

THE IMPACT OF STURGES BOURNE'S POOR LAW REFORMS IN RURAL ENGLAND*

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ABSTRACT. *England was blighted by frequent agricultural depressions in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Recurrent crises brought poor law reform to the parliamentary agenda and led to the passage of two non-compulsory pieces of legislation, Sturges Bourne's Acts of 1818 and 1819. These permissive acts allowed parishes to 'tighten up' the distribution of poor relief through two vital tools: the formation of select vestries, and the appointment of waged assistant overseers. Whilst previous studies have tended to represent the legislation as a failing reform in the dying days of the old poor law, we know remarkably little about the relief practices deployed by parishes operating under the auspices of Sturges Bourne's Acts. This article starts by detailing the genesis of the reforms before considering the provisions of the acts and their rates of adoption in rural England. Focusing upon administrative records from Wessex and West Sussex, the article proceeds to examine the inspection of relief claimants, and judgments made as to their 'character and conduct'; the general measures taken to reduce outdoor relief; and their alternative strategies for allocating relief. It is argued that the reforms re-drew the distinction between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor, ultimately changing individuals' and families' entitlement to relief under the old poor laws.*

The end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 effected a severe agricultural and manufacturing depression. As Roger Wells notes, the 'war-induced high farm-product prices' suffered deflation, whilst there was no longer any need to produce the 'artefacts of war'. Men who had previously been in military service re-entered the labour market depressing wages and increasing unemployment. While in the manufacturing areas the depression was 'relatively short', in rural areas it was both enduring and intense. Indeed, as David Eastwood contends, 'the post-war depression generated the most acute crisis in the entire period' between 1780 and 1840. This was especially the case in relation to the poor

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laws, with national poor relief expenditure rocketing post-1816.¹ The £2 million spent on relief in England and Wales in 1783–5 had doubled by 1802–3 and continued to escalate to £8 million by 1818. When accounting for population growth, there was still a significant increase in the average annual cost of poor relief in England and Wales, which rose from 4s per head in 1776 to 13s in 1818.²

Following a ‘detailed statistical inquiry into the operation of the poor laws and the scale of relief payments’ by the government, a House of Commons select committee was appointed in 1816 to investigate further.³ The select committee comprised forty gentlemen, including Thomas Frankland Lewis, later a commissioner of the new poor law, and chairman William Sturges Bourne, chair of the Hampshire quarter sessions from 1817 to 1822 and later a member of the royal commission on the poor laws 1832–4.⁴ The aim of Sturges Bourne and the select committee was not, however, to abolish the old poor laws – as many commentators had called for – but to develop legislation which permitted administrative reform of the existing parish administrative structure.⁵ The result was a series of parliamentary bills, two of which became known as the ‘Sturges Bourne Acts’ of 1818 and 1819. The 1818 act allowed voting rights in open vestries to be weighted according to a vestryman’s property rating, while the act of 1819 permitted parishes to appoint select vestries and assistant overseers, two measures designed to allow parishes to restrict relief.

Notwithstanding that, as Steve King has suggested, the acts had ‘fundamental consequences for the experience of being poor’, their adoption and impact on the provision of poor relief has been little researched and as such remains poorly understood.⁶ The reasons behind this lack of systematic attention are perhaps understandable for two reasons. First, the royal commission’s Poor Law Report of 1834 stated that, while the reforms were potentially ‘highly beneficial’, in practice, so the report asserted, they were unpopular. Those select vestries that were appointed were sparsely attended and being prone to making ‘injurious’ relief decisions, and that poorly documented.⁷

¹ R. Wells, ‘Poor-law reform in the rural south-east; the impact of the “Sturges Bourne Acts” during the agricultural depression, 1815–1835’, *Southern History*, 23 (2001), p. 53; D. Eastwood, *Governing rural England: tradition and transformation in local government, 1780–1840* (Oxford, 1994), p. 128.

² B. Harris, *The origins of the British welfare state: social welfare in England and Wales, 1800–1945* (Basingstoke, 2004), p. 43.

³ Eastwood, *Governing rural England*, p. 128.

⁴ A. Brundage, *The English poor laws, 1700–1930* (Basingstoke, 2002), p. 48; D. Eastwood, ‘Bourne, William Sturges (1769–1845)’, *Oxford dictionary of national biography* (Oxford, 2004). Online. Available: www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/3012 (accessed 17 Jan. 2009).

⁵ J. R. Poynter, *Society and pauperism: English ideas on poor relief, 1795–1834* (London, 1964), pp. 223–48.

⁶ S. King, *Poverty and welfare in England, 1700–1850: a regional perspective* (Manchester, 2000), p. 26. See Wells’s study of their adoption in two Sussex parishes: ‘Poor-law reform in the rural south-east’, p. 59.

⁷ S. G. Checkland and E. O. A. Checkland, eds., *The Poor Law Report of 1834* (1834; Harmondsworth, 1974), p. 199.

Secondly, analysis of the implementation of the reforms has been hindered by their 'enabling' status, the 'opt in' nature making the legislation of seemingly low importance. The reforms have thus been left in the shadow of that which followed – the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. This condescension of posterity is perhaps best summed up by the Webbs. To them, the measures were '[an] example of the inability of this generation to grapple effectively with its problems'.⁸

This perspective on Sturges Bourne's reforms has been left largely unquestioned. In the words of Wells, 'the adoption of Sturges Bourne has not been systematically studied, merely commented upon'.⁹ Standard texts on poor law history therefore tend to detail the reforms as part of wider 'legislative context' chapters, but then pass over the uptake and effects of the reforms.¹⁰ A two-parish analysis by Wells (of Sussex), and short surveys of the adoption of Sturges Bourne's reforms by Mark Neuman for Berkshire, Anne Digby for Lancashire and Yorkshire, and most recently David Green for London, are notable exceptions to this rule. Yet, apart from the last study which argues that the measures were ineffective in the metropolis because London already possessed many similar relief-granting bodies, these studies all demonstrate that the legislation appears to have achieved its stated objective in reducing relief costs.¹¹ Neuman, for instance, found that the new regime led to a 33 per cent reduction in relief expenditure in the Berkshire parish of White Waltham in the first year of adopting a select vestry, while the 'heavily pauperised' parish of Bray reduced its poor relief expenditure by 37 per cent.¹² Clearly, the reforms could make a considerable impact on the nature of relief and poor relief claimants of the early nineteenth century.

After detailing the specific facets of Sturges Bourne's reforms, this article considers first the nature and pattern of adoption – focusing specifically upon its two main provisions: select vestries and assistant overseers – before going on to consider the impact of the reforms on the poor. After establishing overall trends in England as a whole, the analysis offers a more detailed analysis of the uptake in several counties (for which see below). Focusing on the parish level administration of Sturges Bourne's reforms allows me to see how the complex 'micro-politics' operated when innovations in the delivery of relief were applied

⁸ S. Webb and B. Webb, *English poor law history, part 2: the last hundred years* (London, 1929), p. 43.

⁹ Wells, 'Poor-law reform in the rural south-east', p. 59.

¹⁰ Examples include: L. H. Lees, *Solidarities of strangers: the English poor laws and the people, 1700–1948* (Cambridge, 1998), p. 41; S. Williams, *Poverty, gender and life-cycle under the English poor law* (Woodbridge, 2011), pp. 78, 95.

¹¹ Wells, 'Poor-law reform in the rural south-east', pp. 52–115; M. Neuman, *The Speenhamland county: poverty and the poor law in Berkshire, 1782–1834* (New York, NY, 1982), pp. 180–3; A. Digby, *The new poor law in nineteenth-century England and Wales* (London, 1982), p. 7; D. R. Green, *Pauper capital: London and the poor law, 1790–1870* (London, 2009), pp. 88–91.

¹² Neuman, *The Speenhamland county*, p. 183, cited in Brundage, *The English poor laws*, p. 51.

on the ground.¹³ Lynn Hollen Lees and Steve Hindle use the term ‘welfare process’ to encapsulate the complex web of interactions within the ‘micro-politics’ of relief, the latter explaining how its ‘various participants – the labouring poor, the parish officers, the county magistrates, the itinerant judiciary’ engaged in ‘protracted and often antagonistic negotiations’ to reach a relief decision.¹⁴ This chosen geographical focus is the ‘region’ of Wessex (Dorset, Hampshire, Somerset, and Wiltshire) with West Sussex. Together, these counties represented a variety of landscapes and rural industries: from the cloth trade of Wiltshire and Somerset, dairy farming in Dorset, Somerset, and Wiltshire, mining in Somerset, arable and livestock farming in Hampshire and Sussex, extensive forest industries in Hampshire and Wiltshire, and the important coastal fishing industry. Outworking also persisted in parts of Dorset, Somerset, and Wiltshire, not least in gloving and button-making. There were ‘closed’ parishes under the tight control of one family, such as Lord Egremont’s dominance over large portions of West Sussex, and ‘open’ parishes composed of many landowners with small land holdings. Wages and rates of poverty therefore varied markedly from place to place as fortunes of different sectors changed.

The diversity offered by Wessex and West Sussex allows for the many potential ways in which the legislation was applied by different communities to be analysed and how it impacted upon the lives of relief claimants. Building upon Wells’s important but initial study of the two Sussex parishes of Ticehurst and Westbourne,¹⁵ the analysis presented here allows both for a richly textured understanding of experience and a deeper consideration of the varying ways in which the reforms were implemented across a far wider geographical area. Influenced by Lees’s assertion that ‘[t]he heart of the welfare process lay in the contacts between the pauper and administrator’, select and open vestry minutes, overseers’ accounts and other administrative documents from parishes throughout the region have been consulted to gather information as to how administrators judged and treated relief claimants. By so doing, the approach of the article allows us to move beyond the more socially abstract economic and

¹³ For an introduction to the politics of the parish see K. Wrightson, ‘The politics of the parish in early modern England’, in P. Griffiths, A. Fox, and S. Hindle, eds., *The experience of authority in early modern England* (London, 1996), pp. 10–46. Research with a focus on the micro-politics of poor relief includes: D. Eastwood, ‘The republic in the village: the parish and poor at Bampton, 1780–1834’, *Journal of Regional and Local Studies*, 12 (1992), pp. 18–28; S. Hindle, ‘Power, poor relief, and social relations in Holland Fen, c. 1600–1800’, *Historical Journal*, 41 (1998), pp. 67–96; idem, *On the parish? The micro-politics of poor relief in rural England c. 1550–1750* (Oxford, 2004); J. Healey, ‘The development of poor relief in Lancashire, c. 1598–1680’, *Historical Journal*, 53 (2010), pp. 551–72.

¹⁴ Lees, *Solidarities of strangers*, p. 33; Hindle, *On the parish?*, p. 363.

¹⁵ A brief examination of one of these parishes is also offered by Peter Ellacott in ‘The poor of the parish and the work of the Westbourne select vestries 1819–1835’, Westbourne Local History Group’s publication *Bygone Westbourne*, 3 (1986), pp. 1–25.

political dynamics of the reforms, to instead offer an evaluation of their everyday *human* effects.

I

Before examining the impact of Sturges Bourne's reforms, it is important first to outline the several clauses of the two acts. The first Sturges Bourne's Act permitted parishes to reset the weighting of vestry votes on the basis of one vote per the first £50 property assessment with a sliding scale thereafter, up to a maximum of six votes for an assessment £150 or more. Those without property were also barred from attending vestry meetings. While this was controversial, and attracted opposition for making the vestry an exclusive group, the committee believed that the major ratepayers would better control the expenditure of the poor rates and reduce corruption. As Bryan Keith-Lucas puts it, the measure was intended to take the administration of poor relief 'out of the hands of the poor themselves.'¹⁶

The 1819 Act was specifically concerned with the mechanisms of relief provision, and permitted any parish to 'establish a Select Vestry for the concerns of the Poor' of between five and twenty 'Substantial Householders or Occupiers'.¹⁷ The select vestry had to be voted for by the majority of members of the open vestry and renewed annually therein, the official written agreement requiring the signature of one magistrate.¹⁸ A chairman would be elected by the majority of the members of the select vestry and had a casting vote on unresolved decisions. Being required to meet at least once every fourteen days, the role of the select vestry was:

to examine into the State and Condition of the Poor of the Parish, and to inquire into and determine upon the proper Objects of Relief, and the Nature and Amount of the Relief to be given; and in each case take into Consideration the Character and Conduct of the poor Person to be relieved, and shall be at liberty to distinguish, in the Relief to be granted between the deserving, and the idle extravagant or profligate.¹⁹

Once such inquiries were made, the overseer was bound to abide by the decisions of the select vestry and administer relief accordingly, except in cases of 'sudden Emergency or urgent Necessity'.²⁰

The select vestry was not just a relief-issuing body, though, for the 1819 Act also permitted loans to be made to the poor which would then be repaid

¹⁶ 58 Geo. III c. 69; B. Keith-Lucas, *The unreformed local government system* (London, 1980), pp. 98–9.

¹⁷ 59 Geo. III c. 12, 1.

¹⁸ 59 Geo. III c. 12, 1. The select vestry could operate from any time, but it would expire fourteen days after the annual appointment of overseers.

¹⁹ 59 Geo. III c. 12, 1.

²⁰ 59 Geo. III c. 12, 1.

in weekly instalments.²¹ Scholars of local government, most notably David Eastwood, have suggested though that the idea of a committee composed exclusively for the administration of relief was not itself a new practice. Separate committees were formed prior to the 1819 Act with the specific task of managing the welfare of the poor. Dorchester, for instance, had a system akin to a select vestry from 1794, before deciding in 1821 to place the pre-existing committee under the regulations of Sturges Bourne.²² Committees were also frequently formed to undertake a specific task on behalf of the wider vestry. In the spring of 1798, for example, the Wincanton vestry established a committee of nine men 'to examine into the Managemt. and expenditure of the Workhouse'.²³

Sturges Bourne's 1819 Act also permitted the appointment of assistant overseers, to be sanctioned annually by two magistrates after checking the applicant's financial indemnity agreement. In return for undertaking 'all such of the Duties of the Office of Overseer of the Poor', and any specified in the contract of his appointment, the assistant would receive a salary set by members of the vestry.²⁴ According to Eastwood, this section of the Act encouraged 'a few would-be bureaucrats to devote themselves to parish administration', thereby promoting a growing 'professionalism', akin to a 'poor law civil service'.²⁵ Indeed, assistant overseers were paid a salary from the parish purse and were re-appointed on an annual basis. But just as select vestries were not an entirely new idea before the passage of the 1819 Act, neither were assistant overseers. Variably called 'perpetual', 'deputy', 'acting', 'standing', and 'rating' overseers, such pre-Sturges Bourne appointees were often to be found collecting the rates, distributing poor relief, managing poorhouses, and even playing the church organ.²⁶ Some rural parishes in Wessex and Sussex employed assistant overseers many years before the Sturges Bourne reforms, the large, sparsely populated parish of Chew Magna making such an appointment as early as 1769.²⁷ Chew Magna, according to George Nicholls, was archetypal: the appointment of assistant overseers being particularly desirable in large rural parishes where collecting the rates and distributing poor relief was particularly onerous.²⁸ These early 'assistant overseers' were usually salaried, but not always exclusively supported from the parish funds. In 1811, the Bruton vestry appointed Thomas Bord as a 'rating overseer' to collect the rates. His salary was £20 a year, but only

²¹ 59 Geo. III c. 12, XXIX. Magistrates could have also made an order for the repayment of a loan, and non-payments could result in imprisonment in a common gaol or house of correction. ²² Eastwood, *Governing rural England*, pp. 129, 176.

²³ Wincanton, vestry minutes of 2 May and 25 May 1798, Somerset History Centre (SHC) DPCwinc/1/3/1.

²⁴ 59 Geo. III c. 12, VII. An assistant overseer could continue working until he resigns, dies, or the parish revokes his appointment.

²⁵ Eastwood, *Governing rural England*, p. 177; Brundage, *The English poor laws*, p. 52.

²⁶ The assistant overseer was from Bampton; Eastwood, *Governing Rural England*, pp. 177–8.

²⁷ Chew Magna, vestry minutes of 23 Jan. 1769, SHC DPChe.m/9/1/1.

²⁸ G. Nicholls, *History of the English poor law*, II: 1714–1853 (London, 1898), p. 187.

half came from the poor rates. Each ordinary overseer was also to contribute £5 from their own pockets, as it was a task by law they were supposed to undertake themselves.²⁹

The 1819 Act also contained a series of other optional directives. One such clause allowed parishes to procure twenty acres of land on which to work the poor.³⁰ Another clause also allowed parish vestries both to build and expand parish workhouses for the accommodation of the poor.³¹ Furthermore, parishes were also permitted to enter into arrangements with adjoining parishes for the hire or purchase of workhouses, thus imitating the provisions of Gilbert's Act (1782).³² According to Wells, appointing a select vestry while also providing relief according to Gilbert's Act was forbidden in Sturges Bourne's 1819 Act.³³ Indeed, several parish officials at the time thought this to be the case, with three parishes in Hampshire informing the Poor Law Commission in the Rural Queries that they could not adopt Sturges Bourne's Act because they had adopted Gilbert's Act.³⁴ An examination of the act shows, however, that it was *not* strictly forbidden: a penultimate section of the 1819 Act contained a proviso merely expressing that the act does not intend to alter the 'Powers, Directions, Provisions or Regulations' of Gilbert's Act and those stipulations contained in local acts 'for the Maintenance, Relief or Regulation of the Poor'. All magistrates and parish officials were, therefore, able to decide for themselves whether also to adopt the provisions of Sturges Bourne's Act.³⁵

Magistrates retained their importance in parishes adopting the implementation of the poor laws under Sturges Bourne's Acts. One magistrate alone could issue relief in cases of emergency to a claimant from a parish operating a

²⁹ Bruton, vestry minute of 15 Apr. 1811, SHC DP/brut/g/1/2.

³⁰ Also mentioned in C.J. Griffin, 'Parish farms and the poor law: a response to unemployment in rural southern England, c. 1815–35', *Agricultural History Review*, 59 (2011), p. 184.

³¹ 59 Geo. III c. 12, XII, XIII and XIV, and VIII. Section X also gave parishes permission to sell workhouses. This was not necessarily contradictory because this measure would have assisted parishes to purchase or build larger premises to house parishioners.

³² 59 Geo. III c. 12, XI. Two magistrates had to ratify the arrangement, whilst the workhouse could not be located more than three miles from the parish; for further information on Gilbert's Act see S.A. Shave, 'The welfare of the vulnerable in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: Gilbert's Act of 1782', *History in Focus*, 14 (2008), <http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/welfare/articles/shaves.html> (accessed 31 Oct. 2012); idem, 'Poor law reform and policy innovation in rural southern England, c. 1780–1850' (Ph.D. thesis, Southampton, 2010), pp. 80–132.

³³ Wells, 'Poor-law reform in the rural south-east', p. 88. Note that Wells does not cite Sturges Bourne's Act itself.

³⁴ Parishes of Boldre, Millford and Milton (Hampshire); British Parliamentary Papers (BPP) 1834 (44), XXXII, Report from His Majesty's Commissioners for Inquiring into the Administration and Practical Operation of the Poor Laws. Appendix B.1, Answers to the Rural Queries in Five Parts (hereafter BPP 1834). Part 2. Question 22.

³⁵ 59 Geo. III c. 12, XXXVI. One section of Sturges Bourne's 1819 Act referred to the stipulations of Gilbert's Act about the sale, purchase, and renting of land and buildings for the use of the poor, 59 Geo. III c. 12, XVIII.

select vestry, as they could for a claimant from a parish with an open vestry. Yet Sturges Bourne endeavoured to make it harder for parish relief decisions to be overturned. After hearing a complaint from an individual, just one magistrate was required to direct an open vestry to alter their decision. A claimant from a parish operating a select vestry, however, needed the support of two magistrates.³⁶ According to Peter Dunkley, the role of magistrates to act as a referee on relief decisions meant that minimum standards of relief were often met.³⁷ Steven King concurs.³⁸ Wells, on the other hand, demonstrates how magistrates united with their own class, the propertied, to use poor relief as a way to control the community.³⁹ By analysing the notebooks of Samuel Whitbread, Peter King found a benevolent magistrate who had overturned two-thirds of the cases he heard. But such decisions were not necessarily replicated by others.⁴⁰ Depending on the disposition of each magistrate, therefore, the need of an additional magistrate to support a complaint towards a select vestry decision may have put an additional barrier between the claimant and their poor relief, as Sturges Bourne had intended. Before a vestry could act according to Sturges Bourne's measures, though, magistrates also had to ratify the appointments. Only one signature was needed for a select vestry appointment and two were needed for an assistant overseer's appointment. This may have been because of the financial risks involved in the appointment of a suitable, and reliable, paid official. Although the magistrates' approval was a standard part of the process in the official adoption of enabling legislation, it could often serve as a barrier to its implementation, as will be discussed in the next section.

II

Parishes could adopt both of the main enabling aspects of the Sturges Bourne Acts or just one, i.e. just a select vestry or an assistant overseer. As the Webbs claimed, answers to question 32 of the 'Rural Queries' of the 1834 Poor Law Report suggest that, for the sample counties, the appointment of an assistant overseer was far more popular than the appointment of a select vestry (see [Table 1](#)).⁴¹ There are, however, methodological problems to consider with this source. Some parishes that did not explicitly state that they had a select vestry in

³⁶ 59 Geo. III c. 12, II.

³⁷ P. Dunkley, 'Paternalism, the magistracy and poor relief in England, 1795–1834', *International Review of Social History*, 24 (1979), pp. 371–97.

³⁸ King, *Poverty and welfare*, p. 32.

³⁹ R. Wells, 'Social protest, class, conflict and consciousness in the English countryside, 1700–1880', in M. Reed and R. Wells, eds., *Class, conflict and protest in the English countryside, 1700–1880* (London, 1990), pp. 145–7.

⁴⁰ P. King, 'The rights of the poor and the role of the law: the impact of pauper appeals to the summary court 1750–1834', in S. King, ed., *Poverty and relief in England, 1500–1800* (forthcoming); also see Williams, *Poverty, gender and life-cycle*, p. 93.

⁴¹ S. Webb and B. Webb, *The parish and the county* (1906; London, 1963), p. 166; BPP 1834. Part 3. Question 32.

Table 1 *Parishes with select vestries and assistant overseers in 1832, according to the Rural Queries*

County	Number of parishes answering in county	Number of parishes					% of parishes				
		Select vestry only	Assistant overseer only	Both	Neither	No answer	Select vestry only	Assistant overseer only	Both	Neither	No answer
Dorset	14	0	0	0	6	8	0.0	0.0	0.0	42.9	57.1
Hampshire	57	2	14	8	24	9	3.5	24.6	14.0	42.1	15.8
Somerset	20	1	6	5	5	3	5.0	30.0	25.0	25.0	15.0
West Sussex	32	0	7	1	13	11	0.0	21.9	3.1	40.6	34.4
Wiltshire	25	0	5	6	10	4	0.0	20.0	24.0	40.0	16.0
Total	148	3	32	20	58	35	2.0	21.6	13.5	39.2	23.6

Source: BPP 1834 (44). Part 3. Question 32. Several answers to the Rural Queries were not included because the answers related to an area larger than a parish (such as magistrates' divisions) and/or they represented duplicate answers, or a response was completed about the parish in the Town Queries.

their replies alluded to the existence of a select vestry, while some parishes also stated that they had 'Perpetual' or 'Acting' overseers as opposed to assistant overseers.⁴² In both instances, I have included such respondents in the select vestry and an assistant overseer tallies respectively. Notwithstanding such issues, fifty-six responses to the Rural Queries from Wessex and West Sussex explicitly stated that their parish adopted at least one of the two main provisions of Sturges Bourne's 1819 Act, whilst fifty-eight respondents had neither provision in place. Thus, when taking into account the number of parishes which failed to respond to the question, 37.1 per cent of parishes answering the Rural Queries from this region positively stated they had adopted one or more of the two main provisions of Sturges Bourne's 1819 Act. We can also deduce that those parishes which engaged with the legislation were more likely just to appoint an assistant overseer, or to appoint an assistant overseer alongside a select vestry, than just to adopt a select vestry.

The main limitation of figures of adoption as derived from the Rural Queries is that they only formally record the number of parishes which had either a select vestry or assistant overseer, or both, at the time the returns were taken. Many more parishes had previously appointed a select vestry and an assistant overseer and subsequently abandoned them. The Rural Queries provide some hints as to this complexity where especially detailed responses provided a potted history of their relationship with the act. For instance, the respondent from Pulborough in West Sussex wrote: '[t]here has been a Select Vestry, but it is now discontinued, not being deemed beneficial'.⁴³ At North Curry, Somerset, there was no select vestry, and the assistant overseer had only been appointed nine months prior to the return.⁴⁴

The adoption (and possible abandonment) of these policies can be traced over time through the use of parliamentary returns produced by the Select Committee on Poor Rate Returns who, from 1819 to 1834, collated the number of parishes with select vestries and assistant overseers in England and Wales. [Figure 1](#) shows the percentage of parishes in England as a whole and in the selected counties that appointed a select vestry between 1819 and 1834. As is shown, select vestries were initially more popular in the sample counties than in England as a whole, however; the number of select vestries in other areas of the country rose much more rapidly in the early 1820s, so that by 1825 the percentage of parishes with select vestries in the selected southern counties was slightly lower than the national average. Thereafter, the number of select vestries throughout the country and—in greater proportion—the southern sample counties fell. By 1833–4, fewer than 10 per cent of parishes in the study counties had a select vestry in operation.

⁴² BP 1834. Part 3. Question 32, select vestry: Bramshaw (Hampshire); alternative wording of assistant overseer: Pitton and Farley (West Sussex) and North Bavant (Wiltshire).

⁴³ *Ibid.*, Pulborough (West Sussex).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, North Curry (Somerset).

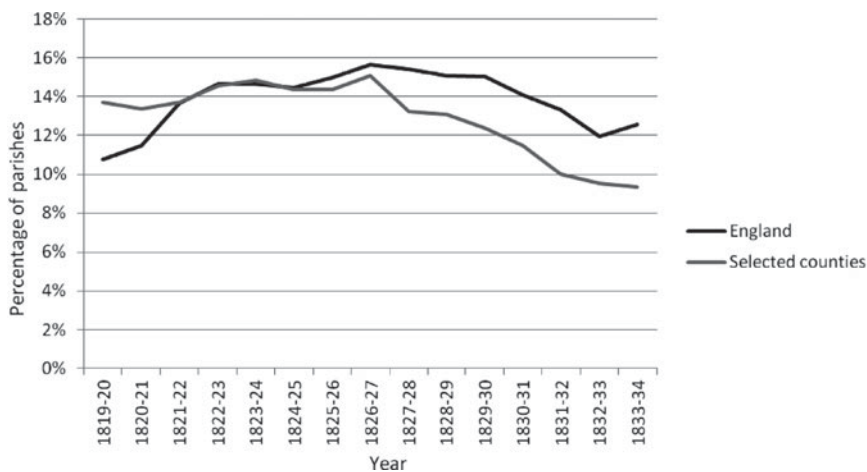


Fig. 1. Percentage of parishes in England and selected southern counties of England with a select vestry, 1819–1834.

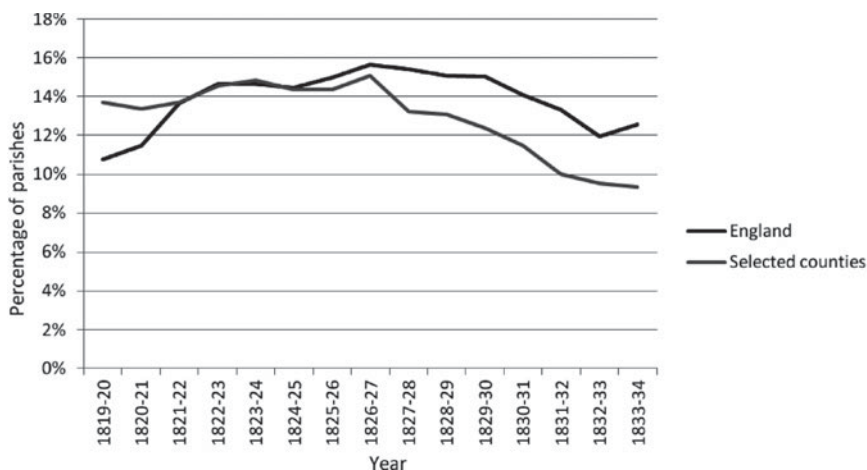


Fig. 2. Percentage of parishes in England and selected southern counties of England with an assistant overseer, 1819–1834.

Sources: A variety of British Parliamentary Papers 1821–1835. ‘Selected counties’ consist of Dorset, Hampshire, Somerset, Sussex and Wiltshire. For details see S.A. Shave, ‘Poor law reform and policy innovation in rural southern England, c.1780–1850’ (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Southampton, 2010), pp. 146–7.

There was a very different pattern in assistant overseer appointments compared to select vestry appointments (Figure 2). The proportion of parishes with assistant overseers in both England and the study counties increased over time, albeit unevenly. Between 1825 and 1827, there was a significant increase in the proportions of parishes with assistants, and, again, a steady increase

during the early 1830s. Notably, the policy was always more popular in Wessex and West Sussex than in England as a whole. These figures, however, conceal the numbers of parishes which adopted the policies for only short periods of time and those parishes which continued to use select vestries and assistant overseers over extended periods of time. This is because the annual returns did not provide the names of parishes adopting each policy, only the number of parishes with a select vestry and the number of parishes with an assistant overseer in each county. Although we cannot tell from the returns exactly *which* parishes had adopted, and continued to operate under, the enabling act at what times, it can be deduced that more parishes adopted Sturges Bourne's provisions at some time than the crude figures suggest.

The main reason why open vestries adopted the provisions of Sturges Bourne's 1819 Act was to reduce poor relief expenditure. This is further illustrated by the data presented above, which shows that both schemes markedly increased in popularity during years of economic strain. Moreover, many of the parishes that responded to the Rural Queries in the south explicitly noted that a saving had been made in the poor rates after implementation of the act.⁴⁵ A larger number still also noted, albeit vaguely, that the act was 'advantageous' or produced 'a good effect in the parish'.⁴⁶ This reflects the findings of Neuman, who found that the parish of White Waltham (Berkshire) had reduced its relief expenditure by 33 per cent within a year of establishing a select vestry and that Bray, in the same county, saved 37 per cent.⁴⁷ All was not entirely positive in Wessex though. Five parishes noted that the act had very little effect, including Tillington (West Sussex) where it was observed that 'The effect has not been beneficial.'⁴⁸

The appointment of assistant overseers and select vestries was influenced, as well as restricted, by a number of other factors. As noted, assistant overseers were particularly useful in rural parishes with widely dispersed populations. At Burghclere (Hampshire), it was reported that '[a]n Assistant Overseer is necessary in this parish, the cottages being scattered'.⁴⁹ Here, it was likely that the parish asked the assistant overseer both to collect the poor rates and distribute poor relief payments. Assistant overseers working in larger parishes tended to have a higher salary, reflecting the labour required to supply relief to the poor in all corners. William Finder, for instance, was paid £50 by the vestry of Kings Somborne (Hampshire), a parish that covered 8,000 acres. Eling, at 10,960 acres, some of which was on the New Forest fringe, paid their assistant

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, Eling and Romsey Extra (Hampshire); Arundel (West Sussex); Box, Chippenham, Fisherton Anger, and Ramsbury (Wiltshire).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, Amport, East Woodhay, Minstead, Odiham, Sherfield English, Weyhill, and Widley (Hampshire); Batcombe, Brompton Regis, Crowcombe, Nether Stowey, Nether Wallop, Stogumber, and Stoke St Gregory (Somerset); Rogate (West Sussex); Corsham (Wiltshire).

⁴⁷ Neuman, *The Speenhamland county*, p. 183.

⁴⁸ BP 1834. Part 3. Question 32, Bentley Liberty, Whitchurch (Hampshire); Bishop's Hull, Curry Rivell (Somerset); Tillington (West Sussex). ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, Burghclere (Hampshire).

overseer £60 per annum.⁵⁰ Select vestries, on the other hand, could only be introduced in parishes which had a sufficient number of large landowners to create the select vestry in the first place, the act stipulating that at least five individuals were needed for a select vestry. Many rural parishes in the south of England were, however, dominated by a small number of large landowners. At Old Shoreham, for instance, it was reported that the reforms were not adopted because 'there ... [was] no resident Farmer in the Parish but myself'.⁵¹ It is possible that such parishes, and many urban parishes, could have already had an exclusive relief-granting body in place, such as those parishes acting under Gilbert's Act and local acts to provide workhouses. As outlined earlier, though, this did not necessarily deter the individual parishes within unions from acquiring a select vestry. Indeed, it is striking that the same factors which limited the adoption of select vestries in rural southern England were also replicated in the capital. Parishes such as Southwark and the City of London, as Green relates, were too small to operate a select vestry, while many other London parishes 'operated, however poorly, under private local acts'.⁵²

There were two stages to the formal adoption of Sturges Bourne's provisions: a vote from ratepayers in favour of the provision, and the approval of magistrates. At both of these stages, plans to adopt the legislation could be scuppered. By far the more controversial of the two key policies was the select vestry, not least because it placed relief administration in the hands of the few. Besides, many parishes had a long tradition of appointing assistants for their overseers, thereby rendering the new legislation instantly familiar. Open vestries that had already adopted restricted and weighted votes under the 1818 Act also introduced select vestries with apparent ease. Other open vestries had more unpredictable decision-making processes. In Hinton Charterhouse, near Bath, the 'principal paymasters' voted in favour of a select vestry while the small ratepayers opposed the move; a select vestry could therefore not be appointed. It was reported that one man who had lived in the parish for forty years, but had never sat on the vestry, decided to attend that particular meeting and vote against the measure, reinforcing social historians' long-held assumptions that smaller ratepayers sided with the poor rather than with the bigger farmers.⁵³

⁵⁰ Colonel Charles Ashe A'Court, 'Notes on every parish in the Winchester division'; 'Notes on the several parishes in the division of Romsey', Nov. 1834. The National Archives (TNA) MH32/1.

⁵¹ In Old Shoreham (West Sussex) there were only three farmers: BPP 1834. Part 3. Questions 28 and 32. In 1870, Wilson classified 65 per cent of parishes in Sussex (using a sample of 300 parishes) as either 'one estate', 'not much divided', or 'in few hands'. J. M. Wilson, *The imperial gazetteer of England and Wales* (6 vols., Edinburgh, 1870), cited in B. Short, 'Landownership in Victorian Sussex', in K. C. Leslie and B. Short, eds., *An historical atlas of Sussex: an atlas of the history of the counties of East and West Sussex* (Chichester, 1999), pp. 98–9.

⁵² Green, *Pauper capital*, p. 89.

⁵³ BPP 1823 (570), Report from the Select Committee on Poor Rate Returns, Appendix E, 'Somerset', 'Charterhouse Hinton', p. 18. It is well known that small farmers and crafts

Not only did these local dynamics impact on the initial votes for a select vestry, but they also generated complex administrative histories. As Wells related, the 'Westbourne select vestry was soundly defeated on one occasion, while Ticehurst's retreated several times'.⁵⁴ Yet the re-appointment of select vestries also depended on their effectiveness. Indeed, if a select vestry had not actively undertaken measures to reduce relief expenditure it was unlikely that it would be appointed again. Ampport, for instance, had once had a select vestry but reported that 'it is now given up, in consequence of non-attendance of the members'.⁵⁵ Only four or five farmers attended the fortnightly meeting of the select vestry at Mottisfont (Hampshire), so relief was left to the discretion of the assistant overseer.⁵⁶ Some parishes even levied fines on those who failed to turn up, to ensure that a sufficient number of people were present to make decisions.⁵⁷ It appears that the royal commission's claim that select vestries were poorly attended was broadly accurate.

The role of magistrates was also potentially problematic. According to Wells, the magistrates at the Battle Petty Sessions supported, and even promoted, the policies developed and decisions made by the select vestries. Indeed, the majority of relief refusals brought to the sessions by individuals remonstrating against the decisions were rejected, especially those based on moral grounds. This reinforced the views and decisions made by the select vestries and assistant overseers which, in turn, buttressed the legitimacy of adopting the measures. This, to Wells, was strong evidence that magistrates in the south-east generally 'supported the central tenets of Sturges Bourne'.⁵⁸ Such a harmonious working relationship did not hold throughout southern England. Evidence from parliamentary papers suggests a much more complex relationship. It was reported by many parish officers that select vestries brought beneficial effects, including a reduction in the poor rates, and magistrates supported their endeavours, yet it was also noted that parishes encountered difficulties with their magistrates.⁵⁹ In Shepton Mallet (Somerset) a select vestry was voted in by

producers supported the plight of the labouring class during the Swing Riots, not least because of their own economic insecurity. See E.J. Hobsbawm and G. Rudé, *Captain Swing* (London, 1969); C.J. Griffin, *The rural war: Captain Swing and the politics of protest* (Manchester, 2012).

⁵⁴ Wells, 'Poor-law reform in the rural south-east', p. 96.

⁵⁵ BPP 1834. Part 3. Question 32. Ampport (Hampshire).

⁵⁶ Colonel Charles Ashe A'Court, 'Notes on the several parishes in the division of Romsey', Nov. 1834, TNA MH32/1.

⁵⁷ A fine of 2s 6d was levied in Nether Wallop, 1s in Shipley and 6d in Hartley Wintney; Nether Wallop, select vestry minute of 11 Apr. 1825, Hampshire Record Office (HRO) 93M83/PV1, Shipley, select vestry minute of 16 Apr. 1829, West Sussex Record Office (WSRO) Par162/12/1; Hartley Wintney, vestry minute of 25 Mar. 1830, HRO 85M76/PV2.

⁵⁸ Wells, 'Poor-law reform in the rural south-east', pp. 82 and 88.

⁵⁹ BPP 1823 (570) Report from the Select Committee on Poor Rate Returns, Appendix E, 'Somerset', 'Lydeard St. Lawrence', p. 18; BPP1824 (420) Report from the Select Committee on Poor Rate Returns, Appendix F.1., 'Somerset', 'Banwell', p. 21.

the ratepayers in 1822, but the magistrates refused to ratify it.⁶⁰ As Keith Snell notes, this was because Sturges Bourne's Acts were a 'move against the power of the magistracy' in that although open vestry decisions could be overturned by one magistrate, select vestry decisions had to be overturned by two.⁶¹ The independence that appointing a select vestry would bring parish authorities was certainly understood by the parish officials. As one Hampshire vestry stated: 'that no effectual measures can be adopted for the employment of the Poor till the Parish shall be made less dependent upon the Magistrates, by placing itself under the operation of the Act for the establishment & regulation of Select Vestries'.⁶²

Even in places where select vestry appointments had been ratified by magistrates, magistrates could undermine the efforts of select vestries by overturning their decisions. At Holcombe (Somerset) the magistrates paid 'little or no courtesy ... to the orders of the select vestry'. According to the parish officers, the poor would constantly 'fly to a magistrate' for an appeal of the vestry's decision, thereby giving relief claimants 'the upper hand of the parish'. Select vestries needed, the Holcombe respondents contended, 'stronger and more efficient powers ... independent of magistrates'. In the following year, the select vestry effected no savings and the poor rates increased. By 1825, the select vestry had been abandoned, the blame for its demise placed on the 'determined opposition shown to all its measures, by the magistrates'.⁶³ This strikes at the more general tension between parish officials and magistrates in the administration of relief under the old poor laws. The vestry clerk of Chiddingly (East Sussex) believed the business of the select vestry would be 'done much better' without the 'interference' of magistrates.⁶⁴ It is important to note, though, that many other parish officials believed that magistrates were not a nuisance, but rather provided a useful mechanism by which claimants could be heard, thus keeping the parish in check.⁶⁵ Either way, magistrates could make or break a select vestry.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 'Shepton Mallet', p. 18; there is no evidence to suggest that the vote was not legitimate and no reason for the magistrates' refusal to ratify the measure is given in this report.

⁶¹ K. D. M. Snell, *Annals of the labouring poor: social change and agrarian England, 1660-1900* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 117.

⁶² Millbrook, vestry minute of 9 Nov. 1820, Southampton City Record Office (SCRO) PR10/8/1.

⁶³ BPP 1826 (330) Report from the Select Committee on Poor Rate Returns, Appendix F, 'Somerset', 'Holcombe', pp. 18, 20-1.

⁶⁴ BPP 1834. Part 4. Question 44. Chiddingly (East Sussex).

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* My review of the answers given to Question 44 of the Rural Queries, 'What do you think would be the effect, immediate and ultimate, of making the decision of the Vestry or Select Vestry in matters of Relief final?' for the counties of Dorset, Hampshire, Somerset, Wiltshire, and West Sussex. For instance in Downton (Wiltshire), Samuel Payne (assistant overseer) expressed that the decisions made by the vestry should not be final because it '[w]ould not be beneficial. Magistrates in this neighbourhood rarely supersede the decisions of Select Vestries of character. In small parishes where no Gentry reside great oppression from the Farmers would follow this plan. Magistrates seldom or never order relief, if the Overseer offers

The next four sections of this article assess the impact of Sturges Bourne's poor law reforms on relief provision. This is not a straightforward process though, not least because, as detailed above, measures reflected, and thus legitimized, the actions of pre-existing forms of select vestries and proto-assistant overseers. The sections occasionally refer to similar practices in other exclusive relief-granting bodies and open vestries. While this offers further elucidation, it also hints at the ability of practices involved in administering the reforms to filter into other economizing parishes at this time.

III

Upon appointment, a select vestry usually reviewed the relief provided to those in regular receipt of support, and then reviewed those who claimed relief irregularly. Assistant overseers signed an agreement, requiring the sanction of two magistrates, which stipulated their task of, alongside making rates, collecting rates, keeping the accounts, and issuing relief, investigating the circumstances of relief claimants. At Droxford, assistant overseer John Dollar was instructed to 'make enquiry as to the Character and Circumstances of the Person or Persons applying for such relief'.⁶⁶ At Bishop's Waltham, James Perrin was told to 'enquire into the character circumstances & condition of all Persons applying for relief of his her & their family & to report thereon to the rest of the Parish officers'.⁶⁷ Other parishes' instructions were similar, closely following the language and ethos of Sturges Bourne's legislation.

Once at the parish pay-table, the select vestry wanted to *see* the poor and question them as to their situation. Particular members of families were asked to attend the vestry. In 1822, the Botley select vestry ordered that Joseph Thomas and all of his family should attend the next meeting, the select vestrymen wanting to obtain more detailed information about their circumstances.⁶⁸ Occasionally, specific groups of the poor were asked to attend. For instance, the Fareham select vestry asked all those receiving relief for bastard children to present themselves.⁶⁹ There were serious repercussions for those not adhering to the select vestries' stipulations. In 1833, the Winsford select vestry asked Ann Crockfield to bring her eldest daughter, aged ten, to attend the next vestry. When she failed to attend, her regular allowance was stopped. At a subsequent meeting, Ann did present her daughter to the select vestry, claiming that her daughter had been unable to attend the previous meeting because she had a

to take the Pauper into the Poorhouse.' The Castle Coombe (Wiltshire) parish answered that the removal of the magistrate from the welfare process would cause 'an immediate rural rebellion throughout the country'.

⁶⁶ Droxford, vestry minute of 11 Nov. 1819, HRO 66M76/PV3.

⁶⁷ Bishop's Waltham, vestry minute of 9 July 1819, HRO 30M77/PV1.

⁶⁸ Botley, select vestry minute of 22 May 1822, HRO 40M75/PV2.

⁶⁹ Fareham, select vestry minute of 22 May 1819, Portsmouth City Record Office (PCRO) CHU43/2C/1.

lame foot. The excuse did not wash with the select vestry: Ann's pay was reduced to 5 s a month on the basis that her eldest daughter was 'fit' to be bound as an apprentice.⁷⁰ Occasionally, acquaintances would be sent to the vestry on the claimant's behalf, invariably with little effect. In April 1824, William Fidow required assistance from Corsham (Wiltshire) parish, sending a third party to make his claim to the select vestry. The vestrymen were not satisfied with the representation and stipulated that William must attend 'himself' or he would not be relieved.⁷¹

Once in the vestry, it was expected that the poor would detail their circumstances, including their occupations, earnings, and living arrangements, relief being refused if such information was not divulged. At Botley, William Whitlock was not allowed any further relief because he failed to give an account of his earnings over the last fortnight.⁷² A similar stance was also taken by some open vestries during the 1820s. William Evans and James Cole attended a Wimborne Minster vestry in 1829, but on failing to give an account of their earnings, the parish refused to pay their house rents. In his family's worsening situation, William's wife claimed poor relief. As well as being frowned upon for being 'without her husband', she had also failed to give an account of her husband's earnings. When this information was finally provided by the family, it was looked upon with suspicion. The following month, William attended the vestry and detailed his weekly earnings (12 s 10d) and rent (1 s 6d). This was, according to the vestry, a very unsatisfactory account of his earnings.⁷³ It is little wonder then that select vestries therefore resorted to asking employers directly for a list of employees and weekly wages.⁷⁴ In some instances, even the employer's wages were placed under scrutiny. Mr Watts, of Fareham, was accused by the select vestry of not paying sufficient wages to a male labourer called Edwards. Edwards, and his family, were offered the workhouse, rather than an increase in outdoor relief, possibly in the hope that Watts would increase his wages.⁷⁵

Through their investigations, select vestries also knew about alternative forms of welfare available to parishioners, those questioned about their circumstances having not only to reveal details about their family circumstances and living arrangements, but also about their membership of local friendly societies ('clubs'). On hearing that clubs would not pay out for a claim, the select vestry would often take the issue further to prevent their having to relieve the individual from parish funds. When an unwell Nathaniel Hayward turned up to

⁷⁰ Winsford, select vestry minute of 15 and 29 Apr., 13 May 1833, SHC DPwins/9/1/1.

⁷¹ Corsham, select vestry minute of 4 Apr. 1824, Wiltshire & Swindon Archives (W&SA) PR/Corsham: St. Bartholomew/1812/9.

⁷² Botley, select vestry minute of 6 Sept. 1825, HRO 40M75/PV2.

⁷³ Wimborne Minster, select vestry minutes of 6 Oct., 3 Nov. and 1 Dec. 1829, Dorset History Centre (DHC) PE/WM VE2/3.

⁷⁴ Whiteparish, select vestry minute of 22 Sept. 1832, W&SA PR/Whiteparish: All Saints/830/32. ⁷⁵ Fareham, select vestry minute of 23 June 1819, PCRO CHU43/2C/1.

the Corsham select vestry, stating that his club refused him 'pay', the gentlemen decided that their assistant overseer should take the matter to a magistrate.⁷⁶ Select vestries were well aware that by individuals subscribing to a friendly society it would reduce the parishes' liabilities if the person later needed assistance. As such, 'topping up' club payments to afford a claimant proper relief might appear to have contravened the spirit of Sturges Bourne's 1819 Act but would still be far cheaper than having fully to relieve the individual. For instance, Elizabeth Clothier, a parishioner of Chew Magna, received just 18*d* per week from the club, probably on account of illness. The select vestry agreed that this payment was too low and she was given 5*s* per month from the parish purse.⁷⁷ Parishes also *used* the poor's membership of such clubs to reduce their own expenses. For instance, when in 1830 the parish of Wimborne Minster decided that Thomas Scutt should go into the poorhouse, it was ordered that the overseers should receive his 'Club money'.⁷⁸ Due to the benefits these clubs brought to the parish finances, it is unsurprising that the select vestrymen also encouraged the poor to retain their memberships. One man was given 3*s* a week 'as long as he remain on the Club'.⁷⁹

Even if the poor did not attend the pay-table, parishes with assistant overseers could still find out about claimants' circumstances, the assistant overseer being ordered to survey the poor and relay any information back to guide the relief decision. Indeed, the assistant overseer – who was also the workhouse master – of Wimborne Minster, was authorized by the parish vestrymen to 'hire a Horse at the expense of the parish to inspect the state of the poor in the outskirts of the parish'.⁸⁰ On many such occasions, vestries and select vestries ordered assistants to visit particular individual claimants and assess whether or not they actually needed relief. For instance, one assistant overseer was asked to visit a man who had asked for money to pay for his rent and 'enquire into his Case'.⁸¹ Surveillance extended beyond salaried assistant overseers' actions, evidence from minute books suggesting that the everyday lives of the poor were also under scrutiny from the wider ratepaying community. For instance, one Winsford man applied for 'assistance' during his wife's illness, but a Mr Paul having seen her 'fetching water' that morning, her illness was deemed fictitious and the claim rejected.⁸²

⁷⁶ Corsham, select vestry minute of 18 Aug. 1826, W&SA PR/Corsham: St Bartholomew/1812/9. ⁷⁷ Chew Magna, vestry minute of 3 Dec. 1824, SHC D/P\che.m/9/1/1.

⁷⁸ Wimborne Minster, select vestry minute of 22 July 1831, DHC PE/WM VE2/3. There is evidence that the vestries of Wimborne Minster had been held in the 'Club Room' since 1809 and select vestries had been meeting there into the 1830s indicating a close relationship between the two, Wimborne Minster, vestry minutes, 1809–49, DHC PE/WM VE1/2.

⁷⁹ Chew Magna, vestry minute of 3 Dec. 1824, SHC D/P\che.m/9/1/1.

⁸⁰ Wimborne Minster, vestry minute of 26 Mar. 1833, DHC PE/WM VE1/2.

⁸¹ Corsham, select vestry minute of 29 Sept. 1826, W&SA PR/Cosham: St Bartholomew/1812/9. ⁸² Winsford, select vestry minute, 31 Mar. 1834, SHC D/P/wins/9/1/1.

Individuals claiming for relief from their settled parish, but resident elsewhere, were arguably most vulnerable to economizing practices, the claims made in their 'pauper letters' being relatively easy to reject. For instance, Corsham parish on one occasion rejected all the letters they had received from Manchester, Leeds, and Brentford asking for relief.⁸³ Another select vestry recorded the letters they had received, frequently noting alongside: 'not to be answer'd'.⁸⁴ Occasionally an assistant overseer would be asked by the vestry to attend the non-resident poor, in order to obtain first-hand information as to the claimant's circumstances. In 1835, the vestrymen of Clutton even went as far as to send their assistant overseer to Monmouthshire to inquire into the case of William Parker who requested regular non-resident relief payments.⁸⁵

IV

From the very foundation of the Elizabethan poor laws, Hindle tells us, 'it fell to overseers (and to the ratepayers and vestrymen who elected them) to construct the calculus of eligibility according to which the entitlements of the poor were computed'.⁸⁶ While the Settlement Acts of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries constrained the number of individuals eligible to claim relief in each parish, in order to determine each parishioner's eligibility, parish administrators divided parishioners into two crass categories: the 'deserving' and the 'undeserving'. Although historians, such as José Harris, suggests this distinction was not universally put into practice, Sturges Bourne's 1819 Act explicitly promoted it through the assessment of claimants' 'Character and conduct'.⁸⁷ Consequently, in adopting parishes, the morals of the poor came under greater scrutiny. Receiving welfare provision meant that, as Steve Hindle has put it, 'the range of personal choice that paupers might make about their personal conduct and ethical behaviour' was reduced. In seventeenth-century England the distinction between deserving and undeserving was manifested through a series of expectations: church attendance, industriousness, sobriety, and deference.⁸⁸ This section shows how Sturges Bourne's second act allowed parish officers to reinforce these same expectations with vigour.

⁸³ Corsham, select vestry minute of 14 Oct. 1825, W&SA PR/Cosham: St Bartholomew/1812/9. ⁸⁴ Wimborne Minster, select vestry minute of 9 Mar. 1830, DHC PE/WM VE2/3.

⁸⁵ Clutton, vestry minute of 14 Aug. 1835, SHC D\P\clut/9/1/1.

⁸⁶ Hindle, *On the parish?*, p. 257.

⁸⁷ Harris suggests that commentators believed a distinction had not been maintained in the late nineteenth century under the new poor law, J. Harris, 'From poor law to welfare state? A European perspective', in D. Winch and P. K. O'Brien, eds., *The political economy of British historical experience, 1688-1914* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 431-2; Alannah Tomkins starts her book with an example of relief given in 1739 to a man, Francis Wheeler, who would have normally been viewed as 'undeserving' at the time, A. Tomkins, *The experience of urban poverty, 1723-1782* (Manchester, 2006), pp. 1-3.

⁸⁸ S. Hindle, 'Civility, honesty and the identification of the deserving poor in seventeenth-century England', in H. French and J. Barry, eds., *Identity and agency in England, 1500-1800* (Basingstoke, 2004), p. 38.

Those in regular receipt of outdoor relief and those living in workhouses were expected to attend church. The select vestry of Whiteparish noted that if the workhouse residents did 'not attend some place of worship on Sundays their Days allowance for the Day be stop'.⁸⁹ The Botley select vestry issued similar directions, specifically targeting 'every man who is on the Parish'.⁹⁰ These policies had not only resulted from select vestry discussions, but some open vestries also issued similar directives.⁹¹ Unlike open vestries, however, select vestries frequently remonstrated with individuals thought able to have prevented their own poverty, especially those whose unemployment was believed to be their own fault. In Fareham, Richard Couzens and William Hawkins were refused relief on the grounds that 'they had left their work and from their general Character they were therefore considered as idle & profligate'.⁹² Henry Noble's claim for 'work' was rejected by a select vestry in Whiteparish, who also requested that he brought a letter 'stating the reason he was Discharged from Esq. Boltons employ'.⁹³ The vestry obviously had its suspicions that Henry had been dismissed due to his own misdemeanours and as such, this errand had no other purpose than to reprimand Henry. It was not just leaving or being dismissed from work that put individuals' entitlement to assistance in jeopardy. At Botley, John Dowling was not employed by the parish because 'he has neglected to apply for work which he knew of'.⁹⁴ Women's work was also placed under the spotlight, with one Wincanton man's regular family allowance stopped on account that 'his wife refuses to work'.⁹⁵

Select vestries also insisted that claimants were sober and publicly grateful for their relief. Not only was drunkenness disruptive, but it was also evidence of profligacy. The Chew Magna vestry, for instance, decided to 'discontinue all relief to persons who are found spending their time or money in a public house'.⁹⁶ Likewise, Henry Cannon was refused work by the Wincanton select vestry because he was a 'habitual drunkard'.⁹⁷ By 1833, the parish of Botley no longer operated a select vestry, but its punitive legacy lived on when the open vestry penalized Joseph Terry for 'repeated drunkenness' by refusing to find him employment.⁹⁸ At Fareham, more drastic action was taken. Relief was not only to be stopped to those 'found Tippling in a Publick House' but it was decided that a 'list of persons receiving parochial relief be given to the

⁸⁹ Whiteparish, vestry minute, 5 Dec. 1834, W&SA PR/Whiteparish: All Saints/830/32.

⁹⁰ Botley, select vestry minute, 17 July 1822, HRO 40M75/PV2.

⁹¹ For instance, in Bury it was 'Agreed that all Pauper's that do not attend their church regular on Sunday's shall not receive any Parochial pay unless they can show any just cause why they absented themselves'; Bury, vestry minute of 29 May 1828, WSR0 Par33/12/1.

⁹² Fareham, select vestry minute, 22 May 1819, PCRO CHU43/2C/1.

⁹³ Whiteparish, select vestry minute of 6 July 1832, W&SA PR/Whiteparish: All Saints/830/32.

⁹⁴ Botley, select vestry minute of 19 May 1823, HRO 40M75/PV1.

⁹⁵ Wincanton, select vestry minute of 29 Dec. 1831, SHC D\PC\winc/1/3/2.

⁹⁶ Chew Magna, select vestry minute of 1 Oct. 1819, SHC D\PC\che.m/9/1/3.

⁹⁷ Wincanton, select vestry minute of 20 Dec. 1831, SHC D\PC\winc/1/3/2.

⁹⁸ Botley, vestry minute of 6 Jan. 1833, HRO 40M75/PV1.

Landlords of all the Publick Houses'.⁹⁹ The select vestry at Wimborne Minster even tried to stop the 'problem' at source: the magistrates were asked to reprimand one landlord who not only sold alcohol during divine service but also allowed two paupers to drink so much one Sunday that they were 'unable to return home till Monday morning'.¹⁰⁰

Behaviour which did not reflect the expected deference from claimants had repercussions. Regular relief was often reduced for behaviour referred to as 'bad conduct' or for 'misdemeanours'. The Wincanton select vestry gave Robert Day 3 s temporary relief rather than his regular allowance for bad conduct.¹⁰¹ James Burin would have received a new pair of shoes had he not 'abused some of the members of the Select Vestry' in Winsford, instead they gave him 4 s towards the cost of a pair.¹⁰² Relief was also curtailed for less dramatic acts of disrespect towards the vestry. Two men were turned away by the select vestry in Whiteparish because they had not attended at the 'proper time'.¹⁰³ While bad conduct was condemned, it appears that good conduct was rewarded, albeit very rarely. James Phillips received £2 for his '[g]eneral good conduct' in Botley.¹⁰⁴

Select vestries also restricted relief to those claimants who had the potential to poach – doubly unacceptable as both illegal practice and evidence that they could supplement their living – by refusing relief to claimants with dogs.¹⁰⁵ At Botley, those with dogs would not be 'exonerated from paying the poors rate'.¹⁰⁶ It is worth noting that this policy was also occasionally applied by ordinary vestries,¹⁰⁷ while other types of exclusive relief-permitting bodies also adopted the policy. For instance, the 'Court of Guardians' in Southampton, the town operating under a local act, in 1824 ruled that one woman's weekly pay should be stopped on account of her keeping a dog. It was reported in the local press that soon after the decision the woman presented a dead dog at the payable, thus dramatically proving to the authorities she was now without her dog.¹⁰⁸

Vestrymen had generally assumed that if someone could maintain an animal, they could maintain themselves. Animals should be sold before relief was sought. This may have also been a factor in their dislike of dog ownership,

⁹⁹ Fareham, select vestry minute of 10 Nov. 1819, PCRO CHU43/2C/1.

¹⁰⁰ Wimborne Minster, select vestry minute of 19 June 1821, DHC PE/WM VE2/1.

¹⁰¹ Wincanton, select vestry minute of 20 Dec. 1831, SHC D\PC\winc/1/3/2.

¹⁰² Winsford, select vestry minute of 9 Dec. 1833, SHC D\P\wins/9/1/1.

¹⁰³ Whiteparish, select vestry minute of 11 Oct. 1834, W&SA PR/Whiteparish: All Saints/830/32. ¹⁰⁴ Botley, select vestry minute of 17 July 1822, HRO 40M75/PV2.

¹⁰⁵ For the use of dogs to poach see D. Hay, 'Poaching and the game laws on Cannock Chase', in D. Hay, P. Linebaugh, and E. P. Thompson, eds., *Albion's fatal tree: crime and society in eighteenth-century England* (London, 1975), pp. 189–253.

¹⁰⁶ Botley, vestry minute of 27 Apr. 1834, HRO 40M75/PV1; Neuman found the same order had been created in the select vestry of Thatcham (Berkshire), Neuman, *The Speenhamland county*, p. 182.

¹⁰⁷ For an early example, see Whitechurch Canonorum, vestry minute of 2 Aug. 1796, DHC PE/WCC VE1/3.

¹⁰⁸ *Southampton Herald*, 31 May 1824.

although other animals were also perceived as a source of income. Relief claimants with pigs were told to sell them before they were granted relief. For instance, Robert Martin of Broomfield was refused a shirt for his boy on account of 'having sow & pig'.¹⁰⁹ Larger animals which assisted labourers to undertake heavy tasks were also used as a reason to refuse relief. James Norris was instructed by the Corsham select vestry to get rid of an ass before he tried to claim for relief again.¹¹⁰ The Chew Magna select vestry thought that Joshua Emery 'ought' to sell his two donkeys 'to support his family'.¹¹¹ Neuman found a parish in Berkshire which created a general policy to prevent claims for relief from those with a horse *and* cart.¹¹² Select vestries sometimes refused loans to those labourers who wanted to buy animals to assist them in their work. Isaac Bauchamp's request for a loan to enable him to buy a donkey had been rejected by the Whiteparish select vestry regardless of the fact he would have used it to draw heath from the common to be sold as fuel. Such an occupation may have supplemented or replaced his regular parish relief.¹¹³

Although relief was overwhelmingly tailored to each individual's behaviour, there were occasions when select vestries issued general policies in relation to the 'conduct' of their parishioners. The Millbrook select vestry set a rate of allowance at 3*d* per gallon loaf for those individuals 'whose Conduct shall appear not to deserve any more allowance'.¹¹⁴ We also know that individuals and families were given less relief according to their stage in the life-course, or whether they were a widow(er) or single woman with a bastard child(ren), as examined above.¹¹⁵ The Millbrook select vestry, however, had moved one step beyond this to produce blanket policies based on character.

V

Select vestries paid particular attention to the amount of outdoor relief being given to individuals and their families through magistrate-set 'Speenhamland-style' scales. In Hampshire, where 74 per cent of parishes which had answered the Rural Queries allocated relief according to a scale, select vestries were particularly attuned to such issues. In 1822 at Nether Wallop, it was decided that

¹⁰⁹ Broomfield, allowances of the poor, select vestry minute of 16 May 1821, SHC D/P \broo/13/2/2. Pigs, unlike all other animals, caused a noticeable odour as well, leading to complaints from fellow parishioners, Winsford, vestry minute book, select vestry minute of 15 Sept. 1834, SHC D/Pwins/9/1/1.

¹¹⁰ Corsham, select vestry minute of 7 May 1824, W&SA PR/Cosham: St Bartholomew/1812/9.

¹¹¹ Chew Magna, select vestry minute of 31 Oct. 1834, SHC D/P/che.m/9/1/3.

¹¹² Neuman, *The Speenhamland county*, p. 182.

¹¹³ Whiteparish, select vestry minute of 22 Sept. 1834, W&SA PR/Whiteparish: All Saints/830/32.

¹¹⁴ Millbrook, vestry minute of 25 June 1821, SCRO PR10/8/1.

¹¹⁵ See also S. A. Shave, 'The dependent poor? (Re)constructing the lives of individuals "on the parish" in rural Dorset, 1800–1832', *Rural History*, 20 (2009), pp. 67–97.

'married paupers applying for Relief be allowed so much as will make up their wages the amount of a Gallon Loaf and sixpence Pr Head for their respective families'.¹¹⁶ Many select vestries, not surprisingly, attempted to alter scales with a view to saving money. At East Woodhay, also in 1822, the very nadir of the post-war agricultural depression, it was agreed that all monthly allowances would be reduced in proportion to the reduction in the price of provisions.¹¹⁷ In other Hampshire parishes, a seasonal reduction in monthly allowances was implemented. At Hambledon in 1824, it was stipulated that all persons who received monthly pay and 'who leave the Parish for work during the Harvest month' shall receive no allowance during that month, and that half of all claimants' monthly pay during harvest 'shall be taken off'. The following year, the policy became more stringent: all monthly pay was stopped during the harvest month.¹¹⁸

All regular outdoor relief maintenance payments, whether allocated according to a Speenhamland-style scale or not, came under closer scrutiny in parishes which had adopted the provisions of Sturges Bourne's Act. Many select vestries had made lists of those receiving outdoor relief. The select vestry of Broomfield, near Bridgwater, for example, decided to start a brand new book to detail the 'Allowances of the poor' in the year of their election (1821). On the left-hand side of each page, the claimants' names were recorded, alongside the sum of their weekly allowance and details of their family. Along the top of the page were columns 'Character', 'Wages', 'Employers', 'Complaints of the Poor', what they were 'allow'd' and 'Why allow'd or disallow'd'. These relief tables allowed the parish to review the relief allocated to the poor, both regular and extra amounts, in relation to the broader household economy. Confirming the purpose of these charts, the select vestry agreed several times throughout 1821 that payments were 'Sufficient for the support of the Paupers'.¹¹⁹ Other parishes had similar ideas, with some creating lists to allow for systematic checks upon specific groups of relief claimants.¹²⁰ Wimborne Minster parish officers, for instance, made lists of people with bastard children and those receiving house rents.¹²¹ The open vestry at Fareham directed the parish surgeon to provide the select vestry with a list of all persons 'Ill and unable to work on Wednesday morning in every week' previous to the meeting of the

¹¹⁶ Nether Wallop, select vestry minute of 21 June 1822, HRO 93M83/PV1.

¹¹⁷ East Woodhay, select vestry minute of 23 Apr. 1822, HRO 27M77/PV1.

¹¹⁸ Hambledon, select vestry minutes of 7 Aug. 1824 and 23 July 1825, HRO 46M69/PV1.

¹¹⁹ For instance, Broomfield, allowances to the poor, select vestry minutes of 16 May, 13 June, and 27 June 1821, SHC D,P\broom/13/2/2.

¹²⁰ From 1820, Beaminster kept a book containing similar tables, containing the names of individuals and families, plus their ages and respective earnings, Beaminster, lists of families with earnings, 1820–36, DHC PE/BE OV9/1. Large printed forms were used in the parish of Lindfield recording similar demographic detail in addition to a range of relief headings: 'Flour', 'Potatoes', 'Work', 'Or Other Relief', and 'Money', Lindfield, Sept. and Nov. 1820, WSRO Par416/13/2 and 3.

¹²¹ Wimborne Minster, select vestry minute of 11 Aug. 1829, DHC PE/WM VE2/3.

select vestry.¹²² The select vestry was to allocate relief with this information in mind and catch those ‘faking’ ailments.

The 1819 Act, as noted, permitted select vestries to issue loans rather than provide relief, with magistrates empowered to chase individuals for repayments. Loans were often allocated for purchasing one-off items rather than for maintenance; for example, money was loaned to William Strongmell to purchase a saw by the select vestry of Fareham.¹²³ While parish loans enabled individuals to obtain expensive items which would help them procure work, in the past many parishes would have previously either bought these items for the individual, or at least paid for part of this item. Some select vestries decided to permit smaller loans to certain relief claimants. At Botley, for example, it was directed that no mechanic or handicraft person be allowed money when out of work except in the form of a loan.¹²⁴ Clearly, this policy was meant to deter individuals from claiming relief unless absolutely essential. Larger sums of money, on occasion, were offered to individuals without the stipulation that the sum of money should be paid back to the parish purse. Such sums were again expended on items to enable individuals to work. The select vestry at Hambledon gave John Merritt £6 so that he could purchase a horse and cart and thus, at least in theory, earn a living for himself and his family. The members of the select vestry noted that he had ‘been lame a long time and a great expence to the parish’. The same select vestry also gave £5 to George Kiln on condition that he would not apply for parish relief for at least two years.¹²⁵

Occasional payments – sometimes called ‘Extras’ – were also curtailed under the direction of select vestries. House rents and poor rates were commonly paid by parishes in the rural south but this practice was increasingly challenged.¹²⁶ In 1825, the select vestry at East Woodhay resolved that the practice be stopped, and at Corsham the select vestry told the overseers to ‘call on the Landlords’ to

¹²² Fareham, select vestry minute of 21 July 1819, PCRO CHU43/2C/1.

¹²³ Fareham, select vestry minute of 16 June 1819, PCRO CHU43/2C/1.

¹²⁴ Botley, select vestry minute of 29 Apr. 1823, HRO 40M75/PV2.

¹²⁵ Hambledon, select vestry minutes of 21 Jan. 1826 and 20 Nov. 1830, HRO 46M69/PV1.

¹²⁶ BPP 1834. Part 2. Question 21 (‘Are Cottages frequently exempted from Rates? and is their Rent often paid by the Parish?’). From the returns received from parishes in Dorset, Hampshire, Somerset, Wiltshire, and West Sussex which answered this question, 93.9 per cent of parishes frequently or occasionally exempted labouring families and poor parishioners from paying the poor rates; 71.4 per cent of parishes used the poor rates frequently or occasionally to pay or subsidize the house rents of labouring and poor parishioners. The latter figure includes parishes which mentioned they rented cottages and other accommodation on behalf of parishioners. For more information about the provision of parish housing under the old poor law, see J. Broad, ‘Housing the rural poor in southern England, 1650–1850’, *Agricultural History Review*, 48 (2000), pp. 151–70; and what happened to parish property after the Poor Law Amendment Act, R. Wells, ‘The Poor Law Commission and publicly-owned housing in the English countryside, 1834–1847’, *Agricultural History Review*, 55 (2007), pp. 181–204.

reduce rents.¹²⁷ Other one-off payments were curtailed, including clothing and textiles, some select vestries even deciding to set aside dedicated days for the receipt of clothing and textile requests.¹²⁸ Again, these were attempts to control the volume of claims and distributions. Numerous other strategies were also developed. First, limits were set on the clothing provided to parish apprentices. The select vestry of Angmering setting a maximum cost of 30 s for each female taken into service.¹²⁹ Second, clothing was given, but the cost was to be repaid as a loan. William Savage's relief illustrates this point. He was provided with a shirt by the Whiteparish select vestry whilst a patient in the local infirmary, but rather than being given the shirt, he was asked to reimburse the parish 'in the Harvest'.¹³⁰ Third, items were issued to the poor in the hope that they returned the article. Bruton started to loan blankets to the poor – prior to the passage of the Acts – in 1815.¹³¹

Taking a very different approach, in 1832, Wincanton select vestry established a clothing 'society' with the purpose of *assisting* poor parishioners in procuring clothing. Similar to the rules of charity-based penny clothing clubs, every person was allowed to contribute 1 d a week to a clothing fund which had its own dedicated secretary and treasurer.¹³² At the end of the financial year, the parish would then add half of the amount saved during the year from the poor rates. If the scheme worked, the select vestry had thereby managed to get the poor to fund the cost of two-thirds of their own clothing. Also in the early 1830s, the select vestry of Wimborne Minster directed that a subscription be raised for the purpose of procuring clothing, fuel, and other necessities for the use of the poor.¹³³ As such, the parish tried to alleviate their financial burdens through the promotion of charity. Giving relief in fuel, such as wood and coal, was also curtailed under select vestries. Claims for services which enabled the poor to heat their homes had also been restricted, such as

¹²⁷ East Woodhay, vestry minute book, select vestry minute of 3 May 1825, HRO 27M77/PV1; Corsham, select vestry minute of 9 Dec. 1825, W&SA PR/Cosham: St. Bartholomew/1812/9.

¹²⁸ For instance, the Broomfield select vestry decided in 1821 to have two days in the year on which clothing would be allowed, a policy extended to four days in 1825: select vestry minutes, 18 Sept. 1821 and 29 Apr. 1825, SHC D\P\broo/13/2/2. Also see the separate 'Clothing accounts', 1810–36, SHC D\P\can 13/2/10.

¹²⁹ Angmering, vestry minute, 27 May 1829, WSRO Par6/12/1.

¹³⁰ Whiteparish, select vestry minute of 12 Apr. 1833, W&SA PR/Whiteparish: All Saints/830/32.

¹³¹ Bruton, select vestry minute of 31 Dec. 1815, SHC D\P\brut/9/1/2.

¹³² P. Jones, 'Clothing the poor in early nineteenth-century England', *Textile History*, 37 (2006), pp. 17–37; V. Richmond, "'Indiscriminate liberality subverts the morals and depraves the habits of the poor": a contribution to the debate on the poor, parish clothing relief and clothing societies in early nineteenth-century England', *Textile History*, 40 (2009), pp. 51–69.

¹³³ Rules to join the society were clarified in a meeting on 27 Jan. 1832, SHC D\PC\winc/1/3/2; Wimborne Minster, select vestry minute of 18 Nov. 1831, DHC PE/WM VE2/3.

in west Somerset where peat-turf digging services were refused to some parishioners.¹³⁴

VI

Although Sturges Bourne's 1819 Act was not a 'workhouse act' per se, several of its clauses encouraged the use of workhouses as part of newly restricted regimes. Drawing on the example of the Ticehurst select vestry, Wells notes that at claimants' first appearance at the pay-table many able-bodied relief recipients and the children of relief-receiving families were asked to enter the workhouse.¹³⁵ Similarly, the Fareham select vestry directed that 'all Persons having relief whose Friends or Children cannot support them are to be taken into the House'.¹³⁶ Similar forms of 'workhouse test' were also ordered in Berkshire, one parish only offering claimants indoor relief, and then only a diet of coarse bread.¹³⁷ While some select vestries filled their workhouses in an attempt to reduce relief costs, others specified that workhouses were exclusively for certain social groups. The Chew Magna select vestry collated a '[l]ist of people to leave the poorhouse or to be taken before the justices and prosecuted according to law', while Whiteparish decided that 'families occupying apartments in the poor houses . . . be given notice by the overseers to quit and give up possession at the end of one month from the date of notice'. In other parishes, then, families were forced to find their own accommodation.¹³⁸ The motivation behind all such policies was inevitably economy. This was clearly demonstrated by attempts to charge rents to poorhouse residents – as at Ubley and Fareham – and to put poorhouse residents to work.¹³⁹

Workhouse management regimes were also targeted by select vestries. Indeed, there was a particular enthusiasm amongst select vestries to start 'farming' their indoor poor to save the parish money and to revise workhouse regulations accordingly.¹⁴⁰ The Corsham select vestry decided to farm out its poor to Mr Isaac Roberts, he then being responsible for the maintenance and

¹³⁴ Whilst some people still had their turf cut by someone employed by the parish, some individuals' claims were refused, such as Grace Grunter who had previously benefited from the service: Winsford, vestry minute book, select vestry minutes of 23 June 1834 and 20 July 1835, SHC D\P\wins/9/1/1. ¹³⁵ Wells, 'Poor-law reform in the rural south-east', p. 65.

¹³⁶ Fareham, select vestry minute of 7 July 1819, PCRO CHU43/2C/1.

¹³⁷ Neuman, *The Speenhamland county*, p. 182.

¹³⁸ Chew Magna, vestry minute of 15 Feb. 1833, SHC D\P\che.m/9/1/1; Whiteparish, select vestry minute of 15 Sept. 1834, W&SA PR/Whiteparish: All Saints/830/32.

¹³⁹ Fareham, select vestry minutes of 9 June 1819 and 14 June 1823 PCRO CHU43/2C/1; Horsted Keynes, select vestry minute of 26 Mar. 1832, WSRO Par384/12/2. Shipley had a price scale fixed in 1829 (under twelve years of age 4d per day, between twelve and fifteen 6d, over fifteen 9d, and 'Old Men' 12d) and regulated the hours of parish work, Shipley, select vestry minutes of 16 and 30 Apr. 1829, WSRO Par162/12/1.

¹⁴⁰ For instance, Shipley, where the general vestry was asked by the select vestry to obtain a contractor and the select vestry subsequently revised the workhouse regulations, select vestry minute book, select vestry minute of 29 Apr. 1830, WSRO Par162/12/1.

employment of the indoor poor.¹⁴¹ In other parishes, such as Bishop's Waltham, it was the open vestry that directed the select vestry to obtain a 'farming' contract.¹⁴² Nevertheless, in previous years, the select vestry at Bishop's Waltham had considered 'farming' the poor of the parish independently of the open vestry, although this had already been considered by the select vestry at a previous meeting.¹⁴³ From the 'articles of agreement' between Mr Isaac Roberts and the Corsham select vestry, the select vestry clearly still wanted to retain some control over the management of the workhouse. The articles allowed members of the select vestry to visit the poorhouse and settle disputes between Roberts and the residents.¹⁴⁴ This was also the practice at Fareham where the contractor was 'subject to the inspection of the select vestry'.¹⁴⁵

The administration of pauper work was central to many select vestries, not least in managing parish employment schemes for their under-employed and unemployed outdoor poor. Such schemes are too complex to detail in full here and have been discussed elsewhere.¹⁴⁶ Parish make-work schemes had been in operation since the Elizabethan Poor Laws and were common throughout southern England by the 1800s. It is unsurprising that select vestries also organized similar schemes. The Wincanton select vestry, for instance, directed unemployed labourers to dig parts of the parish land ('Ball Common' and the 'Brick yard') and to build and maintain parish roads.¹⁴⁷ In 1832, it decided to set a separate 'labour' rate and duly allocated labourers to work for ratepayers in what was a more elaborate employment system holding ratepayers accountable for the wages of labourers.¹⁴⁸ Such schemes gained in popularity in the rural south and south-east of England in the 1820s. This may have been the result of

¹⁴¹ Corsham, select vestry order book, 22 Apr. 1825 (adverts) and 20 May 1825 (appointment and terms of agreement, articles 6, 7, and 21), W&SA PR/Corsham: St Bartholomew/1812/9.

¹⁴² Bishop's Waltham, vestry minute, vestry minute of 17 Mar. 1828, HRO 30M77/PV1.

¹⁴³ Bishop's Waltham, vestry minute book, select vestry minute of 28 Apr. 1828, HRO 30M77/PV2.

¹⁴⁴ Corsham, select vestry order book, select vestry minutes of 22 Apr. and 20 May 1825, W&SA PR/Corsham: St Bartholomew/1812/9.

¹⁴⁵ Fareham, select vestry minute book, vestry minute of 1 Mar. 1826, PCRO CHU/43/2B/3.

¹⁴⁶ Griffin, 'Parish farms and the poor law'; M. Blaug, 'The myth of the old poor law and the making of the new', *Journal of Economic History*, 23 (1963), pp. 151–84; idem, 'The Poor Law Report re-examined', *Journal of Economic History*, 24 (1964), pp. 229–45; G. Boyer, *An economic history of the English poor law, 1750–1850* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 15–21; For an analysis of when relief recipients were employed by the parish during their life-course see Shave, 'The dependent poor?'.
¹⁴⁷ Wincanton, vestry minute book, vestry minutes of 9 Mar. 1832 and 24 Oct. 1833, SHC D\PC\winc/1/3/2.

¹⁴⁸ Wincanton, vestry minute book, vestry minutes of 3 Nov. 1832, 14 Dec. 1832, and 12 Dec. 1833, SHC D\PC\winc/1/3/2. The labour rate system is where a parish agrees 'a rate, levied against the poor rate assessment, which either had to be paid or the rate-payer had to "discharge" the rate by employing "surplus" labour (defined as the number of labourers left over after an allocation of labourers based on either the rates, rental or acreage) at a set wage',

the publicity surrounding the apparently successful adoption of a similar scheme at Oundle, in Northamptonshire, in 1822.¹⁴⁹ Throughout the south, parishes such as Eversley adopted the labour rate system directly as a result of hearing or reading about the 'Oundle plan', though others, such as Wincanton, only adopted the practice after it had been formally legitimized in the 1832 'Labour Employment Act'.¹⁵⁰ Similarly, the select vestry of Bruton set up a scheme 'according to the provisions of the said Act'. Within this scheme, able-bodied men with families would receive between 7 s and 8 s per week and 'Lads and aged Persons' would receive between 4 s and 6 s.¹⁵¹

When parish work was made available to the poor, it was important that the wages could sustain labouring families. At the same time, regulating labour costs ensured parish work was not more desirable than ordinary work, and by setting minimum wages the ratepayers could ensure that they were not being undercut by one another. After inquiring into the wages given to 'independent' labourers, one select vestry paid to their labourers no 'more [than] one shilling per week less than the wages given by the occupiers for labour of equal value'.¹⁵² Clearly, many select vestries also followed the directions of magistrates when setting minimum wages. At New Alresford, single men were given 6d per day for their labour by the 'recommendation' of the magistrates.¹⁵³ Select vestries not only set the wages of those working on and off the parish, but also made inquiries for those searching for work. In 1823, the Broughton select vestry heard how William Gale was unable to gain sufficient custom as a collar maker. The select vestry offered to 'find him such work as the Officers shall direct at the regular pay of the Parish'.¹⁵⁴ Other select vestries were more opportunistic. In 1819, Mr Billis, the Fareham assistant overseer, was directed to take the 'names of all single men applying for relief with a view of sending them to Work at the Arundel Canal'.¹⁵⁵

As stated, Sturges Bourne's 1819 Act also permitted parishes to acquire up to twenty acres of land for the employment of the poor. According to

C. J. Griffin, "Employing the poor": the experience of unemployment in post-Napoleonic rural England' (unpublished paper), p. 29; also see references in n. 146.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 29; Wells, 'Social protest, class, conflict and consciousness', p. 142; M. Rose, *The English poor law, 1780-1930* (Newton Abbot, 1971), pp. 57-8.

¹⁵⁰ Eversley, select vestry minute of 17 Nov. 1822, HRO 6M77/PV1; Wells, 'Social protest, class, conflict and consciousness', p. 142. The act was passed on 9 Aug. 1832 and was officially entitled 'An Act for the better Employment of Labourers in Agricultural Parishes until the Twenty-fifth Day of Mar. One thousand eight hundred and thirty-four' (2 & 3 Geo. IV c. 96).

¹⁵¹ The scheme was repeated on 9 Oct. 1834, Bruton, vestry minutes of 11 Oct. 1833, SHC D\P\brut/13/1/3.

¹⁵² Whiteparish, select vestry minutes of 22 Sept. 1832 and 23 Nov. 1832, W&SA PR/Whiteparish: All Saints/830/32.

¹⁵³ New Alresford, vestry minute book, select vestry minute of 2 Nov. 1832, HRO 45M83/PV1. ¹⁵⁴ Broughton, select vestry minute of 8 May 1823, HRO 137M71/PV1.

¹⁵⁵ Fareham, select vestry minute of 29 May 1819, PCRO CHU43/2C/1.

Jeremy Burchardt, this policy was 'rarely acted on'.¹⁵⁶ Evidence suggests that select vestries did, however, work the poor on newly acquired land, such as in Horsted Keynes (West Sussex) where relief recipients tended to potato crops on rented fields.¹⁵⁷ Select vestries used other land-based schemes explicitly to produce economy. The ratepayers directed to employ labourers in Wimborne Minster were ordered to allot each of their workers a quarter to half an acre of arable land to be cultivated 'in their leisure hours' and by 'parts of their families not otherwise employed'. No rent would be charged until the end of the first year and if it could not be paid by a labourer, the overseers were obliged to pay instead. To encourage the labourers to cultivate their land well, the select vestry planned to reward those who had 'managed their land best' and had 'received the least aid' from the parish.¹⁵⁸ Whilst this promoted industrious habits and 'independence' from parochial relief amongst the labouring poor, it would also reduce poor rates. More conventionally, select vestries rented land and allotted portions to individuals. In 1831, the Wimborne Minster parish, building on its earlier policies, considered renting an entire farm before settling on renting a portion of land for spade husbandry.¹⁵⁹ The stipulations linked to allotment provision could be particularly stringent. In 1833, the select vestry at New Alresford decided to hire ten acres of land to be let to male labourers 'on condition that such poor persons shall discharge themselves from all liberty for the parish to find him work & relief after the expiration of six months from the time of such taking'. William Butler was the first candidate for the scheme and was given one and a half acres with the select vestry paying for the ploughing and sowing of Butler's patch with wheat and barley by way of 'encouragement'.¹⁶⁰

VII

Sturges Bourne's policies facilitated parishes to adopt a more rigorous approach to relief administration. Select vestries paid close attention to relief scales and other regular maintenance costs, extra payments, employment – on

¹⁵⁶ J. Burchardt, *The allotment movement in England: 1793–1873* (Woodbridge, 2002), p. 34.

¹⁵⁷ Horsted Keynes, select vestry minute of 26 Mar. 1832, WSRO Par384/12/2.

¹⁵⁸ If any rent after the first year was irrecoverable, the overseers were obliged to pay for it from the parish rates, Wimborne Minster, select vestry minute of 27 Nov. 1829, DHC PE/WM VE2/3.

¹⁵⁹ Wimborne Minster, select vestry minute of 27 Nov. 1829, DHC PE/WM VE2/3. Plans were mentioned but there is no evidence that the policy was undertaken, Wimborne Minster, vestry minute of 26 Nov. 1831, DHC PE/WM VE1/2. The piece of land desired was offered by the landowner (Mr Machell) at £50 per year, an offer which was rejected by the vestry, Wimborne Minster, vestry minute of 28 Nov. 1831, DHC PE/WM VE1/2.

¹⁶⁰ New Alresford, select vestry minute of 29 Nov. 1833, HRO 45M83/PV1. As Burchardt notes, deciphering the precise motivations behind the creation of allotments is difficult. Either way, Sturges Bourne's Act of 1819 facilitated parishes to act as the regulators of such schemes: Burchardt, *The allotment movement*, passim.

the parish or otherwise – and indoor relief. Blanket policies reduced the relief provided to defined groups of claimants. Loans were made and repayments vigorously pursued, and, at the same time, employment stipulations were developed to promote self-sufficiency and reward industriousness. Indeed, possibly one of the most absurd and counterproductive attempts to reduce relief costs was waged by the select vestry of Shipley who, in the 1820s, decided to stop providing tools to those employed by the parish, except ‘Bars, Malls, and Pikes for Stone digging’.¹⁶¹ These were all measures introduced with the intention of saving the parish money. In particular, the inspection of the poor and attempts to gauge individuals’ character and conduct were illustrative of a more residualist relief system at work. This enabling legislation tended to reinforce the distinction first developed in the Elizabethan era, between the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor. Furthermore, Sturges Bourne’s provisions permitted a select group of individuals to inquire into the lives of relief claimants, whose living arrangements, work, illegal pursuits, ailments, possessions, and leisure activities were all closely scrutinized. Knowledge of these aspects of claimants’ lives allowed officials to restrict individuals’ opportunities to obtain statutory relief. So, while open vestries could have undertaken such inquiries, Sturges Bourne’s legislation *supported* and *encouraged* these actions.

The details of how parish policy developed in relation to assistant overseers and under the auspices of the select vestry are necessarily complex, but, it is important to note, they were not always derived from the parish itself. Magistrates exerted some influence over their decisions, which suggests that there was some co-operation between magistrates and the parish authorities in some localities. Select vestries also took on board the policies developed by other parishes. As noted above, the Oundle plan found its way to Eversley and was subsequently implemented in 1822. This raises interesting questions about the nature of social policy development under the old poor law, especially regarding the role and importance of ‘policy transfer’ from place to place. Further research is needed to understand better how select vestries developed policies which mirrored those being promoted by organizations outside the statutory relief system. Indeed, the provision of allotments from 1830 onwards was linked to the efforts of the Labourer’s Friend Society ‘whose effective campaign’ had ‘promote[d] allotments as the most plausible remedy for the social problems of the countryside’.¹⁶² Again, it appears that not all policies implemented by local poor law authorities had originated from local

¹⁶¹ Shipley, select vestry minute of 16 Apr. 1829, WSRO Par162/12/1.

¹⁶² J. Burchardt, ‘Rural social relations, 1830–1850: opposition to allotments for labourers’, *Agricultural History Review*, 45 (1997), p. 166. For research on the work of the Labourer’s Friend Society and other societies during this period also see R. Wells, ‘Historical trajectories: English social welfare systems, rural riots, popular politics, agrarian trade unions, and allotment provision, 1793–1896’, *Southern History*, 25 (2003), pp. 100–5; Burchardt, *The allotment movement*, pp. 70–97.

governance, but rather inspiration was often derived from other poor law authorities and organizations beyond the parish and even parliament.

Although only the appointment of select vestries was controversial amongst some small ratepayers and magistrates, the examples used above demonstrate that some relief-restricting practices were implemented without officially either appointing a select vestry or assistant overseer. This does not demonstrate the lack of importance of the official legislation; rather, on the contrary, such evidence is suggestive that the ethos of Sturges Bourne's Acts was widely pervasive. Perhaps such parishes were avoiding the structures and labels 'select vestry' and 'assistant overseer' because of how controversial they were amongst both ratepayers and rural workers alike. For instance, assistant overseers received mental and physical maltreatment in the Swing Riots. Labourers at Brede (East Sussex) attempted to 'remove' their assistant overseer by placing him in a cart, which had been especially constructed to enable the men to work on the roads, and dumping him over the parish boundary. This was a practice repeated throughout the Weald.¹⁶³ Select vestries were also targeted by protestors. Three men, aged thirty, twenty-two, and seventeen, were sent to the House of Correction for three months in November 1822 for rioting in a select vestry meeting in Northiam in East Sussex.¹⁶⁴ In the same county, vestries and select vestries frequently offered rewards to catch those sending threatening letters, the letter pinned to the Mayfield vestry door addressed to the overseer being particularly direct in its denunciation of reformed regimes: 'Wee do Intend Washing Our Hands inn Your Blood.'¹⁶⁵ While the thoughts and feelings of relief claimants on the adoption and operation of Sturges Bourne's reforms await systematic analysis, it is apparent that reactions were hostile. To Swing activists, and the labouring class before 1830, the select vestry was the site within which a more restrictive and punitive relief scheme came into existence, and the assistant overseers the 'face' of the dreaded new system.

¹⁶³ C. J. Griffin, 'The violent Captain Swing?', *Past and Present*, 209, (2010), pp. 167, 173-4; idem, *The rural war: Captain Swing and the politics of protest* (Manchester, 2012), pp. 134, 183-4.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 54; Sussex Winter Assizes, 12 Nov. 1822, TNA Assi94/1896.

¹⁶⁵ Griffin, *Rural war*, p. 55; *Sussex Advertiser*, 10 Jan. 1825.