

6. The poor of Earley in 1820

The criteria of eligibility for the Earley Poor's Land Charity were not intended to target its benefits primarily towards the very poor or the near-destitute. It seems likely that there was no intention to give any assistance to those confined to the local workhouses nor those unemployed paupers receiving "outdoor relief", and that the level was set with a view to channelling the benefit to that familiar category to students of English poor laws, the "deserving poor".

The distinction between the deserving poor on the one hand and rogues and beggars on the other runs through all the social thinking and the legislation on poor relief from at least Elizabethan times to Victorian times. It is also important to the thinking and the terms of reference of most old-established charities, including the Earley charities.

The deserving poor, described by a commentator sympathetic to Elizabethan thinking as "the normal poor, the unlucky though honest persons who could not earn a living"¹, were major beneficiaries of Elizabethan legislation. Starting at a local level, notably in London, the Elizabethans introduced for the first time relief institutions and systems of taxation to support the deserving poor.

Nationally, the Poor Relief Act of 1598 placed an obligation upon local churchwardens and overseers of the poor to provide for the maintenance of the deserving poor. This obligation was confirmed by the better-known Act of 1601, which established the basis for systems of poor relief which lasted for more than two centuries. The principles behind the two acts have been well summarised as follows:

Poor relief is recognised in principle as a public concern. It is to be administered by individual parishes through overseers, who are to be appointed and constantly controlled by the justices. The burden of relief is distributed by taxation. In the first instance, however, the nearest of kin are made responsible for the maintenance of their relations; and in case a single parish is overburdened, the neighbouring parishes may be called upon to contribute proportionately. The persons to be relieved are divided into three classes: children, able-bodied and infirm. The kind of assistance consists, in the case of children, in apprenticing them till their twenty-first or twenty-fourth year; in the case of the able-bodied, by setting them to work (which they must perform, under penalty for refusal); in the case of the infirm, in maintaining them, with power to place them in poor houses.²

This is a notably interventionist approach for the period, and contrasts with the approach in other European countries, especially Roman Catholic countries, where alms-giving, charity and charities played a much larger role. In England from 1598, alms and charity were always supplementary to the role of public institutions in the relief of poverty amongst the deserving poor.

By contrast, the treatment of rogues and beggars from the Middle Ages onwards in England was inexorably harsh. Numerous acts concerning vagabonds and

beggars empowered the justices to remove them to their native parishes. Later acts prescribed whipping, and the laws under which men and women could be whipped for begging for alms were not repealed until 1824. One particularly savage Act of 1547 prescribed the branding of beggars with hot irons and their reduction to a state of slavery. That Act was soon repealed, but a more enduring clause is this one from the Beggars Act of 1531:

... and that every such Justice of Peace ... shall cause every such idle person so to him brought to be had to the next market town or other place where the said Justices of Peace ... shall think most convenient, ... and there to be tied to the end of a cart naked and be beaten with whips throughout the same market town or other place till his body be bloody by reason of such whipping; and after such punishment and whipping had, the person so punished ... shall be enjoined upon his oath to return forthwith without delay in the next and straight way to the place where he was born, or where he last dwelled before the same punishment by the space of 3 years, and there put himself to labour like as a true man oweth to do ...³

As we have seen from the example in Reading around 1819, such cart-tail floggings could be merciless and even fatal. There was very little sympathy from the authorities for any class of beggars from the sixteenth century (that is, from the time England became a Protestant country) through to the nineteenth century - and this attitude will have been commonplace amongst the churchwardens and overseers who administered both local poor relief and very many local charities like the Earley Poor's Land Charity. The proper beneficiaries of such charities will have been only the deserving poor; the idea of subsidising beggars or the destitute would have been unthinkable.

The upper limit placed on eligibility for benefit from the Earley Poor's Land Charity, we saw, was a yearly value of £5 for occupation of houses, lands or tenements. This was a high ceiling in a period when a poor labourer earning about £18 a year might expect to pay about £2 a year in rent, and a rather better-off labourer earning £26 a year would pay £4 a year for a cottage with a cottage-garden measuring eight poles. It may be that this limit of £5 a year was not unusual. We find exactly the same £5 limit as a definition of "the poor", for example, expressed in the same terms, in Middlesex, in the Stanwell Enclosure Act of 1789.⁴

Very many agricultural labourers in the post-war period were earning considerably less than £26 a year (which equates to 10 shillings a week or 1s 8d per day). In the harshest periods, wages could be driven below 6d a day, even as low as 2d a day (as happened at Ludgvan, Cornwall, in 1822⁵). The literature has plenty of examples in the period 1795-1825 to indicate that 9 shillings a week would be considered a low wage, but not exceptionally so, while the breadline wage would be considered to be 6 shillings a week.⁶

Even the highest aspirations of radical and disaffected labourers at this time would not have put them much outside the charity's compass. Thus, it is

interesting to consider the demands made by the Captain Swing rioters from Kintbury in 1830, as to what they considered to be a fair wage:

We will have 2s a day till Ladyday and half a crown afterwards for labourers, and 3s 6d for tradesmen, and as we are here, we will have £5 before we go out of the place or be damned if we don't smash it.⁷

These demands (12 shillings a week for 50 weeks would be £30 a year) were made to the startled magistrates at Hungerford Town Hall in November 1830, and the Kintbury men duly left the meeting with their £5. Their charismatic leader "Captain" Thomas Winterbourne was hanged at Reading on 11 January 1831.

It is likely that conditions in Earley will have been quite similar to those in Kintbury and elsewhere in rural Berkshire. The yearly rental value of £5 is unlikely to have excluded many of the ordinary labourers of Earley from the possibility of help by the Earley Poor's Land Charity, at least in its early years.

Berkshire was considered to be, in the post-Napoleonic period, a low-wage county, with high levels of illiteracy (about 44% across the county in 1838). Illiteracy, moreover, was centred in rural areas like Earley. Postage statistics show that in 1840, there was an average postage in Reading of 2906 letters and 1213 newspapers per week, but the average weekly figures for the whole of the Wokingham rural area were only 241 letters and 51 newspapers.⁸

Reading may have been an exception, but illiteracy and poverty characterised rural Berkshire throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. The report of the Poor Law commissioners of 1834 gives an authentic contemporary insight into the situation in the responses which the commissioners received to their questions about the causes of the riots and rick-burnings of 1830 and 1831. Lord Radnor, reporting on behalf of Coleshill, gave a fairly typical set of reasons:

The causes: the low rate of wages; the harsh treatment of the labourers; the desire to depress them; the general feeling of distrust and animosity existing between the agricultural labourers and their employers.

Henry Hippisley, reporting from Lambourne, gave a fuller and more political account:

Actual distress in labourers and mechanics; the low rate of wages; the idea that threshing-machines kept them out of employ, and lowered wages; beer houses; violent tracts and seditious preachers; political feeling; the example of France; they were encouraged by many *who were not in any distress* themselves.
Consequences: A temporary increase of wages; the discontinuance of machines; wages again lowered; an impression that rioting will not succeed.

Thomas Goodlake of Letcombe Regis gave an explanation and description which was broadly similar:

Low wages and real distress amidst a too abundant population; and the village beer houses offered the opportunity for introducing to one another their thoughts and feelings, and enabled them to act in concert in the riots.

It is noticeable that these commentators do not find the riots and spirit of revolt in any way surprising. They simply describe familiar circumstances of poverty and resentment. T. W. Hall, reporting on behalf of the parish of St Mary in Reading gives a very clear summary of the circumstances of the rural poor at the time:

From the best information I could procure, it is my belief that the riotous proceedings of 1830 and 1831 were the acts of a peasantry bowed down to the lowest possible amount of wages on which they could exist, enjoying few comforts, and lacking some things considered (by common consent) the necessities of life.

There is no reason to doubt that the situation in Earley in the first half of the nineteenth century is as described by Mr Hall.⁹

The population of Earley as recorded in the census of 1821 was 447. It was a very stable population: the 1821 figure compares to figures of 436 for 1801 and still only 487 for 1851.

In a liberty, and later parish, with such a small population, this means that the parish officials would have had, in virtually every case, personal knowledge of the circumstances of any poor people who applied for support from either the parish or any of its charities. Personal criteria such as sobriety, attitude, political views, diligence in genuinely seeking work, and “being of good family” would have been taken into account as much as objective criteria of need.

Under the Old Poor Law (before 1834), there were up to six ways of relieving poverty which were open to the parish officials. The first was workhouse-based or indoor relief. The others were allowances-in-aid-of-wages (the Speenhamland system); special payments to labourers with large families (a forerunner of the twentieth-century Family Allowance system); payments to the seasonally unemployed; the “roundsman” system (a parish subsidy to farmers who took on unemployed workers at specially low rates of pay); and the labour rate (a system whereby ratepayers shared the total parish wage-bill, with an option of either paying in cash or paying by employing extra labourers).¹⁰

It has not been possible to determine exactly which measures found most favour in Sonning and Earley, but the likelihood is that Earley will have followed the pattern in the rest of Berkshire, with a preference for outdoor relief in the late eighteenth century being steadily replaced by a reliance upon the workhouse in the nineteenth century.

The principal places of work in the Liberty of Earley in 1820 would have been Mockbeggar Farm (extending from the present Green Road to the present Eastern Avenue); Earley Heath Farm (extending from the “Three Tuns” public

house to what is now Palmer Park); the Earley Whiteknights estate; Erleigh Court (between London Road and what is now Culver Lane); and London Road Farm (in the area now known as Newtown). Those who earned their living from the River Thames dwelt near the riverside inn known as “The Dreadnought”. Lower Earley was virtually uninhabited, an area of rich meadow-land liable to be flooded when the River Loddon rose and controlled from the manor of Earley Whiteknights.¹¹

Ernest W. Dormer, who wrote many articles and pamphlets and two books on the history of Earley, described Earley in 1840 as “almost entirely concerned with agriculture”.¹² The beneficiaries of the Earley charities will have been the “deserving poor” of this class, families of men who worked on the land and in related trades (such as carpenters, joiners, wheelwrights and roofers).

NOTES

¹ James A. Williamson: *The Tudor age*. 3rd ed. London: Longman, 1964, p.422.

² P. F. Aschrott: *The English poor law system ...*; translated by H. Preston-Thomas. London, 1888, p.7.

³ J. R. Tanner: *Tudor constitutional documents, A.D. 1485-1603*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922, p.477.

⁴ See Alan Armstrong: *op. cit.*, pp.41-42 and *The first report of the commissioners ... of the Poor Laws in 1834*. London: HMSO, 1894, p.184 (and see also pp.150ff, 181ff, 194 etc.). Other secondary sources on wage and rent levels used in this section include: Brian Inglis: *Poverty and the Industrial revolution*. New ed. London: Panther, 1972 (e.g. p.39); Robert C. Allen: *Enclosure and the yeoman*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992 (e.g. pp.254-257); and E. P. Thompson: *The making of the English working class* (e.g. pp.233ff.). For the Stanwell enclosure, see J. L. Hammond and Barbara Hammond: *op. cit.*, p.264.

⁵ Alan Armstrong: *op. cit.*, p.70.

⁶ E.g. J. L. Hammond and Barbara Hammond: *op. cit.*, pp.95, 109, 129.

⁷ E. J. Hobsbawm and George Rude: *Captain Swing*. New ed. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973, p.108.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁹ *Report from Her Majesty's Commissioners for inquiring into the administration and practical operation of the Poor Laws*. London: B. Fellowes, 1834.

¹⁰ George R. Boyer: *An economic history of the English poor law, 1750-1850*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, pp.10-23.

¹¹ Ernest W. Dormer: *op. cit.*, p. 56.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 53.