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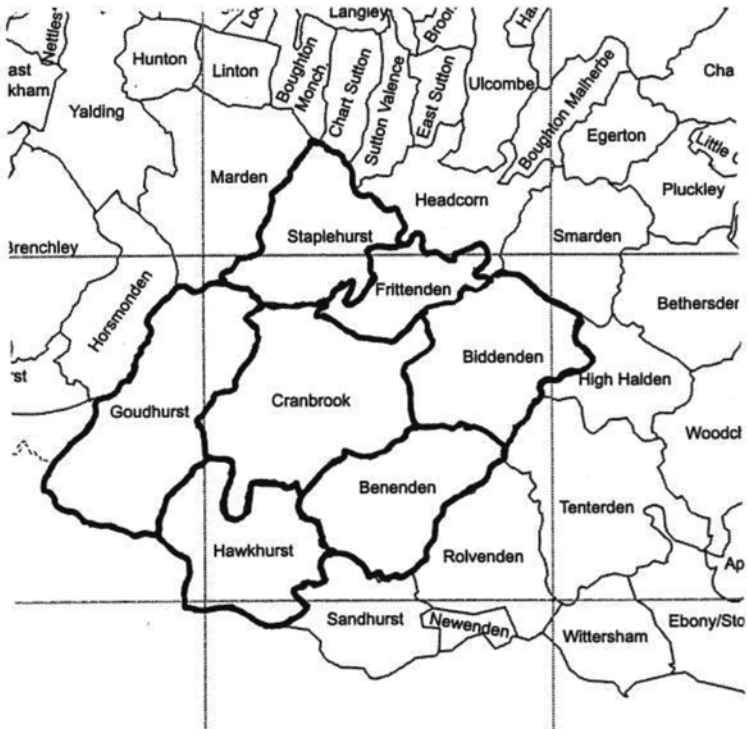
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## WELFARE PROVISION IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY KENT: A LOOK AT BIDDENDEN AND NEIGHBOURING PARISHES

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Cranbrook and its adjacent parishes are remarkably rich in archives belonging to the latter half of the seventeenth century, each of which reveals different aspects of the lives of their inhabitants. This is particularly true of the Accounts of the Overseers of the Poor, which have survived to a greater or lesser extent from Biddenden, Cranbrook, Goudhurst and Staplehurst.<sup>1</sup> They reveal what appears to be a genuine concern for the care of the most disadvantaged members of parish society in the decades which followed the Restoration of the Monarchy, and of the Church, in 1660. The Poor Laws current at the time, based on the legislation of 1598 and 1601 and supplemented in 1662, provided for the treatment of vagabonds and beggars and established a system for the relief of the impotent poor of the parish. Vagabonds were to be whipped by order of a justice of the peace or of the parish officers and sent with a passport to their place of birth or settlement. In this way parishes could lessen the burden on their available funds.<sup>2</sup>

Biddenden, lying to the north-east of Cranbrook in the Weald of Kent, had a population in the 1660s of a little over 1,000 men, women and children; of these, 192 can be identified as householders by comparing the hearth tax returns with the reconstitution of the parish for the 1660s, which utilises parish registers and other records to group those living in the parish into their respective families and also identifies most of those not living in family groups. We know the occupation and status of 112 of these householders: 30 per cent were engaged in farming, more pastoral than agricultural; 20 per cent were involved in the cloth industry; 20 per cent were craftsmen or retailers; and the remaining 30 per cent consisted of gentry, widows and those who do not easily fit these categories. As many as 38 per cent of these householders were sufficiently poor to be exempt from paying the hearth tax (compared with 32 per cent for Kent as a whole). The Compton Census shows that 13 per cent of the population were nonconformists in 1676 (compared with 8 per cent across the county and 4 per cent nationally).<sup>3</sup>



Map 1 Cranbrook and its neighbouring parishes.

The Biddenden Overseers' Accounts, which run from 1652 through to 1700 and beyond, provide a picture of welfare locally which is typical of the area. The following pages, therefore, concentrate on the parish of Biddenden, in particular the years 1660 to 1668 which lie either side of the Kent hearth tax returns of Lady Day 1664.<sup>4</sup> In the 1660s the accounts were written with care, attention to detail and no little pride, first by the elderly clothier, John Beale, and later by Thomas Irons, a barber (sometimes referred to as gentleman), himself overseer of the poor in 1664 and churchwarden four years later. These accounts invariably have two components: assessment lists and disbursements.

The *assessment* lists had a standard introduction: 'A *Sesse* for the relief of the Poor of the Parish of Biddenden and putting out of Children whose Parents are not able to maintain them according to the Statute in that case made and provided'. They list each assessable parishioner in alphabetical order of Christian name, give the rental value of his or her holdings (occasionally the value of movable stock), and indicate their required

contribution to funds for the poor as a proportion of that value, most frequently 6d. in the pound.<sup>5</sup> Such lists, usually presented twice a year, were signed by the officers and other leading members of the vestry. In the assessment list of May 1664, 168 householders were named, of whom 18 did not have to pay any contribution. Of the known 192 households, therefore, 150 (nearly 80 per cent) contributed to the welfare fund according to their means. Some had to contribute in this way even though they were sufficiently poor to be exempt from paying the hearth tax.

The *disbursement* lists provide details of the monthly payments made to the poorest parishioners who formed a small subsection of those exempt from the hearth tax. The overseers of the poor and the churchwardens met every month to plan these payments, and exercised a fine balance between income and anticipated expenditure. In the 1660s, the Biddenden *sesses* were designed to yield between £110 and £130 per annum, and the end of year accounts regularly achieved an approximate balance.<sup>6</sup> Any overspend came out of the overseers' pockets and was recouped in the following assessment. An entry in the Cranbrook accounts under the year 1666 provides a nice example of the provision of extra funds and their instant use. Seven named parishioners were each fined 5s. or 10s. for attending a nonconformist conventicle, and an eighth man was fined for profane swearing. The churchwardens, in possession of fines totalling £3 13s., distributed the money, in gifts of a few pence or shillings each, to a considerable number of their poor, and included a large donation of £1 'towards the relief of the poor visited at Heselden Wood', and 5s. to Edward Beale and his family who were suffering from smallpox. The justices of the peace, who regularly countersigned overseers' and churchwardens' accounts, approved this expenditure.

### *Monthly payments to the Poor*

**Table 1** lists the monthly payments of cash to the Biddenden poor for April 1664. Such lists varied only marginally from one month to the next, as some regular recipients died and other names were added because of personal circumstances.

As can be seen, the sums were hardly large, ranging from 1s. to 6s. per month at a time when the standard rate of pay for a bricklayer in Biddenden was 1s. 9d. per day.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, the bricklayer was probably earning for his whole family, whereas the pauper was usually receiving support for herself or himself alone. The contemporary Gregory King gives £6 10s. as the average income for a cottager or pauper per year, and 3¼ as the average size of such a household, which implies £2 per person per year.<sup>8</sup> £2 per person per year is 3s. 4d. per month. So the sums given to the Biddenden poor would certainly have gone a long way to help them to make ends meet. Many of them were also partial



TABLE 1. MONTHLY PAYMENTS AND ASSOCIATED HEARTH-TAX DETAILS

Payments quoted in Overseers' account book, 2 April 1664 ( <i>s. - d.</i> )		Hearth Tax	(Date widowed)
Imprimis payd Stoaes wife	1 - 0	1 hearth/ exempt	(wife)
Item payd Mercy Brisenden	1 - 6		(spinster)
Item payd Wid Clarke	2 - 0	1/exempt	not known
Item payd Wid Beard	2 - 6		1650
Item payd Wid Evens	2 - 0	1/exempt	1657
Item payd Wid Doune for Reliefe	1 - 0	1/exempt	1663
Item payd Margret Norwood	3 - 6		(spinster)
Item payd Mary Blist	6 - 0	1/exempt	(spinster)
Item payd Wid Wimble	2 - 0	1/exempt	pre-1659
Item payd Wid Bristow being sick	4 - 6	1/exempt	1656
Item payd Wid Dunsteere	5 - 0	1/exempt	1662
Item payd Wid Crowast	1 - 6		1652
Item payd Martha Earle	1 - 6		(aged spinster)
Item payd Tho Borrows Wife	3 - 0	1/exempt	(wife)
Item payd Smiths Wife	2 - 6		(wife)
Item payd Wid Murgan being sick	0 - 9	1/exempt	not known
Item payd Wid Homwood	2 - 0		1645
Item payd Maynard	1 - 0	?	(?)
Item payd Jud Bluet	1 - 0	1/exempt	whore
Item payd Wid Hovenden	0 - 6		not known

wage-earners, and the parish officers could take their circumstances into consideration when allocating funds. This helps to explain the variations in payment as shown; there must have been some sort of means test in operation.<sup>9</sup>

Table 1 gives the names of the 20 people to whom the parish officers at this time allocated money on a regular basis month by month. It links those who received monthly payments to their hearth tax status, and shows that more than half of these paupers occupied a home which they might call their own. As will become clear, they probably did not own the house, and for the most part did not live in it by themselves. Those with no hearth tax status were living as lodgers in the houses of others, many of whom can be identified.

The list consists largely of widows, but also includes a number of spinsters; one of these, Mary Blist, received the largest sum of all, and

benefited every month of the eight years under scrutiny. Widow Downe's 1s. for relief ('Doune' in the list) indicates that she was not yet in regular receipt of payment, although this was just about to start; and two widows, Bristow and Morgan, received slightly more than usual because they happened to be unwell at this time.<sup>10</sup> The circumstances of Elizabeth Bristow illustrate several points. At this time she had been a widow for eight years; from the death of her husband in October 1656 until her own death in May 1668 she received a monthly subsistence allowance of 2s. 6d. rising to 3s. in February 1662 and 3s. 6d. in May 1664. She eked out this allowance, as we shall see, by acting as a midwife.<sup>11</sup>

No men appear on the list at this time, although at other times they do feature. More intriguingly, three wives appear on the list; they must have had husbands, but received the money directly themselves. Maybe their husbands were incapacitated in some way, or in gaol, or maybe they were labouring outside the parish. The case of Thomas Barrow (Borrow) might help us to a greater understanding of the way in which the welfare system worked. He had a one-hearth cottage on which he was exempt from paying tax. Eighteen months after this list was issued he received considerable relief, being sick with smallpox; his wife Ann died of the pox in January 1666, but he recovered and found himself with two young children to look after, Richard and William, aged ten and five. The fact that he was subsequently sent to Bridewell, a place designed to deal with all kinds of petty crime and especially with sexual misdemeanours, suggests a possible reason for his wife having received the payments. Certainly both his children were fostered out immediately after his wife died, first with Widow Simms and then with Widow Chandler. He himself was looked after by Joan Faulkner, whose husband Solomon is recorded as working on the church bell ropes; the Faulknors' surviving children were already of an age to have left home.

Within four months of their mother's death we find the boys' grandfather, William Barrow, who must already have been in his late 60s, being paid by the parish to look after his five-year-old grandson William.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile the elder son, Richard, spent a few months in the care of William Hopper before he was taken in by Elizabeth Sampson and her husband, Robert, a carpenter who frequently maintained the timbers of the church; she received 4s. per month for her services. Old man Barrow and Goody Sampson looked after their charges for a year, until April 1667, at which time the boys' father, Thomas Barrow, married again, this time to widow Hovenden. Thenceforth Thomas, widow Hovenden, Thomas's father and the younger son William all disappear from the Overseers' accounts; the elder son, Richard, continued to be fostered by Goody Sampson.

The apparently pejorative epithet applied to Judith Bluett in Table 1 is taken straight from the burial register, where she is shown to have been

the mother of at least three illegitimate children: Robert, born 1642, Susan, born 1647, and Martha, born 1653; in each case the putative father is known. When she died of smallpox in August 1669, the register simply recorded her as 'an old whore'. She was not, one would have thought, an ideal subject for the village elders to care for, yet she received relief from parish officials every month from April 1661 to May 1664, and from March to September 1664 she in effect earned her relief money by acting as carer for two spinsters. She had her rent paid for her from October 1662 until her death, and in 1668 she became foster-parent to the youngest of Stone's children. There can be little doubt that the parish was genuinely concerned even for its black sheep.<sup>13</sup>

### *The Fostering of Children*

Table 1, however, only provides a selection of those who received money in April 1664; the full list, quoted below, includes another 13 payments, in each case showing parishioners receiving money because they were caring for others. Not only did Edward Stone's wife Margaret receive payment for herself throughout the period in question, but she also took on Margaret Bigg's child for this one month at a time when we know that the child's mother was under stress.<sup>14</sup> Edward Stone actually died later in the month, and his wife's payment as a widow was raised to 3*s.* 6*d.* and then 4*s.* Their daughters, aged eight and five, were baptised together that June, so it would appear that Edward had been a Nonconformist, whereas his wife evidently was not. Maybe that was why she received the support from the parish officers rather than her husband?<sup>15</sup>

### OVERSEERS OF THE POOR: ACCOUNTS, 2 APRIL 1664 (1st page)

Imprimis payd Stoanes wife	1 - 0
more for keeping of Margret Biggs Child	8 - 0
Item payd James Willard for Pottars girle and Peppars boy	10 - 0
Item payd Will Whitney for Hearnas girle	4 - 0
more for Stedmans Boy	7 - 0
more for Will Batmans Boy	3 - 0
Item payd Mercy Brisenden	1 - 6
Item payd Wid Clarke	2 - 0
Item payd Wid Beard	2 - 6
Item payd Wid Evens	2 - 0
Item payd Marketman for Jane Marrian	6 - 0
Item payd Wid Doune for Easons girle	5 - 0
more for Reliefe	1 - 0

Item payd Margret Norwood	3 - 6
Item payd Mary Blist	6 - 0
Item payd Wid Wimble	2 - 0
Item payd Wid Bristow being sick	4 - 6
Item payd Wid Soltar for Pottars girle	6 - 0
Item payd Wid Dunsteere	5 - 0
Item payd Will Hopper for Atwoods girle	5 - 0
Item payd Rich: Collens for Tars daftar	3 - 6
Item payd Wid Mastars for Wacharses girle	4 - 0
Item payd Wid Boone for Henicars boy	4 - 6
Item payd Wid Crowast	1 - 6
Item payd Martha Earle	1 - 6
Item payd Tho Borrowes Wife	3 - 0
Item payd Smiths Wife	2 - 6
Item payd Wid Murgan being sick	0 - 9
Item payd Wid Homwood	2 - 0
Item payd Maynard	1 - 0
Item payd Jud Bluet	1 - 0
more for Looking to Margret Norwood & Mary Blist	2 - 0
Item payd Wid Hovenden	0 - 6
Total	£5 - 12 - 9

As can be seen, the overseers regularly paid out money to villagers who, in effect, acted as foster-parents to orphaned or illegitimate children. Sums generally ranged from 4s. to 7s. per month, which would have covered the basic cost of board and lodging. This parish support was usually provided for these children until they were of an age to be apprenticed. Atwood's girl, for instance, figures on this page; she had been fostered out to William Hopper, a labourer living in a one-hearth house on which he did pay tax, for the past 18 months. She must have made herself useful because, in October 1665, he took her on officially as an apprentice, at a cost of £5 15s. to the parish.

Few of these fostered children were settled with one carer for long, and being farmed out in this way could well have been a miserable experience for the individual child. No doubt they were expected to contribute to the family with whom they were staying by hard work and strict obedience. Much of the accommodation would have been utterly basic. Edward Stone, James Willard, Thomas Marketman and widow Downe were all living in one-hearth houses on which they were too poor to pay tax. Other children may well have fared better: William Whitney, for instance, paid tax on four hearths, Richard Collins and widow Boone on three hearths, widow Salter on two hearths and William Hopper and widow Masters on one hearth. In 1649 Mary Salter had inherited her two hearths from her husband, who had been a haberdasher; she may well have carried on some

sort of retail business as we find her supplying loaves for the Communion Table. Potter's girl, for whom she was receiving 6s. per month in 1664, was with her from the death of her mother Anne in 1658 right through to 1668 and beyond. Similarly, Jane Marrian was fostered by the labourer Thomas Marketman until his death in July 1664, and thereafter she stayed with his widow Mary, for exactly the same monthly payment, until 1668 and beyond. Such stability, however, was rare.

### *Apprenticeship*

The apprenticeship of some of the children at the age of thirteen fits the generally accepted pattern, but many of those who were being maintained by the parish, especially if they were illegitimate children, were apprenticed at a much younger age. In most years the Biddenden overseers' accounts record the arrangement of apprenticeships for children hitherto subsidised by the parish, but the bald statements provide no details. What one does notice is that the sums paid to their masters were considerable, and that the men who took on these orphans as apprentices tended to be either members of the vestry group, or men who anyway worked for the church or the poor as a matter of course. The churchwardens and overseers were therefore using their own kind for charitable purposes, but providing help for them in the process from the parish reserves.

The 15 apprenticeship indentures from neighbouring Frittenden dated between 1663 and 1699 clarify the process which was taking place in Biddenden.<sup>16</sup> In each case the two churchwardens and the two overseers of the poor negotiated terms with an individual willing to take on the child, and the arrangement was ratified by two or three of the local Justices of the Peace. In each case the placement of girls was until the age of 21 or marriage, and of boys until the age of 24. This was a major commitment on the part of the apprentice master; all but two of the eight children for whom the ages are clear were aged ten or below, the exceptions being eleven and fourteen. The adult was therefore contracting to take a child into his or her household for at least ten years.

At Frittenden it was the duty of the parish to have forty poor children placed with masters who would accommodate them and teach them a trade. It is noticeable that less than half (six out of fifteen) of the placements known were to households within Frittenden, the others being to adjacent or nearby parishes. Among the Frittenden placements there is a pattern. At least four of the six children were recently orphaned. Robert Payne, yeoman, took two and John Pullen and John Russell, husbandman, took one each; they were churchwardens during this period, and leading vestry members, who shared in the responsibility for arranging such placements. Robert Payne and John Pullen also happened to be kin by marriage. The

TABLE 2. APPRENTICESHIPS IN THE OVERSEERS' ACCOUNTS, BIDDENDEN, 1660-68

	Apprentice	Master	Occupation	Hearth Tax	Cost
1660	John Potter	Richard Dibley <sup>a</sup>	fellmonger	6 + 1	£6
	Richard Hovenden	Richard Collens		3	£4
1661	Fuller's boy	Alexander Lucas <sup>b</sup>	tailor	2	£12
	Pepper's girl	Jeremy Coltman <sup>c</sup>	handyman	1 ex	£3
1663	Wacher's	Godman Tritton	(not local)		£5
1664	Will Evans	Thomas Scales <sup>d</sup>	clothier	6	£2
1665	Atwood's girl	Will Hopper	labourer	1	£5 - 15
1668	Simmes boy	Simon Raynor <sup>e</sup>	bricklayer	2 + 1	£4

## Notes

a Richard Dibley, an overseer 1671-2.

b Alex Lucas was the tailor most frequently called upon to provide clothes for the parish poor (overseer 1677-8; churchwarden 1682-4); John Fuller, aged 12 at this time, was one of a family of 16 children born/baptized between 1628 and 1652, of whom 10 were buried as infants. When both his father & mother died in 1660, he should have had alive four sisters aged 26, 24, 19 and 16, and a brother Thomas aged eight; John and 'young Fuller' had been in the care of the parish ever since. Thomas was apprenticed in Sept 1662 to Alex Lucas, at a time when he was approaching 10 years of age.

c Jeremy Coltman worked on the church bells and ropes, as did his brother, who also made the coffins for the parish poor.

d Thomas Scales was a Nonconformist; all his children were registered 'born' not baptized.

e Simon Raynor, now elderly, still worked on the church and its maintenance.

other two masters, Thomas Merchant and William Grayling, were both yeomen with strong family ties to contemporary churchwardens. Within Frittenden, therefore, those of yeoman status, with a social conscience, took on the responsibility of accepting orphaned youngsters.

With the exception of John Russell, who undertook to teach his charge 'to ritt and read', no specific training is mentioned. It is therefore probable that these children were really providing masters with cheap farm labourers or domestic servants; this was the common practice for poor-law apprenticeships.<sup>17</sup> The one clear exception was the apprenticeship of William Shoesmith, then aged eight, to Thomas Mercer, a Hawkhurst tanner, who undertook to teach and instruct him 'in arte and skill of tanning by the best means he can'.

The poor Frittenden apprentices who were placed in other parishes may well have fared better in terms of learning a trade; they were taken on by a Cranbrook bricklayer, broadweavers in Biddenden and Cranbrook, a clothier in Biddenden and by Sir John Henden, the Justice of the Peace. One of the masters, John Shelly of Biddenden, was himself a comparatively poor man, exempt from hearth tax on his one-hearth house in 1664, and referred to as a labourer in the indenture. He took on Peter Hyland just after the death of the boy's father, no doubt because his own wife was a Hyland; in this way he received Frittenden parish funds to help to care for his own nephew. Sara Hyland, Peter's sister, had been apprenticed a few months earlier, before her father's death, to the Cranbrook broadweaver mentioned above. Two other siblings feature in the record, both orphaned, and both placed with Frittenden vestry men.

As with the Biddenden examples, there was no standard payment for placements, sums ranging from £2 10s. for Sara Hyland and £3 for her brother Peter, to £14 for Stephen Smith and £10 10s. each for the Jennings children. The largest payments tended to be to Frittenden masters; the median payment was £7. Possibly to assist the parish in managing its very limited funds, and possibly to ensure a steady income for the person taking the child into their home, larger payments were spread over a period of years. Thus Robert Paine was to receive his £14 in six instalments, with £4 at Easter 1683, and £2 each successive Easter until 1688.

While some children were taken into homes just as cheap labour, with the parish actually supplying some funds to help support that labour, kinship and business arrangements were also factors in arranging apprenticeship indentures. It seems to have been commonplace for influential members of the parish, often as part of their responsibility as officials, to take poor children into their homes. That the responsibility was seen as a serious one, and was inherited by their widows, is exemplified by two probate accounts from nearby parishes. On her husband's death, Joannah Bird of Hawkhurst asked for an allowance of £10 from the estate 'for the maintenance and clothes of Priscilla Harmon, a servant maide whom the said deceased tooke as an apprentice from the parish and is bound to maintayne for a certain time yet to come and she is a very hopeless person and a great charge to this Accomptant'. Thomas Bird was a yeoman farmer, and overseer of the poor of the parish of Hawkhurst at the time of his death. A similarly charitable approach is suggested by the case of Thomazine Austin, 'a lame girl and unfitt for service'. Robert Holnes, clothier of Benenden, had taken her on from the parish; at his death, his widow, Mary Holnes, found herself bound to maintain 'one Thomazine Austen, aged about 14 years ... till she comes to 21 years of age'.<sup>18</sup>

*Relief as need demands*

The second page of the overseers' accounts for 2 April 1664 has what might be called occasional payments, and shows why the overseers had constantly to be aware of the circumstances of the poor within the parish, and to act on that knowledge. It would appear that 'Hearne's girl' was due for some new clothes, but she figures frequently as in receipt of such support. Others similarly merited new shoes, or cloth or canvas for making new clothes. One notes the subtle difference between the payment for shoes for the children, and the help given towards a pair of shoes for widow Crowhurst. Frequently the lists name the person who was paid to make up cloth into clothes, but here this is true only of the last entry. Medical assistance, as can be seen, was also provided; Watcher's daughter did survive the treatment! Incidentally, the warrant to distrain indicates that someone had failed to pay their dues into the funds for the poor; the *Chequers* ('Chackar') was one of two local inns where the churchwardens and overseers normally met.

OVERSEERS OF THE POOR: ACCOUNTS, 2 APRIL 1664  
(2nd page)

Imprimis pd for an apron for hearnes girle	1 - 0
More for nickel	0 - 1
More a payre of hoase for hearnes girle	1 - 0
More a payre of Boddages for Hearnnes girle	2 - 4
More one ell & a halfe of Canves & one Ell of Luckaron	2 - 9
Item pd for a payre of Boddages for Pottars girle	1 - 0
Item for one Ell of Canves for Batmans Boy shirts	1 - 5
Item pd for Two Ells of Canves for shirts & a bed for Stedman	2 - 9
Item pd for one Ell & a hafe of Canves for Marrian	2 - 3
Item pd for 2 purdges & letting Blod of Watcharses girle	1 - 0
Item pd for one payre of shoes for Pottars girle	2 - 9
Item pd for a payre of shoes for Hearnnes girle	2 - 7
Item pd for a payre of shoes for Atwoods girle	1 - 4
Item pd for a payre of shoes Stedmans boy	1 - 0
Item pd for a payre of shoes for Peppars boy	1 - 6
Item pd Wid Crowast toward a payre of shooes	0 - 6
Item spent at the <i>Chackar</i> - Making ye sess & giving noattiss thereof	5 - 8
Item pd Brissenden for mending of Peppars shooes	0 - 4
Item pd for a warrant to distraine	1 - 4
Item pd Alex Homsbe for Cotton for a coat for stedman	2 - 3
Item pd Alex Lucas for making stedmans Coat	0 - 6
Total	£1 - 15 - 1



These occasional payments were normally linked with the half-year ends at Lady Day and Michaelmas, and were usually much more extensive than those illustrated here. Those of April 1660, for instance, itemise no less than 25 different orders for cloth, from kersey and skins to broadcloth, and in September 1661 every child on the lists received a new pair of shoes. One regular feature of the Michaelmas accounts, with the onset of winter, was the provision of faggots, bundles of small branches and twigs used in the bread ovens and for lighting household fires, at considerable cost to the parish at 8s. per load. October was also the time to pay off major bills to local grocers and other suppliers for 'things had for the poor'.

Other references help to give a feel for the work of the Overseers and Churchwardens. We have already seen that parishioners were paid to support those caring for the sick; it was commonplace also to pay subsistence to those confined 'in childbed' and to provide nursing support for them. Medical support was frequently paid for, although not all practitioners could claim medical qualifications. Mr Theobald, who was paid 10s. 'for cureinge Jude Bluets childs bodie which was broke and for Wenns wives brest curinge' (1662), was a registered apothecary and overseer of the poor 1659-60, and the overseers paid 2s. 6d., and later £1 7s., for a surgeon to look after Widow Wimble's daughter (1659-61). John Powell, on the other hand, who practised 'surgery about White' and 'more surgery about White' for 5s. and 3s. 6d. respectively (1660), and who lanced and dressed Gaskin's neck for 1s. (1662), was a tailor by trade and doubled as the parish sexton, digging graves and ringing the knell.

The overseers also assisted the poor with the maintenance of their houses. Thus, in September 1661 we find several local men involved in repairing the house of Joan Stringer, a spinster, who was buried in 1692 as 'poor woman'. Alex Homsby was paid 6d. for withes, Mr. Whitfield 3s. for straw for the roof, Thomas Southerden 2s. 6d. for thatching it, and Thomas Reynolds 4s. 6d. for a pair of rafters, some laths and his work about the house. Of these men the first two were substantial members of the vestry group who ran the parish: Alexander Homsby was a yeoman farmer living in a five-hearth house and Mr John Whitfield, an attorney at law and living in a seven-hearth house, was churchwarden that year. Thomas Reynolds was an extremely successful carpenter who lived in a four-hearth house and did most of the carpentry work around the church and churchyard. Thomas Southerden figures again in 1666, thatching the exempt one-hearth house of the shoe-mender John Mills; he does not figure in the hearth tax lists, so was presumably not himself a householder, but he had been married, did have children, and was buried in 1685 as 'an old blind man'.

One of the roles of the overseers was to ensure the proper burial of paupers in the parish. To this end there was a standard process which is

typified by the following entries concerning the sickness and burial of Widow Turner in the accounts for March 1660/61:

Itm pd Richard Bateman for necessarys had of him for Mary Blyst and widow Turner beinge sicke of the small pocks	10 - 4
Itm pd Merce Brissenden for tendynge the wid Turner and Layinge her forth	10 - 0
Itm pd Thomas Reighnolds for a Coffin for Wid Turner	6 - 0
Itm pd for sendinge to gett helpe to bury Wid Turner	0 - 4
Itm pd John Clarke for caryinge the Wid Turner and Mary Willard to buryall	5 - 0
Itm pd John Powell for buryinge Wid Turner	2 - 0

It is noteworthy that by far the heaviest costs in this example were incurred when the widow was ill and dying; the standard costs associated with the actual burial process were approximately 10s. As was commonplace, the people in this example crossed the social groupings of the parish: Richard Bateman was a member of the vestry group, living in a three-hearth house; he was almost certainly a clothier as was his brother and his son Vincent. Mercy Brissenden, on the other hand, was a poor spinster who received support from the parish and earned extra cash by carrying out such menial tasks as socking the dead. John Clarke was a labourer who nevertheless paid hearth tax on two small houses and was assessed on land valued at £8 rent per year.

#### *Group relief in times of distress*

It was also incumbent on the overseers to support parishioners at times of misfortune, whether they were paupers or not. One such occasion happened in 1667 when the parish was struck by plague. The overseers accounts show how the parish administrators arranged for the Peckham and Gutsell families to be quarantined in their houses in Bettenham Woods, on the boundary between Biddenden and Cranbrook parishes, and how supplies were brought there on a regular basis to support the families. Joints of meat were frequently taken in, sometimes by 'the Watchman', so-called because his role was to maintain their isolation, and sometimes by villagers who were paid to take the risk, as (July) 'paid to Tho. Morant for 11lb of Beef for Peckham & Gutsell, being shut up in their house at Bettenham Wood, 2s. 9d.'; 'given to the Watchman to relieve the Sick people, 10s.'; and 'sent to ye two infected howses at Betnam Wood, Gutsells & Brungers, two necks of veale, 1s. 9d.'. Such relief continued throughout August, with 'given to John Marketman for ye relief of the sick people, 10s.', and less hopefully 'paid to Will Day for 18 fagets for the sick people, 3s.; paid to him more for a hand-Borrow to carry out the Dead, 1s.'.

By this time, most of the 12 who were to die of the plague, including the wives of Christopher Gutsell and Zachary Packham and, in each case, two of their children, together with the Packham's maid Susanna and Mercy Brissenden (mentioned above), had already died. Nevertheless, relief poured in to the survivors, who remained isolated in Bettenham Wood throughout September and October. Thus we read (September) of: 'paid to Mr Rogers for severall things the sick people had of him the particulers apparent by his Bill, 18s. 7d', and (October) 'given to the visited at Bettenham Wood 5s.', and 'paid to Wm Day for 7 Faggess more for ye sick people, 1s. 2d'. By November 1667 the crisis was over; the registers tell us that of 24 who caught the plague 12 recovered.<sup>19</sup> The role of the administrators is highlighted by the mention of 'Mr. Rogers'. He was Mr Thomas Rogers, who paid tax on 10 hearths, had been overseer of the poor 1662-3 and, at the time of the plague, was the senior churchwarden and therefore in charge of parish administration. Clearly he played an organising role in the emergency; equally clearly he expected to have at least some of his costs defrayed. William Day was a brickmaker who lived in Bettenham Woods with his wife Mary. He had his first three children registered as born in Cranbrook in the 1650s, and his last two baptised in Biddenden in the 1660s. He paid tax on a one-hearth house and appears to have farmed the timber in the vicinity.

*Individual support in times of distress*

The case of Elizabeth Lattenden provides a not-atypical example of the way in which parishioners supported individuals who were suffering misfortune, even though the misfortune, in her case, was largely of her own making. She was certainly in need of care, because she appears in the parish registers as the mother of an illegitimate infant son buried in January 1665, of another illegitimate son, Thomas, buried in May 1669, and of an illegitimate daughter, buried unbaptized in July 1674. That the parish had done its duty by her at the time of her first child's death is recorded thus:

It pd for a Sock for Lattendens Childe and for releife in her Sickness	1 - 4
It pd to Powell for a Grave for Lattendens Childe	1 - 6

It is her second pregnancy (1667) which concerns us here, however, because the overseers' accounts record:

June	It pd Daniel Ward for a Warrant to take E Lattenden	0 - 6
October	It sent to Eliz. Lattenden when she lay Inn	2 - 0
	It given to Eliz. Lattenden when she lay Inn	2 - 6
	It paid to Daniel Ward for a Warrant for carry Elizabeth Lattenden before the Justice	0 - 6

The notice of a warrant to carry Elizabeth before the Justice directs us to the Quarter Sessions, and they show that, in May 1667, Elizabeth had accused Richard Clements of Cranbrook, labourer, of repeatedly having 'carnel knowledge' of her at the house of Richard Venos in Biddenden, as a result of which she gave birth to a child in September. Subsequently, Martha, the wife of John Morlen, a Biddenden clothier, who had assisted at the birth of the child, testified before the justices that, in the pain of her labour, Elizabeth had confessed that the real father was in fact Thomas Purchen, another Biddenden clothier, and that she freely discharged Richard Clements of all blame. Widow Bristow, acting as midwife, had also heard the confession and gave witness to the truth of Martha Morlen's testimony, as did Mildred, wife of William Clarke, another Biddenden clothier.

The judgement of the justices,<sup>20</sup> was that Thomas Purchen was the true father, and that he should pay the churchwardens or overseers of Biddenden 10s. to defray the costs of keeping the child thus far; that he should pay Elizabeth Lattenden a weekly sum of 1s. 2d. towards the child's keep and maintenance for eight years; and that when the child attained the age of eight he should pay £5 for putting it out as an apprentice. In fact the child, Thomas, died before its second birthday.

This case says a lot about social relationships with the very poor. The parish frequently used Daniel Ward for legal papers, and here ensured Elizabeth's visit to the Quarter Sessions at Maidstone to establish her child's paternity both before and after its birth; in the meantime she received some financial help. In what is often claimed to have been a male-dominated society, it was the potential mother who accused the supposed father before the court; other women journeyed to Maidstone subsequently to give testimony. This disgraced mother, who had already had a bastard child and was about to give birth to another, was nevertheless supported at the birth by a midwife and two women whose affluent husbands were among the more influential in the parish. Elizabeth and her son Thomas continued to receive occasional support from the parish whenever she was not well enough to earn a living; Thomas Purchen died a poor man in 1676.

### *Rental payments*

This brings us to the final page of the accounts for 2 April 1664 which deals largely with rents, as was the standard practice every half year (see below).

Rents were almost invariably paid to one person for another – to widow Stephens for old widow Beard, for instance, and to Richard Lucas for widow Wimble. Widow Stephens and Richard Lucas were clearly acting as landlady and landlord; what is not immediately clear is whether their

OVERSEERS OF THE POOR: ACCOUNTS, 2 APRIL 1664 (3rd page)  
(RENTS)

Imprimis pd Wid Stephens for old Wid Beards rent	5 - 0
Item pd John Chaddock for Mercy Brissenden	2 - 6
Item pd Sharwood for Wid Murgans rent	7 - 6
Item pd Wid Bennet for Wid Crowasts rent	6 - 0
Item pd John Wilkins Jun for Wid Chantlar	6 - 0
Item pd John Igulden for Susan Bust	12 - 0
Item pd Rich Lucas for Wid Wimbles rent	12 - 0
More for Wid Downes rent	7 - 0
Item pd Will Whitney for Bluets rent	12 - 0
Item pd Rich Mills for Shoosmiths rent	10 - 0
Item pd John Wilkins for Smiths & Margret Biggs rent	10 - 0
Item pd Ed Cruthole for Borrows rent	10 - 0
Item pd Rich Batman for Margt Norwood & Mary Blist	10 - 0
Item pd Richard Holman for Bristows rent	15 - 0
Item pd Alex Homsbe for Wid Brungars rent	10 - 0
More for Wid Wosleys rent	8 - 0
Item pd John Burden for Anne Gasons rent	2 - 6
Item pd John Wilkins rent for Wid Hoven~	2 - 6
Item pd Rich Woolbald for Gutsall & Mersy Bar	15 - 0
More for Wid Clarke & Joane Pott	15 - 0
Item pd Mr. John Mills for Wid Sims & Wid Harpar	12 - 0
Item pd for writing this sess and Gatherings Booke and in grossing this p~te of the accompt	6 - 0
Item for Wid Borriches rent	12 - 6
Item pd for the Charge Expended at the giving up of this accompt	2 - 6
Total	£10 - 10 - 0
	(sic)

tenants were living with them in their own houses, or whether they were living independently in property which was owned by the landlord or landlady. Indeed, the entries raise many questions to some of which one might hazard answers based on available evidence:

Who were these people who received rent for others?

What was it about Richard Holman's accommodation that warranted a rent six times greater than that required for Ann Gason or Mercy Brissenden?

Do these differences give a clue to whether the tenant was living with the householder or occupying a separate cottage?

Do the differences depend on the quality of accommodation offered, or on the expectations (one might almost say quality) of the tenants?

Do they reflect work done for the landlord by the tenant which might defray the amount of rent to be paid?

The hearth tax sheds some light. Mercy Brissenden, for instance, does not figure in the hearth tax lists; she was therefore a lodger, and may have helped around the house, thus earning part of her rent. She was housed until 1667 with the husbandman John Chadwick and his wife Alice, who paid on a one-hearth cottage; both John and his lodger succumbed to the plague in 1667. Widow Wimble, on the other hand, appears in the hearth tax list as living in a one-hearth cottage and exempt. She was not, therefore, lodging with Richard Lucas, but living in a cottage belonging to him, for which the parish paid Lucas the rent. Indeed, out of twenty-seven individuals for whom rent was being paid in April 1664, thirteen are readily identifiable as living in exempt properties which were therefore owned by the persons receiving rent from the parish. Variations in amount paid might therefore reflect the quality of the accommodation as well as other sources of income.

### *The Landlords – a closer look*

Finally, if we take the landlord or landlady, and check hearth tax returns and rental value of property occupied, we come up with an order of wealth (see **Table 3**). Categorisation in this way is always imperfect and often crude, but the general correspondence between hearth tax, rental value of land occupied, and putative occupation is encouraging.<sup>21</sup> What does most strikingly emerge is the social and economic spread of the landlords and landladies, and the fact that so many of them in the upper half of the wealth bracket were willing to take in paupers. This is a feature of all the parishes in the Cranbrook area; one cannot escape the strong impression that in each parish there was a sizeable group of comparatively wealthy individuals, yeomen, clothiers, the more successful retailers and the like, together with some gentlemen, who married into each others' families, who took offices like Overseer and Churchwarden, and who worked for the good of the community.<sup>22</sup>

Richard Woolball, for instance, a comparatively young man and only recently married (1662), was an overseer of the poor in 1663-64 and churchwarden in each of the three years between 1664 and 1667. As one holding the offices which were responsible for caring for the poor of the parish he was, in a sense, duty bound to take a lead in making provision for them. Here was a man who, despite his wealth or because of it, and certainly because of his upbringing, saw it as part of his role in society to be of service to those less fortunate than himself.<sup>23</sup> He also acted as bondsman and witness on many occasions, served as parish constable in 1676-7, and was a signatory to church accounts in most years until his death in 1684.

Similarly, Mr Richard Mills (6 hearths), Mr John Mills (4) and Alexander Homsby (5), yeoman, were closely involved in the running of the parish,

TABLE 3. 'LANDLORDS' BY HEARTH TAX VALUE

Hearths	Landlord	Rental (£)	Occupation	Other
6	Mr Richard Mills	34	gentleman	O/P
5	Richard Woolball	30	clothier	O/P; Chw
5	Alexander Homsby	24	yeoman/mercator	Vestry group
-	Richard Holman	24		(not in HT; buried 1675)
4	Edmund Crutwell	20	clothier	
4	William Whitney	16		(not in reconstitution)
4	Mr John Mills	5	gentleman	Vestry group
3	Widow Bennet	22	widow of yeoman	
3	Richard Bateman	18	clothier	Vestry group
3	John Iggleden	9		
2, 1ex	Thomas Caffinch	11	butcher	O/P
2	John Wilkins jnr	5	brickmaker	
1	John Willard	6	clothier	
1	John Chadwick	4	husbandman	
2ex	Richard Lucas	3	tailor	
1ex	John Wilkins snr	1	tilestriker/brickmaker	
1ex	John Burden			
1ex	John Sherwood		labourer	
1ex	Widow Stephens			

had held office during the 1650s and continued to attend meetings and sign accounts. It is no surprise, therefore, to find men like Richard Dibley (6), an overseer 1671-2, and John Jennings (3), overseer 1678-9, both of them very involved in the vestry, providing accommodation for the poor later in the decade. These were also just the sort of men who left money in their wills for distribution to the poor, with bequests ranging usually from £2 to £5, and in one case to £50.<sup>24</sup>

At the other end of the social scale, Widow Stevens, for instance, is known from the hearth tax returns (1 hearth - exempt). 'Old Widow' Margaret Beard, who was living with her, had been married in 1625; she must have been in her late sixties or early seventies, and by 1664 had already been widowed fourteen years; she died in August 1668. The



evidence shows that there was a broad cross-section of people in the parish who took in the poor and the indigent, and did so in housing arrangements which contributed to the welfare both of those accommodating and of those providing accommodation.

### *Conclusions*

The evidence given above refers largely to Biddenden, but is closely paralleled by the evidence from Cranbrook, Goudhurst and Staplehurst; the likelihood, therefore, is that the pattern which one sees in Biddenden is true of the Wealden parishes in general at this time. Approximately 80 per cent of Biddenden householders indirectly supported the impotent poor through their assessed contributions. This financial support provided monthly means-tested subsistence for 20 individuals, mainly widows and spinsters, sufficient to keep body and soul together. These monthly payments were enhanced in times of crisis, and regularly supplemented by the provision of clothing (sometimes provided directly, sometimes subsidised), rents and fuel. Also supported were a similar number of the sick, the infirm and orphans, cared for by parishioners in their own homes, with provisions for medical assistance, maintenance of housing, and burial. The poorest children of the parish, usually orphans, were fostered out until they reached an age to be apprenticed or sent to service; provision was made for them on a regular monthly basis. These children rarely stayed with one carer for long, and the carers were not infrequently those already receiving support, who supplemented their subsistence thereby.

Also providing housing or homes for the poor, and fostering children or taking them on as apprentices, were men of substance, members of the vestry group who ranked below the top flight in the social or economic hierarchy; they provided the overseers of the poor and the churchwardens. All carers, from whichever end of the spectrum, tended to be intimately connected with the parish, either as vestry members and officers or as people who worked on the church and its property.

The parish funds had to meet extraordinary emergencies, like plague relief and apprenticeship payments, as well as the regular payments which could be predicted with more confidence. Age for apprenticeship started at eight years upwards. Unsubsidised care was also provided for unmarried mothers, with those carers including the wives of men of substance within the parish. Such women were quite prepared to travel the sixteen miles to Maidstone to state their cases before the Justices of the Peace.

In conclusion, therefore, the evidence of the Biddenden Overseers' Accounts, supplemented by similar evidence from Cranbrook and Frittenden, and from the Biddenden Churchwardens' Accounts and the



Maidstone Quarter Sessions, suggests that in the 1660s the parishes were doing a remarkably good job of looking after those least able to look after themselves.

ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> CKS P26/12/1, P100/12/1, P157/12/1, P347/12/1.
- <sup>2</sup> W. E. Tate, *The Parish Chest*, 3rd edition of 1969 (reprinted by Phillimore, 2000) 188-214; P. Slack, *The English Poor Law, 1531-1782* (Cambridge, 1990).
- <sup>3</sup> For statistics see A. Poole, 'Kinship and other social and economic links as a basis for personal relationships in the Cranbrook region of Kent, 1660-1700' (Surrey/Rochampton Ph.D thesis, 2002), esp. 112, 131.
- <sup>4</sup> D. Harrington (ed.), S. Pearson & S. Rose, *Kent Hearth Tax Assessment, Lady Day 1664* (British Record Society, 2000).
- <sup>5</sup> Compare S. Hindle, 'Power, Poor Relief and Social Relations in Holland Fen, c.1600-1800', *Historical Journal*, 41, no. 4 (1998), 81-3.
- <sup>6</sup> The annual disbursement at Cranbrook was approximately £400 per annum, at Goudhurst rather more than £300, and at Staplehurst rather less than £300.
- <sup>7</sup> 'It was agreed that no Churchwarden hereafter shall pay for a bricklayer and a boy above 2s 6d for one day's work', CKS PRC 26/5/1, Biddenden Churchwardens' Accounts, 1667. Overseers' accounts allowed workers 1s. 9d. per day, CKS PRC 26/12/1.
- <sup>8</sup> P. Laslett, 'Natural and Political Observations on the Population of late Seventeenth-Century England: reflections on the work of Gregory King and John Graunt', in K. Schurer and T. Arkell (eds), *Surveying the People* (Local Population Studies, 1992), 12-30.
- <sup>9</sup> T. Wales, 'Poverty, poor relief and life-cycle: some evidence from seventeenth-century Norfolk', in R. M. Smith (ed), *Land, Kinship and Life-Cycle* (Cambridge 1984), 352.
- <sup>10</sup> Widow Bristow usually received 3s. 6d., Widow Morgan usually 6d.
- <sup>11</sup> CKS Q/S 231/9 - 231/25, Quarter Sessions records.
- <sup>12</sup> William Barrow the elder was married in 1624 and widowed in 1653; he does not figure in the hearth tax returns, so may well have been living with his son, Thomas, the boys' father.
- <sup>13</sup> Contrary to the advice of M. Dalton, *The Country Justice* (London 1618, 1635, 1643), see S. Hindle, 'Civility, Honesty and the Identification of the Deserving Poor in Seventeenth-Century England', in J. Barry and H. French, *Identity and Agency in England, 1500-1800* (Palgrave 2004), 39-40. Judith's second daughter, Susan, went on to give birth to an illegitimate son whom the writer of the burial register in 1671 thought she had murdered.
- <sup>14</sup> Margaret had received an occasional 6d., but this was briefly raised to 2s. in February and 3s. in March of 1664.
- <sup>15</sup> Hindle, 'Civility, Honesty and the Identification of the Deserving Poor', 41.
- <sup>16</sup> CKS PRC 152/14/1.
- <sup>17</sup> W. E. Tate, *The Parish Chest*, 3rd edition of 1969 (reprinted by Phillimore, 2000), 221.
- <sup>18</sup> CKS PRC 2/40/94, Thomas Bird of Hawkhurst, 1683, and 2/36/203, Robert Holnes of Benenden, 1675.
- <sup>19</sup> The sesse for May 1667 (6d. in the £1) rose to 9d. in November 1667 and April 1668, and 12d. in November 1668.
- <sup>20</sup> Sir John Henden and Richard Hulse Esq., 5 October 1667.

<sup>21</sup> See especially Margaret Spufford, 'The significance of the Cambridgeshire Hearth Tax', in *Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society*, 55 (1962), 53-65, and her *Contrasting Communities* (Cambridge 1974), 36-45.

<sup>22</sup> For a close parallel see W. Newman-Brown, 'The Receipt of Poor Relief and Family Situation: Aldenham, Hertfordshire, 1630-90', in R. M. Smith (ed), *Land, Kinship and Life-Cycle* (Cambridge 1984), 419-20.

<sup>23</sup> His brother Peter is specifically referred to as 'a very honest religious bachelor' in the register.

<sup>24</sup> CKS PRC 17/75/161, Edward Stringer, gentleman of Goudhurst, who left specified sums totalling £50 to the poor of Goudhurst, Cranbrook, Hawkhurst, Staplehurst, Marden and Horsmonden.