid thirties, payments to the unemployed had been cut considerably, though men were often doing the same kind of work as the regular corporation men. According to the Unemployed Workers Movement, in 1935 Corporation employees were paid 50/- for a 48 hour week, whilst those on distress received only 7/- in cash and a 7/- food ticket for 36 hours of the same work. ⁴²

**Red Friday or Black Friday?**

Although a popular figure, Charles Keene’s conciliatory approach to the Guardians had undermined his standing with the unemployed. In contrast to 1905, the I.L.P. had failed to provide the unemployed with an effective spokesman. ⁴³ Given the level of paranoia about the Bolshevik menace in the Government and security services, the replacement of Keene by Jennett and Ley opened the way to rash action by the police. This was made all too easy by the prejudiced views held by the Chief Constable. His view of the unemployed as lazy trouble makers did not make for impartial policing.

It was not the behaviour of the crowd which provoked the police, since, under Keene’s leadership demonstrations at the Poor law offices had been also been lively and on one occasion a stone had been thrown. Despite this, the police had generally reacted with a degree of tact. The view of the Directorate of Intelligence (Home Office) on 10th October was that ‘as anticipated’ the disorder in Leicester was a direct result of the work of agitators such as Jennett

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⁴¹ C.C. 29th January 1924.
⁴³ In November 1921, he was elected as a Labour councillor for Aylestone.
and Ley. Yet the disorder in the town came as a direct response to the heavy handedness of the police. The fact that mounted police were on the scene so quickly suggests that the police had prepared for a confrontation. The action of the police seems to have been more inspired by their views on the leaders of the unemployed, rather than a reaction to the behaviour of the crowd. The police regarded Jennett as a dangerous Bolshevik who should be put out of circulation. This can be the only explanation for the police over reaction to what should have been a simple question of crowd control. The question remains: was the baton charge a premeditated action by the police or just an over reaction?

After his release from prison, Jennett stayed in Leicester, becoming a Council tenant. This confirms that he had indeed returned to Leicester for family reasons and was not some external agitator. Whether he intended that the unemployed should occupy the Trades Hall remains unproven. Although in subsequent years, there was a robust unemployed movement in Leicester, there is no evidence to suggest that either Ley or Jennett had any significant involvement.

The events of Friday 30th September were described by the President of the Trades Council as Leicester’s ‘Black Friday.’ This view was probably shared by those left bruised on the ground by the police. However, the public anger and outrage expressed on Friday evening also justified the Pioneer’s description of that day as Leicester’s ‘Red Friday.’ Though the unemployed did not win all of their demands, there can be no doubt that the events of that day gingered up the Guardians to assist those in hardship. Despite the Leicester Daily Mercury’s plea that the events of that day should be allowed to pass out of mind, they were vividly remembered by those who witnessed them and could only have contributed to the establishment of a locally based unemployed workers movement.

Despite Leicester's comparative prosperity, during the 1920s and 1930s, there was an active movement of the unemployed in the City throughout this period. This was given an impetus, not just by the rise in unemployment, but also by the introduction of the hated Means Test in 1931. During the 1930s, the unemployed movement played a large part in giving the local blackshirts a tough time in the Market Place. By the mid 1930s, there was growing public support and sympathy for the Hunger and Jarrow Marchers when they stopped...

Rowland Walton on the N.U.W.M. Platform in the Market Place in 1934

44 PRO CAB 24/128 Special Report No. 23
45 L.P. 21st October 1921. The Trades Council requested both a public enquiry into the action of the police in Rupert Street and also into the assault on Bert Ley.
overnight in the City. In its report on unemployment in Britain in 1938, the Pilgrim Trust reported that:

What gives unemployment its special character in such a place as Leicester, is the contrast between the general prosperity and the man or the family, who is standing outside it, but witnessing it all day and everyday.....it is no accident that the National Unemployed Workers’ Movement should be mentioned more to us in Leicester than elsewhere."

The Jarrow Marchers had all their boots repaired by local footwear workers whilst they slept.