



Home :: Pupil activity sheets :: Teacher info sheets :: Contact Us/Bookings :: Links
English :: Maths :: History :: Science :: Art and Design :: English as a foreign language

Poverty and Poor Relief in the Sixteenth Century

As one of the collectors of the poor [Thomas Wells](#) would have been responsible for assessing competing claims for parish funds from those who were unable to support themselves. The growth in population from the 1520s coupled with rapid price inflation meant that there were more people living in poverty and a growing problem of vagrancy.

The threat to public order posed by the increase in population were noted by social commentators like William Harrison who observed (in 1577) 'Some ... do grudge at the great increase in people in these days, thinking a necessary brood of cattle far better than a superfluous augmentation of mankind'. The response of government was the promulgation of a succession of poor laws beginning in 1536 with the requirement that churchwardens collect and account for weekly voluntary alms within the parish. Over the next decade some towns and cities replaced voluntary collections with compulsory poor rates. Legislation of 1552 moved towards the introduction of a national poor rate by requiring local registers of the needy poor and records of the weekly contributions of parishioners. In 1563 further legislation imposed fines on those refusing to be collectors for the poor and presentment before justices of the peace of those refusing to contribute to the poor. In 1572 this 'voluntary' system of poor relief finally became compulsory: henceforth parishioners were to be 'taxed and assessed' to provide for the poor and each parish was to appoint overseers of the poor to ensure its distribution to appropriate recipients.

The poor in sixteenth century England were not seen as a homogenous group, but were instead divided into two, broad, categories: those who deserved charitable relief, and those who did not. In rural communities those deemed to be deserving of poor relief were small in number. They were individuals or families who were resident within the community as opposed to migrants or vagrants from elsewhere. The commonest recipients were widows. Landless labourers might require assistance during the winter months, when they were unable to earn a living from agricultural work. Others might require occasional assistance as a result of sickness or accident. Dependency on poor relief was also linked to the life cycle with the very young and very old making up a substantial proportion of recipients. During their year as collectors Thomas Wells and William Bassett spent a total of 25s 4d on needy cases including 6s for a surgeon 'for healing of Richard Ebsted's leg', 12d 'to the relief of Delton's wife and his children being sick', 18d to 'Holland's widow', 18d to 'father Bugges' and 5s 6d to 'Arnold for the relief of his sick wife'. We do not know how many applicants for poor relief Wells and Bassett turned away.

As the sixteenth century progressed the punishment for vagrancy became increasingly harsh. In 1531 an act was passed which required vagrants to be whipped and then returned either to the place where they were born, or to where they had last lived for three years. Beggars were to be licensed by the justices of the peace or face prosecution. In 1572 the act which instituted compulsory poor rates also required vagrants to be imprisoned and tried at the Quarter Sessions or the Court of Assize. The punishment for being convicted of vagrancy was whipping and burning through the ear for a first offence and hanging for a second offence. These punishments were evidently considered too severe and whipping was restored in 1598. The Chiddingstone collectors made occasional payments to vagrants – in 1567 they paid 4d to a 'poor wayfaring woman' – but most of the vagrants who turned up in the parish are only known to us because their deaths are recorded in the burial register: a 'way faring woman whose name could not be known' buried in December 1570, a 'strange man, a beggar' buried in March 1590 and 'a poor maid that went about', buried in January 1591. It is no coincidence that they all died during the winter months. The transience of this group is reflected in the fact that their names were, for the most part, unknown.