

A HISTORY OF THE EARLEY CHARITY

by

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1. The years after Waterloo

The Earley Charity was formed in 1990 by a merger of the Earley Poor's Land Charity with the two branches of the Englefield Charity - known as the Apprenticing Branch and the Widows' Branch. The Charity dates back, however, certainly over two hundred years and probably (in the case of the Englefield Charity) around three hundred years. For most of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, it would have seemed that the (older) Englefield Charity was the more significant. The Earley Charity's present prosperity, however (and it is now among the wealthiest local charities in southern England), derives almost exclusively from the history of the Earley Poor's Land Charity, and can therefore be traced back to the latter part of the reign of King George III, and specifically to the post-Napoleonic part of the Regency, covering the years 1815 to 1820.

The post-war years of the Regency (Prince George had become Regent in 1811) are often described in terms of extreme contrast. English society has seldom been more ostentatiously divided. On the one hand, there was the dandified luxury of the drawing-room milieu, personified by Beau Brummel and the Regent himself, and ironically immortalised by Jane Austen. The wealthy, and especially the land-owning wealthy, had become very much wealthier during the war years (when many rents had doubled) and they were ready to spend their money on architectural and other extravagances and fantasies - of which the most enduring is the Brighton Pavilion. On the other hand, these same years represent one of the most desperate, turbulent and violent periods of English domestic history.

The key years for the origins of the Earley Poor's Land Charity, as we shall see, were 1816 and 1820. The period from 1816 to 1820 was characterised by mass demonstrations in towns and cities; by wild conspiracies against the government (usually hopeless and infiltrated by government spies); by agricultural revolt and sabotage; and by continuing campaigns of machine-smashing, especially in the north of England, by successors to the "Luddites".

The social unrest, popular protest and public violence erupted in notorious events like the Spa Fields riots (1816), the Pentrich Rebellion (1817), the Peterloo Massacre (1819) and the Cato Street Conspiracy (1820), but

disaffection and anti-government anger were constantly present. Trouble was fomented by orators like Henry Hunt, old 'Jacks' (Jacobins) like Arthur Thistlewood, and by radical newspapers like *Black Dwarf*, *The Republican* and *The Cap of Liberty*, and was fed by resentments against the Corn Laws, against forced industrialisation, and against enclosure.

This is an account of the years after Waterloo from Pauline Gregg's standard textbook:

The unhappy years from 1816 to 1820 were marked on the one hand by the uncoordinated and blind protests of the working classes, ignorant of all but the fact of their misery. They were marked on the other hand, not by any vestige of reform, but by repression distorted by fear into a harsh and evil system of espionage and tyranny. This not only routed out the least sign of insurrection, but made the word whispered in the market-place or the conversation at the hearth into evidence of a plot. To make the evidence more convincing Government agents themselves supplied the details of the schemes to the unhappy men who alone would never have dared, and could hardly have conceived, the plots which the Government then punished with imprisonment, transportation and death.¹

Lord Briggs, in similar vein, has laid particular emphasis on 1819 as a year of famine, misery and revolt:

... 1819 was one of the most troubled years of the nineteenth century. It was then that working-class 'distress' took the clearest political form it had ever taken, and there was a consequent fierce struggle between the forces of 'movement' and the defenders of order. Not surprisingly, some historians have chosen these tense years as the nearest point Britain ever reached to social revolution.²

The real chance of a full-scale revolution was, as Lord Briggs goes on to say, fairly remote, but it was very much talked about at the time, and not only by anxious government ministers. In September 1819 Thomas Wedderburn, a leading London radical and a "man of colour" (born in Jamaica) inaugurated a public debate at Hopkins Street Chapel in London on the question "Are not the recent transactions at Manchester [i.e. the Peterloo Massacre] the commencement of a Revolution irresistible?"³

The Reading area suffered as much as any through these bad years for ordinary working people. Poverty and distress were widespread, and they were accompanied locally by the most extreme judicial cruelty:

Men were sentenced in Reading to seven years' transportation for stealing rabbits, for stealing boards, for stealing a pair of shoes, for stealing a piece of silk, for stealing lead, for stealing a silk handkerchief, and for stealing sheep. Men were hanged at Reading for highway robbery, sheep-stealing, horse-stealing, burglary, arson, and forgery, as well as for murder. Of eight men sentenced at Reading Assizes in 1800 to die, only one had taken human life. [...]

Pillory, stocks and whipping-post were discredited correctives used during this period for the last time. A tradesman in 1812 was seen to purchase two baskets of eggs and pelt a man who had been placed in the pillory in the midst of Market Place. Offal from slaughter-houses was also flung upon him. In 1819 men were whipped in the Market Place for stealing strawberries and for begging. About the same date a poor man stole a loaf. For this offence he was flogged at the cart's tail from the Bridewell to his dwelling in Silver Street. Nearly seventy years later, one who beheld his sufferings recalled the sight as the most horrible of his long experience. The victim never left his house alive.⁴

Against this brutal background, the origins of the Earley Charity and its land-holdings are to be found in the story of the enclosure of common land and of popular resistance to that enclosure. In other periods, enclosures sometimes proceeded without any recompense to the poor who lost their common land rights. In the troubled post-Napoleonic years, even the strong-armed government led by Lord Liverpool, supported by two reactionary Lords now widely commemorated in Reading – Eldon and Sidmouth – and closely identified with the Duke of Wellington (as the name of “Peterloo”, for the massacre of demonstrators in Saint Peter’s Fields in Manchester, indicates) recognised that it would certainly be prudent to temper unpopular measures of enclosure with some form of compensation.

In Berkshire, a typical form of compensation for enclosure was the setting up of “fuel charities” deriving their income from parcels of land retrieved from enclosures and known as “the poor’s land”. One of these typical Berkshire charities was the Earley Poor’s Land Charity, which came into being in April 1820.

The early decades of the nineteenth century were, as well as being years of public misery and judicial cruelty, a period when the whole question of poverty and how to deal with it was very much under review - both by government and by economic theorists. Charities, and local charities in particular, were a long-established part of the social structure, but often existed uneasily in an age which was less and less charitable in outlook. For both charities and the poor relief system more generally, the key issue in the early nineteenth century was the treatment of the able-bodied poor - those who were fit enough to work but did not have work to do. The system of “outdoor” relief (i.e. relief issued not in a poor-house) for the able-bodied which is particularly associated with Berkshire and which was codified at Speenhamland in 1795 was increasingly criticised. The Speenhamland system was seen by thinkers such as Frederic Eden and Thomas Malthus and others influenced by the economic thinking of Adam Smith as an encouragement to idleness, insolence and social unrest, as well as being against the principles of sound economics and a free labour market. It was recognised that certain groups, such as widows and people with disabilities, were entitled to relief, but it was argued (notably by those who went on to create the New Poor Law in 1834) that the whole fabric of society was undermined by relief paid to able-bodied persons who were, for whatever reason, unemployed. From 1834 the Speenhamland culture (of public support based on the price of

bread) was systematically replaced by the workhouse culture which Dickens satirised in *Oliver Twist* as early as 1838.

These harsher attitudes towards the poor were naturally also applied to charities. The new economic thinkers, the followers of Adam Smith, were capable of seeing charities as soft eighteenth-century indulgences which fitted badly with the new economic realities. Although many of the charities were administered by the same overseers who ran the workhouses, their benevolence and generosity came under deep suspicion. The New Poor Law commissioners of 1834, in an extraordinary tirade against the pernicious influence of charities, went so far as to write of a “quality of evil” in the work of charities. The passage is worth quoting at length as an epitome of a dark age:

Closely connected with the relief provided by the Poor-Laws is the relief provided by charitable foundations. As to the administration and effect of those charities which are distributed among the classes who are also receivers of the poor-rate, much evidence is scattered throughout our Appendix, and it has forced on us the conviction that, as now administered, such charities are often wasted, and often mischievous. In many instances being distributed on the same principle as the rates of the worst managed parishes, they are only less pernicious than the abuse in the application of the poor-rates, because they are visibly limited in amount. In some cases they have a quality of evil peculiar to themselves. The majority of them are distributed among the poor inhabitants of particular parishes or towns. The places intended to be favoured by large charities attract, therefore, an undue proportion of the poorer classes, who, in the hope of trifling benefits to be obtained without labour, often linger on in spots most unfavourable to the exercise of their industry. Poverty is thus not only collected, but created, in the very neighbourhood whence the benevolent founders have manifestly expected to make it disappear.⁵

This sort of attitude to charity meant that the early nineteenth century was a period when the beneficiaries of charitable support would be carefully and suspiciously scrutinised. The trustees of charities would certainly want to avoid accusations of being over-generous and thus “mischievous”. In later chapters, we will find evidence of trustees who appear to be quite happy to underspend the money available to them. In such a severe prevailing atmosphere, this is less surprising than might at first appear. Certainly, charity trustees would make a very clear distinction between the “deserving poor” (typified by the aged and the sick, widows and apprentices) and the unemployed able-bodied, the poor and the destitute. It was no business of charities in those harsh post-Napoleonic years to keep the poor out of the workhouse.

This rather grim opening chapter, setting the scene for the harsh years which saw the founding of the Earley Poor’s Land Charity, could be rounded off and largely summarised by Shelley’s unforgiving sonnet:

SONNET: ENGLAND IN 1819

An old, mad, blind, despised and dying king, –
Princes, the dregs of their dull race, who flow
Through public scorn, – mud from a muddy spring, –

Rulers who neither see, nor feel, nor know,
But leech-like to their fainting country cling,
Till they drop, blind in blood, without a blow, –
A people starved and stabbed in the untilled field, –
An army, which liberticide and prey
Makes as a two-edged sword to all who wield, –
Golden and sanguine laws which tempt and slay,
Religion Christless, Godless – a book seal'd;
A Senate, – Time's worst statute unrepealed, –
Are graves, from which a glorious Phantom may
Burst, to illumine our tempestuous day.

NOTES

¹ Pauline Gregg: *A social and economic history of Britain, 1760-1965*. 5th ed. London: Harrap, 1965, pp. 96-97.

² Asa Briggs: *The age of improvement*. 2nd ed. London: Longmans, 1960, p. 208.

³ Spy's report in the Home Office papers in the National Archives: H.O.42.195, 29 September 1819. Cf H.O.42.180, 28 September 1818 (Stafford to Clive), where Wedderburn compares the state of the poor in England with exploitation in Jamaica.

⁴ W. M. Childs: *The town of Reading during the early part of the nineteenth century*. Reading: University College, Reading, 1910, pp. 46-47.

⁵ *Report from Her Majesty's Commissioners for inquiring into the administration and practical operation of the Poor Laws*. London: B. Fellowes, 1834.