

Looking After The Poor



Gentleman and beggar.
16th century woodcut

Every generation has had its poor, and society has struggled to find an answer to looking after them. Financing and supporting the impotent or "deserving poor" while making the idle work have been recurring issues over the past millenium.

In medieval England looking after the poor was seen as a Christian duty, reinforced and often administered by the Church. The early Church and monasteries provided care and hospitality for those in need as well as for pilgrims and wayfarers. Within the community, families tended to take care of their own.

For the worldly, religion provided a great motivation: charity was an investment to be rewarded after death; the soul's passage through Purgatory could be hastened by the continuing prayers of the living.

It was common practice for provisions for the poor to be made in wills – gifts of clothing or food might be distributed at the funeral and on the anniversary of the benefactor's death. These local wills are typical:

I doe bequeath unto the poore of the parishe of Hooknorton vi dosen of bread [6 dozen loaves] to be geven at my Funerall Item I give and bequiath unto the poore of Hook Norton the Sume of Twenty shillings of Current English money To be distributed amongst them where is most need

Julian Calcot, widow, 22 October 1580

I give and bequith unto the poore of Hook Norton the Sume of Twenty shillings of
Current English money To be distributed amongst them where is most need
John Parran the Elder, 2 January 1672

Obligations to the poor could be passed down through the ages in land transactions:

Also the said Jno Crocker for himself his Executrs and Assigns covenants and grants to and with ye sd Bp and his Succesrs that he ye sd Jno Crocker & his Assignes shall deliver every year during the said Terme [80 years] granted by this Indent to the Parishrs of Hockenorton aforesd for the time being one quartr of Mastlin [mixed grain] to be distributed to poor people Parishioners of Hockenorton aforesaid at such time of the yeare as it hath been accustomed to be dd heretofore

Leasehold agreement between the Bishop of Oxford and
John Croker of Hook Norton, 14 October 1553

In addition, some wealthy people founded secular charities, as Charles Brandon, Duke of Suffolk and lord of the manor, did in 1522.

The Garret Trust

On 12 May 1522, Brandon gave to Thomas Newman and 11 others a property and garden in the High Street, The Garrett House (between Queen Street and St Peter's).¹ Newman and his colleagues were the "feoffees", or trustees, of this gift which would provide housing and support for the poor for centuries.² The Duke of Suffolk's Charity was specifically "to the use and common advantage" of all the tenants of his manor. The Garrett House was later divided into seven dwellings, such as "the little house in the Garret", "the west end of the Garret House", "the house up in the lane" and so on. Later deeds describe the transfer of usage or authority over this gift until a new trust was set up from the profits gained by the sale of some of the houses attached to the original Garrett House endowment.

The accounts of the feoffees, itemizing the rents and disbursements, including full lists of the tenants of what was known as the Down's Holding, still exist. When the rents were paid, the tenants received some money in return, sometimes with

¹ The present Garrett House on the corner of Queen Street and the High Street was built in the 17th century on part of this site.

² Ed. J D Rusher, Reports of the Commissioners for Enquiring Concerning Charities in the following places... (Banbury, 1826), pp 112–113.

food or drink. In 1771 they had “Cakes and ale at Thomas Scarsbrooks”. Money was spent on the upkeep of the various houses; payment was made to a teacher at a Charity School, or to a Curate for “attending the Sunday School”; a new town pump replaced the old one in 1762.

Other charitable gifts known to have been made to the poor of Hook Norton before 1830 are:

The Bishop of Oxford's Annuity: £11 10s given to the Churchwardens by the lessees of the Bishop of Oxford, Impropiator of the parish. Two guineas were spent on schooling; eight for the provision of coals and corn for the poor; and £1 for new bell ropes

Calcott's Charity: 15 shillings; 10/- to the Minister for a sermon on Boxing Day and 5/- (and the sacrament money) for the poor

Hobbs's Charity: bequeathed in 1810. There is a memorial to this in the Church: “William Hobbs by will in 1810 gave to the Minister and churchwardens 5£ in trust to pay the Interest for ever for the Education of Poor Boys on ye Sabbath day”.³

All this charitable help for the poor was, however, incidental to the main means of looking after the poor in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: poor relief since 1600 had become a public and official local responsibility imposed by the state.

The Old Poor Law

Under the Tudor monarchs, there was an increase in population, inflation and economic uncertainty. Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries and the reformation of the English Church swept away corrupt or cynical practices cloaked as pious charity, but also enriched the royal treasury – and created discontent among the devout. There were uprisings, most notably in the north, and the Tudor monarchs worried about rebellious peasants spreading discontent on a national level.⁴

³ Reports of the Commissioners for Enquiring Concerning Charities, *op cit.* pp 112–113.

⁴ Charles Brandon, Duke of Suffolk, was sent to quell the uprising in Lincolnshire in 1536 but it was followed by rebellion in Yorkshire (The Pilgrimage of Grace) and Cumberland.

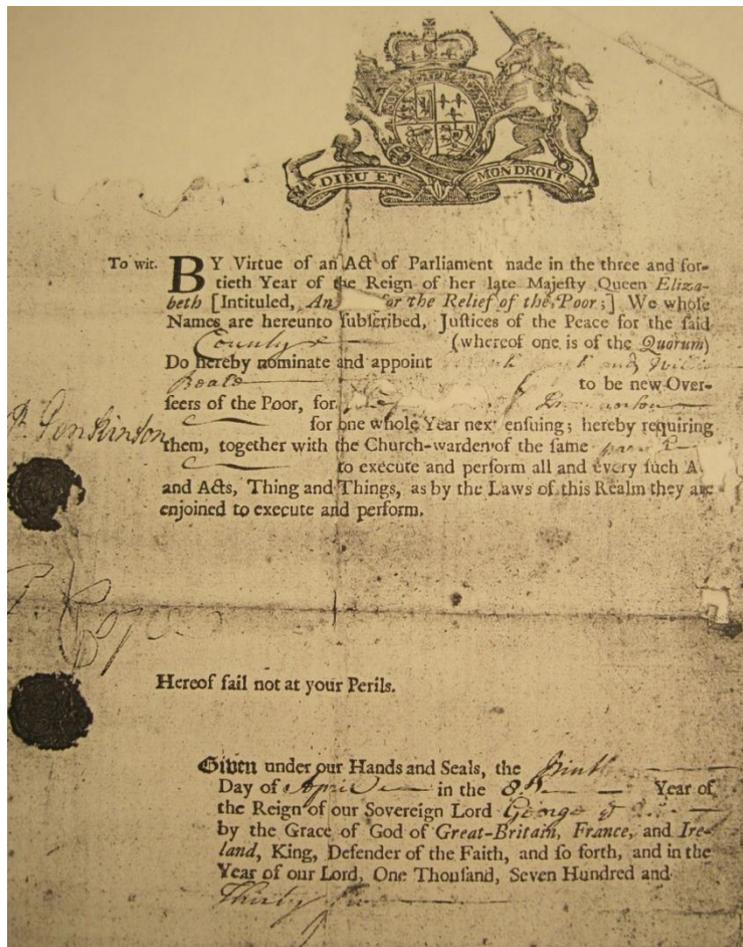
The insecurity of the governing classes under the Tudors led to a series of measures from 1531 onwards placing responsibility for the poor on the parish. Poor law acts of 1597 and 1601 discriminated against "sturdy beggars" (people who were physically capable of work) and vagrancy itself was a crime. The law defined who could claim support and where. Locally elected unpaid overseers of the poor would levy poor rates according to need; the overseers were answerable to the nearest Justices of the Peace, and people who thought they had been unfairly treated had a right of appeal (and used it).

Essentially, landowners were taxed according to the size of their holdings, and the "deserving poor" had to be in physical need to expect help. Deserving or not, there was a stigma attached to poverty. Poor relief was no sinecure; families were supposed to look after their own, neighbours sometimes helped, people begged from door to door in their village. Fathers of illegitimate children were traced and were made to pay maintenance. Landless labourers whose work was seasonal were vulnerable to long periods of unemployment but under the common field system, where everyone owned at least a little farming land and/or common rights (for example, to graze animals on common land or to gather wood or furze for firing), most people were likely to get by in good years. The very poor were exempted from most taxes, if not from the obligation to work on the lord of the manor's land or pay the heriot (giving up an animal or fee on succeeding to your deceased parent's land). Most of these rights and duties were flexible; manor stewards or the village jury (an elected council) might waive them.

Later refinements of the poor laws included the Act of Settlement in 1662, just after the restoration of Charles II. Anyone who could not prove residency in a parish could be removed to what was determined to be his legal settlement. Normally, the place of birth was a person's legal settlement, but residency could be achieved under certain conditions, for example having been in service for more than a year or owning property worth at least £10 per annum. A system of settlement certificates grew up; churchwardens and overseers sometimes acknowledged in writing a parish's continuing responsibility for someone going to live or work elsewhere. Disputes were taken to court. There could be hostility when strangers passing through – legitimately or otherwise – were taken ill or were incapable of moving on.

Heavily pregnant women were unwelcome as their children might become a burden on the parish where they gave birth. There are accounts of women in labour being carted to the next parish: anything to avoid the parish being liable to pay poor relief for years to come. Abandoned children were cared for by the parish, but would be apprenticed out as soon as possible, probably at the age of seven. [See "Passages in Village Life", in the *Fictional History* section, for some illustrations of living under the poor laws.]

The Overseers of the Poor



The Overseers of the Poor were two local men, appointed on an annual basis to work in collaboration with the Church Warden. Their role was to set a local levy, the poor rate, which would provide some relief for the poor, usually in their own homes, "out relief". Tudor reforms had provided for the impotent poor to have cottages erected for their use, and it is possible that such cottages were erected in Hooky

before the eventual establishment of the workhouse in the late eighteenth century. For some time the overseers rented accommodation for the poor within the Garrett House or Town House.

In Hook Norton poverty was exacerbated by parliamentary enclosure in 1774. Land in the common fields was re-allocated. Surveyors and adjudicators were appointed to supervise the consolidation of land holdings, the laying out of roads, and the actual enclosure of the new farms by hedges. The costs of all this were shared out according to the amount of land held by individuals: but that meant that some people could only meet these costs by selling what little land they owned. The loss of common rights hit the poor hardest, and some compensation was made in the form of an allocation of 40 acres as common land where furze for firing could still be gathered. Trustees, including the churchwardens and overseers, were appointed to administer the property. The Heath Allotment Trust still exists and now manages modern allotments for today's villagers.

In *Children of Dissent* Pauline Ashbridge describes the devastating effects of enclosure on Hook Norton families, and analyses the way the village tried to support the landless poor. Poor rates shot up and were sometimes imposed more than once a year. There are photocopies of their accounts in Hook Norton Museum (the originals were sent to the Oxford Record Office, now the Oxfordshire History Centre).

The workhouse that had fallen into disuse had to be refurbished. What evidence there is seems to point to the Hook Norton Workhouse being a series of small cottages acquired as needed by the Overseers of the Poor. The lane that runs down beside East End Farmhouse (now simply called East End) was once called Workhouse Lane but the workhouse cottages have long since been demolished.

Later the management of the workhouse was privatized at a price calculated on the average number of inmates. In 1789 the workhouse was "set" to John Dee at £170, and the next year at £180. In 1796 it was set to John Phipps, shoemaker, at £315. According to Margaret Dickins, this procedure was described by the Poor Law

Commissioners as a “desperate expedient” which shewed the “hopeless state of a parish, far gone in pauperism.”⁵

1812 & 1813	Persons In the Workhouse	21
1813 & 1814	Persons In Ditto	24
1814 & 1815	Persons In Ditto	25
1812 & 1813	Persons Out Relief	56
1813 & 1814	Persons Out Ditto	58
1814 & 1815	Persons Out Ditto	63

Accounts show that the number of people in the workhouse rose but that there were more people receiving relief in their own homes.

In 1803 the Poor Rate in Hook Norton was 6s 6 ½ d [33p] in the pound: the rates amounted to £1,203 11s. 8d. In 1816–17 there were eight levies, each at 12d [5p] per pound. In 1818 there were 11 levies. In 1812 to 1815 there were respectively 21, 24, and 25 persons in the workhouse, and 56, 58, and 63 persons on Parish Relief.⁶

The Conditions of an Agreement between the Parish of Hook-Norton and the Governor of the Workhouse of the said Parish.

The Governor to find the Poor of the Parish of Hook Norton with all clothing & maintenance for out & in paupers, excepting sheets, Blankets, & Bedding. To be answerable for all pays, excepting broken limbs, pestilential fevers, Small-pox and Lunatics.

The Above agreement was approved & signed by the Committee of Inhabitants met by an adjourned Vestry on latter Monday March 30th 1807 at the Parish Church.

⁵ Dickins, *History of Hook Norton* (Banbury, 1928), p 155

⁶ In 1811 the population of the village was 1,129.

In 1807 it was Benjamin Somerton who took charge. He soon complained that he was expected to pay all the running costs of the workhouse out of his fee, and a compromise was reached whereby he was to provide clothing for the poor, out and in, but not to find bedlinen; he was not responsible for payments for broken limbs, fevers, smallpox and lunatics. Everything else fell within his remit. For this he would receive £11 10s a week. This was significantly more than that given to his predecessors, but then the number of poor had risen too.⁷

The poor cost Hook Norton a fortune: outlay rose, for example from £1,062 in 1815–16 to £2,248 in 1818–19. According to Pauline Ashbridge, Hook Norton spent more on the poor in 1816 than Chipping Norton, Bloxham, Deddington and Enstone and as the county trend dropped, Hook Norton's costs continued to rise. Ashbridge suggests that the villagers felt strong sympathy with and responsibility for the poor.⁸

The parish could take its own initiative. For example, the Speenhamland system (named after a village in Berkshire) was a response to rising food prices caused in part by the Napoleonic Wars. The intention was to top up the income of the poor based on a sliding scale of means and needs, the price of bread and the number of dependents in a family – rather like the more recent Working Tax Credit. Not surprisingly this system was unpopular with the farmers and better off people in the community. Nineteenth-century reformers dismissed it as a failure.

However, in hard times landowners agreed to hire pauper labour subsidised by the poor rate. There were local projects to give the unemployed work, for example on road repairs. Flour and coal were bought to be sold cheaply to the poor. The parish would even subsidise emigration, a short-term outlay in anticipation of long-term savings.

The New Poor Law

Eventually, Parliament made the greatest reform of all by passing the Poor Law Amendment Act in 1834. The new poor law took responsibility for poor relief out of the parish, founded the poor law unions (groups of parishes) and formalised the

⁷ *Children of Dissent*, Pauline Ashbridge, Kershaw Publishing, 2008, p 128

⁸ *Ibid*, p 145–146

rules governing workhouses. Hook Norton was allocated to the Banbury Union which covered north Oxfordshire and nearby areas of Northamptonshire and Warwickshire (and Shenington which was then an outlying parish of Gloucestershire). The closer Chipping Norton Workhouse covered part of western Oxfordshire, including Swerford and Great Rollright. The regional workhouses replaced local care for the poor, though parishes were obliged to contribute to the running costs.

The Guardian;
OR,
MONTHLY POOR LAW REGISTER,
FOR THE DISTRICT COMPRISED IN THE UNIONS OF
BANBURY, BICESTER, BRACKLEY, CHIPPING-NORTON, DAVENTRY, NORTHAMPTON,
SHIPSTON, SOUTHAM, STRATFORD-ON-AVON, WITNEY, AND WOODSTOCK.
PRINTED AND PUBLISHED BY WILLIAM POTTS, PARSON'S STREET, BANBURY.

No. 1. THURSDAY, APRIL 5, 1838. Price 2d.

ADDRESS.	BANBURY.				COALS.—Moiru and Wednesbury, 2½s. 6d. ton.
	Number of inmates in the Workhouse.				March 22nd. On an application from the Master and Matron, for an augmentation of their salary, the following motion was carried. That the Guardians, while declining any addition to the salary of the Master of the Workhouse, are desirous of giving him the advantage of his services; they therefore place on record their testimony to the very satisfactory manner in which Mr. and Mrs. Gate have, respectively, discharged the duties of their offices, since the House was opened. March 29th. The following Resolution was passed. That the terms of office of the elected Members of this Board expiring this day, they cannot separate without placing on record, their sense of, and cordial thanks for, the diligence and valuable services of the Chairman, and Vice-Chairman, and believing their re-election will not only be acceptable, but important to the Board in future, the present Guardians respectfully request that, should the services of the Chairman and Vice-Chairman be again called for, they may not be withheld. A Vote of Thanks was also moved to Mr.
	Week ending March				
	16th	19th	20th	27th	
Able Men	9	4	3	4	
Temporarily Disabled	9	10	7	6	
Old or Infirm	24	24	20	21	
Youths from 9 to 16	40	32	34	31	
Boys from 2 to 9	31	24	25	26	
Women, Able	21	17	16	15	
Temporarily Disabled	8	8	8	8	
Old or Infirm	23	20	20	20	
Girls from 9 to 16	20	19	17	18	
Girls from 2 to 9	22	31	26	23	
Infants	13	13	13	11	
Total	227	202	180	184	
Born	0	1	0	0	
Dead	3	4	2	2	
The Deaths have been, of					
Infants					4
Aged Women					4
Men					1
Boys from 2 to 9					2
Total					11

By 1835 the Union Workhouse in Banbury was active. (The *Guardian* newspaper was launched a little later, to record and inform the public about the New Poor Law and how it was operating in Banbury. It later became the *Banbury Guardian*.) Nineteenth-century workhouses segregated the inmates by sex and age, so that families were split up. A work regime was imposed; the residents of the workhouse could only leave the premises with specific permission and wearing the workhouse uniform. Children in the Workhouse would be given a basic education and given apprenticeships. It seemed more like a prison than a charitable institution, and the poor dreaded being sent to the workhouse.

Oxford MP and newspaper proprietor Frank Gray visited Banbury Workhouse in disguise.

He was initially touched to be greeted by a porter who said that his trousers were not thick enough for the weather and he was provided with a luxurious bath. However, his later treatment failed to live up to this and he ultimately concluded that, "They do not desire to be cruel. They have simply lost interest in the unending procession of degraded men who present a problem which they do not understand and for which they have no remedy."⁹

In 1836 a Vestry Meeting in Hook Norton agreed to sell the village workhouse and in 1837 it was turned into nine cottages, rented out on an annual basis. An oven house was built. These houses were sold by the parish in 1871.¹⁰ Census returns for the Banbury Workhouse show few of its inhabitants came from Hook Norton, though, perhaps ironically, the privately owned Lunatic Asylum in Hook Norton had a high percentage of pauper inmates from the Banbury Workhouse. They also show that the village continued to help its own. In 1851, for example, there were 42 villagers listed as paupers. That year there were eight residents from Hook Norton in the Banbury Workhouse, four of whom were under 12 years old.

Other sources of support

Private charity for the poor still continued alongside the New Poor Law. The old Garrett Trust survived, having long adjusted to the public system of poor relief. In the 1760s, under the Old Poor Law, the feoffees had let one of the Trust's houses, "Horsley's house", to the Overseers of the Poor, who were also paying rent in 1770 for the Town House (or Garrett House). However, the Overseers eventually bought the Workhouse and their contribution to the Down's Holding was lost. Many of the individual tenements fell into disrepair and were sold. Thereafter the feoffees distributed the income derived among the poor. Eventually the capital was placed in the Banbury Savings Bank and from 1838 half-crown payments were made to the poor twice yearly.¹¹ By 1928 the capital was £176 15s 4d, with a yearly income of £4 8s 4d and was administered by the Parish Council which had taken over several charities including the Suffolk Charity.

⁹ *The Other Oxford* by Charles Fenby (Lund-Humphries,1970) quoted in <http://www.workhouses.org.uk/Banbury/>

¹⁰ *History of Hook Norton*, op cit, p156

¹¹ *History of Hook Norton*, op cit pp 174–5, 177

Hook Norton Local History Group

There were other forms of support, including religious charities. Hook Norton had always been a centre for dissenters. Elizabeth Busby cites "Relief by Quakers" rather than Pauper in her return for the 1851 census:

19										
Parish or Township of		Ecclesiastical District of		City or Borough of		Town of		Village of		
Hook Norton										
Name of Street, Place, or Road, and Name or No. of House	Name and Surname of each Person who abode in the house, on the Night of the 30th March, 1851		Relation to Head of Family	Condition	Age of		Rank, Profession, or Occupation	Where Born	Whether Blind, or Deaf, and Dumb	
					Male	Female				
	Chas. Ricketts	Son	M	17		Ag Lab	Dean Hook Norton			
	Ann Ricketts	Daughter	F	11		Scholar	Do Do			
	John Salmon	Lodger	M	51		Ag Lab	Do Sandcliffe			
78	Charlotte Coffe	Head	M	66		Greener & Weaver	Do Hook Norton			
79	Elizabeth Busby	Head	F	71		Relief by Quakers	Worcester			
80	Ann Harrington	Head	F	52		Farmers, 100 acres and 1/2 dist	Dean Sandcliffe			
	Ann Harrington	Daughter	F	36		Farmers Daughter	Do Hook Norton			
	P. Harrington	Daughter	F	26		Do Do	Do Do			
	E. Harrington	Daughter	F	23		Do Do	Do Do			
	W. Harrington	Son	M	16		Do Son	Do Do			
81	James Gilkes	Head	M	56		Shoe Maker	Do Swerford			
	Elizabeth Gilkes	Wife	F	56			Do Chipping Norton			
	J. Gilkes	Son	M	15		Ag Lab	Do Hook Norton			
	Daniel Walford	Lodger	M	70		Annuitant (Widow)	Do Do			
	George Cogbill	Do	M	23		Ag Lab	Do Do			
	Thomas Cogbill	Do	M	22		Ag Lab	Do Do			
82	John Sumner	Head	M	51		Ag Lab	Do Hook Norton			
	Elizabeth Sumner	Wife	F	38			Glor 4 th Oxington			
	Chas. Sumner	Son	M	13		Ag Lab	Dean Hook Norton			
	Sophia Sumner	Daughter	F	11			Do Do			
Total of Houses	I 4	U	B	Total of Persons ...		10	10			

Various clubs or friendly societies came into being, paying an annual bonus of clothing or fuel to the people who saved with them: but, of course, people had to be in work to pay their dues. The nascent trade unions drew subscriptions, again from working men, but were not always successful in providing long term relief. Benefactors like Lord Talbot made an annual gift of coal. Perhaps it was on such an occasion that Relieving Officer George James Dew commented on a collection of coal from a Banbury depot.

*June 10 1870....Yesterday there actually came from Hook Norton to Banbury a team of 30 men with a waggon to take back coal; & these were all men who were out of work. It seems certainly a curious transformation from men to horses, but in all probability it was done to serve some other end beside employing the men to draw coal....*¹²

¹² Ed. Pamela Horn, *Oxfordshire Village Life: The Diaries of George James Dew (1846–1928)*, Relieving Officer, Abingdon, 1983, p 14

The Welfare State

As the twentieth century dawned, the Liberal government that came to power in 1906 introduced a series of reforms, including child benefits, pensions and labour exchanges. The National Insurance Act of 1911 covered sickness benefit, medical care and maternity benefit, and unemployment benefit. In 1913 the term "workhouses" was dropped in favour of poor law institutions. In 1929 all poor law authorities were abolished and "public assistance" became a local council responsibility.¹³ During the Second World War Liberal politician William Beveridge was entrusted with the task of highlighting priorities for post-war Britain. To combat the five giants – poverty, disease, ignorance, squalor and idleness – that threatened to impede reconstruction, Beveridge recommended a welfare state with social security, a national health service, education for all, council housing and full employment. After the war, a series of acts of parliament introduced the foundations for what became known as the welfare state.

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Further Reading

The Chantry Certificates; The Edwardian Inventories of Church Goods (1919), Edited by Rose Graham from Transcripts by T. Craib (Oxfordshire Record Society, 1919).

Ed. J.D. Rusher, *Reports of the Commissioners for Enquiring Concerning Charities in the following places...* (Banbury, 1826).

Ed. Pamela Horn, *Oxfordshire Village Life: The Diaries of George James Dew (1846–1928), Relieving Officer* (Abingdon, 1983).

Pauline Ashbridge, *Children of Dissent* (London, 2008).

<http://www.workhouses.org.uk/>

¹³ The Banbury Workhouse building provided an infirmary built in 1870 that subsequently became the Neithrop hospital, the forerunner to the Horton Hospital. The site of the old workhouse has been built over.