



The Poor Laws & Law and Order

The Poor

Over the centuries there were a number of Poor Law Acts. The original act of 1601 was the basis of poor law administration for over two hundred years. Under its provisions the churchwardens and other substantial landholders were made, each year, 'Overseers of the Poor'. In 1662 the act of settlement was put in place with another modification in 1697. Strangers would be allowed to enter a parish only if they possessed a settlement certificate showing that their old parish would take them back if they became in need of poor relief. In 1722 parishes were encouraged to build properties to house the poor locally. In 1834 the Poor Law Amendment Act came in when outdoor relief was almost entirely abolished and parishes combined to form a Union for which a workhouse was built. Workhouses were made as unpleasant as possible so people would prefer to work. The workhouse for the Aston parish was in Thame at what is now Rycotewood College. All these measures were replaced by the Social Security system we have today.

The earliest we know of the poor in our parish was the hearth tax of 1665 when four householders of Aston and one each from Kingston and Chalford were discharged on account of poverty. In 1770 it is known that John Caillaud gave the churchwardens some property known as the 'poors houses' in the corner of the churchyard. This replaced others around the churchyard called the 'college houses'. It is likely that these were used to house the poor. Around this time there was a massive increase in population and after the prolonged wars there was a big problem with poverty. For instance in 1784 four of the six burials in the parish register were of poor persons and in 1786 there were six out of nine. This trend continued until the end of the century.

An indenture dated December 1770 between the churchwardens and the overseers and John Caillaud and Harry Rixon was for a newly erected cottage or tenements to be let for a peppercorn rent to be paid at the feast of St Michael. These were situated at the lower end of Brookfurlong and were inhabited by John Loader, John Crowdy and Richard Wiggins, who were described as 'poor persons of and belonging to this parish'. These houses were situated on the right of the track which is the continuation of Church Lane. There are no longer any properties there. In 1807 the overseers paid £19 3s 5d to build a house for the poor at Kingston Blount; its location is not known. On 30 April 1838 Sir Henry Lambert bought four cottages from the Poor Law Union, possibly the houses in

Brookfurlong, for £140. These were occupied by paupers of the parish. Another house, used as two homes, which was used for the reception of the poor, was bought by Lambert from the Thame Union in 1848, for £60. This was called the Pest House and was situated beyond 'five ways' on the left of the road, now a path, to Chalford. It is possible that some of the people from these houses had to move into the workhouse in Thame. From 1838 the Aston burial registers start to record deaths of people dying in the workhouse. However in 1851 there were still a significant number of paupers living in the parish presumably still receiving out relief for which the Thame Union was well known.

Over the centuries there have been a number of charities formed when bequests have been made for the poor of the parish. The earliest was one made by Peter Crispe of Copcourt, who left £50, the interest to be spent on the poor of Aston and Copcourt. In 1781 Francis Wastie founded a charity of 5s to be paid to two widows each year, one from Kingston and one from Aston. In 1786 a rent of £1 was received from an estate, Hill Foot Close in Kingston. This was a gift from Andrew Crooke. Mary James from Aston left money in her will to the poor. After her death in 1820, £1,163 was invested in stock and it was decreed that the distribution was to be in clothes and money. In 1828 this was in the possession of the Brown family and was called the ten groat money. The money was distributed annually to six poor men of Kingston who did not receive parish relief. It was not to be given to the same person two years running. There were at least two other charities for the poor in Kingston.

We are very fortunate that for a few years, 1797 to 1814, the overseers accounts have survived for the parish and they make fascinating reading. The overseers were appointed yearly by the vestry, one for Kingston, Aston and Chalford. They met monthly to settle the accounts. The poor rates were set at the meeting and were paid by local landowners. In 1801 the rate was very high at 9s 6d in the pound. They were dealing in large sums of money for the time, as in that year Aston alone paid out £661 8s 1d.

By this time the overseers were in charge of vermin control instead of the churchwardens. At a meeting on 25th March 1799 of most of the occupiers of land in Aston Rowant, they agree to pay John Grant of Worminghall to take the moles for three years at £16 16s 6d yearly. He had to covenant to keep the parish reasonably clean of moles. They were also still paying for sparrows at a rate of 1s per dozen and rats were paid for now at 16s 6d for a hundred.

Another of the jobs of the overseers was to invoke the act of bastardy. With the rise of illegitimate births in the 18th century and the subsequent risk of both the mother and her child needing parish relief, a pregnant woman could be forced to marry. The alternative was to obtain payments from the father for the child's upkeep. The magistrates determined the payments at the Petty Sessions. For instance in 1870, Ellen Surman charged William Cox of Kingston Blount with being the father of her illegitimate child. He was ordered to pay 1s 3d per week and 19s costs. Sometimes a one off payment could be made, as in March 1803; the overseers received of John Steptoe £26 as final acquittance for Mabel Harrod's child. There are several examples like this but a more interesting one is in 1802 when they paid Jonah Britnell £3 4s for a licence, ring and marrying. This was obviously an inducement to marry his pregnant girlfriend. They would go to great lengths if payments weren't made on time. In 1807 John Weson's payment of £3 1s 8d was due on March 28th and on that very day they went to Crendon at a cost of 2s 6d to recover the money. In 1813 they were still chasing him and it cost 3s for a warrant and a further £1 9s for the journey to take him to Oxford, presumably to be charged.

The overseers would go to considerable lengths to avoid paying relief as illustrated by a case that came before the magistrates in 1857. Marshall Hall of Kingston Blount was

summoned by the Guardians of the Wycombe Union to show why he had refused to contribute to his grandchildren's upkeep. They were now destitute due to the death of their father. The case was dismissed after hearing the pleas of the defendant who presumably was not well off himself.

The overseers were responsible for trying to organise work for the poor and the roundsmen system was devised. The pauper applied to the overseer who sent him to the houses of people who would provide work. The employer met some of his wages, the parish met the rest. At a meeting of parishioners held in 1814, Phillip Wykeham, lord of the manor, Mr Dorrell, Mr Filbee and Mr White of Chalford agreed to employ and pay the men on rounds in regular turns. Many of the bigger landowners employed men on the rounds but it did not always work out, as illustrated by an entry in the Kingston log in 1807; £5 8s 6d was paid to the roundsmen who were 'turned back and out of work'. Men were often employed in menial tasks such as flint picking, presumably from the fields and in 1797 John Caillaud paid £2 18s to the overseers for fifty eight loads of flint.

The overseers also paid the poor who were unable to work, perhaps because of illness or if the weather was bad. They would pay if 'on complaint', we believe that was when someone in the family was ill and they were needed to look after them. The rent would be paid as well as help with clothes and food. Money was also given to travellers, sailors and people with passes.

They would pay for nursing if required and for a midwife who cost 5s. Funeral expenses were also covered including alcoholic refreshment afterwards. The sorry saga of Elizabeth Steptoe in 1797 is given below. It illustrates well the sort of help given.

30 Dec: Paid Elizabeth Steptoe, ill, 1s. Bought a piece of mutton for Elizabeth Steptoe, 1s 11½ d.
6 Jan: Elizabeth Steptoe ill, 2s.
10 Jan: Washing two caps, two aprons, a shift and petticoat for Elizabeth Steptoe, 3s 4d.
10 Jan: Gave Elizabeth Steptoe wood for the washing and gave her 1s.
11 Jan: Paid Elizabeth Steptoe's expenses to the infirmary, 8s.
2 Feb: Paid for a man and a horse to Oxford to see Elizabeth Steptoe, 8s 1d.
3 Feb: Paid a man and a horse and cart and a woman to fetch Elizabeth Steptoe from Oxford, 13s 11d.
23 Feb: Laying out Elizabeth Steptoe, 3s, paid clerk and minister 3s, beer 3s. Two and a half weeks for a room at Piddington's house and for nursing, 9s. Paid at the shop for the sitters up, washing, candles and liquor 15s 6d. Paid for a pair of stools for Elizabeth Steptoe.

Poor Elizabeth Steptoe died at the end of all this and her funeral expenses fell on the parish. Elizabeth Steptoe was taken to the infirmary as were a significant number of others. The parish paid a quarterly subscription of £3 5s to the infirmary for the treatment of the poor. At the end of the 18th century smallpox vaccinations had just been introduced and the overseers were paying for families to be inoculated. It cost £1 1s for one family who may have had a large number of children but still quite a significant amount of money. However it was very necessary, as smallpox seems to have been a big problem. For instance in 1797, they paid £8 5s for nursing the two Atkins with smallpox and there were many other cases. They obviously thought alcohol would help as an entry in 1802 says 'to wine and gin for the smallpox, £1 7s'. Other entries say 'paid for gin for Hannah Ditton, when she was ill' and in 1814 'two quartains of rum, 2s, for John Davis when ill'. Dr Smith was the doctor at the time and his bill amounted to £28 5s 6d in 1802. I don't know if he prescribed the two boxes of essence of mustard which they bought for the Davis girl in 1797 or for dressing Isaac Hill when he had the itch, for which they

bought baking and brimstone and things to shift him at a cost of 5s 6d. Perhaps the doctor also recommended that William Hailey lay still for one week with chilled feet and Mr Cluley lay still for three days with a pain in the back.

One more interesting series of entries from the accounts is that of a woman passing through and how much they spent to see her on her way in 1802.

Paid a woman for attending woman in labour on the hill, 2s.

A woman said she was in distress and appeared to be in labour, 2s.

Sent William Atkin's wife, she said she was in great distress, £1.

Paid Thomas Gunman's wife for nursing and board and lodging for woman that was in labour in the hill, 2 weeks, 16s.

Paid for the woman's expenses home to Kent, 7s.

There was no mention of the child if there was one and with only 7s to get home it is likely she would have had to walk.

Another interesting story is of the Hester family of Kingston in 1807.

20 Aug: Given to Hester when his house was burnt, 5s.

27 Aug: Paid for lodging and some victuals, 11s.

1 Sep: Two bedsteads for the Hesters, £1.

22 Oct: For drawing Hester's goods and family uphill, 6s.

28 Nov: Hester's lodging at The Lion, 3s 6d a week, £2 2s.

After this the family obviously found a cottage as the overseers were then paying rent and for bread for the family. They received four loaves a week. This seemed to be the maximum anyone had, so he probably had a large family. The price the overseers paid for bread was about 1s 9d a loaf. In 1814 there is a further mention of John Hester when Mr Draper is paid £3 3s for a cure for him.

The overseers also paid for schooling for the poor, presumably at the charity school. After finishing school, girls usually went into service and they would help with that too. Two examples are, £1 5s 6d for Elizabeth Chapman for clothing for service and the same year, 1802, 5s was paid for a shift for Mr Cluley's daughter. For Thomas Loader's daughter they bought silk and bobbins for 3s, presumably so that she could earn money by lace making. Another payment, which seemed unusual, was regular instalments of £3 0s 6d to Mr Murrell for Mr Flitt's substitute family. We can only guess this was a fostering arrangement as it went on for several years.

When the Thame Poor Law Union was established in 1836 our local landowners served as Guardians but local overseers were still elected. Arthur Henry Brown and Sir Henry Lambert were present at meetings in the 1850s. They met to take tenders for food deliveries and clothing and to settle bills. They also dealt with medical matters and noted on 5th October 1853 that under the compulsory vaccination act for smallpox Mr Thomas Ede, who was medical officer for Aston Rowant, would attend at noon in the house of Mary Floyd of Kingston on the first Thursday in the month between 12 and 12.30 for vaccinations and on the second Thursday for inspection. The Guardians also dealt with nuisances. In 1853 they said that John Stevens of Aston Rowant had an offensive cesspool adjoining the road and there was filth and a nuisance from the drains by cottages belonging to him along the road from Aston to Kingston. He was reported to the county surveyor. Drains were obviously a big health hazard as at that time, typhus was reported in Sydenham and this was blamed on the drains. .

Poor people could also apply to the Union to fund their emigration from the parish. On the 14th April 1844 Thomas White, his wife and two daughters, Jesse Stops his wife and daughter, Richard Young and his wife and a single woman, Lydia Baker all left for Port Phillip in Australia on the ship Lord William. It cost about £10 to send them but it made

financial sense as it would have cost more if they had to be supported here for many years.

Law and Order

In the Court Rolls are the papers referring to the Court Leet and View of Frankpledge for the Stokenchurch court, which dealt with our parish. This was a court held by the lord of the manor or his steward and attended by freeholders and tenants. Everyone over sixteen was supposed to attend but rarely did. This court had jurisdiction over petty offences within the manor and also performed a variety of administrative duties. Collective responsibility for apprehending offenders was a dominant part of village life until police forces came into being in the 1840s. The court elected the constable, one for Kingston and one for Aston. As well as petty crime their duties could involve inspecting alehouses and supervising settlement of the poor. As you can imagine this was usually not a popular job. The court also elected the Tithingmen for each village, which was for the View of Frankpledge. This ancient court originated in Saxon times and was based on each area being divided into an association of 'tithings'. These were ten men who would stand security for each other and the Tithingman was their representative. These men were probably subordinate to the constable. The court also elected the Hayward, who supervised repair of fences and looked after the commons and common stock. The earliest record for the court that we found was 1800 and the latest 1847.

The Court Leet was held at Postcombe in 1800 but at the end was being held at the Chequers Inn in Aston. A list of eleven jury members is included in the Court Rolls documentation and in 1809 Thomas Rixon was their foreman and some well-known local names, the Applebys and Wakelins were members of the jury. In 1801 John Bailey was constable for Aston and Thomas Filbee for Kingston. The Hayward for Kingston was Thomas Oakley and the one for Aston was Amos Novaway. Presumably when criminals were apprehended their cases were heard at the Watlington Petty Sessions unless they were very serious when they would be sent to Oxford Assizes.

The earliest mention of a policeman for the parish is in 1924 when Constable William Ewart Brain was officer in charge. He came from the Chinnor Police Station.