

Pauper Fortunes in Oxfordshire, 1660-1760

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IN most of the Oxfordshire parishes under the Restoration poor laws the main burden upon the ratepayers was the local widows. These women and their children needed outdoor relief to supplement whatever they could earn from casual employment, from the lodging of parish orphans, from domestic services performed for neighbouring men of substance, and from work done for the workhouse if there were one. In several parishes whole families of perennially poor lived precariously near the bread-line, eking out subsistence upon the enforced charity of the community; a charity dispensed through the overseer and infrequently supplemented by the occasional gift. The returns from lands held by the parish, or from annuities upon capital bequests, were usually sufficient only to provide additional pensions at Christmas and Easter. There were orphans to rear and apprentice, poor families to aid in all the vagaries of sickness and unemployment, and the incapacitated to support. Beggars and vagrants, conners and tricksters, strolling players and the unlawfully settled also took much of the overseers' time, whilst there were journeys to be made to return men to their parish of origin, or to take paupers to a bridewell or Bedlam.

Surviving records after 1660 permit a fuller understanding and demonstrate a more comprehensive system of relief than the scanty materials for earlier periods will support.¹ Whilst the records are predominantly administrative in purpose, they contain entries which afford insights into the careers and personalities of individual poor people,² and when augmented by the fuller accounts of the overseers and churchwardens they provide information on the details of parochial care and dispute.³

At a time when the gentlemen in London applied themselves to endless debate and pamphleteering, seeking palliatives for their purses and panaceas for their consciences,⁴ the dull routines of the Oxfordshire overseers were punctuated only by panic in the larger vestries at the endless upward movement of the rates.⁵ Then would come schemes and political manoeuvres, then would come the predictable conflict between the expedient morality of charity, and the interests

¹ This short survey of Oxford concern is based upon study of papers relating to twenty-five Oxfordshire parishes, including seven city parishes.

² Many parishes leave us settlement certificates, apprentice indentures, bastardy and lunacy certificates, removal orders, lawyers' letters and Vestry minutes.

³ Most parishes have a series of overseers' accounts for at least half of the period 1660-1760, and most have considerably better than this minimum. Churchwardens' accounts sometimes add comments on parish meetings, and show the level of Churchwarden charity.

⁴ The best treatment of the London debates remains that of S. & B. Webb, *English Local Government: English Poor Law History, Part I* (London, 1927), p. 101, and pp. 221-2. Sir F. M. Eden, *The State of the Poor* (London, 1797), is of general use.

⁵ As at Mapledurham, MS. D.D. Par. Mapledurham b 3 f. 43 v.; St. Ebbes, Oxford, MS. D.D. Par. Oxf. b 8 (no folio numbers; see 1737, 1740, 1741 entries); and at St. Peter-le-Bailey, Oxford, MS. D.D. Par. Oxf. St. Peter-le-Bailey b. 13 f. 116, f. 117 (1722) f. 118, f. 119, f. 120 (1727-8). All references are to parish register deposits in the Bodleian, unless otherwise stated.

of the oppressed and mulcted. In the country hamlets regulation proceeded in a much quieter way, with the usual disbursement of small sums to the few in need of aid.

The problem that faced the overseers was the mundane one of preserving some level of social well-being amongst the small communities under their tutelage. Tax-payers were made to contribute towards the pensions, clothing, food, rent, light, heat, and the necessary extras which their poorer neighbours required. Only the wholly unemployed, the widow, or the elderly, received direct monetary relief; many others were more likely to be helped with grants in kind.

Sickness was perhaps the greatest hazard for the working poor. When a man like John Yvats fell ill at Newington his overseer arranged for Sarah Fuller to be employed in looking after him.⁶ Two doctors were consulted at the parish expense,⁷ and food, lighting and heating were supplied to the house of the invalid. He was provided with a diet of mutton, bread, sugar, treacle, milk, carrots, oatmeal, and beer, and cost the parish some £2 10s. *od.* for the duration of his trouble. Conversely, when a wandering woman fell ill of the smallpox in Oxford, she was promptly carried over the boundary by St. Clement's parish, where she died quickly from the disease and this disruption. The parishes began a long dispute over the costs of her funeral, which St. Peter's had been forced to provide in the interests of civic hygiene.⁸

These cases illustrate the difference of the fortune of a man settled in his small parish where he was well known, and of a woman of no such fixed abode who crept into an urban parish suffering from high rates and vagrancy. It is well known that parishes were especially keen to remove pregnant women, and this is reiterated in city accounts when parishes like St. Mary Magdalen spend 2s. on a warrant, and give the woman concerned a small sum to be rid of her.⁹

Sickness could be precipitated by epidemics, as it was with the smallpox contagion in the 1680s, or it could be no more than the havoc wrought by a bad winter combined with high food prices and unemployment. A severe winter such as that of 1740-1 increased poor rates throughout the county in response to the growing numbers of sick, unemployed, and needy.¹⁰ A woman like Rachael Ives had been working as a washerwoman to the workhouse in St. Mary Magdalen parish in Oxford, and had been regularly paid for these functions from the public purse. In 1740 she fell ill, with many others, left her job, and was nursed under the guidance of the parish officers.¹¹ The Doctor was called in to bleed her on several occasions, but to no avail, for she died in 1742 never having recovered, and was buried at the parish expense.

Medical attention and other provisions were also needed for a poor woman

⁶ MS. D.D. Par. Newington, c. 1 (no folio numbers).

⁷ *Ibid.*, where reference to the bills of Drs. Harms and Brock may be found.

⁸ MS. D.D. Par. Oxf. St. Peter-le-Bailey, b. 15, f. 62 r. (1740).

⁹ MS. D.D. Par. Oxf. St. Mary Magdalen, c. 40 entry for 1736 (no folio numbers).

¹⁰ In all the sampled parishes rates rose notably during that winter. T. H. Ashton, *Economic Fluctuations in England, 1700-1800* (Oxford, 1959), gives impressions of the national effects of these months.

¹¹ MS. D.D. Par. Oxf. St. Mary Magdalen, c. 41 (no folio numbers).

about to give birth to another child. At Noke a meticulous overseer noted the details of Mary Walker's lying-in. She had been receiving a regular pension of some three shillings a week as her means of livelihood. When she began her labour the overseer had to arrange the hire of horses to go and fetch the midwife, and had to supervise the acquisition of beer, bread, firewood and candles for the time of her crying out, and again for the baptism. The grocer was requested to send sugar, nutmeg, and other goods for the christening party; John King's wife was hired to entertain the guests and to serve beer.¹² The eight pence Mrs. King thus earned was useful, for her husband was supporting the family on a parish pension.¹³

John King was one of a number of men unemployed for long periods. Whilst the prevalence of the rural widow is a comprehensible feature of contemporary society, the reasons for the prolonged difficulties of the Deane family in Crowell¹⁴ or for the troubles of King at Noke are less easy to explain. If a man were lame or blind or otherwise incapacitated, the records usually say so. It may be that the few cases of men unemployed for long periods represent merely a set of exceptions to this unwritten rule of record keeping; or it may be that there was genuinely no employment available for them other than odd jobs for the parish, and unlike so many they decided not to trust to the vagaries of movement.

The extent to which small parishes supported one or two people as their major relief effort should not be forgotten. In Crowell the widow East was the principle cause of expenditure for forty years, and in years like 1695 and 1696 all the rate revenue was going to her.¹⁵ In a year like 1693 she would receive £5 out of a total of £6.¹⁶ In such a small hamlet the purchase of clothes for Robert Webb in 1732 and again in 1734 could be a major burden.¹⁷ At Hempton in Deddington widows Cox and Hartin were the main recipients in the 1740s,¹⁸ and at Noke Mary Pettifer, Anne Johnson, and Martha Boworman received three-quarters of the parish's attention in 1735.¹⁹ Anne Johnson and widow Pettifer had been maintained by the parish since the 1720s, and widow Pettifer continued on the books into the 1740s. At Taynton the Asletts, the Baileesses, the Belchers and the Elsworths were congenitally unable to pay their way for decades.²⁰ These were the typical long term needy of Oxfordshire. Most of the revenue collected by the overseers was paid to these people; the costs of administration and litigation so often lamented were rarely more than 5 per cent of the total, and in most parishes considerably less. Such a proportion remains true on a

¹² MS. D.D. Par. Noke, b. 2, f. 99.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ MS. D.D. Par. Crowell d. 1.

¹⁵ MSS. D.D. Par. Crowell d. 1 and e. 1. For 1695 see e. 1, f. 18 v. and for 1696 see e. 1, f. 20 r.

¹⁶ MS. D.D. Par. Crowell, e. 1, f. 19 r.

¹⁷ MS. D.D. Par. Crowell, d. 1, f. 44 r., f. 45 v., and f. 46 r.

¹⁸ MS. D.D. Par. Deddington, b. 17, f. 1 ff.

¹⁹ MS. D.D. Par. Noke, b. 2, f. 34 v. and f. 35 r. For e.g. 1728, references to Pettifer and Johnson, f. 6 v. and for 1743 f. 74 v.

²⁰ MS. D.D. Par. Taynton, c. 1.

national level in 1787, when 4.2 per cent of the total income was taken up in legal and administrative costs.²¹

There were many families just capable of supporting themselves in ordinary times, who turned to the parish when they were forced to make extraordinary disbursements from their family accounts. The parish would perhaps pay for a funeral or provide them with clothing, as it would help in sickness, and contribute towards the apprenticing of a child.

Apprenticeship was an expensive item for any poor person. St. Ebbes paid £6 1s. 6d. in 1756 for apprenticing Brabourne's boy, and this was not unusual.²² Throughout the period under review the Oxford parishes were plagued with petitions for more relief, people seeking more in their pensions, and needing additional gifts in kind. St. Cross had to find over £11 for one indenture in 1715 for young Kirkham,²³ whilst clothes, legal costs, warrants, tax relief, rents and workhouse supplies were always increasing in scale or price. For example, the payment of rents alone to a total of some £7 9s. od. at St. Ebbes in 1698, combined with high sessions charges, a funeral, and the loan of small sums of money to the poor in particular distress, all conspired to augment the rates again.²⁴

From the polemical days of 1744, when *An Account of the abuses open to overseers of the poor* was published in London, to contemporary debates over the well-being of the underprivileged in Augustan England, overseers have more often been seen as mean dealers swindling their way through their offices, than they have been praised for their administrative equity. It is true that some overseers indulged in speculation, and the larger the parish the more possibility there was for such a lack of probity. Reading their patient records, however, it is possible to deduce that some of them genuinely attempted to reconcile the tasks of their offices with their own businesses, and that they unflinchingly recorded weekly and daily entries as they sought to perpetuate the system they inherited. They had to attend vestry meetings, compile their accounts, carry out Justices' orders, supervise the acquisition and distribution of goods, tax the locality, listen to the grumbles of all that they had been unfairly taxed and needed some remission, distribute pensions, and distinguish the needy from the indigent, the deserving from the indolent. In addition they could well have functions imposed upon them not directly connected with the poor laws, like the supervision of street lighting.

It could be no easy task to check on everyone petitioning for relief in an overburdened city parish, and to ensure that their settlement credentials were as impeccably established as their need. Nor is it easy to condemn an overseer who stopped for an extra drink on the highway to London over a settlement dispute, or when he embezzled a little by exaggerating his expenses, when he

²¹ *An Abstract of Returns made to Parliament concerning the Poor* (London, 1787).

²² MS. D.D. Par. Oxf. St. Ebbes, b. 9 (no folio numbers). Similarly in 1696 the indenture for Joanna Crosse cost £14 over ten years, MS. D.D. Par. Oxf. St. Ebbes, b. 7. Cf. MS. D.D. Par. Oxf. St. Mary the Virgin, b. 5, f. 103.

²³ MS. D.D. Par. Oxf. St. Cross, b. 13, f. 144 r.

²⁴ MS. D.D. Par. Oxf. St. Ebbes, b. 6 (no folio numbers).

saw the much larger sums the tradesmen and contractors were making out of the poor account.

The overseers who were dishonest stood the risk of being brought to task for their excesses. At Mapledurham a conscientious audit discovered peculation by the overseer. The vicar on behalf of his rate-paying congregation expressed the wish that this should not be repeated, writing a note to the same effect in the parish records. Mapledurham was not to allow alehouse reckonings for its officers; and in a small community it was difficult to disguise such activities.²⁵ Nor were the overseers of St. Ebbes who pillaged £10 from the parish in 1740-1, permitted to escape with this money, for their successors were enjoined to balance the accounts, and urged thereby to prosecute their predecessors.²⁶ Despite such checks corruption did continue, however much auditors, rectors and rate-payers strove to analyse every item of cost. But entries like that at St. Peter's which charged £1 9s. od. for expenses at the Constable's house for the detention of a vagrant for one night and two days, expenses mainly concerned with the purchase of ale and other essentials, were exceptional even for that parish where extravagance was greater than elsewhere.²⁷ Only here did the overseers seem to write their way through numerous pens and sheets of paper, and only here did the overseer's book, carefully listed as being of Act of Parliament quality, manage to cost 17s., some 13s. more than the average. By 1762 their sins had caught up with them, for a vestry minute records the decision that overseers should no longer be exempt from rates.²⁸

Litigation when it did occur was usually with another parish of the same county, or with contiguous counties, and was nearly always a settlement dispute.²⁹ Few small rural parishes ever indulged, but a place as large as Stanton St. John felt it advisable to spend £13 12s. od. on ridding itself of Sam Stevens.³⁰ If too much litigation were indulged in, the overseer could expect trouble from the rate-payers, and it might prove a self-defeating exercise in parsimony. In 1719 the harassed overseer of Mapledurham had great trouble trying to collect money following the declaration of the rate-payers that they would grant no more. The overseer tried obtaining sanctions against the rebels from the vestry, but in the end was forced to concede in some cases and write them off as bad debts. The villagers had decided that £90 a year was too much, and direct action was necessary to prevent the inflation of demands.³¹

Only the city parishes regularly fought in the courts, often against one another, and this was but one device which they all used to keep down costs. Another expedient was the contractor scheme tried by St. Peter-le-Bailey in 1722, when they agreed to pay Mr. Horlocke £37 10s. od. in quarterly instalments

²⁵ MS. D.D. Par. Mapledurham, b. 3, *The Poor Book of Mapledurham*, f. 56.

²⁶ MS. D.D. Par. Oxf. St. Ebbes, b. 8 (no folio numbers).

²⁷ MS. D.D. Par. Oxf. St. Peter-in-the-East, b. 28, f. 134 r.

²⁸ MS. D.D. Par. Oxf. St. Peter-in-the-East, b. 29 (1762), inside front cover.

²⁹ Taynton for example has twelve extant settlement certificates to 1768 which show legal movement was predominantly from within the county (6) or from Gloucestershire (3). Other parishes afford several more, but never sufficient to warrant statistical argument.

³⁰ MS. D.D. Par. Stanton St. John (no folio numbers), 1765, Casual disbursements.

³¹ MS. D.D. Par. Mapledurham, b. 3, f. 43 v.

towards his expense in buying a stock of materials to put the poor of the parish on work. The proviso was that Horlocke would only receive this sum if taxes for poor relief did not rise to more than £28 2s. 6d. above his quarterly expenditure. The project failed to limit rates to £150 a year as planned, and it was a sign of the discontent following the high rates of 1721.³²

In 1728 a less ambitious palliative was tried after the disastrous rates of 1727. The overseers were offered 2s. 6d. for each certificate of removal they could obtain for a pauper of the parish.³³ St. Mary Magdalen had operated such a scheme for several years, and a payment of 1s. 1d. to Mr. Woods for moving 'a great bellied woman' betrays the tragedy of a mother without legal settlement, and the tangible approbation which fell to Mr. Woods.³⁴

By 1730 the workhouse schemes had succeeded in reducing the alarming levels of taxation in Oxford in the 1720s, and the rates were not to rise so high again until the bad winter of 1740-41. During the 1740s there was a return to more frequent payments of outdoor relief.³⁵

Certain personal problems were always before the overseer from his humble charges. Amy Holmes was a regular pensioner in St. Clement's, and had to write to her official:

' Mr. Overseer

I have been very ille this 3 weeks not abel to do any thinge of work so am not abel to wait upon you my pay being behind 8 weeks it is very hard upon me so I beg of you gentlemen to consider this my condishon and send the mony by the carer or I must make my complaint to be sent with my children to you so I beg of you not to fail in this my nessicity who am your afflicted servant Amy Homes³⁶

The position of the St. Mary Magdalen overseer for 1718 was less enviable, for he was the subject of a legal wrangle following one of the local brawls. The parish agreed to support him with the following statement:

' We whose names are hereto sett do promise to indempnify Charles Rushton from all costs & damages he may sustain on account of an accion lately brought against him by the widdow Annison for a Battery & assault on her we being satisfied he did no more against her than what he was obliged to do in the execution of his office of an overseer of the poor of our parish . . .³⁷

The poor law administration drew both its greatest strength and its greatest weakness from its parochial nature. In the tradition of Hay and Tucker³⁸

³² MS. D.D. Par. Oxf. St. Peter-le-Bailey, b. 13, f. 116, f. 117.

³³ *Ibid.*, fs. 118-20.

³⁴ MS. D.D. Par. Oxf. St. Mary Magdalen, b. 57 (no folio numbers), entry for 1693. The parish was especially pleased as sickness was rife.

³⁵ Based upon analysis of records for St. Clement's, St. Cross, St. Ebbes, St. Giles, St. Mary Magdalen, St. Peter-le-Bailey, and St. Peter-in-the-East.

³⁶ MS. D.D. Par. Oxf. St. Clement's, b. 5, f. 7 (attached to folio 8).

³⁷ MS. D.D. Par. Oxf. St. Mary Magdalen, b. 70, Jan. 1718.

³⁸ Tucker, *Causes for the increase of the poor* (London, 1760). Hay led the Parliamentary campaign for larger units of administration in 1735.

critics have ventured that small parish units bred too much litigation, and failed to provide the professional skills needed in a humane and rigorous direction of social relief. Against this must be set the record of rural parishes, which were not so litigious as their Oxford city neighbours, and were probably better able to regulate their own affairs. Local knowledge and even genuine concern about the misfortunes of neighbours must have expedited the system. The city parishes were less well favoured, for they were larger, and size brought greater opportunities to peculate, as it brought more work for harassed overseers. It brought a larger vagrancy problem, and a scale of operation which is notable for the difficulty created by virtue of the units being too large. Small parishes along the London road had more sympathy for the problem of the wandering poor, for they experienced it to a greater extent than secluded villages and hamlets.

Contemporaries were most concerned about their rates, and perhaps also concerned that their less fortunate neighbours, often affected by forces beyond their control, should be looked after; provided they were well-established residents, friends of the rate-payers. Parishes struggled to provide subsistences for those stricken by ill health, family deaths, and unemployment, as well as attempting to redistribute small sums from the more prosperous to the less favourably placed. The solutions they sought had to be parochial; they needed local knowledge of the personal tragedies inherent in the vicissitudes of economic life. National organization and a paid civil service to administer a universal system was scarcely thought of, for it involved the destruction of cherished local liberties. Had such a policy been possible, it might have led to a less flexible regime, unable to pay for a new coat for an orphan when he needed it, unable to pay for the medical attention that Robert Webb required when he was bitten by a mad dog,³⁹ or unable to pay 12s. to Mr. Franklin to take a man to London to receive the Queen's touch.⁴⁰ Despite the groans of contemporaries, the system could even be humane for the legally settled, although the amateur organization of the city parishes often found more desperate remedies necessary to cope with an ever burgeoning poor problem. Above all it was the vagrancy question that no-one managed to solve, and this was most pressing in the city.

³⁹ MS. D.D. Par. Crowell, f. 45 r.

⁴⁰ MS. D.D. Par. St. Peter-in-the-East, f. 113 v. (1710).