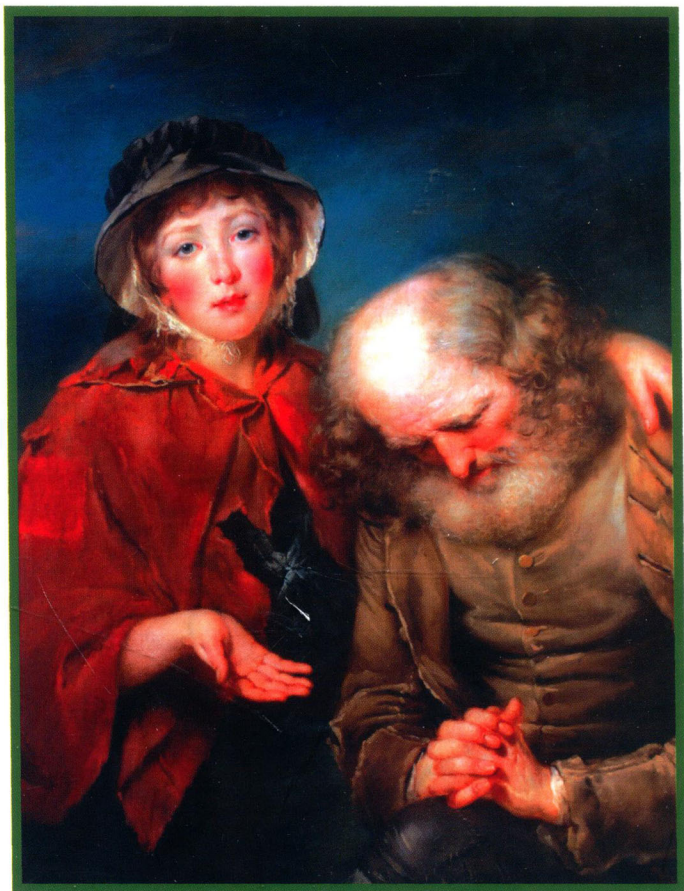


POVERTY, GENDER AND LIFE-CYCLE UNDER THE ENGLISH POOR LAW



1760–1834

Samantha Williams

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THE ROYAL HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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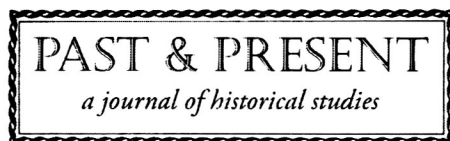
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TO HAMISH

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Samantha Williams
July 2011

Abbreviations

AgHR	<i>Agricultural History Review</i>
A&S	<i>Ageing and Society</i>
C&C	<i>Continuity and Change</i>
EcHR	<i>Economic History Review</i>
EHR	<i>English Historical Review</i>
HJ	<i>Historical Journal</i>
IRSH	<i>International Review of Social History</i>
LPS	<i>Local Population Studies</i>
JBS	<i>Journal of British Studies</i>
JEcH	<i>Journal of Economic History</i>
P&P	<i>Past and Present</i>
SH	<i>Social History</i>
TRHS	<i>Transactions of the Royal Historical Society</i>
BHRS	Bedfordshire Historical Record Society
BLARS	Bedfordshire and Luton Archives Service
FRF	Family reconstitution form
JP	Justice of the Peace



Map 1. Bedfordshire, c.1834

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Introduction

‘The poor of the parish crowded upon us.’¹

This book is about the poor and their families during the last three decades of the eighteenth century and the first three and a half decades of the nineteenth, the final seventy years of the old poor law. This was a period of long-drawn-out crisis for the relief of the poor which resulted in an overhaul of welfare legislation in 1834 and the introduction of the New Poor Law. At its core is a micro-history, providing detailed case studies of poor relief and the makeshift economy in the two communities of Campton and Shefford in Bedfordshire. It may even be termed ‘micro-cosmic’ history, in that the local is the site for the consideration of much wider issues; it is a testing ground for research questions that can only be answered accurately by detailed analysis at the parochial, familial and individual level.² However, it is also possible to move beyond the locality to the broader regional and national framework. Campton and Shefford can be placed in the much wider geographical area of south-eastern England, a largely agrarian region characterised by high poor law spending, effectively the heartland of the ‘poverty problem’. It was concern primarily about spiralling relief costs in this region that prompted the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834.

A number of issues within current historical scholarship are pertinent to this study: the implementation and growth of the poor laws, the ‘mixed economy’ of social welfare and the related concept of the ‘economy of make-shifts’, and the economic impact of the poor laws, as well such wider questions as the ‘politics of the parish’ and the gendered and life-cycle nature of poverty.

¹ The quotation, dated 1800, is from William Holland, a Somerset parson, and is cited in P. King, ‘The rights of the poor and the role of the law: the impact of pauper appeals to the summary courts, 1750–1834’, in R. M. Smith and S. King (eds), *Poverty, poor relief and welfare, 1650–1929*, Woodbridge 2011.

² On microhistory as a methodology see B. Reay, *Microhistories: demography, society and culture in rural England, 1800–1930*, Cambridge 1996, ch. ix. On the concept of microcosmic history M. M. Postan comments that ‘Unlike the macrocosmic subjects of the general sociologist and the microscopic subjects of the antiquarian, those of the historian are microcosmic ... The microcosmic method of a scientific historian implies a recognition of the need for making his investigations relevant to the wider issues of social science and a yet further recognition of the special difficulties and peculiar shortcomings of social investigation’: *Fact and relevance: essays on historical method*, Cambridge 1971, 20–1.

The old poor laws

The ‘old poor law’, codified with the acts of Elizabeth I of 1598–1601 (39 Eliz., c.3, 39 Eliz., c.4, 43 Eliz., c.2), established a clear legal obligation for parishes to deal with three broad classes of applicants for relief: the impotent poor, ‘the lame ... the old, the blind, and such other among them being poor and not able to work’, such as orphans, widows, the sick and the elderly, were to be relieved; poor children and orphans were to be apprenticed; and the able-bodied, ‘all such persons (married or unmarried) as having no meanes to maintaine them, use no ordinary and daily trade of life to get their living by’, were to be set to work.³ Those refusing to work – such as rogues, vagabonds and sturdy beggars – were to be whipped or otherwise punished, and then returned to their place of birth or dwelling. ‘Wandering and begging’ was prohibited unless approved by overseers of the poor,⁴ who were to be appointed to raise funds (the poor rates) ‘by taxing inhabitants and occupiers of land in the parish’ and were then to dispense them to the deserving poor.⁵ Responsibility for poor relief thus fell at the parish level and eligibility for relief was negotiated through legal settlement (which identified the parish which was legally responsible for an individual), enshrined in legislation of 1662, 1685, 1691 and 1697–8.⁶

The pace of implementation of the Elizabethan poor laws differed by locality and region.⁷ Some communities, particularly urban ones, embraced parish-centred relief even before it became mandatory. Rating was widespread in Kent in the 1590s, was beginning in Lancashire in the 1620s and in Sussex, Lincolnshire and Warwickshire in the 1630s, but was much slower

³ E. M. Leonard, *The early history of English poor relief*, Cambridge 1900, repr. London 1965, 140; M. J. Daunton, *Progress and poverty: an economic and social history of Britain, 1700–1850*, Oxford 1995, 449; G. Taylor, *The problem of poverty, 1660–1834*, London 1969, 4; P. A. Fideler, *Social welfare in pre-industrial England*, Basingstoke 2006, 99–101.

⁴ P. Slack, *The English poor law, 1531–1782*, London 1990, ch. iii, and *Poverty and policy in Tudor and Stuart England*, London 1988, ch. v; A. L. Beier, *Masterless men: the vagrancy problem in England, 1560–1640*, London 1985; J. P. Huzel, ‘The labourer and the poor law, 1750–1850’, in J. Thirsk (ed.), *The agrarian history of England and Wales*, VI: 1750–1850, Cambridge 1989, 755–810 at p. 756; Fideler, *Social welfare*, 100.

⁵ Slack, *Poverty and policy*, 126–8; Fideler, *Social welfare*, 100. L. A. Botelho emphasises that churchwardens, who had played a crucial role in the relief of poverty before the Elizabethan poor laws, continued in that role long after the establishment of overseers: *Old age and the English poor law, 1500–1700*, Woodbridge 2004, 24.

⁶ K. D. M. Snell, *Parish and belonging: community, identity and welfare in England and Wales, 1700–1950*, Cambridge 2006, 85–6. For how settlement was gained see chapter 1 below.

⁷ Slack, *Poverty and policy*, 114; S. Hindle, *On the parish? The micro-politics of poor relief in rural England, c. 1550–1750*, Oxford 2004, 21–3; Fideler, *Social welfare*, 103, 105. See also P. Slack, *From reformation to improvement: public welfare in early modern England*, Oxford 1999, 66–7.

INTRODUCTION

to start in Northumberland and Durham.⁸ It has been estimated that by the end of the seventeenth century perhaps 80 per cent of parishes were implementing a parish rate.⁹ Paul Slack has asserted that this 'machine of social welfare' was well established by the later seventeenth century and was still expanding. This was, he states, 'a general phenomenon of major importance'.¹⁰ Given that relief was administered at the parish level and that there were around 15,000 parishes, the old poor law was highly decentralised and policy varied from locality to locality.¹¹

The growth of social welfare¹² – with an increasingly extensive and 'generous' poor law system – has been documented for the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.¹³ There was a significant increase in poor law expenditure due to the increase in the size of parish pensions (regular weekly or monthly relief to all categories of the poor, not just the elderly), some expansion in the numbers of pensioners, and also by increasing spending on 'casual' poor relief in the urban centres of York, Exeter, Norwich, Salisbury and Bristol.¹⁴ Far more charitable relief was available in urban centres than in rural areas and London in particular generally spent far less *per capita*, partly due to alternative sources of welfare assistance and its younger age profile.¹⁵ In the London suburb of St Martins-in-the-Fields, for example, the number of pensioners did not keep pace with the increase in population but there was

⁸ S. Hindle, *State and social change in early modern England*, Basingstoke 2000, 153–5; *The birthpangs of welfare: poor relief and parish governance in seventeenth-century Warwickshire* (Dugdale Society Occasional Papers xl, 2000), 1–32, and *On the parish?*; Fideler, *Social welfare*, 109, 140; J. Healey, 'The development of poor relief in Lancashire, c. 1598–1680', *HJ* liii (2010), 551–72.

⁹ Fideler, *Social welfare*, 140.

¹⁰ Slack, *Poverty and policy*, 182.

¹¹ A. Kidd, *State, society and the poor in nineteenth-century England*, Basingstoke 1999, 13; Botelho, *Old age*, 20; J. Broad, 'Parish economies of welfare, 1650–1834', *HJ* xlii (1999), 985–1006 at p. 986.

¹² Slack notes that the term 'social welfare' was first used in the Victorian era: *Reformation to improvement*, 1.

¹³ Hindle, *Birthpangs*; Slack, *English poor law*; T. Wales, 'Poverty, poor relief and the life-cycle: some evidence from seventeenth-century Norfolk', in R. M. Smith (ed.), *Land, kinship and life-cycle*, Cambridge 1984, 351–404; S. King, *Poverty and welfare in England*, Manchester 2000.

¹⁴ Slack, *Poverty and policy*, 178–82. For the eighteenth-century urban experience see A. Tomkins, *The experience of urban poverty, 1723–82*, Manchester 2006; R. Dyson, 'Who were the poor of Oxford in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries?', in A. Gestrich, S. King and L. Raphael (eds), *Being poor in modern Europe: historical perspectives, 1800–1940*, Oxford 2006, 43–89; and S. King, 'Friendship, kinship and belonging in the letters of urban paupers, 1800–1840', *Historical Social Research* xxxiii (2008), 249–77.

¹⁵ Slack, *Poverty and policy*, ch. viii. See also the research on London by D. R. Green: *Pauper capital: London and the poor law, 1790–1870*, Farnham 2010.

an upward trend in average pensions.¹⁶ There is evidence that in rural areas, particularly in the south and east, poor relief became more comprehensive and markedly more generous after the middle of the seventeenth century.¹⁷ Tim Wales has charted a rise in pension payments in rural Norfolk from around 6d. a week in the first half of the seventeenth century to around 1s. a week in the second half, a sum which could maintain an individual living alone and which might provide a standard of living that compared favourably with that of families of day labourers in work. Moreover, pensions were increasingly supplemented with relief in kind, such as fuel, rent and medical care.¹⁸ During the seventeenth century the majority of the aged poor in Aldenham, Hertfordshire, and Norfolk received more and more as the parish became their principal, and in many cases their sole, source of support.¹⁹

Vestries which sought to set the under-employed to work faced persistent problems. Some parishes still had stocks of materials which could be used for this purpose in the eighteenth century, but they were few in number.²⁰ Early in the eighteenth century concern at the cost of poor relief resulted in the permissive legislation of the Workhouse Test Acts of 1722, which recognised Corporations of the Poor in fourteen provincial towns and the City of London. If the act were adopted by a parish, all paupers were to enter the house. In East Anglia, Corporations of the Poor were also founded, offering 'houses of industry', and outdoor relief was cut back.²¹ Many workhouses could not achieve even partial success, however, once population, prices and rural unemployment started rising again after 1760. The concentration on arable farming in the east produced large-scale seasonal demands for labour in the summer and autumn, but left a large reserve of labour not fully employed for more than half the year.²² Opinions were shifting and Gilbert's Act of 1782 reflected the turning tide of opinion and recognised the problem of un- and under-employment. If parishes adopted the act, they were only to house the impotent poor inside workhouses. The able-bodied were to be found employment outside, and supported from the rates if wages were

¹⁶ J. Boulton, 'Going on the parish: the parish pension and its meaning in the London suburbs, 1640-1724', in T. Hitchcock, P. King and P. Sharpe (eds), *Chronicling poverty: the voices and strategies of the English poor, 1640-1840*, London 1997, 19-46.

¹⁷ Wales, 'Poverty, poor relief and the life-cycle'; W. Newman Brown, 'The receipt of poor relief and family situation: Aldenham, Hertfordshire, 1630-90', in Smith, *Land, kinship and life-cycle*, 405-22; Botelho, *Old age*, ch. ii.

¹⁸ Wales, 'Poverty, poor relief and the life-cycle', 354-7, 360, 364-5, 374, 387-8.

¹⁹ Newman Brown, 'The receipt of poor relief', 414; Wales, 'Poverty, poor relief and the life-cycle', table 11.1 at pp. 362-4.

²⁰ Slack, *English poor law*, 39.

²¹ Ibid. ch. iii; Daunton, *Progress and poverty*, 453; T. V. Hitchcock, 'The English workhouse: a study in institutional poor relief in selected countries, 1696-1750', unpubl. DPhil. diss. Oxford 1985.

²² J. D. Marshall, *The old poor law, 1795-1834*, 2nd edn, Basingstoke 1985; K. D. M. Snell, *Annals of the labouring poor: social change and agrarian England, 1660-1900*, Cambridge 1985, ch. i.