

9. The Earley parochial charities, 1820-1903

The Earley poor's land in 1820 comprised three pieces of land. By far the largest of the three, over twelve acres in extent, is described as being "situate on Earley Lower Woods Commons", and is substantially the land which was still in the possession of the charity in the mid-1980s in the southern part of Lower Earley. The other two pieces of land are described as being "on Earley Heath", and they disappeared from the charity's ownership and from the public view some time in the first twenty years of the charity's existence. It is believed that the two small pieces of land were near to the present A329(M) at the end of Mays Land and they may possibly have become part of the Reading and Reigate Railway. In a later report by the Charity Commissioners, the two lost pieces of poor's land are described as follows:

1. One parcel of land situate on Earley Heath, marked 7 on the award map and containing 1r. 22p. [1 rod 22 perch]
2. One parcel of land situate on Earley Heath marked 9 on the award map and containing 2r. 11p. [2 rod 11 perch]

The report then proceeds to tantalise the reader with the skeleton of an account of how the land disappeared:

From information furnished by Captain J. St. L. Wheble it appears that parcels Nos. 1 and 2 were bought by his grandfather prior to 1840. No information as to the amount of the purchase money, or its application, can be obtained.¹

Captain James St Lawrence Wheble was Lord of the Manor of Bulmershe and the owner of Bulmershe Court (although resident at Hungerford Lodge) around the turn of the twentieth century.² Like the Englefields, the Whebles were a family with strong Roman Catholic traditions. The grandfather of Captain Wheble will have been the wealthy Roman Catholic benefactor James Wheble, who built the Catholic chapel at Woodley Lodge (near the present-day Bulmershe College) in 1802 and gave the site for St James' Catholic Church in Reading (which opened in 1840).³ He was also one of the landowners named in the Sonning Inclosure Act, and thus one who had already benefited considerably from the enclosure. Unless the vestry minutes for Sonning Parish for the period 1815-1851 were to be found, it is doubtful whether we shall ever be able to be sure of what happened to the two small pieces of "poor's land". I have not found any evidence at all to support my early suspicion that Mr Wheble sold on the land, on advantageous terms, to the railway company.

Berkshire Record Office does not hold vestry minutes for Sonning before 1851 nor for Earley before 1858, and this very much limits the amount of information available to us about the activities of the Earley charities in the first half of the nineteenth century. Two things, however, appear clear. First, whereas the Sonning Inclosure Act envisages that either the Churchwardens or the Overseers of the Poor, or both, would act as charity trustees, in fact this role

passed at an early stage to the Churchwardens. Second, in the period 1816-1858 the administration of the charities was fairly casual and the record-keeping disorganised.

We have already noted that the national Charity Commissioners in 1837 were not happy with the way that the Apprenticing Branch of the Englefield Charity was raising and spending its money, and that they intervened to stimulate the trustees to action. Having done so, however, they returned to London and left the trustees once more to their own devices, with the result that similar problems continued for a further twenty years.

In the case of both charities, it was not in the rental of their land that the casualness arose, but in the collection and spending of the income from the rentals. The Englefield Charity land was rented throughout the nineteenth century to the Goddard family. The rental of the poor's land had a more varied history. We know that from 1845 to 1852 it was rented to a Mr Jonathan Elliott at £26 per year. In 1852 "after a spirited competition" at the vestry meeting the land passed to Mr Thomas Harris at £29 a year. From 1860, Mr Harris's rent appears to have been reduced to £28, and then from 1867 the tenant became Mr William Pither paying £29 a year. In 1875, the tenancy passed to Mr G. Green, paying £30 annual rent, and he continued as tenant until he defaulted in 1880, when owing the charity one and a quarter year's rent.⁴

It appears that during the 1850s some queries were raised about whether the charities were operating properly. In 1855, Robert Palmer Esq. M.P. sent a note of legal advice on the subject to Mr Charles Stephens of Earley. Palmer's main points were about the beneficiaries and the benefit of the rental. He stressed that the beneficiaries could only be inhabitants of the liberty, and emphasised that if the poor's land was being leased out (as it was, at that time to Mr Harris), then any rights of the poor of Earley to cut turves or to take fuel from the poor's land disappeared:

By a subsequent Clause the Trustees are empowered to Let the Lands on Leases not exceeding 21 years, & the Rents & Profits arising from such Allotment shall from time to time be laid out in the purchase of Coal, or other fuel, & such Coal & fuel shall be sold and disposed of among the industrious poor Inhabitants of the Liberty, who shall occupy Lands or Tenements less in quantity than one Acre, at a price not exceeding two thirds of the original cost - the money so received from the poor to be laid out again in the purchase of other Coals or fuel.

All orders relative to the purchase, sale & distribution of the Coals etc. to be made at a Vestry Meeting of which Ten days Notice is to be given.

It would seem therefore that when the Allotments are Let & Rent received, the Poor are not entitled to any fuel purchased by the Trustees unless they purchase it, & where the Allotments are not Let, but remain Waste, the poor may cut it for themselves under certain regulations, without any payment. - It is a curious enactment, but so it is. - I should rather think the "industrious Poor Inhabitants of the Liberty" mentioned in the latter Clause, would be held to mean those who are legally entitled as mentioned in the first Clause - otherwise a different class of persons would be entitled to the benefit in the one case, than the other,

according as it may happen that Allotments were let or not. - It is rather a nice question, and would require a better opinion than mine to decide that point.⁵

This was the age of Dickens's *Bleak House* and obsession with legal niceties, but Palmer does seem to have identified some ambiguities in the original Act, upon which he draws minutely. We shall return later to his opinion and to the probabilities as to whether the charities felt obliged to charge the poor of Earley for coal which they provided for them.

It seems likely that by the mid-1850s the operation of the Earley charities had drifted into a casual easiness. The land was being leased, although the full rental for the Englefield Charity was not always collected. Some money was being paid out for widows, for apprentices, and to provide coal for the poor, but the record-keeping was not being well done. And it may be, given the calling in of Mr Palmer and his particular emphasis on rights to gather fuel, that some of the local poor were seeking to exercise rights to use the poor's land directly for their fuel supply - to the annoyance perhaps of the tenant.

One encounters occasional pieces of evidence that poor people in various parts of the country believed that they (and not the churchwardens or overseers) had direct rights over the poor's land. In one extreme case, on Peat Moor near Oxford, two poor families (the Steels and the Parsons) had moved onto the land allotted by the Enclosure Act of 1802 and set up their own "hovels", which were still causing nuisance and offence to the churchwardens as late as 1869.⁶ Robert Palmer's advice seems to indicate a risk that laxness in the administration of the Earley Poor's Land Charity might encourage the poor to make their own use of the land. In Earley, however, the era of laxness was about to come to an end.

In 1858 two new chapelwardens or churchwardens were elected for the parish of Earley. The interchangeable use of the terms "chapelwarden" and "churchwarden" at this time is intriguing, since chapelwarden would be the appropriate term for a liberty and churchwarden for a parish - and Earley had by then been a parish for fully fifteen years. The Earley Parish Vestry Minutes⁷ for 1858 report the election of John Fuller as vicar's warden and George Shackel as parish warden. (The Shackel family, who held the Sidmouth Grange farmhouse on the Earley Court estate, are described as "well known agriculturalists in this neighbourhood".⁸) The two new wardens were clearly active and vigorous. At the Vestry Meeting for 1859, a motion was proposed by a previous churchwarden:

Mr Charles Hy Foyle proposed and the Rev^d John Horne seconded - "That a Vote of thanks be given to Mr George Shackel Jun^r for preparing the New Parish Books (Viz. "The Chapelwardens' Minute Book" - The "Charity" and "Church Account Books" -) and for entering up all the past Accounts, and arranging the papers &c. - which was accordingly passed.

The fruits of Mr Shackel's labours were soon apparent. At the same meeting, it is recorded:

Sufficient funds having accumulated under the “Englefield Charity”, for apprenticing a Boy, according to the content and purpose of the Charity, it was determined to advertise for a Wheelwright to Apprentice the Boy Taylor [...], who having been brought before the Vestry was approved of.

At the Easter Vestry of 1860, it was agreed to apprentice two more local boys (“Mr Geo: Shackel consented to see to it immediately”), and a further boy was apprenticed in 1863. The population of the Liberty at this time was around 1500 (and the census figures - then as now - included children), so the creation of four new apprenticeships in five years will have created some impact in Earley.

The apprenticeships would, it appears, normally be worked in central Reading. Of the last three referred to, one was to a carpenter in Grey Friars, Reading; one to a painter, plumber and glazier based in Friar Street; and the third to a coach maker based in Minster Street.

Of Mr Shackel’s three New Parish Books, one at least has survived. The *Parish of Earley: charity accounts* remains in the possession of the Earley Charity and bears testimony to his diligence. It contains maps and information about various charities in Sonning, such as Sir Thomas Rich’s Charity, Barker’s Charity and Payne’s Charity, and also includes copied sections of the Sonning Inclosure Act of 1816 and the advice of Robert Palmer M.P. which has already been quoted. Mr Shackel’s particular attention, however, was directed to the current condition of the Englefield Charity and the Earley Poor’s Land Charity.

For the Englefield Charity, he drew up a full account for the period of Mr Goddard’s tenancy, from 1816 onwards. From 1816 to 1852, Mr Goddard had been due to pay £6 a year in rent (a total of £216) plus small sums for other land which was not chargeable to the poor. In 1853, the Englefield Charity land had been re-surveyed by Mr William Simmons, a valuer based in Henley-on-Thames, and the rent increased to £10 a year.

It appears that Mr Goddard’s rent was not collected on an annual basis by the charity’s trustees but was paid out according to the needs of the charity. He paid £2 every Michaelmas for distribution to local widows, and paid the costs of apprenticeships as and when they arose. In the period 1816-1858, there appear to have been only five such apprenticeships (in 1821, 1830, 1836, 1837 and 1840), one to a shoemaker and the others unspecified, with the result that by the 1850s Mr Goddard had underpaid in rent to the charity by over £43. (We notice that after a burst of apprenticing activity in 1836-40 provoked by the attention and criticism of the national Charity Commissioners, the Apprenticing Branch had gone back to sleep and the arrears had been allowed to build up.) It was the regularising of these arrears, together with the 1853 rent increase, which made possible the four new apprenticeships between 1858 and 1863.

We saw that in 1837 at Michaelmas the Englefield Charity was distributing 2s 6d (half a crown) each to sixteen local widows. By the 1850s the Charity had reverted to allocating the substantial sum of 10 shillings each to just four

widows (or sometimes fewer). The same names recur in the accounts of the Widows Branch year after year. In particular, the widow Kislingbury received her 10 shillings each year from 1853 to 1878 and probably beyond (the records grow less precise), even though in some years she was one of only two widows to be paid.

Local widows and apprentices did not get full benefit from the Englefield Charity in the first half of the nineteenth century, partly because of slack administration, but also because of high running and maintenance costs. We notice, for example, that between 1816 and 1851 almost £24 (or four years' rent) was paid in Land Tax. In 1824 a mysterious entry records £3 18s paid to a Mr Hawkes for "Expenses of Inclosure", and in 1854 £22 9s was paid for repairs to the cottages by John Brown, Carpenters. They must have been substantial repairs.

For the Earley Poor's Land Charity, there is generally a simpler story of income and expenditure, with about 90% of income received being spent on coal for distribution to the poor, and the remaining 10% or less being spent on administrative and other costs - mostly the tenant's Land Tax, which the charity always paid, but including miscellaneous other bills, of which the most questionable was the £3 8s paid in 1874 to Mr Shackel himself for legal costs involved in setting up Mr Green's ill-omened tenancy.

We have full records for the Poor's Land Charity for a number of fairly typical years. In 1852, £26 was received in rent from Mr Elliott; expenditure was £23 on coal (23 tons at £1), £1 14s 5d on Land Tax, and 11 shillings paid in occasional donations to three widows. In 1858, the charity changed its coal merchant to Arthur Hill of Friar Street, Reading, and began to pay slightly less for its coal. In that year income was £29 in rent from Mr Harris; expenditure was £24 19s 8d on Mr Hill's "best Bath coal" (26 tons and 18 hundredweight), £1 14s 5d on Land Tax, and £2 0s 2d on drainage works. 1865 was a year of underspending, with income of £28 and the only expenditure being £22 19s 9d on best Bath coal from Mr Hill and £1 15s 9d in Land Tax. 1873 was a year of overspending, with income of £29 and expenditure of £40 1s 11d on coal and £1 15s 9d on Land Tax. Overall, however, the pattern is very similar, and the accounts are very simple, for several decades. From about 1886, we find that the Poor's Land Charity began to receive regular private donations, originally ranging between £5 and £10 a year, but totalling £36 19s 6d in 1894. The pattern of expenditure, though, varied very little; if the Charity received more money, in general it bought more coal.

This brings us back to the question of Robert Palmer's advice, and whether the Charity was giving coal to the poor or, perhaps more correctly, selling it cheaply to the industrious poor and then re-using that income.

The *Parish of Earley: charity accounts* give no hint of any such complicated transactions - which would have required, for example, buying 24 tons of coal at £1 a ton, selling it to the poor at perhaps 10 shillings a ton, and then spending the resulting income of £12 on further alms. There is no reason to believe that

this was being done, and every reason to believe that, correctly or not, the coal was simply being distributed free of charge.

There is some evidence that the Poor's Land Charity and the Englefield Charity were used interchangeably by the Vestry. We have seen in passing that widows were occasionally helped by the Poor's Land Charity. The Vestry minutes for 1874, for example record that:

It was proposed by the Chairman, seconded by Mr Wheble that Thomas Willmott be elected to be apprenticed from the funds of the Charity. Carried unanimously.

This award is recorded in the Minute Book of the Vestry against the funds of the Poor's Land Charity, written over the top of the deleted words Englefield Charity. It is not possible to confirm this, however, from the badly scrawled charity accounts for 1874-75. Unfortunately casual and slack book-keeping had returned.

By 1874, a new regime of churchwardens was in place. Following a change of vicar in 1872, two new churchwardens, Charles Stephens and Colonel Blandy were first elected in 1873. They served in tandem until 1889, when Colonel Blandy stood down. Charles Stephens served continuously as vicar's warden until 1898, and three or four years later a lych gate was erected at St Peter's as a memorial to his long service.⁹ In the Blandy-Stephens period, there are passing references in the Minutes to the charities but virtually no reporting of charity activity. The Vestry Minutes become scant and scruffy; no apprenticeships are reported at vestry meetings between 1874 and 1890; meetings are very badly attended. It is easy (a little too easy, as we shall see) to conclude that Earley's 'economisers' were in control. Certainly the bankers were (Mr Stephens was for many years a partner in the banking firm of Stephens, Blandy and Co., until it was taken over by Lloyd's Bank in 1899¹⁰). The situation does not seem to have changed much when Colonel Blandy was succeeded by Mr W. W. Cowslade (who served until 1898). The attendances at the vestries in the mid-1890s were as follows: 1893 three; 1894 four (including the vicar and curate); 1895 the same four; 1896 eight. There was little charity activity reported to the vestry in these years, and the major item of business appears to have been a decision not to shift the position of the church organ.

In fact, although the minuting and the accounting during this period of rather more than twenty years was neglectfully done, the work of the Englefield Charity, in both the Widows Branch and the Apprentices Branch, was quietly continuing. The widows are no longer named in the accounts, but most years four of them received 10 shillings. And a number of apprenticeships were entered into, sadly with very little detail given. The only cases where a profession is specified is for an apprentice to Mr George Fox, blacksmith, of Earley (1869) and for an apprentice to Holmes & Son, upholsterers, of central Reading (1874).

It is interesting to note that, by contrast with the Earley Poor's Land Charity and the Englefield Charity, the accounts of Barker's Charity in the *Parish of Earley: charity accounts* (in the same volume) were during this period very carefully kept, with every recipient meticulously and neatly recorded, except for a few years when Colonel Blandy had to keep the record himself. The Barker beneficiaries are listed in alphabetical order, receiving usually either sixpence or a shilling, and there we find familiar names like the widow Kislingbury, who continued to receive a shilling a year from this source until at least 1885. (According to her gravestone in the churchyard of Earley St Peter, she died in 1886 after 43 years of widowhood.) The only explanation for the contrast would seem to be that someone other than the churchwardens had a special interest in Barker's Charity.

At the Easter Vestry of 1891 (held on 6 April), the Vicar made an announcement of some significance:

The Vicar announced to the Vestry that no application had been made for the apprenticing of any boy (under the Englefield Charity) though a notice stating that application might be made to the Vicar or Churchwardens had remained outside the Church door from March 5th up to the present date.

There are no further references to charity-funded apprenticeships in the vestry minutes in the period up to the First World War, although at least two further apprenticeships show in the accounts - in 1899 and 1902. The principal period for apprenticeships was coming to an end.

The nature of the Earley Vestry began to change in 1897-98, when a number of new members, of a reforming tendency, began to make their appearance. These included Reginald Crook Mount, Richard Lea, Arthur Hill (the charities' coal merchant), John Heelas, and Herbert William Dunlop. Mr Dunlop in particular appears to have been almost a firebrand: the Minutes show him to have been especially agitated about the question of reserved seating in the church and the way it could be bought and sold.

In 1898 Mr Cowslade stood down as parish warden and was succeeded by one of his sons, after Mr Mount (with some show of reluctance) stood aside in the son's favour. The tensions in the Vestry between the newcomers and the old guard can be inferred from a deleted passage in the 1899 minutes, when

Mr Dunlop said before electing Mr Cowslade he should like to ask him two questions: (i) whether he approved of the Changes which the vicar had made during the past year [...]

(The clerk was apparently instructed not to minute the second question and to cross this passage through.)

Mr Cowslade reported to this meeting that although it had not been possible to make a full audit of the books, owing to the absence of his fellow churchwarden, the Hon. Eustace Fiennes (who may, from later evidence, have been fighting in

the Boer War), he was able to report “that the various [charitable] funds were in a satisfactory, but not too satisfactory, condition”. It is not difficult to detect an ‘economiser’ tone in this report and especially the beautifully revealing phrase “not too satisfactory”.

It was clear that the sympathies of the new vicar, Rev. Charles Adams, were with the reformers and in 1900 the old guard bowed to the inevitable: Mr Mount became vicar’s warden and Mr Lea parish warden. Their decade in power (Mr Mount moved away from Earley in 1911 and was succeeded by an older and perhaps calmer Mr Dunlop) was marked by many changes, including a large increase in attendance at Vestry meetings with even “non-parishioners and non-ratepayers” being made welcome by Rev. Adams and by his successor Canon Fowler. At the 1903 Easter Vestry, Mr Mount announced some major charity business:

Mr Mount then presented the Charity accounts. He remarked that the Charity Commissioners had decided that the Poor Lands Charity was not an Ecclesiastical Charity. In future, therefore, the accounts would not be presented to the Vestry. The funds of the Englefield Charity had been very greatly improved by the sale of the Cottages and land occupied for many years by Mrs Goddard. The proceeds of the sale had been invested in Consols & would produce nearly £30 a year. The accounts were approved unanimously.

The sale of the Englefield Charity property, which was organised by Messrs Blandy and Blandy after being authorised by the Charity Commissioners, realised £1080. The purchaser was a well known local figure, Mr Avigdor Goldsmid. In October 1902 the trustees of the Englefield Charity purchased consolidated stock (or “consols”) to the value of £1097 15s 2d, at a total cost of £1023 13s 3d. The consols were held for the Charity by the Charity Commission, and dividends were paid quarterly into the Charity’s account at Lloyd’s Bank, Reading. It may be that the trustees were also allowed to invest in other types of stock. A rather worrying note amongst the Charity’s accounts, written on the back of a notice of an election to Wokingham Rural District Council, reads “India Stock: £69 19s 4d: cannot find certificate”.

Also in 1903, the situation of the Earley Poor’s Land Charity was regularised by the Charity Commissioners, who re-established it as a secular charity, with clear terms of reference (described in the following chapter).

The churchwardens saw that if the Earley Poor’s Land Charity could not be regarded as an ecclesiastical charity it was illogical to regard the Englefield Charity as such (although the historical justification for the administration of the Englefield Charity by the churchwardens was perhaps stronger). Some years later, Messrs Mount, Lea, Dunlop and Heelas petitioned the Charity Commissioners to make a new scheme for the Englefield Charity and the new scheme was sealed on 4 July 1911. Although this appeared to mark the separation of the work of the charities from the work of St Peter’s Church, in fact, as we shall see, the links remained strong for some years to come.

NOTES

¹ Charity Commissioners' report ... op.cit.

² See e.g. *Kelly's directory of Berkshire, Bucks and Oxon ... 1907*. London: Kelly's Directories, 1907, p. 76.

³ See Daphne Philips: *op. cit.*, p. 91.

⁴ Information taken from *Parish of Earley: charity accounts*, handwritten volume in the ownership of the Earley Charity.

⁵ Robert Palmer opinion, in *ibid.*

⁶ *Village life and labour* / edited by Raphael Samuel, p.143.

⁷ Berkshire Record Office D/P 191/8/1. The account in the following pages is drawn largely from these handwritten vestry minutes (unnumbered pages, reference by year), supplemented by the *Parish of Earley: charity accounts* (unnumbered pages, reference by charity by year).

⁸ Ernest W. Dormer: *Erleigh Court and its owners*. Reading: G. A. Poynder, 1912, p. 5.

⁹ See *Kelly's directory of Berkshire, Bucks and Oxon ... 1907*, *loc. cit.*

¹⁰ Lesley Hanna, with Chad Hanna: *The story of Earley St Peter's, 1844-1994*. Earley: Earley St Peter's Parochial Church Council, 1994, p. 22.