

Text for accession

This summary (prepared by Steph Cox and Michael Heaton) of the Poor Law from 1600-1834 (when the basis changed radically) brings together additional material as well as references found in accession numbers 160, 298, 680, 1536 (Victoria County History), 1754 and 1831; and also four summaries of files at Oxford History Centre. These references are shown by footnotes.

## Poor Law

From its beginnings in the 14<sup>th</sup> C, up to the inauguration of the NHS in 1948, the evolution of England's poor laws is one of the most significant strands of social policy and administration.

The history is conveniently divided into the old Poor Law of 1601 (Act for the Relief of the Poor) and the new Poor Law of 1834 (Poor Law Amendment Act)

The old Poor Law can be broadly described as parish-centred, haphazardly implemented, locally enforced with some parts (inc. operation of workhouses) being completely voluntary. The New Poor Law introduced a rigorously implemented, centrally enforced, standard system that was imposed on all and was centred on the workhouse. So essentially it was the manner in which poor relief was administered that changed between the two laws. One fundamental change, however, was how the poor were viewed. The 1834 act was guided by the view that the poor were largely responsible for their own situation which they could change if they chose to do so, whereas the traditional attitude had been one of poverty being inevitable and that their relief was a Christian duty. Essentially it was the manner in which poor relief was administered that changed under the Poor Law of 1834.

The old Poor Law was introduced in 1601 to be administered by each parish for the relief of the poor as grants of money, clothing, food or fuel to mostly those living in their own homes. The payment of poor rate was compulsory, to be raised by two Overseers and Churchwardens) of the Parish, to give relief to the sick, elderly, orphaned, 'unable' and 'impotent', these latter two categories meaning incapable of earning one's own living.

The introduction of the Poor Rate required the authorities, known as a Vestry, in each parish to set the poor rate and to appoint an overseer of the poor to collect the money by taxing the parish householders and landowners until 1834. (The 'new Poor Law' of 1834, which collected monies in a similar way, overhauled the previous system of support by taking beneficiaries off-the-street in an attempt to reduce costs, now requiring residence in workhouses in return for assistance. This became the main method of receiving help and was viewed as a punitive approach. These workhouses were abolished in 1930.)

The act saw a move away from the more obvious forms of punishing paupers under the Tudor system towards methods of "correction". It had three central 'planks':

1. To send vagabonds/vagrants/'sturdy beggars' (those who looked as though they should be able to work) back to where they belonged (not always easy to establish).
2. The 'labouring poor' to be set to productive work' in a few rare cases in a parish workhouse (e.g. Henley for 150 people) which was not the same as the Victorian workhouse which was a feared punishment.
3. The 'impotent' to be maintained by the community.

Monies were raised by a levy on land, based on the rental value. In the early days payments out were mainly to widows on a regular basis with other 'extra-ordinary' payments.

Legislation was added to in 1662 by the Poor Relief Act 1662 (Settlement Acts), and a similar Act in 1691, which attempted to deal with 'settlement'. This term did not apply to a conurbation of houses but rather to the area (parish) in which a person was entitled to poor relief. The amount of relief to the poor was based on the price of bread and the number of children. Settlement arose through yearly service or apprenticeship for 7 years.

In 1723 Knatchbull's Act (The Workhouse Test Act) enabled workhouses to be set up by parishes either singly, or in combination with neighbouring parishes. In addition, relief was to be offered only to those willing to enter the workhouse and thus denying out-relief.

Various references, in chronological order, from the Oxfordshire History Centre and elsewhere in this archive are included here.

A number of entries suggest an increase in pauperism in the early 18th century.<sup>1</sup> In 1704, 6s. was spent on making 'badges for the poore', (this was abolished in 1810); in the following year £3 18s. was spent on cloth to provide work for them; and in 1710 and 1711 meetings were held to discuss this problem of unemployment. Possibly the entries for repairs to the highways in 1711 were the result.

PAR286/13/4/D/2 - Lease for 12 years, 21/Mar/1734<sup>2</sup>

Parties: 1. Edward Redhead of Wheatley, chapelwarden, & James Harding [Acc 1007 lessee for 40 years in 1694 of the cottage – now Mulberry Cottage on Crown Road] & John Wakelin [Acc 2279 C Wakelin was landlord of King & Queen in 1754; Acc 966 Wakelins lived in the house in Farm Close Lane from 1702 until 1787 now number 6] of Wheatley, overseers...

PAR286/13/4/D/3 - Lease for 12 years, 23/Apr/1747<sup>3</sup>

Parties: 1. John Sheldon [many Sheldon references but maybe not this man specifically] of Wheatley, chapelwarden, & Thomas Sheldon [Acc 1831, grocer] & John Richmond of Wheatley, overseers..

PAR286/13/4/D/4 - Lease for 12 years, 08/Apr/1763<sup>4</sup>

Parties: 1. Robert Juggins [Acc 1007 lessee of Mulberry Court and 60 acres in 1763] of Wheatley, chapelwarden, & Thomas Davis [Acc 311 licensee of Kings Arms 1779-1784?] & Edmund Joanes of Wheatley, overseers

26<sup>th</sup> Feb 1771 Ben Butcher, late servant of Thos. Wastie, Cowley eloped from Wheatley, where he and wife Ann had been moved by order of Tetsworth Parish.<sup>5</sup> He left her chargeable assets to Wheatley Parish. Reward for recapture was offered by John Chapman, churchwarden; Thos. Davis & Edw. Soames, overseers.

In November 1789 Thomas Ray was assessed for Poor Rate on Rent of £6/6/-.<sup>6</sup>

In 1782 Gilbert's Act authorized parishes to unite and set up a common workhouse controlled by a board of governors appointed by JPs. The able-bodied poor were to be dealt with outside

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<sup>1</sup> WVA, acc 1536.

<sup>2</sup> Oxfordshire History Centre

<sup>3</sup> Oxfordshire History Centre

<sup>4</sup> Oxfordshire History Centre

<sup>5</sup> WVA, acc 1831.

<sup>6</sup> WVA, acc 1754.

of the workhouse e.g. by providing them with work and supplementing wages. These workhouses were often just ordinary local houses rented for the purpose although some purpose-built ones existed. (In Oxford there was one at Bridewell – just outside the Northgate. There was a small Wheatley/Cuddesdon workhouse at Littleworth (location unknown). After 1834, Wheatley was in the Headington Poor Law Union, with the Union workhouse being built along what is now the London Road in Headington.<sup>7</sup>

In 1789 November. Wm. Harford was assessed for Poor Rate on rent of £3. In 1791 November, William Harford was an Overseer of the Poor of the Parish'.<sup>8</sup>

In 1791 William Tombs had fallen on bad times, for he was granted 2/- a week from the Poor Rate and was buried in the next year by the parish for the sum of £1.4s. 3d.<sup>9</sup> In 1831, the family of John Tombs complained in vain to the vestry that their allowance from the Parish was inadequate – a loaf and 3d per head.

In 18C, the poor levy grew rapidly, and by the start of 19C had increased tenfold. The levy was expressed as x shillings per £ rent and, in some places this rose to £1 or even more per £ rent (forerunner of rateable value?), leading to bankruptcy. National expenditure rose from £2m in 1776 to £8m in 1813, by which time one-third of the population were in poverty. In 1830, the poor rate accounted for 20% of all national expenditure.

The total expenditure on the poor of Wheatley in 1776 was £143 12s. 2d.; the average for the years 1783–5 £218 16s. 6d.; while in 1803 it was £386 5s. 6d. with an average rate of 7s. in the £, a shilling higher than the next highest rate in the hundred.<sup>10</sup> Fourteen persons were relieved in the workhouse at Littleworth and 17 outside, while as many as 40 persons received casual relief. The total expenditure on the poor in 1776 was £143 12s. 2d.; the average for the years 1783–5 £218 16s. 6d.; while in 1803 it was £386 5s. 6d. with an average rate of 7s. in the £, a shilling higher than the next highest rate in the hundred.

At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> C farmhands were transformed into casual labourers with no guarantee of work and hiring for less than a year meant the unemployed could not claim on the Poor Rates.<sup>11</sup> Wheatley/Cuddesdon workhouse (Littleworth) was small but unemployment in a growing population meant no parish could afford its poor. 71 people in Wheatley received various reliefs in 1832 alone. In 1832 Wheatley Chapelry farmed out [privatised] its poor and their dole was cut. (see Acc 1536). They had to prove they had applied for jobs. Itinerant workers were banned from taking local jobs. Anyone with a gun or dog was excluded from receiving relief. Attitudes hardened leading to the order by Wheatley overseers for the construction of the lockup in 1834 which coincided with the Poor Law Act of 1834.

The system had many difficulties such as:

1. Defining limits of entitlement
2. How to restrict relief to those who deserved it (déjà vu!)
3. The local overseers might be generous and/or inefficient

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<sup>7</sup> There are four references to the Wheatley workhouse in W.O. Hassall, *Wheatley Records; 956-1956*, (Oxfordshire Record Office, 1956) on pages 86 and 88.

<sup>8</sup> WVA, acc 298.

<sup>9</sup> WVA, acc 160.

<sup>10</sup> Taken from Victoria County History which is quote in full in an attachment to WVA, acc 1536.

<sup>11</sup> WVA, acc 680.

Villages which only had cottage industries or little means of employment other than agriculture were more prone to having a lot of poor.

By 1829 the more complex problems of poor-law administration, such as the scale of relief, eligibility, or methods of dealing with pauperism which had so 'greatly accumulated in recent years', were dealt with by the select vestry.<sup>12</sup> In 1830 an assistant overseer was appointed at a salary of 18s. a week; he was also responsible for the workhouse, where the cost of maintenance was 3s. a week, any additional earnings by the poor being paid to the workhouse master. The poor were employed by the parish and received a loaf and 3d. a day, which compared favourably with 10d. paid ten years previously; and the vestry considered the poor 'better off now than at any time during the last 20 years'. There was, however, so much unrest that mounted and foot constables were organized. In 1831 a meeting considered means of lowering the very high poor-rates, and in 1832 it was agreed that the poor should be farmed for a year to a contractor who would be responsible for clothing, lodging, maintaining, and burying them, and would undertake to repair the turnpike road with parish labour. It was estimated that the necessary repairs would cost £150, and a man was employed at 2s. 6d. a day to supervise the workers. In 1833 a labour rate was adopted, by which every ratepayer assessed at over £5 paid 1s. 6d. to help provide employment. But after the passing of the Poor Law Amendment Act in 1834 plans were drawn up at the end of the year to reduce allowances and induce men to be independent. In 1835 only £5 6s. 9d. weekly were paid for the support of 8 widows, 5 widowers, 6 old couples, 4 impotent persons, 5 children, and 6 families

It was a nationwide problem and the introduction of the threshing machine exacerbated the problem as, prior to this, corn had been harvested on its stalk and stored in sheaths for threshing when needed. This led to the Swing riots of 1830. Between 1815 and 1830 the poor rates were cut and people were discouraged from asking for relief leading to a rise in the local crime rate. Wheatley, with the remnant of its stone business, a brick industry and being on the coaching routes may have fared better than some communities although the Oxfordshire hierarchy shows that Wheatley had sunk in the league table by 1835.<sup>13</sup>

There are few references to the Poor Rate in the Wheatley Archive and at the Oxford History Centre: The two references to a Poor Rate appeal provide no useful information.<sup>14</sup> It is not known where the following records were found.

#### THE VESTRY (1830 – 1831)

The parish people who met together to make decisions about parish affairs were called 'The Vestry'. They appointed 'Overseers of the Poor', 'Constables', and 'Surveyors of the Highways', or they named men from whom 'Justices of the Peace' made a choice. They decided when the inhabitants and occupiers of the lands should pay 'Church Rate' & 'Poor Rate', and how much that rate should be.

These are extracts from the minutes recorded in the Vestry Book (now in the Bodleian Library in Oxford) in 1831. These extracts concern claims for extra allowances by the poor

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<sup>12</sup> Taken from Victoria County History which is quote in full in an attachment to WVA, acc 1536.

<sup>13</sup> Kate Tiller and Giles Darkes, *An Historical Atlas of Oxfordshire*. [Acc 2466 - not on public website, on shelf in WVA].

<sup>14</sup> Both from 1833, these are QS1833/2/A8/28 and QS1833/1/A6/7.

and, probably due to the unrest caused by the Otmoor Riots, the appointment of seven divisions of 'Special Constables', six on foot and one mounted.

Altogether there were sixty six men.

#### Vestry Meeting (November 22nd 1830)

At a vestry held at the Crown Inn on Monday 22nd November. Joseph Cooper in the Chair: Robert Mortimer complains and says his allowance of 5 pence a week for himself and his daughter is not sufficient. The vestry will not agree to allow more saying that 'he and his daughter have their option of going into the workhouse'.

The complaint of William Hawes for more money is rejected 'he having 3 shillings 6 pence per week – the same as other men.'

It is agreed to allow Morris's wife a pair of sheets.

Widow Broadway – it is agreed not to allow anything – her earnings being considered sufficient – or she may come into the workhouse.

Joseph Cooper.

#### Vestry Meeting (November 30th 1830)

At a vestry held at the Crown Inn on Tuesday 30th November in the purpose of considering certain charges brought against Mr Williams the assistant overseer by Joseph Ares and Shillingworth and also for the purpose of organising the constabulary force especially to the recommendation of Mr Ashurst and Mr Henley. After hearing the evidence in support of the said charges, it was resolved to postpone the further consideration of them and the adoption of any measure in consequence of them in a future vestry. At the same time it was carried that Mr William Juggins be appointed superintendent of the mounted special constables and that Lang....be superintendent of 'the Foot'. The special constables who are to serve on foot were at the same time formed into the following divisions: (the superintendents of each division being denoted by the asterisks opposite to their names).

### **1845 SURVEY AND VALUATION**

The 1845 survey and valuation of the parish of Wheatley for the purpose of making a poor rate is a complete record of ownership and occupation that year, and it was carried out by Edwards Lane Franklin of Ascott, Oxon, see WVA record 2525.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> 1845 PAR/286/5/E1/1.