

(poor)

THE POOR AND POOR RELIEF

[The following are pieces written by Alan Macfarlane in the early 1980's]

DOLES

Under this somewhat anachronistic title one could consider the nature of the aid that was given to the poor. Firstly one could consider the way in which the relief was channelled -through private charity of an immediate kind, through private charity setting up a charitable fund, through the poor rate etc. In fact, channel is the wrong word here, and indeed it might be that this subject would best be dealt with in a separate section. What it concerns is the origins of charity; it would discuss such things as the Jordan thesis that the Protestant Reformation led to an increase in private charitable donations. A careful analysis of the wills would help to see how far this was true. As 'state' charity increased, did private charity decrease? Were there particular funds set up for the poor and how effective were they?

More properly under this heading is the whole question of the nature of what was handed out. I assume that the help that was given was basically limited to four ways: food, jobs, housing, money. There might also be other smaller categories - for example medicine (anything else?). What proportion of the aid was given in each of these ways and, in detail, what was given? For example, with housing, how much accommodation was there over time in the 'town houses', in the workhouses and in county workhouses. Was there any system of outdoor relief to help with rents or to board out poor children or old people? In relation to food, what was given in what quantities, etc. Was this help seen as topping up a person's wages etc., or as a substitute for them? Was there a growth in one or more of these categories at the expense of the others? Of course, we are very hampered by the absence of poor records before the eighteenth century; can anything be said about the period before that?

POOR

This, as we know, is a vast subject and may have to be dealt with in a separate book or section. But it is clearly theoretically linked to regulation - providing as large a subject as the keeping of the peace, or regulation of the market. It would be possible to divide it up in a number of ways. Parts of it will already have been dealt with elsewhere. The raising of money and other items to pay to the poor will have been dealt with under revenue. The poor law officers, their function and deficiencies, will have been dealt with under office and under revenue. The actual proportion of the population in various wealth categories,

the number of poor etc., will have been dealt with under property. What we are concerned with here is the methods by which the various problems defined as 'poverty' were dealt with. Indeed the very changing perceptions of the problem of 'poverty' will need to be examined and the degree to which such problems were dealt with by private charity or through public regulation. One is thus looking at the social and governmental origins of the welfare system, or how the Old Poor Law was developed and worked in practice.

One possible way to divide up this working was to follow the contemporary classification in terms of the types of person who were in receipt of poor relief. At present one can distinguish various different categories: the disabled poor (temporary and permanent, through sickness etc.), the sturdy poor, the old poor, poor children, mothers of bastard children, prisoners. These categories of recipient were then intersected by another criterion which concerned the residence of the person in question and hence the parish's obligation. The four main categories were: Earls Colne persons living in EC, EC persons now living elsewhere, other village poor living in EC, vagrants and beggars.

The treatment of each case would further be affected by another important criterion, namely the perception of what seemed to be lacking/needed. The main resources available to those in charge were: access to jobs (through apprenticeship, through the workhouse), access to medicine (through fees etc.), access to food, access to housing, access to money. The way in which these three major criteria, as well as minor criteria such as the previous behaviour of the potential recipient, his family and background, what action he had taken to relieve himself, are of course legion. There is also the major resource which the parish officers controlled, the right of settlement, or rights to the support of the parish. We may look at these three types of category under the separate headings of 'recipients', 'settlement' and 'doles'.

RECIPIENTS

One of the most interesting aspects of the development of the poor administration is the way in which the poor were divided up and categorised. This reflected changes in what people conceived to be the causes of poverty and the responsibilities which they felt towards the victims of circumstances. The general legislation as well as the detailed treatment of each of the major categories needs to be spelt out. Here I will just divide out the major categories and write down off the top of my head distant memories of how they were treated. I will not follow in any detail the major distinction, especially important during this period, between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving', but it might

be worth investigating this further. Basically, the 'deserving' were those who appeared to have been attempting to manage, and then through accident etc. were crushed. The 'undeserving' were those who brought their poverty on their heads, so it was believed, through their own behaviour. But the boundaries shifted subtly as people were quite aware that, for example, even those willing to get jobs could not do so, and that children could not be blamed for their parent's behaviour.

DISABLED POOR

This category covers those who through no fault of their own were unable to manage. This might be a permanent disablement, such as blindness or lameness, or a temporary disablement like sickness. Usually it was the result of some affliction to the body, but it might also be disablement caused through loss of the means to a livelihood through no fault of one's own, principally through fire or flood. What provision was made for such people through our period? How far was it recognized to be the responsibility of the state and of the local community to look after such people - and how many of them were there? There must be something in Josselin as well as in our records about such things as blindness, insanity, losses by fire etc. and how these were dealt with. Also, presumably, in the poor law records, there is something about provision for the sick - food, medicine etc. Is there any evidence as to how effective this was and to what extent it was felt to be the responsibility of public officers and how far the private charity of individuals, especially the kin and near neighbours? There are six references in our data so far to 'blind' and it should be possible to look under other categories as well. Is there any evidence that the disabled became destitute and starved? Were they allowed to beg? There is some evidence about fire damage in church briefs. What we are basically dealing with is a pre-insurance, pre-welfare state society: its tolerance and humanity will partly be estimated in the way it deals with these problems.

OLD POOR

It is often argued that old age and poverty were more or less synonymous for a large part of the population in a pre-pension society. It should be possible to estimate how far this is true and to what extent the problem of 'poverty' is really a disguised problem of pensions. What was the age of those in receipt of poor relief, and what proportion of those below a certain threshold economically had to go onto poor relief. What was the usual (modal) age at which people went onto relief? Was there a system whereby the middling and young supported the old? Was there any basic difference between men and women in this respect - or between widows/widowers and unmarried persons? What kind of support did the old poor need and get. Unfortunately, we can only speak with any confidence about the last part of the long period -

one wonders, though, how the old were dealt with in the C15 and C16. Is there any evidence at all? Was it through private charity, the church(bedesmen etc.), through the manorial system(as some have argued). Did people tend to return to their native parish in old age in order to be near a source of relief?

YOUNG POOR

Almost as problematic as the old were the young, that is to say the young who through accident had become dependent on the parish. The major category here seems to have been those without a father - either because he had died (orphans) or because he was unknown (illegitimates). To have no father or mother, through abandonment or death, was even worse. It seems to have been assumed from a very early stage that the provision of some kind of livelihood for such persons was indeed the responsibility of the parish - and not of the wider kin. A consideration of this would take one into the whole question of apprenticeship indentures, bastardy orders for the maintenance of children, tuition bonds etc. I don't know whether the young poor were also given regular payments of cash or food, or had their lodging paid for. It should be possible to look at the poor records for the eighteenth century in order to see what were the age of the recipients - were any of them children and how were they dealt with? How much responsibility did kin, especially putative fathers, have? Did the young poor have to repay anything. What sorts of trades and occupations were they apprenticed to?

POOR MOTHERS

Related to the problem of poor children created by the absence of marriage, was the problem of their mothers, also placed in a predicament in the absence of a husband. How early was it formally stated that a man had the responsibility, even if not married, to maintain the woman by whom he had had a child? It would appear that from the very earliest times it had been a duty of midwives at the time of delivery of unmarried women to enquire for the name of the putative father, and from very early on we have the investigations concerning bastardy. By the end of the sixteenth century, if not before, the woman was to be punished - but also, it would seem, to be supported, by being put in a house of correction. The exact treatment of such women, and the situations in which they were treated in such a way can be investigated. For example, the word 'bastardy' appears about 70 times in our data so far, and it would be possible to see how often some form of maintenance order was enforced - how much was raised, how it was paid etc.

PRISONERS

A category of person who posed a problem of a kind which is concealed in our society were 'poor prisoners'. Prisons tended to be run as institutions which had to make themselves pay - and even though one might not have asked to enter such an expensive hotel voluntarily, this did not prevent warders and gaolers from extracting payments for food and lodging. Since many of the prisons were also filled with debtors, people waiting trials for non-criminal offences etc., they did not necessarily have the connotations they have today. Such people, especially men, were unable to earn a living and could therefore fall upon the charity of their neighbours. Were there any such cases in Earls Colne, one wonders? Looking under the word 'prisoner' in our present word-list gives some 27 references(including 'prison'). It would be interesting to look at these - and any graphic accounts of the poverty it caused, as in the case of Robert Partridge, Rose's husband. Are there any reflections of this in the poor accounts?

STURDY POOR

The term 'sturdy' was a contemporary one and is used to cover the residue - that is all the people who were 'poor' but for whom there was no obvious reason for their inability to survive. In the absence of disability, age, imprisonment etc. contemporaries were often mystified that people should still be poor; as today there were fierce battles between those who blamed it on the attitude of the individual(lazy, thriftless, etc.) and those who placed the reason in wider reasons beyond the control of the individual - a slump in the economy, unemployment caused by technological change, the movement of prices, the cost of a large family etc.

It was early realized, probably well before the official realization in the savage statutes of the early sixteenth century, that there were structural reasons for poverty which meant that perfectly fit adults of both sexes were often unable to manage. It was no use just whipping them and telling them to get on with the job - the jobs did not exist or paid too little to support them. There thus arose that system whose vast consequences we see around us in the dole queues, supplementary benefit etc. etc. It should be possible to see how far this group grew, whether the problem was particularly great in certain years, who the people were, what they received etc. This is the heart of the matter. Accidental poverty, or poverty caused by youth and age, is to be found in all societies and is, in the end, something which people could accept. It was the growth - if there was a growth - of perennial poverty of willing workers which was the great problem. There are some who would argue that the

creation of such a group was an absolute pre-requisite for industrialization - for it would supplement the wage earners in producing the industrial proletariat. But no-one has really studied in great detail its creation and the ways in which contemporaries tried to deal with it. There is a good deal on the general level about how things like prices, population, enclosure etc. caused the problem, but the working out of these general pressures at the local level deserves investigation.

SETTLEMENT LAWS

The treatment of those classified as 'poor' would depend on the responsibility felt for them by the villagers. These responsibilities were fairly clearly laid down in the continuing legislation about settlement which will need to be summarized. An examination of the settlement and removal information needs to be undertaken to see how this worked in practice. Were there disputes over settlement with other parishes and how were these resolved? The word 'settlement' occurs some 111 times in our data so far - so there is obviously a great deal here. We need an analysis of the differential treatment of the poor according to whether they were: Earls Colne persons living in Earls Colne, Earls Colne persons living in other parishes (how were they aided?); people having settlement elsewhere but living in Earls Colne; those who were classified as 'vagrants', that is temporary wandering poor persons with no obvious settlement. How large a problem was the last group? And how were they dealt with - whipped and sent on their way or what? And what sign is there of kin responsibility?

It may well appear that one of the very striking features of the system was the acceptance of responsibility on the part of unconnected strangers - i.e. fellow villagers - rather than kin. In most societies it would be the kin who would sustain the poor. Here, already, there is a sense of generalized obligation. How early do we detect this?