

PARISH ECONOMIES OF WELFARE, 1650–1834*

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ABSTRACT. *This article argues for a more holistic approach to understanding the Old Poor Law. Using three detailed case studies from southern England, it focuses on the dynamics of differing social groups within the parish. It also looks at the role of the law, looking beyond the statutes to the parts played by King's Bench, Quarter Sessions and individual justices and petty sessions in creating a diversity of experiences for the poor. However, it also stresses the differential access to charitable funds, common rights, and poor relief in individual communities, and the ways in which parish elites attempted to put the total available resources to what they saw as the best uses. From 1650 to 1780 these combined resources allowed a generally humane approach to the treatment of poverty and misfortune, and maintained the independence of the cottager and labourer in southern England. Only after 1780 when population rose sharply and rural employment shrank did the flexibility of combined charitable and rate-based relief founder and more drastic devices were employed to cope with basic needs. In this process the independence of the labourer and cottager was undermined, charitable sources were marginalized, and the seeds were sown for the acceptance of the New Poor Law.*

I

The purpose of this article is to suggest new approaches to the study of the relief of poverty during the long eighteenth century and to sketch the outlines of a parochial economy of welfare. Some ten years ago, Tim Wales suggested that the life cycle needs of the poorest 30 or 40 per cent of the parish community on the verge of poverty were a powerful influence on the distribution of parish resources.¹ Before the poor had recourse to the overseers for poor relief they used a range of other possibilities. These included personal and neighbourly charity, landlord and tradesman credit, subsidized housing, and whatever charitable sources were available. These last could add food, clothing, or fuel to family income, support the education, health, and training needs of young

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¹ T. Wales, 'Poverty, poor relief and the life-cycle', in R. M. Smith, ed., *Land, kingship and life-cycle* (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 351–404; cf. T. Arkell, 'The incidence of poverty in the late seventeenth century', *Social History*, 12 (1987), pp. 1–22, and John Walter, 'The social economy of dearth in early modern England', in John Walter and Roger Schofield, eds., *Famine, disease and the social order in early modern society* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 75–128.

persons, and keep the old, sick, and disabled in decent retirement. The range of resources available to any individual or family reflected the particular circumstances of the parish community in which they lived. But it was only in the later seventeenth century that the product of the poor rates overtook the monetary equivalent of the voluntary and charitable sector nationally.²

In this article I will argue that the combination of customary and charitable sources with the parish poor rate provided a raft of security for most rural families. It was not until the late eighteenth century that the non-rate-based resources were squeezed into insignificance by the pressures of population surge, the erosion of customary rights and perquisites, and growing under-employment. Charitable funds should be seen not as separate entities, but as complements to rateable provision, often used to provide those on the margins of deep poverty with precisely those additional resources that kept heads above water in the long struggle. Many charities stipulated that beneficiaries should not be in receipt of parochial relief. The article will indicate the varied ways in which different kinds of parishes manipulated those resources, to contrasting ends. My examples are drawn from southern England, particularly Hertfordshire and Buckinghamshire where the agrarian changes of the eighteenth century were reducing agricultural employment at a time when few new male jobs were being created to replace them. One important effect was to reduce the labouring family, with little more than cottage, garden or smallholding, and rural skills, from the self-sufficient stereotype of the seventeenth century, to a marginal and increasingly dependent group by the early nineteenth century. This is the group that lost most from enclosure and the reduction of customary perquisites, and who benefited most from charitable resources. The pressure from this group on the disposition of non-poor-rate resources during the eighteenth century provides an important indicator of the extent of the poverty crisis in southern England.

Until the late eighteenth century poor relief was the last resort of the poor and in most rural parishes it rarely provided permanent support for anyone apart from the aged and infirm, and the disabled. After an accident, or in sickness, families received temporary support, and on the margins of extreme poverty there were families who received partial help in winter when farming employment dwindled. In times of difficulty, there were other expedients. Families drew on various sorts of credit – they fell into arrears of rent, they borrowed from shops, dealers, and neighbours. They drew on village doles and other charitable resources. When they grew old and gave up the battle to mix and match a whole variety of facilities their final rite was the decision to put themselves in the hands of the parish. By the last quarter of the eighteenth century the parish frequently marked this event by taking over a person's

² P. Slack, *Poverty and policy in Tudor and Stuart England* (London 1988), pp. 169–82; detailed studies of the particular relationship between charity and poor rates are to be found in D. Eastwood, 'The republic in the village: parish and poor at Bampton, 1780–1834', *Journal of Regional and Local Studies*, 12 (1992), pp. 18–28.

personal property and real estate in return for a regular pension, thereby acknowledging dependency.³

For most cottagers and labourers the battle to retain a respectable independence was a basic instinct. Parish charities had an ambiguous position in this struggle. On the one hand, they provided sources of funds and kept families from calling on parish relief. On the other, the more a charity discriminated in favour of the most needy, the greater the extent to which parish power relationships were brought into play and highlighted the frailty of family resource, thereby reinforcing deference. Charity came in a variety of forms. Elements of the tradition of personal charity, hospitality, and neighbourliness still lingered on into the eighteenth century in a variety of ways. Gifts of cash, clothing, and food were commonly associated with particular annual festivities such as Christmas and Whitsun, or traditionally with specific events such as funerals. It was perpetual charitable trusts, based on the income derived from gifts of capital invested in land, rent charges, or in later cases government funds, which were most important. Finally there were various ways by which parishes ensured that the poor were housed through almshouses, church or poor houses, and, increasingly, workhouses.

A concrete illustration of the full range of charitable resources is provided by the randomly chosen example of the village of Bledlow in the Buckinghamshire Chiltern Hills near High Wycombe. In 1801 it was a large village with a population of 931. In the eighteenth century it had a rich variety of charities, most of which dated from the seventeenth century, and which were in full use according to the accounts amongst the parish records. The charity commissioners' report lists the following charities and their objects. East's charity produced an income of 20s a year divided amongst four widows decided by the vicar and three of the 'best of the town'. In practice the money rotated amongst all widows 'except in case of abandoned conduct'. Henry Smith's and Babham's charities were clothing charities for men and women respectively which the commissioners reckoned provided twenty-one sets of working clothes a year. Bland's charity raised £10 to bake bread for 112 persons once a year. Eustace's charity was another clothing charity, this time providing four lots of linen. In addition four cottages in an outlying part of the parish each owed 16s a year rent, and the Poor's land – twenty acres allocated in the enclosure act, produced £13 15s a year in rent. The vicar used these two sums to buy coal to distribute to the poor.⁴

The impact of charities on parish communities depended on their value proportionate to the population of the parish, the relative 'openness' of the

³ P. King, 'Pauper inventories and the material lives of the poor in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries', in T. Hitchcock, P. King and P. Sharpe, *Chronicling poverty: the voices and strategies of the English poor, 1640–1840* (Basingstoke and New York, 1997), pp. 155–91.

⁴ Parliamentary Papers 1843 xvii provides the best county by county summary of the results of the charity commissioners' work. The details of the Bledlow charities are to be found in xxvi, pp. 66ff. The surviving Bledlow accounts are found in Buckinghamshire County Record Office (BCRO) PR17/12 and PR 27/17.

charity, i.e. how discriminating were the restrictions placed on those who could benefit, and the rigour with which the trustees and/or parish authorities ensured that funds were properly distributed. The numbers of defunct and abused charities were always considerable, but their significance has been overplayed, particularly in the era of the New Poor Law, with its very different approach to the problem of poverty.

II

The approach taken here contrasts with much recent work on the Old Poor Law after 1650 which has travelled down a number of important but nevertheless relatively narrow channels. The pamphlet debates on policy towards the poor have been systematically reviewed, and scholars have explored the workings of the settlement certificate system to good effect. Pioneering work has been done looking at the system from the point of view of the poor and what their petitions, letters, and patterns of behaviour revealed in the written record can tell us about their attitudes and beliefs.⁵ The Cambridge Group for the Study of Population and Social Structure is about to link machine-readable overseers' accounts to parish reconstitution data to show long-term trends in the amounts of poor relief paid and the social composition of recipients. It seems an apposite moment to take a more holistic approach to parish support for the poor, pursuing the interaction of various forms of provision rather than searching for trends in particular sources. We need to look at the internal dynamics of different groups of people within the parish but also at the part played by justices at the petty sessions and county level. In particular we need to explain the negotiations that took place to decide need and benefit and to ascertain the extent to which parish decisions reflected the intentions of the law or accommodated to the reality of rural life.

The major features of the Poor Law system after 1662 were three. First, there was the virtual universality (perhaps for the first time) of the raising of parish rates to pay doles and pensions to the old, sick, and, less frequently, the unemployed. Secondly, the crucial – and growing – importance of settlement, that is to say the question of which parish should pay for those in need. The problem had been dealt with by case law before 1662, when the first specific legislation was passed, but the complexities involved required refinement in

⁵ In particular see the contributions by Norma Landau, Joan Kent, Steve Hindle, and Keith Snell: K. D. M. Snell, *Annals of the labouring poor* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 17–18; N. Landau, 'Who was subjected to the laws of settlement? Procedure under the settlement laws in eighteenth-century England', *Agricultural History Review*, 43 (1995), pp. 139–59; J. R. Kent, 'The centre and the localities: state formation and parish government in England, 1640–1740', *Historical Journal*, 38 (1995), pp. 363–409; S. Hindle, 'Exclusion crises: poverty, migration and parochial responsibility in English rural communities, c. 1560–1660', *Rural History*, 7 (1996), pp. 125–49. Hitchcock, King, and Sharpe *Chronicling poverty*, pp. 155–91; J. Innes, 'The mixed economy of welfare in early modern England: assessments of the options from Hale to Malthus c. 1683–1803', in M. Daunton, ed., *Charity, self-interest and welfare in the English past* (London, 1996); S. Lloyd 'Perceptions of the poor' (D.Phil. thesis, Oxford, 1991).

eight further acts up to 1722. Even then it was a matter of endless legal dispute.⁶ Thirdly, came the rise of the parish workhouse, originally using powers available in the 1601 Poor Law. This was refined and expanded by a movement that took root in the 1690s and spawned a rising number of urban and rural examples by 1750. Parish workhouses were characterized by local initiatives and were adopted in urban communities and larger ‘open’ communities in England by 1750, particularly in the south-eastern and East Anglian counties. Tim Hitchcock has estimated that London had eight-six workhouses with 15,000 inmates by 1750.⁷

However, these trends in Poor Law administration between 1650 and 1834 were in a sense secondary to an over-riding axiom: the local autonomy of each parish to decide its interpretation of the law. The work of Joan Kent, Steve Hindle, and David Eastwood⁸ has reinforced the idea that parishes acted as little kingdoms, and their emphasis has been on parishes with elites below gentry level. The gentry in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century England saw Poor Law administration as a personal fiefdom, extending initially to their own estates, but often further into the hundred or petty session area unless it conflicted with other gentry interests. Between 1710 and 1714 the Verney family in Buckinghamshire was involved in four separate ‘boundary’ determinations with fellow landowners, and the underlying ethos is well expressed in the following letter of 1712:

I do not think it Civil to interfere in your parish which is the reason I did not make an order for the bearer to be relieved. I am sure you are the best judge & if you think she ought to be relieved it being your own parish no body ought to order relief to her but yourself; it has formerly been a resolution taken amongst the Gentlemen that another justice should not meddle where another inhabits it being supposed that every justice is the best judge who ought to be relieved in their respective parishes; which is the reason that I do not care to meddle in this affair.⁹

⁶ See P. Styles, ‘The evolution of the law of settlement’, *University of Birmingham Historical Journal*, 9 (1963), pp. 33–63, and J. S. Taylor, ‘The impact of pauper settlement, 1691–1834’, *Past and Present*, 73 (1976), pp. 42–74. Two pioneering earlier accounts of the workings of eighteenth-century Poor Law are still useful: E. Hampson, *The treatment of poverty in Cambridgeshire, 1597–1834* (Cambridge, 1939); F. G. Emmison, ‘The relief of the poor at Eaton Socon’, *Bedfordshire Historical Record Society*, 14 (1933).

⁷ T. Hitchcock, ‘“Unlawfully begotten on her body”: illegitimacy and the parish poor in St. Luke’s Chelsea’, in Hitchcock, King, and Sharpe *Chronicling poverty*, pp. 70–86. On early workhouses see T. Hitchcock, ‘The English workhouse: a study in institutional poor relief in selected counties, 1696–1750’ (D.Phil. thesis, Oxford, 1985).

⁸ Kent, ‘The centre and the localities’; S. Hindle, ‘Power, poor relief, and social relations in Holland fen, c. 1600–1800’, *Historical Journal*, 41 (1998), pp. 67–96; D. Eastwood, *Government and community in the English provinces, 1700–1870* (London and Basingstoke, 1997); Eastwood, ‘The republic in the village’.

⁹ Francis Mardston to John Verney 28 June 1712, Verney MSS, Claydon House, Bucks, R54. Verney references: those with an ‘R’, e.g. R33, refer to the microfilmed correspondence held in various libraries including the British Library MSS Department M636; other references, e.g. 5/4/5, are to the recently catalogued Claydon House papers, copies held at the National Register of Archives and BCRO. The other references are: William Aubrey [of Boarstall] to John Verney

The upper gentry were not present everywhere, and it may well be that they spent less of their time on their estates as the eighteenth century progressed. In their absence the clergy frequently took the lead, and even before 1750 there is increasing evidence that the more substantial gentry were withdrawing from participation both on the bench and in parish level administration. In Buckinghamshire between 1736 and 1745 only four knights and one peer attended Quarter Sessions, each on a single occasion.¹⁰ In 1751 Charles Gray exhorted men of £500 a year or more either to engage actively in administering the Poor Law, or at the very least to oversee appointment, scrutinise accounts, and foster developments such as workhouses.¹¹ ‘Empowerment’ was the interestingly modern word used by Gray in 1751 to describe the process by which individual communities took their own paths within the broad parameters of the Old Poor Law.¹² Of course, it was not just the community dynamics of squires, land agents, clergy, and village elites that determined local responses, but the size, landholding structure, and availability of employment.

The part played by JPs and gentry connections was particularly relevant when it came to the settlement laws. The extent to which individual and family movement between parishes was policed crucially influenced long-term parish obligations in an era when the settlement laws became a game played between communities over the fate of potentially vulnerable individuals. The most extreme types of case are well known: the pregnant woman in labour pushed over the parish boundary in a wheelbarrow; the multitude of living-in servants sent away on an enforced week’s holiday in September (or March) to destroy residence qualifications. Less well known is the huge volume of case law on minute details of the legislation that became the raw material for a vast industry of legal paper work. Many cases were removed from Quarter Sessions to the King’s Bench by *certiorari* writs despite many attempts in the legislation to leave jurisdiction with justices and the Sessions.¹³ Even in cases settled in London legal commentators are clear that judges were often inconsistent and contradictory throughout the eighteenth century. In 1725 Carter wrote: ‘The Cases and Resolutions upon the Laws are few, and those that are cited are not well stated and digested, and the Resolutions (for that Reason) seem to be sometimes different and contrary: Nay, many times the interlocutory

14 Aug. 1710 R54; Nicholas Merwin to John Verney 15 July 1711 R54; Peter Dayrell to John Verney 12 Apr. 1714 R55; Charles Challoner to John Verney 23 Nov. 1710 4/5/61.

¹⁰ BCRO, Q/SO/14, Quarter Sessions order book; cf. J. M. Rosenheim, ‘County governance and elite withdrawal in Norfolk, 1660–1720’, in A. L. Beier, D. M. Cannadine, and J. M. Rosenheim, *The first modern society* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 95–125, and, more generally, N. Landau, *The justices of the peace, 1679–1760* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1984).

¹¹ [Charles Gray] *Considerations on several proposals lately made for the better maintenance of the poor* (London, 1751), pp. iv, 25. It also fits well with the 1731 raising of the property qualification for JPs to an income of £100 p.a.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ N. C. Johnson and N. J. Williams, *Warwickshire county records*, ix (Warwick, 1964), introduction includes a full discussion of *certiorari* writs in settlement cases.

Discourses of the Judges, upon a single Argument, they thrust in as an adjudg'd Case.'¹⁴ Over sixty years later counsel's opinion on a Buckinghamshire case was little different: 'The decisions of the Court of King's Bench of late have been so much upon the particular circumstances of the cases before them that they have left very little Trace of principal [sic] by which Council can advise safely any party of the Law on the like Cases.'¹⁵ At least one factor in this was the use by gentry of a variety of well-known channels of influence to sway judges and courts. An unusually well-articulated example of the methods available is given in a letter from Sir Ralph Verney to his son John Verney in 1679:

the widow Norman and her 2 sons...are very unjustly settled at Wasing by Mr Brightwell [Berkshire JP]. I am advised to move the judge of assize to heare the Cause. And I think my lord Chief Justice Scroggs sits on the crown side, and then twill belong to him to heare it. But if Judge Atkins sits on the Crown side, then 'tis good to make some friend to him before he goes down. I hear Mr Powis of Lincolns Inn is his favourite, and if he bee feed in the cause will speak to him and hath interest enough to obtain all lawful favour and I desire no more. But if it bee Scroggs I have heard Mr Fall say he hath greate Acquaintance with his chief servant and if it be so, he can carry you to him and perhaps the servants interest may prevaile more with his master then if a greater man should speak to the Jury.

Even a parish without strong gentry influence such as Myddle in Shropshire could boast that it had not lost a single settlement case after one particularly sore experience.¹⁶

How these groups interacted to manage the growing problem of poverty in southern England is articulated in long-term case studies. Three detailed parish studies together illustrate the variety of ways in which parish structures and economies, but above all the parish histories, profoundly influenced the dynamics of local provision for the poor. The three draw on a variety of sources, but in each, one source is particularly illuminating: family correspondence in Middle Claydon, vestry papers in Ashwell, and Exchequer court cases at Brill. The predominant perspective is therefore different in each case, but not so much as to unduly distort our view of the community and its economy of welfare (see Fig. 1 for locations).

¹⁴ S. Carter, *Legal provision for the poor* (London, 1725). Specialized volumes dealing only with precedents in settlement cases were published and reprinted throughout the eighteenth century; see e.g. James Burrows, *A series of decisions of the court of King's Bench upon settlement cases ..., 1732–1754* (London, 1768).

¹⁵ E. Dayrell, Lincolns Inn 19 June 1787, Huntington Library, San Marino, California, STGM, Box 9 (11).

¹⁶ Sir Ralph Verney to John Verney (his second son, later successor and Viscount Fermanagh) 12 July 1679 R33. For more general discussion see W. Prest, 'Judicial corruption in early modern England', *Past and Present*, 133 (1991), pp. 66–95. On Myddle see R. Gough, *The history of Myddle*, ed. D. Hey (London, 1981), p. 252, quoted in S. Hindle, 'Exclusion crises', pp. 127–8.

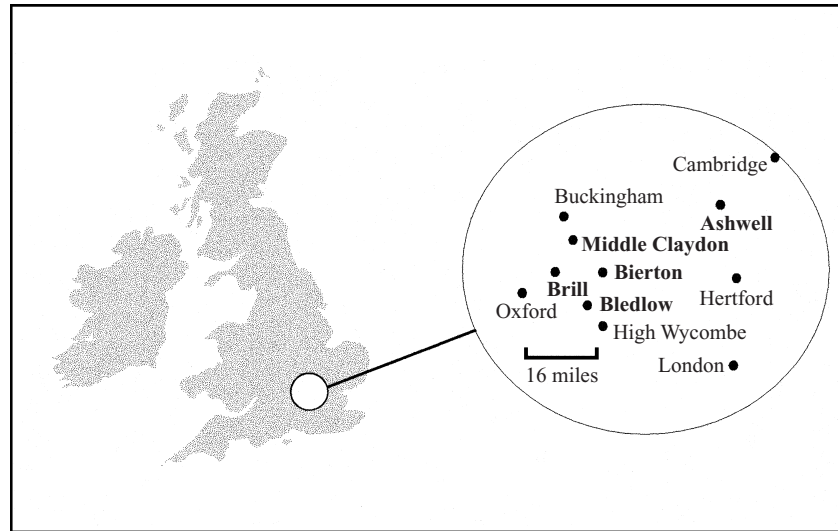


Fig. 1. Main places mentioned in the text.

III

Middle Claydon in north Buckinghamshire is a case study of a close village with a resident landlord and tight control of a shrinking community. After 1650 the resident Verney family enforced a strong policy encouraging out-migration, deterring marriage amongst the poor, and enlarging farms. At the same time they provided a wide range of help and care that enhanced their idea of the paternalist landlord. The 'success' of this policy over the period 1650–1780 can be seen in the reduction of farms from forty to eight, and a fall in population from 250 to 100 at a time when the secular trend for southern rural parish populations was one of stagnation or slight decline up until 1780.

The strict regulation of population involved both carrot and stick. A constant watch was kept to prevent servants staying a full year, while tenants taking on apprentices were immediately asked to stand surety for any future liability to the parish. Lodgers were discouraged, and one continuing recalcitrant householder, Will Symonds, was taken to Quarter Sessions in 1689 to prevent him taking lodgers. He had on a previous occasion allowed a single woman to stay in his house only two or three days before she gave birth.¹⁷

The carrot on offer was help with apprenticeship, particularly for the children of the poor. Sir Ralph Verney and his son Sir John paid sums of £5 or £6 on numerous occasions, particularly where parents were widowed or disabled. Parents considered the landlord's assistance quite normal. In 1700

¹⁷ William Butterfield to Sir Ralph Verney 28 Aug. 1682 4/5/35; Sir Ralph Verney to William Coleman 4/5/35; Richard Harding's invoice for constables' expenses Mar. 1688/9 R43.

John Bett arranged an apprenticeship for his younger son to a tailor in nearby Hillesden for £5 and then asked Sir John Verney and the parish to pay – which they readily did.¹⁸ Apprentices often went to London in the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, and when established were often used to find suitable openings. Payments by the Verneys to fund apprenticeships were regarded as a regular outgoing. This is well illustrated by a remark by Edmund Verney in 1675 that he would not bind out a lad that year because his building repair costs were so high.¹⁹

The way in which servants and apprentices who returned to the village were dealt with is a clear indication that apprenticeship was seen as a one-way ticket. Goodwife Guttridge's son had been apprenticed as a button-mould presser, but returned to live with his mother in 1685. Sir Ralph instructed his steward to obtain a warrant to exclude him, and to look for damaging evidence of criminal misdeeds while he had been living in nearby North Marston. Goodwife Guttridge was under intense pressure to send him away, found him two places as servants in other parishes, and when he refused them was forced to bribe him to leave the parish with a gift of 10s.²⁰ The Verneys did not always succeed: in 1678 a one-time resident of East Claydon, Will Holdum, returned there and claimed he had fallen sick, but before he could be excluded he had not only gained settlement, but married. As Edmund Verney wryly remarked, his sickness was 'in his tail'.²¹

Migration control was only one aspect of a fully articulated set of responses that can only be regarded as population control. Parson Butterfield of Middle Claydon wrote in 1671 that 'those that are like to multiply may do it for the King, but not for Middle Claydon', and as the Verneys' client and agent undoubtedly reflected their views.²² The Verneys tried to dissuade the poor from marriage and expected parishioners who intended to marry to ask their permission and approval. Permission was no idle ritual, for as sole landlords of Middle Claydon the Verneys controlled all access to housing. This was particularly true of their servants, and Sir Ralph Verney was extremely angry with a gamekeeper who did not ask him. The poor were a particular target. John Butcher was a Middle Claydon born man who in May 1660 at the age of twenty requested permission to marry a local girl, claiming a right to live in his father's old house, now empty and locked up.²³ When Sir Ralph Verney refused, Butcher defiantly planned to marry in neighbouring Winslow, but called the marriage off when Sir Ralph ordered his bailiff to make the house

¹⁸ William Coleman to Sir John Verney 7 and 10 July 1700 4/5/53.

¹⁹ Edmund Verney to Sir Ralph Verney 1 Mar. 1674/5 R28.

²⁰ Sir Ralph Verney to William Coleman 4 Jan. 1685/6 4/5/38; William Coleman to Sir Ralph Verney 10 Jan. 1685/6 4/5/38.

²¹ Edmund Verney to Sir Ralph Verney 30 Dec. 1678 R32.

²² Edward Butterfield to Sir Ralph Verney 6 Feb. 1670/1 4/5/23. He also wrote up and approved the overseers' accounts during the 1670s, with two JPs 'allowing' them. He may also have held the overseers' money himself.

²³ Edward Butterfield to Sir Ralph Verney 14 May 1660 R17.

uninhabitable by removing the floorboards and demolishing the chimney.²⁴ The couple now waited two and a half years before trying again. The bailiff pulled down another house to prevent them gaining accommodation. The villagers were divided on the issue with some dissuading them while others urged Butcher to ‘get up her [his sweetheart’s] belly’ to gain Sir Ralph’s approval.²⁵ In 1663 matters came to a head. Butcher first vainly hoped that Sir Ralph Verney would relent because his son was marrying, and even hoped that his goodwill would extend to helping the couple. Butcher then threatened secret marriage claiming his betrothed was pregnant, and finally in June the couple were married by licence away from the village, still without the Verneys’ permission. They returned and squatted in a barn where the steward found him at work, presumably at his trade of carpentry. Even then Sir Ralph lobbied a neighbouring JP to prevent Butcher obtaining a housing order from Quarter Sessions.²⁶

Butcher finally outwitted the Verneys, but the extraordinary length to which he was forced to go is a strong indicator of the importance of the issue, and must have acted as a strong deterrent to others. Sir Ralph might also have looked back more than thirty years later and claimed how right he had been to prevent an improvident marriage. By 1671 Butcher was exempt from the Hearth Tax, while by 1680 he needed help from charities and poor rates. The couple had at least two children who in 1682 ‘live idle at home’ and on one occasion Sir Ralph and the parson pressed the churchwarden to threaten to withhold support unless they were put into service.²⁷ Furthermore, the cycle of poverty renewed itself in the next generation. In 1695 parson Butterfield reported that ‘Jack Butcher has been asked to Mrs Verney’s dairy maid thrice and nobody has been so kind as to forbid the banns and without you please suddenly to interpose he will doubtless run headlong into execution.’²⁸ Remarriage was as frowned upon as improvident marriage, and Sir Ralph Verney, who was widowed at thirty-five and never remarried, set an example here. The main reason was that a wife gained settlement too, or if a widow there might well be stepchildren as was the case with Gamball in 1671. However Sir Ralph Verney’s work as a JP meant that those with clear-cut settlement rights were accepted without question. For instance when Richard Scarlet’s widow

²⁴ Edward Butterfield to Sir Ralph Verney 14 June 1660 R17; Hugh Holmes to Sir Ralph Verney 4 June 1660 R17.

²⁵ Edward Butterfield to Sir Ralph Verney 23 Feb. 1662/3 R18. Sir Ralph Verney’s puritan morality on many occasions saw him pressing shot-gun marriages: in this case the fact that the girl’s sister had mothered three bastards in the previous ten years may have added weight to the argument.

²⁶ Hugh Holmes to Sir Ralph Verney 16 Feb. 1662/3 R18, and 25 June 1663 R19; Edward Butterfield to Sir Ralph Verney 2 Mar. 1662/3 R18 and 26 Apr. 1663 R19; cf. S. Hindle, ‘The problem of pauper marriage in seventeenth century England’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th ser., 8 (1998), pp. 71–89.

²⁷ William Butterfield to Sir Ralph Verney 22 Feb. 1682/3 4/5/35; Sir Ralph Verney to William Coleman 26 Feb. 1682/3 4/5/35.

²⁸ William Butterfield to Sir Ralph Verney 31 Mar. 1695 4/5/48.

returned to Claydon in 1674 he wrote that ‘she cannot be refused... for she is an inhabitant and [if] she want the overseers of the parish must find her work’.²⁹

The declining population of Middle Claydon in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is testimony to the long-term effectiveness of the Verneys’ estate and social strategy. One continuing result was low poor rates which aided estate management by enabling the Verneys to keep rents high and attract tenants with promises of low taxes. Furthermore, by transferring the costs of poor cottager rents to the poor rate in the early eighteenth century the Verneys not only reduced their own costs, but increased the incentive for tenant farmers actively to promote their landlord’s policies toward immigration. In the 1670s and 1680s only one person was regularly on a pension, and even in the sickness crisis of 1729–30 only six were temporarily paid. In the 1780s when poor rates were rising in other parts of the country only two or three families received pensions, while early in the next century Middle Claydon pensions were amongst the lowest in the country.³⁰

However, this was only part of the story: in reality the Verneys contributed substantially with informal charitable gifts to the poor not just as paternalist landlords, but as part of a complex negotiation with the overseers, who were also tenant farmers paying high rents. Overseers were reluctant to provide for marginal cases of poverty from the rates, and even when the Verneys expressed strong opinions they did not always carry the day. In 1672 parson Butterfield tested village opinion on one case and found ‘most are wiling they should be put to their shifts a while longer’. The burden of crisis aid in these circumstances fell on the parson and landlord. When the Claydon housekeeper reported a local woman and child were ‘pinched with want’ she got permission to give money from her housekeeping budget rather than approach the overseers. When a month later the woman had sold ‘her hog and three sheep’ and only had a cow left, the parson persuaded the overseers separately to give her 2*s* 6*d*, but once they had met they immediately reduced this to 1*s* 6*d* and parson and landlord were forced to make up the difference. In March 1674 the parson commented to his absent patron that the ‘poor want you extremely’ indicating the personal nature of much informal charitable help. The scale was presumably beyond parson Butterfield’s means, for a year or two earlier he had paid 6*d* a week to provide winter fuel for a widow who thus avoided approaching the overseers.³¹ In general it was the Verneys, not the parish who paid for medical attention, spectacles, and help for the insane and short-term accident and illness in the later seventeenth century.

²⁹ Edward Butterfield to Sir Ralph Verney 20 Feb. 1670/1 4/5/23; Sir Ralph Verney to Edward Butterfield 3 Dec. 1674 4/5/27.

³⁰ BCRO PR52/12/1–4 Middle Claydon overseers’ accounts.

³¹ Hugh Holmes to Sir Ralph Verney 16 and 30 Dec. 1672 4/5/25; Edward Butterfield to Sir Ralph Verney 31 Jan. 1672/3 4/5/25; Edward Butterfield to Sir Ralph Verney 2 Mar. 1673/4 4/5/26: ‘So she thinks she will not trouble the parish.’

The changing nature of the evidence from Claydon after 1730 when the estate correspondence becomes intermittent makes it less easy to show directly that these practices continued in the mid-eighteenth century. However, events after 1771 when the second earl effectively went bankrupt suggest a substantial and continuing contribution. At that moment the fourteen craftsmen building the earl's new mansion were discharged and removed to their parishes of settlement. Although the number of families receiving pensions from the rates only rose slightly, their week doles were considerably raised.³² The parish economy of the poor remained a partnership of tenant farmers as ratepayers, and the Verneys as providers of largely informal charity – for instance their almshouses built in the 1690s were not formally endowed until the nineteenth century.

IV

Ashwell in Hertfordshire, on the Cambridgeshire border, was a large open village. Active village politics below gentry level were typified by both genuine responsiveness to village opinion, and a continuing contest between village elite and the clergy in policy making. It had a population of about 740 in 1700 and this had changed little in the eighteenth century, with census figures of 715 in 1801 and 754 in 1811. It lies on the productive barley-growing lands of the chalk escarpment, between Baldock and Royston. It has a rich parish archive going back to the sixteenth century which allows us to follow the activities of overseers, churchwardens, and charitable trustees responding to changing patterns of poverty. Ashwell was a parish without gentry until the nineteenth century, though leading farmers were high constables of the hundred on several occasions in the early eighteenth century.³³ There were large farms and small. There were twelve farmers of fifty acres or more in 1754, while fifty-two others had decent smallholdings or small farms. This community was guided by its open vestry, whose orders were signed by anything from eight to fifteen people, and which had a record of positive action on behalf of the poor going back to the Civil War when the north porch of the church was used to store coal bought for the poor. There is also good evidence of broadly based parish politics, with attempts to reduce the power of the parson by electing two *parish* churchwardens in 1713, which may in part reflect the local strength of non-conformity.³⁴ In the later eighteenth century the documents suggest that the parson took a much greater lead in the administration of charities and poor relief. Certainly by the end of the century the land tax records indicate more large farms, fewer small farms and smallholdings, and an increased number of

³² BCRO PR_{52/12/1-4}.

³³ In 1699 there is a list of all copyholders and freeholders of £10 or more p.a. and only one styled himself 'Mr' and there were no 'Esquires'. W. Le Hardy, *Hertfordshire county records: notes and extracts from the Sessions Rolls, 1699-1850*, II (Hertford, 1905), p. 4. A number of the Ashwell names are described as tenants to various gentlemen, suggesting that the tenant farmer was in practice being brought into the parish elite for parish, hundred, or jury service.

³⁴ Hertfordshire County Record Office (HCRO) D/P7/5/1 pp. 48, 84.

cottager families, a prelude to the nineteenth-century situation in which the old participative village community underwent erosion.³⁵

The early eighteenth-century activities of the vestry were unusually bold across a wide front. The overseers bought houses for the poor to live in, and also paid an increasing number of labourers' rents – rising from two in 1677 to a peak of twelve in 1716. A particularly interesting innovation was the decision to use parish funds to buy parish lands, which were then let to local farmers and their income used to help the poor. The core of the parish holding was an ancient bequest of 1618, but additional land was added in 1701, 1718, 1722, and 1727. In 1716 the total acreage was thirty. In 1727 a further £20 was laid out to buy twelve acres, and the whole were producing an annual income of £17. During the period up to 1770 this money was used to bind out apprentices locally, or in Hitchin, or by 1770 as far away as St Albans. Between 1741 and 1745 nine apprentices were financed, while the remainder of the money was laid out in bread doles.³⁶ However in 1770 a debate over at least two vestry meetings marked a change in policy. The income from the parish lands had by now risen to £43 19s a year and it was decided to divide its use between £27 for apprenticeships and £16 to buy 'clothing for the relief of such poor people as do not receive relief from the parish'. 184 yards of cloth were bought to make waistcoats for the men and gowns and petticoats for the women. In 1801 further changes were made, again favouring immediate basic needs over apprenticeships: on 21 December 1801 the overseers decided to divide £45 income from parish lands between £20 'to lessen the price of coals', £10 for apprentices, £5 for bread, and £10 for clothing. The name of the then vicar appears prominently in all the decisions surrounding this change, suggesting considerable influence.³⁷

The Ashwell vestry also showed an awareness of contemporary philanthropic developments, setting up a charity school in 1712, quite separate from the endowed parish school that had been built almost sixty years before.³⁸ Even more interesting is its experiment with a workhouse, coming at the height of the first phase of the movement. On 18 February 1728 eleven villagers signed a vestry order setting up a workhouse and ordering all poor people to move into it within five days on pain of losing relief. The goods of the poor were secured and inventoried, and master and mistress installed, and high-minded rules provided supervision of inmates and gentle treatment of the elderly. However, fifteen months later the vestry reversed this decision and ordered:

suppress the workhouse in ye parish of Ashwell (pursuant to an order of ye last Easter

³⁵ W. Page, ed., *Victoria county history of Hertfordshire*, III (London, 1912), pp. 192–209; B. J. Davey, *Ashwell, 1830–1914: the decline of a village community* (Leicester University Department of English Local History, Occasional Papers, 3rd ser., 5, Leicester, 1980).

³⁶ HCRO D/P7/12/1, D/P7/25/1 passim.

³⁷ HCRO D/P7/25/1 passim.

³⁸ Christ Church, Oxford, Wake MS 324 p. 88; the curate observed that although the school had been substantially endowed its master was only being paid £14 a year in 1712, and had no pupils. This may account for the impetus to set up a charity school.

Vestry) entirely and to maintain the poor of our said parish according to the usual way, before the said workhouse was erected and given leave for the said poor to dwell in y^e sd House till Michaelmass next if the said poor do not provide themselves, or are provided for in a dwelling-House elsewhere by that time by us.

There were eight signatories, but only two of them had appeared on the original order, while two of the new participants could only make a mark. The surviving record suggests a successful vestry coup in which the older or poorer members of the community had responded to popular uproar to reverse what proved to be an unpopular decision. That had targeted all those in receipt of relief, and particularly older women, to be moved into the workhouse. When ten years later a workhouse was successfully introduced it took a different form. It effectively became an orphanage in which an older woman cared for ten children and set them to work spinning.³⁹ The early history of the Ashwell workhouse is an excellent illustration of the tension between efficient and morally uplifting use of resources, and the humane treatment of vulnerable members of the community that recurs again and again in eighteenth-century England.

Ashwell's response to increasing poverty in the early eighteenth century was imaginative, multi-faceted and responsive. Charitable resources were integrated with rateable provision, while the setting up of the workhouse was firmly set in a context of local housing need as well as ideological fashion. It produced a clash of old and new approaches to relief, perhaps between the increasing number of tenant farmers and larger owner-occupiers and the less-educated smallholders and labourers. Hidden beneath the surface is a battle between clerical influence, which came to predominate in the later eighteenth century, and nonconformist and anti-clerical sentiments that were powerful between 1690 and 1730. A further interesting, but intractable, problem is to explain how such a populous, and squireless, village managed to stabilize its population over the eighteenth century while the numbers of landless and near-landless swelled.

V

Brill is a large hill-top village in Buckinghamshire, close to the Oxfordshire border and only ten miles from Oxford. Until 1632 it was part of the Royal Forest of Bernwood which fell victim to Charles I's disafforestation. Bernwood was unusual in having the Dynham family as foresters and dominant local resident landowners. They bitterly opposed the end of the forest, and exploited their rights, and the forest freeholders and commoners, mercilessly in the last eight years of its existence. One result was that the minor gentry and commoners were able to extract an improved deal for their forest rights. Those without ancient rights of common were given some 280 acres of land, in the

³⁹ HCRO D/P7/25/1; D/P7/12/2. A very similar reversal of workhouse policy, not far away in Eaton Socon, Beds, in the same years, but led by the parson, is described by Emmison, 'The relief of the poor at Eaton Socon', pp. 23–7.

adjoining forest village of Boarstall. That village was the seat of the Dynhams and became an estate village with a small and static population in the next 130 years.⁴⁰

Disafforestation resulted in enclosure for pasture and in Brill and Boarstall created farms of 100–200 acres for grazing and dairying. Almost all the woods had gone within ten years of disafforestation, and the populous near-urban settlement of Brill had a large number of landless labourers previously dependent on the forest resources who had only small amounts of common land in the parish, and for whom the disafforestation grant, which became known as the ‘Poor Folks Pasture’ was the most considerable resource. The Pasture was unusual in a number of ways. It was not common land, but was held by trustees ‘in severalty’ and they had to partition pasture rights in it to the poor villagers of Brill and the third forest community, Oakley, on an annual basis. Equally unusually, the terms of the trust specifically excluded the lords of the manor (the Dynhams at Boarstall) from becoming trustees, and designated a fixed number of trustees from neighbouring but disinterested villages to add to those from the two parishes. Administration of the Pasture thus fell into the hands of a group of lesser gentry, freeholders, and farmers.⁴¹

The history of the Poor Folks Pasture 1632–1720 provides an important insight into the issues facing the poor and those who administrated charities and the Poor Law in the period. The size of the Pasture was considerable, and it was worth between £120 and £150 if let to a tenant. This was a very substantial income for a rural community, and much more than was available in Ashwell or the Claydons. Underlying the terms on which it began in 1632 was support for the ancient patterns of rural life – a cottager with his or her own animals, able to make a living from a combination of labouring, smallholding, or garden plot, and common rights. Such a family remained independent of charity, relief, and the stigma of dependence that went with it. It was an ideal that was being destroyed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and even at Brill it was unrealistic by 1650. Brill’s population fell by 30 per cent between 1620 and 1712, responding to the effects of disafforestation, but also to the disruption of Civil War garrisoning. During the eighteenth century it rose rapidly from 350 to 859 in 1801. The fields of the village were farmed in medium-sized and large units, while an increasing and landless cottager population in the cramped hill-top village was narrowly dependent on the declining pottery-making industry, brick and tile production, and an widening range of service occupations.⁴² The Poor Folk’s Pasture should have been a valuable asset for direct exploitation, but in practice its position over two miles

⁴⁰ On early Stuart disafforestation see B. Sharp, *In contempt of all authority: rural artisans and riot in the west of England, 1586–1660* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1980); a fuller discussion of provision for the resulting problems of poverty is found in B. Sharp, ‘Common rights, charities, and the disorderly poor’, in G. Eley and W. Hunt, eds., *Reviving the English Revolution* (London and New York, 1988), pp. 107–37.

⁴¹ For a fuller account of Bernwood see J. Broad and R. Hoyle, eds., *Bernwood: life and afterlife of a forest* (Preston, 1997).

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 77–85.

away adjoining the ancient area of forest commons in Oakley made it difficult for individual cottagers to use.

Consequently, the real economy of the Poor Folk's Pasture between 1632 and 1685 was very different from that intended. Many cottagers converted their rights to keep animals there into cash by selling them to larger farmers every year. One of the trustees was accused of managing the land for his own benefit and even letting rights to a local gentry family. During the Civil War a family squatted in an old house on the land and attempted to claim rights to it. After the Restoration complaints continued, the Pasture was administered by unapproved trustees, and by 1679 disaffected villagers forced the court of Exchequer in London to intervene. A series of actions followed until in 1685 an Exchequer special commission was set up to make rulings on the future administration of the Pasture.⁴³

The two eminent local JPs who undertook the commission met the villagers and came up with a radical proposal to divide the Pasture between Brill and Oakley and change its management. Brill received two-thirds but the cottagers were to give up their rights to pasture animals and the land was instead to be let to a single tenant and the rent used to provide cash payments to eligible cottagers. Recognition of local unease at maladministration resulted in a clause allowing the cottagers to unseat trustees and make new appointments if they were dissatisfied. Quarter Sessions was charged with registering all changes in trustees and passing accounts – which it regularly recorded up to 1760.⁴⁴

The implementation of the new arrangements did not go smoothly and brought further court cases. These illuminate the tensions between old ways and new, and in particular the attempts by overseers and local gentry to make this substantial charitable income part of an integrated parish provision. In 1696 outraged cottagers claimed that the new trustees had not just let the land, but encouraged the tenant to build a house on it to be paid out of the rent, to the disadvantage of poor cottagers. The tenant had ring-fenced the farm and moved the road that ran through it to skirt the edge of the property. They also accused the trustees of diverting money from the charity 'to buy a Town Stock for Brill and to sett forth Apprentices and ease their poore and collectioners in the manifest breach of the trust [and] the other rich freeholders, tenants, and farmers' ... great benefitt ... contrary to the intention of the said Charity'.⁴⁵

Elements in the village continued to oppose the new arrangements and resorted to direct action to pull down fences and restore the old ways of land use. Meanwhile the rent from the pasture was distributed to between eighty and one hundred cottagers in Brill, each receiving between 10s and £1 each year. However, the cost of these payments was less than half the received rent. Accounts show that the remainder was spent on quit rents, parish rates (for the rich parish of Boarstall where the land lay), and administrative charges, including accounting. The trustees responded to the villagers' protests and

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 90–8.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 98–101.

⁴⁵ Public Record Office E112/620/109 ml.

legal actions by attempting to coerce them: they forced villagers to sign a paper saying they were happy with the administration of the charity before they could receive any money. Some twenty families appear to have refused.

The changes in the administration of the Poor Folk's Pasture paralleled a series of important steps by local magistrates, gentry, freeholders, and farmers to tackle the problems of poverty as they saw them in Brill between 1685 and 1715. They attempted to have the adjoining village of Dorton (where no poor rates were raised) linked with Brill in poor administration. They appealed to outsiders such as the Verneys (in the same county hundred and petty sessions division) to make donations to apprentice out young people. A number of charities were founded around 1700 to support and enlarge the school and finance apprenticeships. But there were also concerted attempts to push teenagers who were living at home, unemployed, into employment and service, taking named families to Quarter Sessions and threatening loss of all parish relief if they were ignored.⁴⁶

Brill's overseers' accounts have not survived, and much of the story has been garnered from court cases and Quarter Sessions orders. This limits the understanding we can gain of the inter-relationship of charities and poor relief. Yet the existence of the Poor Folk's Pasture enabled cottagers to claim some level of independence, and as a dole it was not means tested even if around 1700 there was some variation in payment. It may have had some effect on poverty levels even in 1800 when Brill's poor rate remained surprisingly modest considering the type of community it was, and the rise in population it endured.

However, at some unknown point before the charity commissioners' report in 1835 the terms of the Poor Folk's Pasture trust were altered to remove its openness and independence. The composition of the board of trustees was turned upside-down, with the Aubreys as lords of the manor, the duke of Buckingham, and four local clergy involved, while the eligibility rules were drastically tightened. To receive money a householder needed to be resident, married for more than ten years, not living in a parish house, or receiving rent subsidy from the parish, not taking on an apprentice, and not in receipt of poor relief during the past ten years, nor had been convicted in the courts. Furthermore, a householder had to be present on the distribution day, and not be a frequenter of pubs. Meanwhile, other charities in the forest parishes were redirected to provide winter fuel for poor villagers rather than apprenticeships for young people. In the long term Brill's success in upholding the independence of the Poor Folk's Pasture charity around 1700 may have had a significant impact on the independence of the cottager population. What it could not alter was the continuing squeeze on cottagers and smallholders that came with the rising population of the later eighteenth century.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Broad and Hoyle, eds., *Bernwood*, pp. 101–2.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 104–5.

VI

Three communities, all with a different range of problems, and quite different community dynamics, had a number of threads in common. The economic problems they dealt with were similar: the declining demand for agricultural labour as small independent farms disappeared and labour productivity on larger farms increased markedly; the absence of a sufficient counterweight of new industrial and service employment to offset these employment losses; rising population levels from *c.* 1780. Their strategies for dealing with falling employment opportunities through to the mid-eighteenth century all involved the extensive use of parish and charitable apprenticeships to place the young unemployed in training. In all three parishes personal charity and intervention, charitable trusts, and the provision of parish money from churchwardens' and overseers' accounts, were part of a range of resources which the poor could turn to in need. However, the ways in which they were distributed was subject to a complex range of negotiations involving not just overseers and the poor, but the parson, squire, and richer farmers on one side, and those struggling to maintain their independence in cottages and on smallholdings on the other.

Can we generalize at all from such diverse experiences? There seem to be a number of trends that enrich our understanding of the processes. One is a recognition that over the long period from 1660 to 1834 there were two important periods when the amounts of money being paid in relief took a step upwards to a new general level. One was in the period from 1690 to 1710, and the other the period of the Napoleonic wars from 1790 to 1815. Each had its own pattern of response. In the early period JPs and overseers looked to new and punitive measures such as badging the poor, and forcing teenagers into apprenticeship. In general, the combination of an increased, but not intolerable, level of poor rates, and a more flexible use of charitable resources was sufficient to provide an acceptable solution. There might be crises caused by harvest failure or epidemic, but by and large parishes coped with them by drawing on the full range of parish resources. Where workhouses were introduced, they were regulated under humane sets of rules, and largely catered for orphaned and homeless people. The poor rates increasingly paid for cottage rents, off-loaded by landowners adopting stricter estate management practices. Some parishes without workhouses bought or built parish or church houses in which poor families lived rent free without institutional rules. The total parish resource for the poor might include a range of charities to provide clothes, food, and fuel, and to fund out-migration through apprenticeship, and improve educational standards through parish schools. Though some were undoubtedly inefficiently or corruptly used, far more were not only diligently maintained but flexibly applied to suit changing needs.

A new and far more damaging crisis emerged from the 1790s onwards as rising rural populations in southern England combined with falling non-agricultural employment opportunities in town and country alike changed the

balance of needs and resources drastically. First indications from the Cambridge Group's recent long-term linkage of reconstitution data and overseers' records of relief suggest that in the later eighteenth century poor relief began to support older family men at a younger age (the eighteenth-century equivalent of early retirement). At the same time fewer young men and women were put into apprenticeship or service.⁴⁸ This crisis produced the many *ad hoc* initiatives of the late eighteenth century such as Speenhamland, the roundsman system, and bread quotas. Money raised from the rates was concentrated on meeting urgent need. The scale of poverty was so much greater than what had gone before that the contribution from the charitable sector was proportionately reduced. Increasingly prominent were the pressures which, whether we call them 'closure' or the erosion of custom, made the dependency of the smallholder, labourer, and cottager much more explicit than it had been in the past.⁴⁹ A number of interesting examples show what happened.

The most obvious change was the decline of ancient hospitality and personal charity. Where it remained it was much more obviously and consciously linked to questions of electoral advantage and local self-advertisement on more than a parochial level. A surprising amount of customary personal charity persisted through the seventeenth century. The Verneys' annual slaughter of a bull and distribution of its meat in Middle Claydon at Christmas was part of ancient landlord–tenant ritual and custom, but such practices were not immutable. When the Verneys became landlords of adjoining East Claydon they decided to end the practice of giving out doles to the poor. This brought instant protest from the inhabitants. Interestingly, when after the reversion of the manor and lands in 1722 to the previous landowning family the new landlord publicly announced that he was restoring doles.⁵⁰ One aspect of such annual doles was that they were frequently open to all who attended at a given place and time without distinction, making them immune from taints of dependency. This is well illustrated in Thomas Turner's diary from East Sussex in the 1750s and 1760s. Turner was involved in distributing a dole from the duke of Newcastle available to all-comers from the parishes of East Hoathly and Laughton which often cost the duke £50 or more and was paid out to anything from 600 to 900 people. In 1762 he 'distributed upwards of £7 and I conjecture to between five and six hundred people, as also a sack of wheat made into bread and at the least a hogshead of good fresh beer'.⁵¹ However, in 1764 the duke's new steward withdrew the dole, and the parish gave Turner the task of proving their legal

⁴⁸ Richard Smith, paper to 'Long eighteenth-century' seminar, Institute of Historical Research, London, May 1997.

⁴⁹ K. Wrightson and D. Levine, *Poverty and piety in an English village: Terling, 1525–1700* (London, 1979), ch. 7; R. Johnson, *An archaeology of capitalism* (London, 1996), esp. chs. 2–4; D. Hay and N. Rogers, *Eighteenth-century English society: shuttles and swords* (Oxford, 1997), esp. chs. 6 and 7.

⁵⁰ Edmund Verney to Sir Ralph Verney 20 Dec. 1669 R23; Charles Challoner to Ralph Verney 16 Dec. 1722 4/5/68.

⁵¹ D. Vaizey, ed., *The diary of Thomas Turner, 1754–1765* (Oxford, 1984), pp. 196, 241.

right to it. There were records going back a hundred years or more, but no legal documentation.⁵² He was also the distributor of annual parish gifts to the twenty or thirty poor people from East Hoathly on 21 December and in February. One year he noted that the payment should be to those who were not in receipt of relief and thought worthy by minister and churchwarden, but in practice this seems to have been flexibly applied. On one occasion when the amount spent exceeded the charity's income the parson made up the difference from the sacrament money. 21 December was not just a distribution day for the charity. It was 'the day on which the poor in this parish go round the parish to ask for something against Christmas' suggesting that the remnants of old forms of neighbourly charity still survived in his part of Sussex.⁵³

Other customs were dying too: the availability of food from the kitchen door of the great house came under scrutiny on moral and economic grounds. At Middle Claydon in 1712 Lady Fermanagh banned it as illegal. Forty years later a servant in the same household was sacked for the same offence.⁵⁴ Increasingly in eighteenth-century southern England such types of open parish charity were associated with elections, family marriages, great events, and pageantry, not with attending to the day-to-day needs of village families.

The reaction of institutional charities was interestingly different. Here in the early eighteenth century they had been able to use their help discriminating in favour of those in most need. As the scale of need increased they were forced to change how they provided, spreading their resources more thinly. Bierton (Bucks) Feoffees Charity's accounts show how the cash doles it provided were administered between 1680 and 1820 and Fig. 2 shows the changes at ten-year intervals. Between 1680 and 1780 the numbers of recipients rose from under thirty to around sixty, but there was a considerable range of payments extending to 10s or more in some years. During this period the amount spent on doles was generally around £7 a year. After 1780 the funds available for doles jumped to over £15, by 1820 to over £20. However, at this point the trustees changed distribution policy and used the money to increase numbers of recipients, and decrease the range of discretionary payments. From henceforth the maximum was 7s, and the numbers of beneficiaries was ninety or more. After 1810 further standardization took place and the 7s doles limited to those families with five children or more. Food and fuel doles in such places as Brill and St Albans showed an increased number of recipients and a reduction in discrimination in payments between 1780 and 1820.⁵⁵

An analysis of a similarly long set of clothing charity accounts from Beaconsfield (Bucks) between 1740 and 1850 shows a parallel squeeze on

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 305–6, 326.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 244, 266, 288, 326. So flexible was the parish fund that the capital was subsumed into general church funds to repair the church during the 1760s!

⁵⁴ Elizabeth Verney to William Coleman 27 Dec. 1698 R50, using the pretext of recent legislation. Undated letter (c. 1770) from an ex-housemaid to Ralph, 2nd earl Verney about dismissal for giving food to a poor man, 5/1/1. ⁵⁵ BCRO PR27/25/2; HCRO D93/5/3.

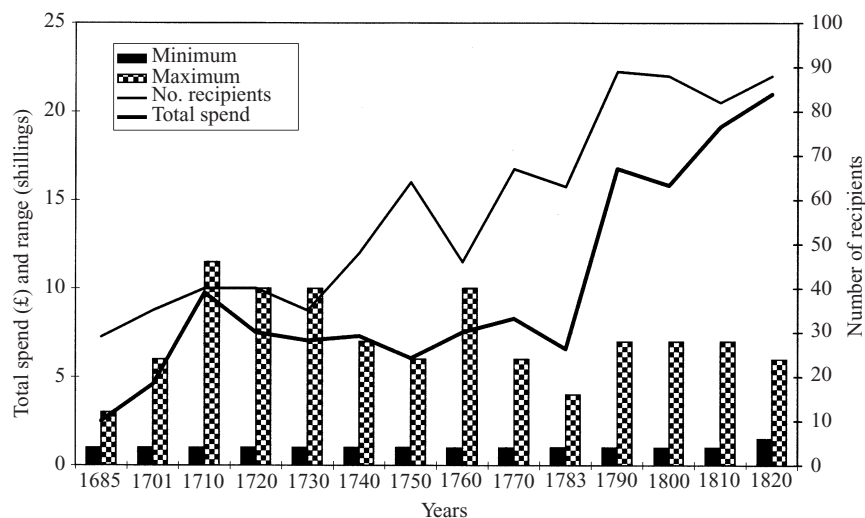


Fig. 2. Bierton (Bucks) Feoffees Charity, 1685-1820.

resources where the response was also to spread the money more thinly. In the mid-eighteenth century the labour cost of making the gowns exceeded the cloth cost per item, but after 1800 this was reversed. Labour costs approximately halved while cloth costs remained little changed. A slight reversal of this trend in 1850 came about because giving them petticoats rather than gowns expanded the number of female recipients.⁵⁶ A similar pattern was seen in the parish of Bledlow. Here in 1702/3 cloth, buttons, thread, canvas, and serge cost £4 12s 8d but the tailor was paid £10 2s for making them up into fourteen garments. By the 1830s a decision had been made to expand the number of female recipients to forty-seven by providing women with calico or baize for them to make up themselves.⁵⁷

Arguably, the changing trend which encouraged subscription giving rather than endowment, and institutional rather than personal responses, reduced the flow of new funds into these traditional fallbacks of the poor. Certainly the scale of the problem by the period of the Napoleonic wars did not make traditional charitable funds seem an efficacious way forward except in small closed communities. As the poor found that resources were more thinly spread then so their ability to keep head above water and avoid drawing on the Old Poor Law fell. A secondary effect was the loss of work for village craftsmen and traders as funds were directed more efficiently towards the end-recipients. This was directly so in the case of tailors in Beaconsfield and Bledlow. There is also some evidence that the squeeze on resources meant that a higher percentage of charitable funds went to the intended beneficiaries. The losers here were again often not so much the trustees themselves but the tradesmen such as building

⁵⁶ BCRO PR_{14/25/6}.

⁵⁷ BCRO PR_{17/25/1}.

craftsmen maintaining charity property, book-keepers, and a variety of more dubious causes.

Charity accounts frequently displayed a response to increasing need that widened the recipient group while reducing the value of doles. When Brill switched a major charitable source from funding apprenticeships to buying fuel it illustrated both the rising need for basic necessities, and the decline of employment opportunities in rural southern England, and also in the traditional migration outlet, London.⁵⁸ The expanding number of people helped by the more open charities may superficially appear to make them less selective and discriminatory, and to decrease the overt pressures to proclaim dependency. In reality, this became a meaningless distinction when confronted with the scale of the problem.

In the 1820s parishes reduced their poor rate bills by curbing pensions, as the inflationary pressures disappeared after the Napoleonic wars. However, the problem of underemployment and overpopulation in the rural south continued, and ensured that the traditional mix of parish resources could no longer deal with those on the margins of poverty effectively. Payments from the poor rates now dominated provision and were directed overwhelmingly at penury and subsistence, and ever less at enabling the independence of the labouring village family. In this failure lies at least part of the acclaim with which the gentry, and those who administered charities and poor relief, greeted the radical if coercive measures of the New Poor Law.

⁵⁸ L. Schwarz, *London in the age of industrialisation, 1700–1850* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 231–40. For a wider ranging view of the transformation of early nineteenth-century rural society see Eastwood, *Government and community in the English provinces*.