

# *Barnet & District Local History Society*

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## **THE TREATMENT OF THE POOR** In Chipping Barnet in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries



VAGRANTS IN THE CASUAL WARD OF A WORKHOUSE

Parish documents provide much interesting material about the treatment of the poor. The records examined here are the Accounts of the Overseers of the Poor, 1720-44; the Churchwardens' Accounts Book, 1656-1760, and the Vestry Minute Book, 1765-75. These cover roughly the period between the Settlement Act of 1662 and Gilbert's Act of 1782, a period characterised by intense parochialism.

The Poor Law Act of 1601, which remained the foundation of Poor Law administration for more than two centuries, established the principle of public responsibility, and laid down that each parish must care for its own poor. Under the Act Overseers were to be appointed to provide for all those "having no means to maintain them." The Overseers were to raise the requisite funds by

a compulsory rate levied "weekly or otherwise" upon every inhabitant and every occupier of lands in the said parish "under pain of distraint or imprisonment." The poor were grouped as able-bodied, children and impotent. For the first, work was to be provided, for the second, work or apprenticeship was suggested, while impotent the Overseers were empowered to erect upon the common or waste land convenient places of dwelling.

The Settlement Act of 1662 supplemented the 1601 Act by providing that any stranger settling in a parish could be removed by the Justices unless he rented a tenement for £10 yearly, or found security to discharge his adopted parish of any expenses on his behalf. When a stranger only expected to stay for a short period, as at harvest time, he had to bring a certificate from his own parish agreeing to take him back. The effect of the Act was to render artisan labour more immobile, and to stress the importance of the parish as an administrative unit. The parish official became an important personage whose power could only be checked by an appeal to the Justices at the Quarter Sessions. There were many disadvantages in this local control, and Gilbert's Act of 1782 attempted to abolish these. This Act also sought to break down the parochial system for the poor based on the Vestry and partially succeeded; it was left to the 1834 Act to deal the deathblow.

Throughout the period covered by the above legislation, the church Vestry was the organ of local government. By the early seventeenth century this Vestry consisted of the incumbent and ten to twelve of the most important men in the parish, who met at least once a month. Other parishioners were not debarred from attending and H.C.Stephens in **Parochial Self-Government** states, "There is ample evidence that it was the custom for the parishioners to join the churchwardens and overseers in their deliberations, and that the purpose of the framers of the Poor Law Act in requiring the parish officers to meet in a public place, the parish church, was secured." In the case of Chipping Barnet, although the election of officers took place in the church, regular meetings were held in a room chosen by the Vestry. The first notice of these meetings appears in the Chipping Barnet Churchwardens' Book.

"At a vestrie meeting upon the 19th of October in the year of Our Lord 1657 it was agreed upon by the inhabitants of this parish to have a meeting every month, and did appoint

the first Tuesday in every month to meet about eleven of the clock in the morning, and if any man of this parish whose name is hereunder subscribed shall absent himself from the said meeting, except he shall have a lawfull and good occasion for his absence, shall first fault forfeit sixpence, and for the second fault twelve pence and if he continue, for every default twelve pence until further order."

The exact composition of the Vestry is shown by the following :-

At a meeting holden the thirteenth day of April was chosen officers as follows :- Nathaniel Dowdall and Henry Lepage (churchwardens), Robert Penistone and James Burgess (overseers of the poor), Richard Newman, John Norris, Jr., and Thomas Taylor (constables), Mr Roberts and James Judas (surveyors of the highways), John Wilkins and Michael Allison (headboroughs), and Daniel Gregorie and George Branche (aletasters)".

All the parish officers with the exception of the parish clerk were unpaid. The duties took up much time, and often at the end of a term of office the holder found himself out of pocket, so the work was sometimes done unwillingly. There is no case, however, in the Chipping Barnet records, of a parishioner buying himself out of office. The officers were appointed at Easter for a year, but each churchwarden and overseer served for only half that time. The two churchwardens were at first elected by the parish, but by the eighteenth century one was being chosen by the incumbent. The overseers of the poor and the constables were only nominated by the parish, and did not take office until their nomination had been approved by the Justices of the Peace at the Quarter Sessions. The two overseers were originally subordinate to the churchwardens, who among their other duties had the supervision of the care of the poor, but the overseers gradually assumed full responsibility. They were aided by the constables and their subordinates, the headboroughs, whose duty was to keep the peace, escort vagrants to the parish boundaries, and generally assist the overseers in a minor capacity. The Vestry as a whole kept a tight hold over all moneys :-

By a vestrie held 20th April, 1708, That no churchwarden

shall lay out above forty shillings for repairing and mending anything about ye church or parish without ye consent of a Vestry, and ye overseers shall spend no money at their monthly account, only ten shillings at ye sealing a rate and ye churchwardens for ye future shall spend no more than three shillings and sixpence beside fees to ye Archdeacon."

There was evidently to be no excessive merrymaking at the expense of the parish!

The Poor Rate was based upon an estimated rent. This rate was levied in Chipping Barnet in September and was, if necessary, reviewed in March and a second rate called for. The procedure at the formal rate settlement can be deduced from the Overseers' Accounts of 1721 :-

"Paid at the ordering of the rate, 2s

The Justices for signing the rate, 2s

The parchment for the rate, 1s.8d.

At the signing of the rate allowed to be spent by the order of the Vestry, 10s."

In 1709 a rate of 6<sup>1</sup>/<sub>d</sub>. in the pound raised £56 10s.5d., and in 1769 a 6d. rate brought in £75 7s. 5d. The population at this time, as estimated from the burial registers, was roughly 1,000. Funds for the poor were also derived from endowments and charities, some of which were earmarked for clothing and apprenticeship indentures. Fines were also frequently devoted to the poor and in this respect the following is interesting:-

"Received of John Richardson, Esq., one of His Majesty's Justices of the Peace, Jan. 31, 1682, the sum of Eight Pounds one shilling and tenpence being forfeited by several persons for suffering conventicles and unlawful meetings in their houses and being present at the same. For the use of the poor £8 1s. 10d."

The overseers' expenditure was divided into regular payments and casual disbursements. In Chipping Barnet the majority of the very poor were old people, chiefly widows and spinsters, and these were boarded out, or lived in almshouses, until 1729, when the Old Blockhouse at the foot of Barnet hill was taken over for a workhouse. These old people received amounts of from one to three shillings weekly. In addition to these weekly payments, there

was a wide range of casual disbursements to them, and also to many other persons not wholly dependent on the parish. This casual assistance sometimes took the form of payment of rent or the repair of a cottage :-

"It was likewise agreed that the Officers of the Parish should pay the widow Hunt's rent for the time to come from the 29th September, 1658."

"Sarah Farthing shall be allowed for ye year coming twenty shillings towards paying of her house rent." (1708)

"Paid Richard Archer for mending ye house where Old Shingle is, 6s. 6 $\frac{1}{2}$ d

Bequests frequently took the form of rents, as the following entry shows :-

At the monthly meeting of the 4th Jan., 1658 it was agreed to give the gift of Mrs. Palmer to the Poor, being one year's rent, £2 13s. 4d."

Clothes were often given to the poor and there are frequent payments for the repair of shoes and clothing :-

"Gave Old Crow two pairs of draws, 4s. 6d." (1727)

"For two sheepskins for breeches and coats, 7s." (1709)

"17 $\frac{1}{2}$ d. yds. of cloth at 2s. 4d. a yard, £2 1s. 5d.

10 yds. of cloth at 2s. 6d. a yard, £1 5s. 0d.

Payd to Miles for making, 5s. 6d." (1666)

Sometimes gifts of money were used for the provision of coats :-

"Mr Henry Smith's gift due and payable, and to be distributed amongst the aged poor, infirm people and married persons having more children in lawful wedlock than their labours can maintain, for coates with badge on them, or for bread, flesh or fish, given in church, £20 per annum." (1691)

The badge referred to was the parish badge, usually worn at the bottom of the left sleeve, and intended to prevent the poor from going out of their own parish to beg. Many people did not like wearing this badge, which identified them as paupers, and in the

Hertfordshire Quarter Sessions' Records there is a notice of a certain T. Omitt of East Barnet who was sent to the House of Correction "for assaulting Ed. Hughes, the churchwarden, and not wearing the badge as Act of Parliament directs."

Food and fuel were also provided and the following items are typical of this kind of assistance :-

"Gave Old Lawrence in meat, 2s." (1721)

"Paid widow Carter for firing, 1s." (1723)

"Gave Old Slacker tobacco, 1d." (1729)

The sick were not neglected, and payments were made directly to them, as well as to those entrusted with their care :-

"Paid Goody Stanford in the time of her sickness, 5s." (1657)

"Paid to Goody Stanford to redeem her cloathes from pawn when she came out of hospital." (1657)

The year 1725 saw one of the very frequent smallpox epidemics. This disease was often brought into the villages by vagrants from London, and there was a heavy toll of life :-

"Gave John Spicer and his child having ye smallpox, 2s. 6d. (1725)

Gave Richard Slacker for being sick of a fevour, 1s. 6d.

Gave Spicer's wife for nursing a woman with ye smallpox for four weeks at 7s. 6d., £1 10s. 0d.

The woman last mentioned was a vagrant and shortly afterwards there appears this record :-

"Gave same woman to get her out of town, 2s. 6d.

Gave Spicer's wife herself being sick, 6d." (1725)

Many of the poor entirely at the charge of the parish were children, and regular payments were made for their maintenance. These children were orphans, bastards, or children whose fathers had deserted them, and the local records throw considerable light upon the pattern of their lives. As young children they were boarded out to labouring families and the vestry paid for their education, which was the same as for other children of their class.

The following entry occurs regularly :- "Paid for children's schooling, 4s. 2d." As soon as the parish children were old enough they were bound out as apprentices. Boys were so bound until the age of twenty-four, and girls to the age of twenty-one. Some of them were placed with local tradesmen but most of them were sent to London. This apprenticeship of pauper children was profitable for the Vestry, because not only was the child taught a trade but he was also no longer a charge on the parish, for he took the settlement of his place of apprenticeship. Many entries such as the following occur :-

"Paid to Mr. John Pettell of St. Bartholomew the Great in London, Pipe Maker, for taking Richard Mitchell an apprentice, £3 10s. 0d." (1721)

"For Indentures and charges in binding Henry Palmer, 10s." Paid his Master Joseph Tufnell, Barber and Periwigg maker, at the upper end of Old Street, £3 0s. 0d." (1721)

Often the overseers, in their eagerness to get rid of a child, were not too careful in their choice of master, and children were put into the hands of unscrupulous people who looked upon pauper children as a cheap source of unskilled labour and treated them cruelly :-

"For horse and self going to London to attend ye Justices at Hicks Hall about James Hodges girl being starved by her master, 5s. (1716)

There is much evidence beyond the local records that many masters made life so unbearable to apprentices that they ran away and sought their fortune on the roads. Consequently a large proportion of all vagrants were runaway apprentices. A number of cases occur in the Chipping Barnet Examination Book for 1747-61 of persons stating that they had left their masters after one or two years. These entries make depressing reading, but the Barnet Records do show that a real interest was taken in the welfare of apprenticed children. Money was bequeathed to provide satisfactory apprenticeships, and the overseers often visited the apprenticed child after he had left their care.

In addition to the regular and casual payments made to the poor of the township, Chipping Barnet expended a considerable

amount of money in small payments to vagrants. The town lay on one of the busy roads to and from London, and throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the stream of homeless people through its streets was a constant worry to the overseers. Since settlement had to be guarded against, these poor unfortunate travellers had to be kept on the move, and the relief given was often in the nature of a bribe. Between 4th July, 1742, and 4th March 1743, four hundred and twenty-nine vagrants received relief from the Barnet poor rate. Unfortunately there are no figures available for Hertfordshire as a whole, but by 1772 Bedfordshire was spending £164 11s. 6d. per annum on vagrants, Berkshire £183 12s. 1d., and Buckinghamshire £303 9s. 11d. Paradoxically, laws framed to reduce vagabondage only served to increase it and the roads swarmed with unemployed labourers, fleeing apprentices, and young women who had been seduced and turned out of their own or their masters' houses lest shame should come upon the household. One of the most frequent entries in the Overseers' Book and one of the most tragic is this :- "Getting a great bellied woman out of the town, 1s. 4d." (1726). Other vagrants ranged from poor ministers during the Civil War to Irish labourers in harvest time. Soldiers and sailors are frequently mentioned :-

"Gave three disbanded soldiers, 1s." (1721)

"Gave three poor lame soldiers, 6d.

Gave a seafaring man and his wife and four children, 6d."  
(1725)

In the early part of the eighteenth century quite a number of people who had been captured at sea and made galley slaves by the Turks escaped from their captors and on their return to England wandered about the countryside, as the following entries show :-

"Given by an order from his Majesty to a distressed man that had been in slavery, 4d." (1662).

"Gave six poor slaves, 2s. 4d.

Gave five slaves, 2s. 4d

Given to the son of Lyonell Turner, a poor minister, who is in captivity in Tunis in Barbary, 6d." (1735)

Vagrants were always suspect because so frequently they were the carriers of disease. Thus :-



"Gave to a man that had smallpox to goe forward, 1s.  
Gave to sundry sick people to go on, 1s. 1d." (1738)

Vagrants were rarely allowed to stay in the parish, and it was an indictable offence to harbour them so that they might obtain settlement, as the following entry shows :—

"At this Vestry, the 28th March, 1769, it is ordered that John Nix shall be Indited for taking in Inmates and thereby occasioned and exposed to this parish of three pounds that Mr. Rumball, the Justice's Clerk be employed in this affair."

So many payments proved a heavy drain on the parish purse and throughout the early part of the seventeenth century the burden of maintaining the poor grew progressively heavier, with the result that most townships felt that they were fighting a losing battle against poverty. The Act of Settlement, passed in 1662, attempted to deal with the problem by giving the overseers the right, by Justices' warrant, to remove "any person or persons coming so to settle themselves as aforesaid in any Tenement under the yearly value of Ten Pounds" if they judged that the intruders were likely to become a charge upon the parish. Such persons were to be removed within the space of forty days to "such Parish where he or they were last legally settled as a Native, Sojourner, Householder, Apprentice or Servant for the space of forty days at least." A later Act in 1693 defined more clearly the terms for settlement. Women could gain settlement by marriage, apprenticeship served a similar purpose, and so did being hired as a servant for a year. The result of the above two Acts was to bring about a great spate of litigation as parishes appealed against having people of dubious settlement thrust upon them. The Cambridgeshire records, examined by Miss Hampson, tell some very sad stories of families shuttled about from parish to parish until the high cost of pursuing the matter through the courts brought their journeying to an end. The people who suffered most from removal were labourers with large families and single women who, as they became old, were no longer useful as servants. The procedure for removal was to complain about the person to the local magistrates, who called up the person for examination. Most parishes possess Examination Books in which are recorded the depositions of the persons examined. The earliest Chipping Barnet Book commences in

1767, and continues until 1791. The following is a typical deposition :-

"Mary Sandforth maketh Oath that she is the wife of John Sandforth who is gone away from this Deponent about three weeks since, and left her at Chipping Barnet in the Liberty of St Albans. That about seven years since her said husband rented a farm of the yearly rent of Fifty Pounds and upwards in the parish of Kingsbury in the County of Middlesex for about two years, and paid the poor rates during this said term, and has never gained any other lawfull settlement elsewhere since by any other means to the best of her this Deponent's knowledge. This Deponent further says she has by her said husband three children, Charlotte aged upwards of six years, John aged near four years, and Henry about a year and a half.

Sworn this 18th day of December, 1771, before us

R. Harris  
T. Niccol.

Mary Sandford  
her mark

A removal is recorded in this manner in the Churchwardens' Accounts for 1716 :-

"Paid for an examination of Jan Lemon and for an order to send her away, 2s. 6d.

Paid for a messenger for going to St. Albans to get ye order to send her away, 2s. 6d.

Gave Jan Lemon and for coach hire, 2s. 6d.

For horse hire and expenses delivering Jan Lemon with an order to ye Churchwardens and Overseers of ye Parish of St. Dionis back Church, Cullum (? Lime) Street, 6s."

Not all the examinations recorded concern removals. Some were to force the father of an illegitimate child to make a contribution towards its upkeep. Such a child, born in the parish, received the settlement of the parish, and the overseers made every effort to find the father in order to avoid the consequent charges. The overseers had the right to seize the father's goods if he evaded responsibility by flight but, since these goods were often of little value, the Act of 1693 gave the Vestry the right to seek out the father and force him into marriage. An examination of the mother

took place and the person named as the father was given little opportunity to deny his responsibility. The following is a record of such an examination :-

"Sarah Walker, Single woman maketh Oath that she was born in the parish of Dullington near Wellinborough in the County of Northampton where her parents were Lawfull Inhabitants, and that she has gained no other Lawfull Settlement by any means to the best of her knowledge. This Deponent further says that about six months since she was delivered of a female Bastard child Baptized by the name of Mary in the parish of Chipping Barnet in this Liberty and that Robert Cook of Chipping Barnet aforesaid is the true and only father of the same.

Sworn the 2nd day of Nov., 1767."

In 1729 High Barnet decided to lessen expenses and trouble by having its own workhouse. Henceforth the overseers had little to do, since most of their work was put out to a salaried contractor, and so their accounts contain in little of interest. As the century wore on, a strong body of opinion showed that the poor had become too large a task for the parish, and some writers such as Crabbe denounced the workhouse system. The result of this agitation was Gilbert's Act of 1782, which for Poor Law purposes replaced the Vestry by a local magistrate, and provided for more State supervision of workhouses. Then in 1834 came the Poor Law Reform Act, which abolished the old Poor Law system altogether.

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*The Committee wish it to be understood that they do not necessarily endorse all the statements made by contributors to the Bulletin.*