THE POOR OF OTHAM AND NEARBY PARISHES: THE COXHEATH POOR HOUSE

HUGH VAUX

A study of the parish records gives some insight into the lives of the poor in Otham and a comparison can be made with the surviving accounts of the nearby villages which built and used the Coxheath Poor House. These parishes all border the county town of Kent, Maidstone, and the majority, in 1836, joined the Maidstone Union. This essay covers the years from 1597 until 1834 when the new Poor Law Amendment Act was introduced.

The parishes were Linton, Loose, East and West Farleigh, Hunton, Barming, Detling, Chart Sutton, Bearsted, Otham and Boughton Monchelsea (**Fig. 1**).[1] They were mixed agricultural communities growing fruit and hops while, in some, ragstone quarries, a fulling mill and, at a later date, paper mills and the military camp at Coxheath, provided extra employment. All were dependent on the market at Maidstone. Of these parishes, only Loose and Otham have any surviving seventeenth-century overseers' accounts while Bearsted has records from 1566-80 but none for the following two centuries.

Is there any means of knowing what was meant by the word 'poor'? When the overseers of Detling compiled a list of their poor in 1699 and the disbursements which they were given, they provided a brief glimpse of how the problem was viewed:[2]

> Widow Wheatear beinge blinde and having foure children we allow her weekly payment foure shillings a weeke, besides paying her Rent and finding her wood and cloathes for her children.
> Jeremiah Hadlow, by reason of a Lame hand, we allow him, his house rent, and wood for burning and cloathes for himselfe.
> Widdow Kemsley, being Ancient, we allow her wood for her fyreing.

A hundred years earlier the poor were considered to be 'all such persons maryed or unmaryed as havinge no means to mayntane them, use no ordinary and dayly Trade of life to get there lyvinge by'.[3] The Elizabethans had placed the responsibility for the care of the poor on the

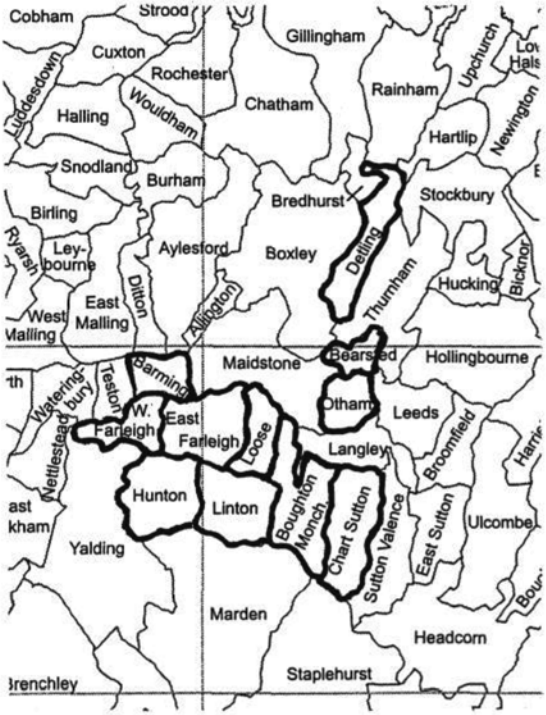

Fig. 1. The parishes around Maidstone owning the Coxheath Poor House.

parish. The legislation which culminated in the Poor Law Act 1597/8 and the Poor Law Relief Act of 1601, established a hierarchy of control between the Privy Council, the Justices of the Peace and the officers of the vestry – of whom it was the overseer who carried the principal responsibility for the poor and who had to keep accounts to be approved by his fellows and by the justices.

One of the recurring problems for those in authority was how to deal with the 'able-bodied' poor, the care of the 'impotent' only requiring some form of sustenance in cash or kind. One solution introduced at the end of the sixteenth century was the building of poor houses to provide work for those who would be otherwise idle and a drain on resources. It may be this which resulted in the bequest of Thomas Hendley who 'gave a house and also land, the fiftene for to pay, and to relieve the people pore of this parisshe for aye' and which is recorded on the only brass memorial in Otham Church, dated 1590.

What was the extent of poverty within the parish? There are few details during the first forty years of the seventeenth century but the names of individual villagers of Otham, considered to be poor, first appear in the burial registers.[4] From 1598 until his death in 1625, John Broome the Rector left more details of his parishioners than many of the later incumbents. The burial register gives no ages but does indicate whether the person buried was a child or infant. From 1598-1625, there are 115 recorded burials in Otham of which 17 are stated to be of poor people. During the same period 36 infants and children were buried and if these are excluded, it means that 22 per cent of the adult parishioners were considered to be poor. A quarter of the family names of this group of paupers appear in later overseers' accounts between 1642 and 1666.[5] This suggests, at least, some ability of the most deprived families to survive even in a time of great hardship due to dearth of food and outbreaks of pestilence.

While harvests had been good for the twenty years to 1620, after 1621 they became increasingly poor, a cycle which lasted for thirty years, with a rise in the price of cereals and accompanied by increasing outbreaks of plague.[6] In 1625 over 14,000 people died of this disease in London.[7] During this period the Otham parish registers show fluctuations in the numbers of baptisms and burials. In 1629 and 1634 there was a doubling in the number of burials compared with the average for the decade either side but the numbers of burials each year were small, making it difficult to draw any conclusions. However, in Bearsted four out of fifteen burials in 1625 were blamed on plague and although the number of burials in 1634 was more than double the average, there is no mention of cause.[8] Loose registers show a doubling of burials in the three years 1624-6.[9]

The overseers' accounts for Otham run from 1642-1836 with a gap from 1666-1713 and another from 1768-1806.[10] A little more information can be gleaned for this period from the Loose accounts which extend from 1615-1836 with a break from 1800-13.[11] In the twenty years between 1615 and 1635, the annual disbursements in Loose varied from £7-9 except in 1624 and 1625 when they increased by 50 per cent and again in 1630 when they nearly doubled. But even then the numbers of people receiving relief was small, three regulars and six occasionals, a widow receiving 1*s*. weekly and a man with a family 2*s*. Some fuel was provided but there are no records of food or clothing.

How did the poor compare with fellow parishioners? At the start of the seventeenth century the agricultural labourer, who was little better off, was earning about 8*d*. on the days that he worked although there was extra during the harvest period.[12] Between 1640 and 1650 the purchasing power of his wage had fallen to 'little more than a fourth of his grandfather's'.[13] But if he was lucky he had a small patch of ground to cultivate and the help of his family.

Seven poor people are named in the Otham overseers' record of 1646

when £3 18*s*., out of a total budget of £6 8*s*. 10*d*., went on providing seven loads of wood for the poor.[14] Another £1 6*s*. was spent on rents for Widow Price and Widow Usher but few cash payments were made, the most being a total of 9*s*. to Widow Usher, spread over twelve months. Six other poor received between 1*s*. and 4*s*. during the year. Thus only seven of the villagers (the number of their dependants is not known) were considered poor in 1647, and none received continuous relief. In Loose, the disbursements for the same year were £7 6*s*. 7*d*. out of which one widow received continuous care and six other people were given occasional payments and fuel; a very similar situation.

It was not easy for the overseer to predict expenses. In Otham, these rose suddenly from £6 8*s*. 10*d*. in 1646 to £29 7*s*. 9*d*. in 1649 and the level remained high until 1655 before falling gradually to £10 19*s*. in 1665. Any surplus or deficit was carried over to the next account but if expenses were badly adrift a second rate was made half way through the year, in October. These changes are reflected in the Loose accounts but not to the same extent. According to the diaries of Ralph Josselin, vicar of Earl's Colne in Essex, written between 1646-51, the causes were yet more bad weather, bad harvests and outbreaks of disease.[15] In addition there was a major problem with increasing prices and the reduced purchasing power of wages set against the unstable background of the Civil Wars.

How did these problems affect Otham? By 1651, all, except one of the eight families in Otham receiving occasional aid four years previously, were having regular payments throughout the whole year. In some cases this was a constant amount, for example, Widow Usher receiving 1*s*. 6*d*. per week while others were paid according to means, 1*s*. or 6*d*. a week. This may be illustrated by the case of Widow Oldwood who had had to look after her husband, Ralph, during a three-year illness in which time he was in receipt of 3*s*. a week. In 1650 their financial burden was eased because their son, Ralph, was bound apprentice to James Warde, the current overseer, he being allowed £1 19*s*. 4*d*. for the purpose. The apprenticeship scheme was the usual solution for coping with the cost of feeding and supporting children who could not be cared for by their family. Ralph and Elinor Oldwood had six children and Ralph junior was 16 years old at the time, three older children had probably left home but there still remained William, aged twelve and nine year old Mary. When Ralph died, the parish paid for his funeral expenses and his widow subsequently received 1*s*. 6*d*. per week. In the summer of 1651, her parish payments were reduced to 6*d*. a week when she moved to live in a house at the other end of the village and gradually became self-sufficient, receiving no more parish support except for one payment of 1*s*. in 1653 because she was sick. In fact, in 1654, she appears to have been usefully employed, 'pd to goode ouldwood for making ould rafes briches.' She lived another twenty-nine years and was buried in 1683.

The money for poor relief had to be raised within the parish. The overseers with the help of the churchwardens and the rest of the vestry carried out this responsibility by setting and collecting the annual rate. Their basic assessment tool was the market value of property which in turn determined a rent based on the size and quality of the land, hopland being more valuable. Cannan points out that in a community where agriculture was carried out by nearly uniform methods this was probably as fair a process as any and 'provided the convenience of something arithmetical to go upon'.[16]

The assessment and rental figures for Otham remained constant between 1642 and 1665 and they were used to set an annual rate at so many pence in the pound to cover the expected expenses of the overseers for the coming year.[17] The rate varied from 1*d.* in the pound in 1645 to 8*d.* in the pound in the 1650s and reducing to 4*d.* in the next decade. It was the occupier of the property who paid the rate and not the owner. In addition, from 1642-5, a sum was paid according to 'ability' which was a rather arbitrary figure related to the worth of the individual. This was a remnant of the way in which alms had been assessed in the previous century.[18] Thus the 'ability' of Henry Toke, a doctor of medicine, was assessed at 5*s.* 3*d.* whereas the amount for Thomas Fludd, the principal landowner, was 3s. 10*d.* This was changed to a fixed figure, in 1646, for 'stock' which represented movables, usually at half the rental rate, to the subsequent advantage of Dr Toke who had little land.

How did the two parishes of Otham and Loose compare with each other in the second half of the seventeenth century? A national tax on lands, rents, fees, goods and merchandise in 1662, of 6*d.* in the pound on landlords and 1*d.* on tenants, assessed Loose at £12 8*s.* 4*d.* and Otham at £8 19*s.* 2*d.* while Maidstone was £145 19*s.* 6*d.*[19] The assessments for the Hearth Tax which was levied throughout the county between 1662 and 1688,[20] suggest that the population of Loose was about 50 per cent larger than Otham. The records of 1664 and 1671 for both parishes list those who paid and those who were given exemption, the latter amounting to nearly 30 per cent of the households.[21] The exempt were those whose houses were worth less than 20*s.* in annual rent or contained less than £10 in moveable goods, together with those excused the rate for poor relief. Three of the twelve exempt in Otham were receiving continuous poor relief in 1664, around 7 per cent of all the names in the assessment, each receiving between 6*d.* and 1*s.* 6*d.* weekly. A roughly similar proportion in Loose received regular care, four out of the twenty exempt, 6 per cent of the total. In the 1671 tax assessment, the numbers of those on 'constant alms' were noted in all the parishes except three, Bearsted, East Farleigh and Otham. These ranged from 16 per cent of the recorded persons in Hunton and West Farleigh to 3 per cent in Loose.

Rents, at this time, were paid for some of the poor, usually £1 yearly

but varying between 12*s*. and 30*s*. Fuel and some clothes were additional benefits with occasional food for the sick. There is little evidence of provision of work by the parish for the able-bodied except for young females who could care for the elderly or sick in return for some meagre payment. Widow Baxley of Loose with two small children was initially allowed 1*s*. a week but two years later was being paid £12 annually to look after William Mason who was 'bed ridd' and allowed 5*s*. weekly by the parish to finance this.[22]

Wages were set for the whole district. In 1669, the magistrates in Maidstone assessed the labourer's daily wage in summer at 14*d*., or 7*d*. with meat, and more at harvest, while in winter it was 10*d*., or 5*d*. with meat.[23] Despite poor harvests and rising prices, especially in the last decade of the century,[24] wages remained unchanged, the labourer's basic wages probably amounted to £15 to £16 a year, depending on the weather, sickness and the luck of the individual.

Gregory King, writing at the end of the seventeenth century, calculated that in 1688, nationally, labouring people and outservants received, on average, an annual income of £15 (with an average household of 3½ persons) while cottagers and paupers received £6 10*s*. (with an average household size of 3¼). He thought that the annual expense per head in the labourer's household was £4 12*s*. and in the pauper's £2 5*s*.[25]

The last years of the century seem to have been reasonably prosperous for Maidstone, at a time of increasing trade and gentrification which attracted more people to the town.[26] But this produced problems for the poor who, migrating there in hope of work, were to find inadequate facilities and, in consequence, to need relief. Nationally, a growing population that was becoming increasingly mobile in its search for work was looked on as a threat by the authorities and as a result the Settlement Act of 1662 was introduced.[27] Slack points out that this was essentially an 'Act for Removal'.[28]

The idea of 'belonging' to a particular place had been in existence for several hundred years and the new Act made the place of settlement responsible for relief. Under the new legislation an undesirable could be removed if he or she had no prospect of work within forty days of arrival and had no certificate from their home parish guaranteeing support in case of need. The Loose overseers recorded obtaining warrants on five occasions between 1690 and 1700 to remove individuals, mainly women and children.

The problem of settlement is illustrated by the case of John Fishenden in 1667. Clearly neither Otham nor the neighbouring parish of Leeds wanted him and the matter had to be settled in court:

> Upon debate of the matters and difference betweene the parishioners of Otham and the parishioners of Leeds concerning John ffishenden It is

> ordered by this Court that the said ffishenden be sent to Otham and that ye church wardens and overseers of Otham are hereby required to receive him into their parish and provide for him according to law.[29]

Fishenden was still living in Otham in 1671 when he was exempted payment of the Hearth Tax.

More records have survived from the eighteenth century. Of the parishes which later combined to establish the Coxheath Poor House, four, apart from Otham and Loose, have overseers' records surviving from the early eighteenth century; Detling from 1699, Linton from 1701, Hunton from 1712 and East Farleigh from 1715.[30]

There is a gap in the Otham overseers' accounts between 1666 and 1713 but weekly payments to the poor remained the same during that time. For both the ordinary and the skilled labourer, wages which were assessed regularly by the justices of the peace at the Quarter Sessions in Maidstone, show no change in the rate of pay from 1686-1722[31] and for the unskilled labourer, no change from 1669. During this time, the overseers expenses in Otham had roughly trebled from £10 19*s*. in 1665 to £29 6*s*. 3*d*. in 1715. The number receiving relief was the same, three, each still paid 1*s*. 6*d*. weekly but now receiving payments on a regular basis. One of them was to a blind boy who needed clothing and who also received teaching from his 'master' at 15*s*. for two quarters.[32] The overseer paid a doctor £2 12*s*. to attend another villager but, in this year, 25 per cent of the expenses went on pursuing Ffran Sparks and the putative father of her child in order to force them to marry which was cheaper than maintaining a bastard on the parish. It was regular relief and these extras which put the costs up.

From 1670-1713 the records of the Loose overseers show a steady rise in disbursements; from £8 9*s*. 2*d*. for 1669 to £42 7*s*. 0*d*. in 1680 where they continued to hover for the next seventy years until rising rapidly again at the end of the eighteenth century. These fluctuations were largely related to the number of poor receiving constant relief. Five regulars together with other temporary expenses, resulted in costs of £43 1*s*. in 1703. In 1710, ten paupers caused the bill to rise to £65 9*s*. 6*d*. but four years later this dropped back to £46 3*s*. 10*d*. when there were only six again. Swings in the expenses are mirrored in the rates which were raised to pay them.

Writers at the end of the seventeenth century were starting to blame the attitude of the poor who, they thought, were abusing the relief system by not working sufficiently hard. When they had sufficient for basic living, it was believed, they would rather have leisure than cash. They would prefer idleness and drunkenness to work.[33] This was hardly the situation in Loose where, in 1710, out of ten paupers, six were 'ancient' men and woman, one girl was a 'naturell and unable to provide for herself,' one a cripple, one lame and one a widow with ten children. None were able-bodied men.

The relative sizes of the populations of the villages may be compared in the table below. The figures in brackets have been adjusted to try and reflect the actual numbers[34] but these have to remain very approximate. However, they do suggest a doubling in the number of the inhabitants between the end of the seventeenth century and 1800 with a further large increase in the years to 1831. The population of all the parishes grew through the eighteenth century and this is reflected in the rising rates and disbursements which varied considerably year by year.

TABLE 1. THE POPULATION OF THE PARISHES.[35]

	Hearth Tax		National Census	
	1664	1671	1801	1831
Linton	78 (260)	82 (273)	590	723
Loose	63 (210)	60 (200)	668	882
West Farleigh	33 (110)	27 (90)	244	392
East Farleigh	65 (216)	71 (236)	642	1461
Detling	52 (173)	49 (163)	253	372
Barming	31 (103)	32 (106)	328	565
Otham	42 (140)	41 (136)	277	344
Boughton Mon	102 (340)	96 (320)	712	1025
Bearsted	62 (206)	82 (273)	294	594
Hunton	53 (177)	41 (136)	583	765
Chart Sutton	70 (233)	65 (216)	706	1144

The years 1725 to 1730 were bad times for everyone, both nationally and over much of Europe, with epidemics, bad weather and harvest failure.[36] Reflecting these widespread problems, marriages in Otham fell to a third and baptisms to a half of the average for the decades on either side of this period while the number of poor doubled.[37]

But it was in the second half of the century that rates levied by the overseers rose much more rapidly. In 1762, the disbursements in Otham were £105 10*s*. 1*d*. for which the monies had to be collected three times to produce £106. In effect, this required 8*s*. in the pound to be raised to pay for the poor in that financial year. After 1765, there is a gap in the Otham records but the situation in Loose continued to deteriorate as can be seen in **Fig. 2** and is a reflection of what was happening elsewhere both locally and nationally.

During this period the overseers were responsible for giving cash relief but the provision of clothes (especially shoes and coats), fuel, rent and food were just as important. Furniture, bedding and linen were often supplied together with nursing care and the midwife's attendance. For those who did not survive, there was help with the funeral expenses.

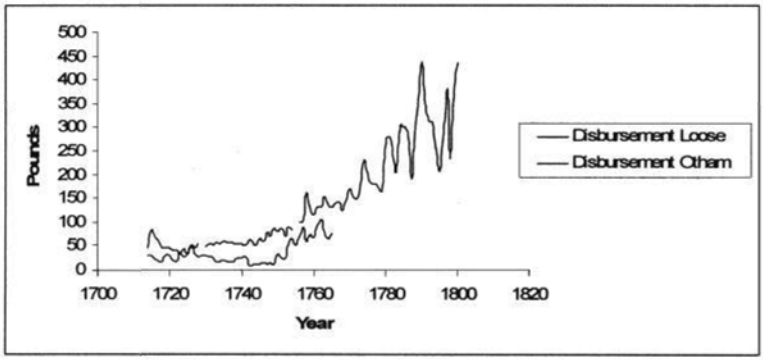

Fig. 2. Overseers' disbursements for Otham and Loose 1715-1800.[38]

Sometimes considerable time and expense had been expended on people who suffered a misfortune while passing through the parish. One stranger was provided with care by John Collison, the overseer in 1745, who lived at *Synyards*:

July 11 pd 4 men for Caring a poor woman from Green Hill to my house was found with fitts	0. 1. 0
For Victuals Drink Lodging and looking after the woman	0. 2. 3
For Caring the Certificate to Gilingham	0. 1. 0
For maintaining and looking after a sick woman 3½ weeks	0. 17. 6
pd Mr Shadgett for healing ye Sick woman	0. 3. 0
For laying fourth putting in ye Coffin Caring to Church	
Beer after Davy & wool for Burying ye poor woman	0. 10. 6
For a coffin	0. 8. 0
The Clarks ffees	0. 3. 6 [39]

At other times it was the villagers of Otham who needed extra support from the overseers who relied on a number of doctors, for example during a small-pox outbreak in 1763. This included paying for clothes and fuel as well as nursing care and extra food from the butcher.[40] In Loose the vestry agreed 'to ask Mr Pett if he likes to attend the poor when wanted at five pounds or five guineas per year'. Two years previously, in 1772, the same vestry had agreed on another positive measure, to inoculate all the poor of the parish against smallpox.[41]

Help in kind might allow a family to survive a crisis. In December 1765, Thomas Betts, the farrier and smith in Otham who lived at *Kitchen House*, provided hop poles for his neighbour John Wiles for which the overseer paid. John couldn't pay his rate that year for Greenhill Cottage

where he lived.[42] He was a carpenter and, with other family members who also received intermittent parish relief, farmed some land. Fortunately for him, this setback was only temporary and, by the nineteenth century, the family became one of the most thriving in the village.

Bastardy problems increased during the eighteenth century and because the charge for these children fell on the parish, one solution was to force the parents to marry. Another was to make the father support the child and, when the child was older, apprenticeship arrangements could be made to rid the parish of a potential long term problem. In December 1751, the Otham overseers paid for a warrant to 'take' William Woollett which was accomplished three weeks later and cost the parish 3*s.* for beer (!). A week later the cause of the problem, William, son of William Woollett and Mary Fridd, was baptized and became a charge on the parish, yet another to be placed in the care of William Wilkins, a local miller who boarded children at 1*s.* 6*d.* a week. The child's father paid towards his upkeep with considerable reluctance and only after being forced to do so. Young William continued with the Wilkins family until 1759 when, at the age of seven, he was apprenticed and the overseers paid 7*s.* 6*d.* for his indentures and £5 5*s.* 0*d.* to be 'freed' of him.[43] Henceforth he was to become the responsibility of his master and the parish into which he was apprenticed.

Settlement laws were a continuing problem. A removal order had been made in January 1765 for Francis Parker, his wife and daughter to be sent from Otham to Langley which was his place of settlement. However, he reappeared in Otham and was then taken to Frinsted, only to return again:

Pd Mr Betts his Expenses with Parker to Frinsted	0. 4. 4
Pd Parker his days	0. 1. 6
Expenses at the Sitting and removeing Parker	0. 6. 10
Pd for the warrant and expenses	0. 3. 0

A further removal order on 6 May settled the matter and caused the family to be taken to the neighbouring village of Leeds.[44] Even if the labourer had a trade, there could be problems such as those of Robert Williams who was living in Milton with Mary, his wife, when he was examined about his settlement at the petty sessions in December 1761:

> Says he served an apprenticeship to Alexander Matthewson of Otham papermaker of 7 years and that he had a Certificate about…from Otham to Sittingbourne and that he came from Sittingbourne into Milton about two years ago and has gained no settlement.[45]

Finally, in January 1762, the churchwardens and overseers of Otham wrote a letter to those of Milton in which they recognized the legal settlement of Robert and Mary in Otham.

How great was this movement of people? The Loose overseers recorded the names of 69 persons between 1700 and 1760 bringing certificates to the parish enabling them to work. Of these 62 certificates were for men and 7 for women, nearly all coming from parishes within ten miles of Loose.[46] In roughly the same period, 1718-84, the Linton overseers recorded a total of 63 people who were removed either into or out of the village.[47]

In most of the parishes there was an annual influx of pickers for the hops which was sufficiently large for the vestry at Linton to remind farmers that if they called a doctor to a sick person without the permission of the overseer, then they would be responsible for the bill. The parish would, however, bury all those 'hoppers' who died.[48]

The local population was increased dramatically when the militia training camp was formed in 1778 on Coxheath. This area lay within the parishes of Linton, Loose and East Farleigh who were responsible for burying any dead soldiers. At intervals the authorities called on all the local villages to search for able-bodied men 'as do not follow or exercise some lawful calling or employment' and send them before the Commission. Recruits were chosen by lot and the parish from whence they came was subsequently responsible for supporting any wives and children in need.[49]

While the number of poor in Otham had more than doubled between 1720 and 1765, those in Loose had quadrupled. The disbursements for all the local parishes had risen dramatically, resulting in increasing demands on the rate payers, due to the rise in the population and the worsening national economic situation with higher prices and unemployment, a process which continued for the rest of the century. In 1770, it was probably the difficulty in funding poor relief within the parish which, although not specifically stated, made the Loose vestry determined to find a piece of land 'to build a House for the use of ye Poor.' A second object was to put the poor to work and thus recover some of the costs of relief paid out.

In Otham, the poor house which had been donated by Thomas Hendley in 1590 for the 'fiftene' (see above), was really an almshouse, providing a home for two families. The rent of £4 from the land of 2½ acres with which it was endowed, was used to provide fuel for all the poor but nothing more.[50] A workhouse had been opened in Maidstone in 1720 which was administered by the overseers of the parish of All Saints[51] and Bearsted had access to a small workhouse for '27 persons'.[52]

In Linton a workhouse was in existence by 1737 for which the parish paid annual rent to the Mann family of Linton Place. This was distinct from the alms houses built by Robert Mann and 'by his will gave £1 to each inhabitant but the nomination thereto and the annual payment is vested absolutely in the present Mr Mann and his heirs'.[53]

Thus the parishes had some practical experience to draw on when, in 1771, Linton and Loose with East and West Farleigh, purchased 20 roods of woodland from James Tapley on which to build the new house, 'the said parishes being too small to hire build or support a separate house in the said parishes for the reception and keeping and employing of the Poor'. The sum of £250 was raised on a mortgage of 4 per cent to fund the whole enterprise, including the building, and the total cost was £554 17*s.* 8½*d.*[54] Hunton, Barming and Detling joined these parishes in 1776 and, in February 1790, the churchwardens and overseers of Otham, Boughton Monchelsea, Chart Sutton and Bearsted signed an agreement for 21 years as joint proprietors. Each parish paid £150 for a ninth part of the house and buildings and this provided for 'laying in of household goods, furniture, stock and utensils'. The parishes were then able to use and occupy the 'said house and premises without paying any rent for the same'. The building was in Coxheath, in what is now Workhouse Lane

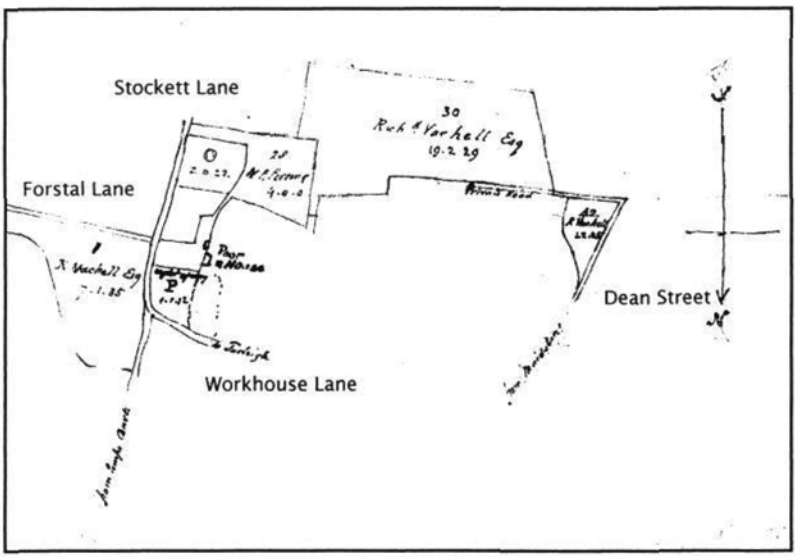

Fig. 3. The Poor House at Coxheath in 1775 taken from a rough copy made in 1849.[57] (By kind permission of the Norman Family and the Centre for Kentish Studies).

(**Fig. 3**) but was eventually pulled down in 1841.[55] It was big enough for 100 people.[56]

In 1794 an agreement between the parishes was made about terms, conditions and expenses:

> That for the better government and management of the said House of Maintenance of the Poor therein the churchwardens and overseers of the said several parishes for the time being together with four of the inhabitants of the said parishes to be yearly in Easter Week named and chosen for that purpose by the parishioners and inhabitants of each parish respectively should be Visitors and governors thereof and should on the first Monday of each month meet at the said House or some other convenient time'.....etc.
>
> To make and appoint in writing or otherwise such rules, orders and regulations for the government, Management, Employment, setting to work, disposing of the goods and manufactures and ordering of the said House and Poor People.....etc.

Expenses were to be shared by the parishes for 'reception of, for lodging, keeping, maintaining and employing the Poor'. These included 'the wages of a Housekeeper, servants, Apothecary and other persons to be retained'. The repair of the House, buildings, furniture and utensils were included as were the shares of the land tax, window tax and all parochial and other taxes. Coals, wood and other fuel and candles were charged and so was 'bread, beer, meat, butter, cheese, milk and all other necessary for supporting, maintaining and providing for the Poor'.

All costs were to be paid by the churchwardens and overseers in proportion to the number of poor from each parish. These officers were responsible for providing clothes for their own respective poor and for burying their dead, the clothes of those dying becoming the property of that parish. Proper records of expenses and the names of those admitted were to be kept. Each parish was responsible for a four week stint buying, in turn, meat and drink but not clothes. No person suffering from small-pox or any 'contagious distemper' was to be sent to the workhouse on pain of a fine of £5.[58]

Some provision for work by the inmates was made when the overseers of Linton, in 1772, paid the master of the workhouse £1 10*s*. 5½*d*. for 'wages and work' to produce hopbagging and in return received £6 1*s*. 2¼*d*. for 'goods sold'.[59] In Loose, Thomas Charlton paid for 31 pieces of hopbagging 'weight 25cwt 1qt 17 at 14s per cwt ... £17-15-7' in 1784. The sale of the bagging to Loose farmers in 1799 accounted for £40 9*s*. 7*d*., equivalent to 8 per cent of the total overseers' receipts for the parish and a significant contribution by the poor towards their own care. In Linton this formed 8 per cent of the receipts of £854 in 1800 and in East Farleigh 16 per cent in 1807.[60]

Settlement problems had to be guarded against. If a woman sent to the workhouse had a child subsequently, the charges of the delivery and lying-in were to fall to the parish whether the child was legitimate or illegitimate. The child was to be considered to be part of the poor of that parish which had to pay 20*s*. to indemnify East Farleigh, in which the

workhouse lay, in order to protect it against any claim. The responsible parish had to issue a certificate or else pay East Farleigh 20*s*. and after two months to pay a further 20*s*. every month until the matter was resolved.[61]

In 1770, before the workhouse was built, there were 18 regular parish poor in Loose and total disbursements of £170. Any small gain in the numbers on out-relief after the House was opened was quickly lost as by 1777 there were 16 regulars (2 widows, 2 males, 5 females and 7 children) on out-relief and roughly nine in the workhouse each costing 2*s*. 6*d*. a week, numbers varying from month to month. But, during this time, the disbursements had only risen to £180 of which £38 went to the workhouse and this included extras such as a share of repairs, fire insurance and window tax. Thus, at first the new system appeared to work in terms of money spent but only to do so with coercion exercised by the vestry, reducing the cost of out-relief to 1*s*. or 1*s*. 6*d*., half as much as the poor had been receiving twenty years previously. To keep the costs of out-relief down the overseers threatened to place people in the workhouse unless they would make do with 1*s*. a week on the parish; once in the house, they could only escape if someone was prepared to take responsibility for their care:

> 28 April 1790, agreed to take off 2s per week from Mrs Pierson, if she don't agree to put the two boys in the workhouse. It is also agreed if Dame Larkin won't do with a shilling per week to put her in the Workhouse. It is also agreed to allow Jane Chapmans sister 1 shilling per week to take her out the Workhouse and maintain her.[62]

Although this kept down the rates for a while costs had more than doubled by the end of the century, and in the case of Linton trebled.[63] This situation was made worse by the deteriorating conditions of the last decade of the eighteenth century. In many parts of the country starvation became a possibility and in the particularly bad year of 1795, the vestry at Loose voted that 'that the resident poor of the parish shall be furnished with meal flour at fourteen pence a gallon' in July and the same provision was made again in September for a further six weeks.[64]

Expenses were difficult to contain and Thomas Brown, in charge of the workhouse in 1797, overspent and was made to forgo £10 of his salary until matters were resolved. This did not happen and he lost his job. However, this may not have been altogether his fault as the numbers of poor had steadily increased. By 1800, Loose had twenty five regulars on out-relief and ten in the House, a disbursements bill of £440 and a further bill of £140 for the provision of flour for the year to feed the poor.[65]

While, for example, the workhouse at Westwell, near Ashford, had been closed down by 1797 'as it did not serve' and all the poor maintained at home,[66] all the parishes contracted to the Coxheath Poor House continued

to use it. However, as the general economic climate deteriorated during and after the wars, there was increasing need for help with the provision of flour and, occasionally, root vegetables to prevent starvation. In addition, attempts were made to use the 'roundsman' system in order to increase employment. Labourers without work were sent round the parish from one farm to another and their wages were paid partly by the farmer and partly by the overseers. But the system became open to abuse by the employers and it was to prevent this that the Loose vestry recorded that:

> 29 Dec 1800, it is agreed that Every Gentleman Imploying journeyman or labourer do pay their wages or Releif Expenses but so as to enable them to keep from the Parrish Books. It is likewise agreed that everyone Imployed out of the Parish shall be relieved at a vestry help for that purpose.[67]

With the new century, the same economic problems, increasing food prices and more unemployment, continued. Despite a rising population (Fig. 2) and although the total annual disbursements to the poor remained high and fluctuated widely during the first three decades, there were no

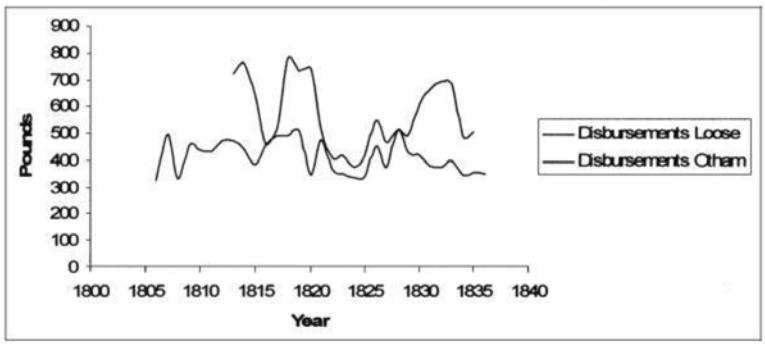

Fig. 4. The Disbursements of the Loose and Otham Overseers 1806-34.[68]

continually rising expenses and rates, as in the previous century in the group of parishes under consideration (**Fig. 4**).

The numbers of paupers receiving regular relief remained fairly constant until 1815, approximately six in Otham and twenty in Loose; twice as many as those permanently in the workhouse. But the worst factor with which the overseers had to deal was the number of poor requiring temporary relief, double the number of regulars but also varying unpredictably year by year and season by season.

Pay rose from roughly 2*s*. a week in the first decade of the century to a maximum of 2*s*. 6*d*. by 1820 and then declined to 2s. again by 1830.

There was slightly more generous treatment of families with three or more children under the age of twelve. Thomas Foreman received the highest recorded payment in Otham, 22*s*. weekly, but he had ten children. Supplementation of wages, mainly in the winter, was given to those with children who were prevented from working through sickness or unemployment despite attempts by the authorities to reduce this. The overseers of Boughton Monchelsea pointed out in their answers to the 'rural queries' of Parliament that there was no point in waiting for the magistrates to make an order for relief when families might otherwise starve if there was no work and that they, therefore, had made no attempt to discontinue the system of supplementary payments. Besides which, they had found that the provision of any relief in kind was impractical.[69]

The 'roundsman' system was only used in three or four of the parishes of the Aylesford South lathe although it had been tried in some parishes and failed in Boughton Monchelsea.[70] Loose parish were still trying it in 1831:

> That a man be sent to every Person at £25 rental unless they are employing their full proportion of Parishioners.[71]

In Otham, the only continuous record of labourers' wages for this period is that paid by the parish surveyors between 1809 and 1836.[72] This pay was for work on the roads which took place largely during the winter months and was used to provide the able-bodied poor with labour. Between these dates, the daily wage gradually fell from 2*s*. 6*d*. to 1*s*. 6*d*. The only parish in the group under discussion to reply to a series of 'rural queries' posed by the Royal Commission into Administration and Practical Operation of Poor Laws in 1834, was Boughton Monchelsea who said that labourers were paid between 2*s*. and 2*s*. 3*d*. daily (in winter 2*s*.) and no distinction was made between married and unmarried. Women could earn 1*s*. and children 6*d*. but only when work was available which was usually haymaking, harvesting and hop picking, there being little work at other times particularly during the winter. When asked whether a family could subsist on this the reply was 'with difficulty, rent being high. Food is chiefly wheaten bread and occasional meat'. Any gardens were very small although recently half acre plots of land had been let to the poor at the rent of 20-30*s*. free of tithes and taxes.[73]

The overseers had to cope not only with the costs of out-relief but also with the greater expense of keeping a pauper in the workhouse. This had risen from 2*s*. 6*d*. weekly in 1780 to between 2*s*. 5*d*. and 4*s*. 11*d*. in 1820 depending on the time of year but by the end of that decade a flat rate of 3*s*. 6*d*. had been adopted,[74] which was 50 per cent more than out relief. Numbers in the workhouse varied considerably from parish to parish and the parliamentary returns for 1813-15 show that four of the eleven parishes, Loose, Boughton Monchelsea, West Farleigh and Hunton, filled nearly half

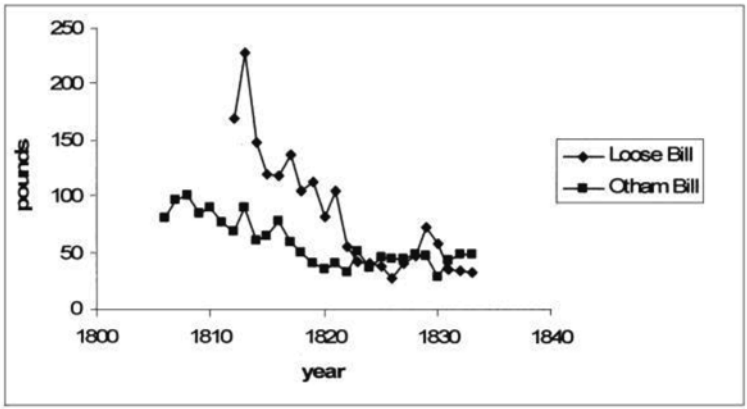

Fig. 5. Annual workhouse bills for Otham and Loose 1806-34.[78]

the places whereas Otham had only three permanent residents.[75] But there were, in addition, all those requiring temporary admission.

The monthly workhouse bills for Otham and Loose were high at the start of the century but gradually fell after 1815 and by 1834 had halved (**Fig. 5**). This is reflected in the accounts of the other parishes and suggests that that they were using the Poor House less because it was the only way to keep costs down. By 1813 Barming and Detling had no one in the workhouse and the overseers provided all their relief on an 'out' basis.[76] Later still, in 1832, the fall in numbers of people admitted on a permanent basis from the usual villages meant other parishes could become tenants of the workhouse and thus poor came from Yalding, Cliffe, Mereworth, West Malling, St Mary's in Hoo, Frinsted, Halling and Snodland.[77]

There is no evidence of sales of hopbagging or other organised work in the Poor House after 1810. However, two acres of land had been acquired with the enclosure of Coxheath in 1814 which 'now and for some time past had been used as a garden for the workhouse' and this may have been an attempt to provide work especially when a further two acres were added in 1821. But it sounds as if interest in the workhouse was waning because the visitors to the Poor House, who were expected to attend meetings quarterly, were becoming lax in their duties and a 20*s*. fine had to be levied on any visitor not attending.[79] Some of the parishes were forced to make payments to their overseers and others, like Otham, appointed a salaried assistant overseer to manage affairs from day to day and to keep the books.

The vestries managed to keep the disbursements from rising excessively, despite the increasing numbers of recipients, by keeping

as many as possible on out-relief using a weekly cash payment for an individual which was roughly the equivalent of a labourer's daily wage. Between 1815 and 1834, the number of poor in Otham receiving relief in the village had doubled to seventeen regulars and twenty five occasionals, totaling 12 per cent of the villagers not including their dependants, but despite this the annual disbursements had fallen from £400 to £350. The result may have been lower bills for the rate payers but, for the poor, life became harder:

> Relief to Geo Carroll in nutriment and money who fell here through want of food 3s 6d.[80]

Some insight into conditions in the parish can be gained from the comparison of the payments made from the surveyor's and overseers' accounts during the severe winter of 1829-30. Following a bad harvest, work on the roads began in mid November and by the start of December each of the nine men (six adults and three youths) were working up to five or six days a week. This continued until Christmas when the weather deteriorated. Because of this, during the whole of January and February, not more than the equivalent of twelve days worth of work in any one week from the whole labour force was possible and sometimes as little as two. An alternative was provided of breaking up loads of stones which earned a few pence. Half the regular workers received payments for illness during these two months while the others received relief or supplementary wages. By the beginning of March, all except one boy had been laid off.[81]

The following summer and autumn produced the 'Swing' riots with demands for better wages, reduced tithes and the removal of machines such as threshers which reduced winter work for the labourer. Later, when asked about the cause, the overseer of Boughton Monchelsea replied that it was 'in a great measure actual distress'.[82] The *Times* correspondent who was investigating the origins of the riots, wrote from Lamberhurst in November 1830:

> So far as I can learn, the farmer's labourers would be satisfied with 2s or 2s 6d a day – a rate less than 1s 6d a day, universally paid 40 years ago, when provisions and every necessity of life were 50 and 100 per cent cheaper than at present.[83]

There were no significant sources of help other than wages or parish relief. The bequests with which individual parishes had been endowed in the past consisted of small amounts of ground which produced at most a few pounds annually but, in any case, many of these charities had ceased to exist by the start of the nineteenth century. By 1815 the annual amounts of charity monies available for the parish officers to apportion ranged from *3s. 4d.* in Detling to £24 in West Farleigh, five of the eleven parishes

having nothing.[84] A small amount came from the offertory money but this was given, in most parishes, to the poor who were not otherwise in receipt of relief.[85] In only one parish at that date, Loose where there were twelve members, did anyone belong to a 'friendly society'[86] with the addition of John Wiles in Otham whose subscription was frequently paid by the overseers.

There were few charities but there were even fewer schools. Apart from Sunday schools, the 1806 visitation returns recorded small day schools in Linton and Boughton Monchelsea but, in Otham, there was 'a private school at which all the children are taught gratis'.[87] However, by 1815, Loose and Linton received £6 and £10 respectively from charitable sources for the management of parish schools.[88]

On 28 September 1835, as a result of the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act, the Poor Law Commissioners ordered the parishes that had formed the Coxheath Workhouse to become 'a union for the administration of laws for the Relief of the Poor' and thus the Coxheath Union came to be made up of Bearsted, Boughton Monchelsea, East Farleigh, West Farleigh, Hunton, Linton, Loose, Nettlestead, Otham, Teston, Yalding, Marden and Staplehurst. The next year, on 17 May 1836, Maidstone was added to the other parishes and the whole renamed the Maidstone Union.[89] Finally, by 1841, the old Poor House had been pulled down and the remains together with five acres of land sold off for £300.[90]

Summary

From 1597-1834 the responsibility for the care of the poor fell on their fellow parishioners. For the first half of the period Otham and the surrounding villages coped but the increasing problems of the second half of the eighteenth century resulted in a collective attempt by eleven parishes to resolve these by founding the Coxheath Poor House which was opened in 1772.

However, the expense of providing in-relief always remained higher than out-relief and thus, from an economic point of view, it was not successful. By threatening admission, the workhouse was used as a deterrent by the vestry in order to cut out-relief to those remaining in the community but this neither reduced the overall costs to the parish or the rates. Attempts to keep payments of cash down resulted in the overseers having to provide more subsidy in the form of food (usually flour), fuel and clothes.

In the first three decades of the nineteenth century, the overseers' disbursements and rates fluctuated from year to year but did not increase steadily as in the previous fifty years. A rising population, the conditions during and the depression following the Napoleonic Wars meant that increasing pressure was placed on the ratepayers to which the overseers

and vestry responded by reducing wages, out-relief payments and the use of the workhouse. Because there was no wish to see the poor starve, wage supplementation continued in spite of Parliamentary suggestions that this should be cut. Attempts at using the 'roundsman system' were made without much success. Whatever the parish officers tried, the average pauper was worse off in 1834 than seventy years previously and was to face even harsher conditions in the years to come.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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