

**THOMAS WAKLEY (1795–1862)**

**"If this is not the body of the man who was  
killed in your vat, pray, Sir, how  
many paupers have you boiled?"**

**—British coroner Thomas Wakley to  
workhouse official  
Thomas Austin inquest, 1839**



British surgeon Thomas Wakley (1795–1862) was a prominent medical and political reformer. In 1823, Wakley founded *The Lancet*, a journal dedicated to the reform of medicine. In 1828, Wakley became active in campaigns to extend voting rights beyond the small group of men, abolish slavery, and suspend the Newspaper Stamp Act, which priced newspapers out of the reach of many Britons. He himself first ran for Parliament in 1832 as a radical. He was defeated in that race, but was elected in 1835, and served in the House of Commons for seventeen years thereafter.

As a member of Parliament, Thomas Wakley was particularly concerned with reform of forensic medicine, public health, and other medical issues, and campaigned to reinvent the office of the coroner as an open, democratic, and medically competent institution. In cases of suspicious death, the coroner was traditionally required to make a public "view of the body" before jurors and witnesses at the crime scene or other accessible place. But when officials or powerful persons were involved, inquests were sometimes moved behind closed doors or not

held at all, and evidence was suppressed.

Wakley argued that coroners should be qualified medical men and elected advocates of the people—not lawyers'. He insisted that an inquest could only produce justice if conducted publicly and scientifically, without favoritism or prejudice. Wakley was elected Middlesex coroner in 1839 along with his political position. He worked to expose cover-ups and wrongdoing, such as the 1839 case of Thomas Austin, a 79-year-old man who was incarcerated in a workhouse for indigents, and who died there after falling into a copper vat of boiling water. Austin's body was hastily buried by the workhouse authorities, but Wakley ordered it to be exhumed and held an inquest. The coroner's jury found ruled that Austin's death was an accident. The workhouse authorities' were negligent in not placing railings around the vat, which was a contributory factor.