

### CHAPTER 3. AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS AND THE OLD POOR LAW IN WORCESTERSHIRE 1790-1829

By 1790 the Elizabethan Poor Law of 1601 had initiated almost 200 years of subsequent legislation and practice affecting virtually all the parishes of England. The process of administering the Poor Laws, however, was only universal in the sense that it was based on the parish vestry, whose members appointed churchwardens and overseers to levy a poor rate. Individual vestries then submitted their overseers' names to local Justices for what was usually automatic approval. In rural parishes the power to administer relief usually lay with a local oligarchy of squire, cleric and principal farmers or other principal inhabitants.<sup>1</sup> By 1790, the Poor Laws were complex, open to interpretation and implemented by local men with a range of ability. This meant that whilst the laws themselves were designed by men influenced by specific social theories they were administered locally by others who might not have shared their ideologies. Poynter's (1969) close study of this period suggested that it was pointless to look for an application of social theories in the laws themselves since there was no national practice or national model being implemented in a local context. Poynter also pointed out that, although the Act of 1601 stipulated three main forms of relief rural parish, vestries interpreted these in a number of ways.<sup>2</sup> Generally, there was an assumption that local farmers were morally obliged to employ all the poor or to set people to work on roads, in the workhouse or on the parish farm. In some instances, however, local interpretation did lead to changes taking place that preceded future legislation or took place regardless of whether any national legislation followed.<sup>3</sup>

Cowherd (1977) took a different approach and suggested that poor relief could not be divorced from the competing social ideologies of the period nor from the impact of English radicalism during the French Wars (1793-1815). He suggested that a combination of labourers' loss of common rights, reliance on daily wages and lack of employment in the winter months led to increasing dependency

---

<sup>1</sup> Poynter, *Society and Pauperism*: 9.

<sup>2</sup> Money for those unable to work, employment for children and adults without the means to maintain themselves and apprenticeship for pauper children.

<sup>3</sup> Poynter, *Society and Pauperism*: 15-21.

on poor relief. This dependency not only became associated in many commentators' minds with increasing population growth gobbling up resources, but in years of bad harvests and high prices, food riots and arson attacks were all too redolent of behaviour that contemporaries believed had started the French Revolution. Cowherd suggested that such thinking increasingly coloured some of the debate about the Poor Laws from the 1790s onwards and culminated in the Act of 1834, which was partly designed to keep the poor subdued.<sup>4</sup> Snell agreed that the Poor Laws and their administration were strongly influenced by fears of social unrest and upheaval, but suggested that far from being the manifestation of widespread social antagonism, food riots and other demonstrations of unrest were basically traditional forms of protest used to 'encourage' local gentry and farmers to fulfil their customary obligations to the poor. He suggested that local relief systems often encompassed some element of patriarchy so that, money apart, the rural poor received shoes, pattens, boots, clothes of all sorts, furniture, bedding, rents, fuel (coal), childbed linen, lying-in expenses, flour, meat, marriage/burial costs and employment opportunities for the poorest children. This did not mean that Snell believed that all within the system was sweetness and light. He recognised that there was some corruption and maladministration in the Old Poor Law, which was most apparent where parish workhouses were contracted out as a means of relieving the poor as cheaply as possible. He also recognised that mothers of illegitimate children, non-settled inhabitants and vagabonds were often treated badly. Nevertheless, putting these factors to one side, he pointed out that until 1816 poor relief was, by and large, a generous and, importantly, a democratic process since parish vestry meetings were open to the whole village and the poor could also attend to put their case in person.<sup>5</sup>

Wells (1990) saw the Old Poor Law and its administration as a fundamental agent of change in rural society, where the arrival of structural unemployment in a relatively immobile rural population led to chronic underemployment and rising relief costs. This meant that not only were many labourers' incomes stagnant or reduced in real terms, but rising prices, particularly in the great grain crises of December 1794 to August 1796 and November 1799 to September 1801, meant

---

<sup>4</sup> Cowherd, *Political Economists and the English Poor Laws*: Xiii.

<sup>5</sup> Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor*: 106-107.

that a labourer's entire earnings were spent on food leaving nothing for clothes and fuel. Wells argued that this inevitably led to increases in the rates of poor relief and a rise in crime as more labourers were forced to break the law in order to survive. He suggested that most measures taken to relieve rural poverty such as food doles or parish work schemes were, in reality, forms of social control that influenced the way select vestries operated in the 1820s. Wells believed that rural social relationships were becoming polarised in some areas as early as the 1800s, leading to incidents of looting, arson and threats to local officials.<sup>6</sup> In his view traditional forms of unrest were becoming replaced by what could be described as 'class warfare'.

Rule (1991), however, reminded historians that poverty was always part of rural labourers' lives and was not just restricted to those unable to work and the elderly. The first years of marriage meant that women with dependent children were often unable to work, leaving the whole family reliant on their husbands' wages. This meant there were many occasions when families on low incomes required relief and the Old Poor Law supplied it generously. This was because the Old Poor Law was operated as a local, face-to-face system where people and their problems were usually well-known to local overseers. Rule suggested that local overseers knew people well enough to know when they were truly in want and that the poor themselves were perfectly capable of appealing to magistrates if relief was unjustly refused. In such instances, benevolent Justices often took the side of the poor and could overrule local overseers and order relief to be given.<sup>7</sup>

Although the Old Poor Law operated differently from area to area, most research in rural history has focused on the southern and eastern counties, so that practices there, like Speenhamland, have come to exemplify the national picture. In seeking to broaden research, this study has linked contemporary social theory to local practice and concentrated on how the Old Poor Law was administered and how rural labourers in Worcestershire experienced it. It has tried to establish what factors impacted on the labourer's experience of poverty by following up Cowherd's suggestions that three factors became increasingly important during this

---

<sup>6</sup> Wells, 'The Development of the English Rural Proletariat and Social Protest', 2-40.

<sup>7</sup> Rule, *Albion's People*: 119-122.

period: growing use of casual labour, cyclical changes in the economy (periods of bad harvest/low prices) and technological development.<sup>8</sup> Logic also suggested that there were also other variables that needed to be taken into account. Firstly, not all agricultural labourers in Worcestershire in the 1790s and 1800s were similar people with similar incomes. There were probably only a minority of labourers who were highly skilled regular hands, like carters, shepherds and threshers, employed all year on reasonable wages. Those who had long working lives, living in tied cottages with substantial gardens and able to grow crops and raise livestock, were probably comfortable and financially secure. Into this category, could also be placed a small number of labourers determined to improve their prospects, by being willing to speculate to accumulate and, if successful, able to save money as a consequence.

However, it was important not to put too much stress on those in regular work or to assume that very many labourers were saving significant amounts of money. Most labourers had to exist on weekly wages that varied according to the season and were subject to sudden fluctuations or reduction, especially when work could not take place due to bad weather. There were also increasing numbers of casual day labourers, often working for lower wages and with little or no winter work. Men in these categories may, however, might have had wives and children working and their supplementary earnings no doubt allowed many families to subsist rather than fall into poverty and want.<sup>9</sup> Lastly, there were others who could or would not work, either because of age or infirmity or simply because they were feckless. In the 1790s such people were most likely to be reliant on the parish for support and assistance. In between these somewhat artificial categories there was a range of individuals whose disrupted or dysfunctional lives meant that they were sometimes forced to rely on parish relief. This category included orphans, widows, mothers of illegitimate children, vagrants, the destitute, travellers, prisoners' wives, soldiers' wives and those who were mentally ill or physically disabled. How all of these fared under the Old Poor Law depended both on the legislation in force at any

---

<sup>8</sup> Cowherd, *Political Economists and the English Poor Laws*: 91.

<sup>9</sup> Cowherd, *Political Economists and the English Poor Law*: 183. Unfortunately, such wages were liable to dry up when the economy worsened, exactly coinciding with times when such wages were most needed.

given time and how magistrates, churchwardens and overseers in individual parishes interpreted it.

Cowherd provided a useful summary of the legislation passed at the start of this period that enabled a comparison to be made between national legislation and local practice in Worcestershire in the 1790s. The three key Acts in force were Gilbert's Act 1782, the George Rose Act 1793 and the Workhouse Act 1795.<sup>10</sup> Under Gilbert's Act, which only affected rural areas, the 1722 condition that the poor had to enter a workhouse for relief was repealed, as was the forcible removal of the sick and pregnant who became chargeable. Instead, the Act encouraged parish unions to build larger workhouses with better management and outdoor relief was encouraged. The George Rose Act 1793 was designed to make people more responsible for their own well-being and encouraged Friendly Societies to raise funds to support their members. No member of a Friendly Society was to be removed from a parish until he or she became chargeable. Finally, the Workhouse Act of 1795 reiterated the right of the poor not to enter a workhouse to receive relief and gave the industrious 'deserving' poor the right to be relieved in their own homes even if they refused to be lodged in a workhouse and regardless of whether the parish had contracts with people to provide relief and employment.

On the surface the Acts appeared benign, encouraging and successful, particularly so far as Friendly Societies were concerned. By 1803 there were 9,672 Friendly Societies in England with a membership of 704,350,<sup>11</sup> indicating ten years of rapid growth and substantial membership. In the same period, although there were 1,233,768 people who received parish relief, 956,248 did so in their own homes and only 83,468 had to enter a workhouse.<sup>12</sup> Yet although the George Rose Act appeared to endorse a growing Friendly Society movement, the records of local societies that survived in Worcestershire suggested that the subscriptions to be paid were well beyond the pocket of any agricultural labourer. The rules of the Amicable Society, Astley, established in 1782, for example, required a man to have three character witnesses before he could join and stipulated regular monthly

---

<sup>10</sup> Cowherd, *Political Economists and the English Poor Laws*: 5-10. Gilbert's Act usually needed a separate Local Act such as the Worcester Act of 1783.

<sup>11</sup> Cowherd, *Political Economists and the English Poor Laws*: 9.

<sup>12</sup> Cowherd, *Political Economists and the English Poor Laws*: 10.

contributions of 6d in the box and an additional 2d every club night. When the money in the club box reached £10 every member had to make a one-off payment of 3s 6d and when funds reached £20 a further one-off payment of 5s. No monetary support could be received from the club until after three years' membership. The same rules applied to the Union Club of Females, Astley, founded in 1787.<sup>13</sup>

Membership of a Friendly Society also had to be registered with the churchwardens and overseers of the poor. For example, in 1809 Elizabeth Hunt and Ann Williams, stewardesses of the Female Friendly Society, Droitwich, signed a statement in front of a Justice of the Peace that Elizabeth Tunks, a married woman, had become a member. This presumably meant that if she was entitled to benefits from the Friendly Society she might not receive any parish relief. Such a document, however, would have proved problematic if relief were required before a member had paid sufficient money into a Friendly Society.<sup>14</sup> In that situation local overseers might have challenged the individual's right to any parish relief while they still had money invested in a Friendly Society's funds.

Both Elizabeth Hunt and Ann Williams signed their statement with a mark, which indicated that an inability to write was an issue during in this period.<sup>15</sup> It certainly created a fundamental problem for those without certificates who left their Settlement to work elsewhere and eventually became reliant on their former parish for relief. In order to obtain help and avoid removal, labourers sometimes had to travel back to their original parish to request relief, with or without a letter of support, or they had to use an intermediary to write letters for them.<sup>16</sup> Such letters, although flowery and obsequious, sometimes failed to get an answer. For example, Joseph Jinks living in Tewkesbury employed a letter writer in 1815 in trying to

---

<sup>13</sup> WCRO: BA/110/47, Midsummer Quarter Sessions, 1795: Rules of the Amicable Society, Astley. It is assumed that such rules evolved locally and with certain types of contributor in mind.

<sup>14</sup> WCRO: BA/5476/14, Statement to the Churchwardens and Overseers of the Poor of the Parish of St Peter in Droitwich, 27<sup>th</sup> July 1809 by Elizabeth Hunt of St Peter's and Ann Williams of Dodderhill.

<sup>15</sup> Based on the signing of marriage certificates in Parish registers.

<sup>16</sup> WCRO: BA/8719/8, See overseers' correspondence. In 1812 William Quinton travelled with a letter of support from Aston near Birmingham to overseers at All Saints, Evesham to claim relief. William's wife was dying, his son was at home looking after her and he was unemployed due to bad weather. The letter that he carried was from R. Charles and dated March 3<sup>rd</sup> 1812. It describes William Quinton as, 'an industrious hard-working man'.

obtain a certificate from Evesham overseers in respect of his wife, who had been badly burned. The letter-writer began with a flourish by saying ‘Permit me to address you on the subject of my present unhappy situation’ and ended with ‘for which favour I shall be very thankful and remain your distressed humble servant’. No help was forthcoming however, so Joseph sent another letter some months later saying that he had received no relief, was ill, out of work and behind with the rent - again apparently to no avail.<sup>17</sup>

The correspondence between Hannah Taylor and the overseers of All Saints Parish, Evesham was even more interesting. Hannah sent a letter, not in her own hand, from Tewkesbury on 8<sup>th</sup> September 1811 requesting a certificate from Evesham so that her unemployed sister Elizabeth Thorpe, whose legal Settlement was Evesham, could work in Tewkesbury in order to support her child. There was no response, forcing Hannah to write again in her own hand to say that her sister had gone to do temporary work in Bredon and could the overseers send some money to support Elizabeth’s child, who was now living with Hannah. Hannah wrote with great difficulty, and a brief extract from her letter showed her limited ability to put her case into words ‘my sester Hannah has Been Varey kind in landing me a fow shelens hor hels for I should a Been.....’<sup>18</sup> Behind the struggle for words, it was clear that Hannah was forced to write because she believed Elizabeth was not receiving her right to relief. Despite all the difficulties involved Hannah felt she had to make a stand on her sister’s behalf.

Hannah’s letter and others like it can often be found amongst what remains of parish overseers’ correspondence and deserved closer examination. What such letters highlighted was an unforeseen danger that might lie ahead when people who were not literate began moving about from place to place in search of work. Between 1790 and 1829, however, it became increasingly difficult to obtain a year’s employment and gain a new Settlement. Worse still, failure to gain one often ended in removal back to the individual’s original place of Settlement many years

---

<sup>17</sup> WCRO: BA/8719/8, Undated letter from William Jinks to the overseers of All Saints Parish, Evesham and a subsequent letter to the overseers dated April 18<sup>th</sup> 1815. The first letter appears to have been written by a professional letter writer and the style was deliberately flattering.

<sup>18</sup> WCRO: BA/8719/7, Undated letter from Hannah Taylor on behalf of Elizabeth Thorpe to the overseers, All Saints, Evesham.

later. However, those who could not be removed for reasons of health or childcare sometimes found it impossible to obtain relief locally. This meant they were ultimately reliant on the willingness of local overseers to contact a former parish on their behalf. Whilst some overseers carried out such tasks responsibly, those in the parish of origin were usually tardy in replying or failed to respond at all. Although such cases were in a minority, people trying to obtain relief from a distance were clearly disadvantaged by poor literacy and reliant on the administrative ability of churchwardens and overseers. Their willingness to act on behalf of the poor may also have been conditioned by whether they regarded the applicants as deserving or undeserving of support. Those with a legal right to Settlement, however, were also at the mercy of any existing variations in local relief practices and a closer examination of the parishes chosen for this study revealed some interesting differences in how the Poor Laws were administered during this period.

Elmley Lovett in the decade 1790 to 1801 was a small and prosperous parish. The Poor Law was administered there by an oligarchy of local farmers, dominated by Francis Moule, a gentleman farmer of Sneads Green House.<sup>19</sup> The Moules had lived in the parish since 1621 and played a leading role in poor relief from 1764 to the 1820s. During the 1790s, evidence indicated that the parish had no difficulty keeping a check on its residents or supporting them when they needed relief. The Parish Book, unusually, listed all the certificates of outsiders and kept these certificates in the parish chest. This suggested that anyone who came into Elmley Lovett with a certificate had it taken from him or her for safe keeping in case they eventually became chargeable.<sup>20</sup> During the 1780s and 1790s there were only 11 to 15 individuals with legal Settlement receiving weekly pay, although others received casual payments for illness or lack of work. Allowances were also given for shoes, clothing, fuel, lying-in and lodgings. Existing evidence also suggested that there were not many poor labouring families in the parish, although a James Bray appeared regularly in the accounts as out of work or 'in want' and his two children had to be apprenticed by the parish in 1790.<sup>21</sup> The Brays apart, however, the parish appeared relatively unaffected by Gilbert's Act, the George

---

<sup>19</sup> *The Victoria History of the counties of England: Worcestershire: Vol. 3.*

<sup>20</sup> WCRO: BA/9845/6, The Parish Book. See list of certificates held in the parish chest.

<sup>21</sup> Only nine children had to be apprenticed by the parish overseers between 1787 and 1792.



Rose Act or the Workhouse Act. It had a small population, few outsiders and very few poor families. It was a typical 'closed parish' and although this situation was not unique Elmley Lovett also had the advantage of economic prosperity.

By way of contrast, Inkberrow was an 'open' parish and its problems in respect of poverty went back to the 1700s. Inkberrow was so poor in 1774 that the vestry was making up labourers' wages from the poor rates and by 1799 these were subsidised by 4d a day.<sup>22</sup> The parish also had a workhouse and regular lump sums were paid to overseers to be distributed from the workhouse as doles to those in need. By 1796 Gilbert's Act and the Workhouse Act of 1795 had their impact and the parish began to move away from a system of workhouse relief to outdoor relief. That said, from 1796 to 1797 the overseers made one quarterly payment of £100 to be distributed from the workhouse in the form of bread or money, probably as part of their response to the rising cost of bread during the grain crisis of 1794 to 1796. By 1800 the Inkberrow workhouse, in keeping with others elsewhere, housed the old, the sick and women with illegitimate children. That year a part-time manager was appointed to ensure that those who could, worked. Women were to be employed as spinners and to receive 4d for every slip spun and 2d in the shilling on cloth that was sold. The inmates lived mostly on a diet of bread, cheese, and porridge, with some occasional meals of bacon, pork and beans.<sup>23</sup> They slept on home-made beds in a building that was typically dilapidated and often in need of repair.

What was remarkable about Inkberrow in this period, however, was its methodical accounting system and the guiding hand of the Reverend William Heath, vicar from 1792 to 1830. Heath was much praised in retrospect for his efficiency in dealing with problems of poor relief in a parish where the bulk of the inhabitants were labourers.<sup>24</sup> The Parish Account Book 1781-1801 demonstrated the strategies implemented through his overseers after he became vicar in 1792.

---

<sup>22</sup> WCRO: BA/818/5, Inkberrow Parish Account Book 1781-1801. This meant that farmers only had to pay 8d a day.

<sup>23</sup> Such diets reflected labourers' diets outside the workhouse, although those probably varied considerably.

<sup>24</sup> William Bradbrook, 'A History of the Parish of Inkberrow and Local Government.' *Transactions of the Worcestershire Archeological Society*, Vol. XXXV1, (1912).

Apart from subsidising wages and removing outsiders, poor children were automatically apprenticed out and men were paid to enter the militia or the navy. Men and women were also encouraged to marry outside the parish and overseers paid for their weddings.<sup>25</sup> Those in receipt of weekly pay were visited regularly to ensure that their claims were genuine and their allowances spent appropriately. On the surface, these strategies appeared harsh and indifferent, but there was no evidence that labourers were dealt with inhumanely. In any case, firm measures were necessary because the population of Inkberrow rose significantly during this period from 889 residents in 1770, to 1,335 in 1801 and then peaked at 1,743 in 1831.<sup>26</sup>

Because the parish had a large population of labourers, and squatters at the Ridgeway and Stock Wood, underemployment and unemployment were long-standing factors in parish life and without Heath's managerial skills the poor in Inkberrow would have been worse off. For example, one of the less efficient overseers, Thomas Davies, became insolvent in 1790 and did not complete his accounts. This meant that the parish eventually lost £18.<sup>27</sup> With Heath and his successors in charge from 1792 onwards, the poor rates were dealt with meticulously. What Heath could not have predicted, but had to deal with, were the grain crises of 1794 to 1796 and of 1799 to 1801, both of which began with poor harvests and led to rising food prices. In a parish like Inkberrow where wages were both low and subsidised, rising prices were potentially catastrophic. The overseers' response to the crisis of 1794-96 was to ensure that bread allowances or monetary payments were made from the workhouse on the basis of personal application and individual need. The crisis of 1799-1801, however, had a major impact on the parish and the numbers on weekly pay rose from a weekly average of 27 in 1800 to 70 in December 1801 before peaking at 149 in June 1802. The cost of poor relief, not surprisingly, rose rapidly:

---

<sup>25</sup> WCRO: BA/818/5, Inkberrow Parish Account Book 1791-1801, one can only speculate about how this happened, but presumably word of mouth was important. In 1794, however, George Wegbury, one of the overseers, held meetings in the parish to consult about hiring men to serve in the navy. Men willing to join were given £8.8s to assist them

<sup>26</sup> BPP, *Population. Vol.6, 1852 – 1853* (Irish University Press: Shannon, 1972). See Worcestershire.

<sup>27</sup> WCRO: BA/818/5, Inkberrow Parish Account Book 1781-1801. See end of year entry 1790.

**Table 3.1: Cost of Poor Relief, Inkberrow 1798-1803, extracted  
from Inkberrow Parish Account Books**

Year	Cost of relief
1798-1799	£1,273. 14. 5.
1799-1800	£1,117. 14. 2.
1800-1801	£1,581. 10. 11.
1801-1802	£2,635. 3. 3.
1802-1803	£1,152. 6. 7.

The significance of this crisis year was that whilst it might have officially ended in 1801, the impact on some parishes lasted well into 1802. In Inkberrow, the overseers reacted to the crisis by raising more money to distribute in poor relief and in November 1800 they also tried to force local farmers to take on day labourers in proportion to the amount each paid in poor rates at wages of 8d a day. A refusal to do so resulted in a fine of the same amount.<sup>28</sup> A month later, in December, local farmers were banned from employing labourers from outside the parish and each occupier of land was required to take a poor child as an apprentice or fined £5 if they refused, a higher fine than imposed elsewhere in other parishes.<sup>29</sup> This strategy, however, appeared not to work and by June 11<sup>th</sup> 1801 it was agreed that the parish would put out a limited number of apprentices and farmers were expected to take them on in turn.<sup>30</sup>

What was difficult to capture, was how labourers themselves experienced these periodic crises or the poverty that came with infirmity, disability or old age. It could not be assumed that neighbours and family stepped into the breach if parish relief turned out to be mean and scanty, because they were probably sharing the

---

<sup>28</sup> WCRO: BA/818/5, Inkberrow Parish Book. Vestry Minute November 24<sup>th</sup> 1800.

<sup>29</sup> WCRO: BA/818/5, Vestry Minute, December 10<sup>th</sup> 1800.

<sup>30</sup> WCRO: BA/818/5, Vestry Minute, and June 11<sup>th</sup> 1801. This appeared to be a variation of The Roundsman System.

same hardships. John Clare, perhaps the most empathetic observer, experienced at close range the ignominy felt (and heaped on) those unable to exist on out-relief and reduced to dependency on the workhouse:

Shoved as a nuisance from pride's scornful sight  
In the cold corner stands the woeful plight  
The shuttered workhouse of the parish poor.....  
Here dwell the wretched, lost to hopeless strife,  
Reduced by want to skeletons in life,  
Despised by all; e'en age, grown bald and grey,  
Meets scoffs from wanton children in their play,  
Who laugh at misery by misfortunes bred  
And point scorn's finger at the mouldering shed.  
The tottering tenant urges no reply,  
Turns his white head and chokes the passing sigh,  
And seeks his shed and hides his heart's despair  
For pity lives not as a listener there.<sup>31</sup>

To go into the workhouse under the Old Poor Law was, for some, undoubtedly the end of the road since age and infirmity meant they could not look after themselves and nobody else was willing enough to assist them. Pregnant women expecting an illegitimate child, however, were sent to the workhouse as a matter of course, as in the case of Hester Dilworth, who had to go into the Inkberrow workhouse with all her possessions. Only then was she eligible to receive a weekly payment of 5s throughout her pregnancy.<sup>32</sup> If these women had other children, they usually went into the workhouse as well. Apart from this, pressure to enter the workhouse at Inkberrow was most acute in times of high prices and an increase in numbers between 1800 and 1802 forced overseers to employ Samuel Owen and his wife to manage the workhouse. In April 1800 they were

---

<sup>31</sup> J. Tibble & A. Tibble (eds.), John Clare: *Selected Poems*, Extract from 'The Parish: A Satire', written between 1820 and 1824 after the Select Vestry Act led to a generally harsher attitude to the poor.

<sup>32</sup> WCRO: BA/818/5, Inkberrow Parish Book. See entry February 4<sup>th</sup> 1795.

ordered to take in and relieve, 'each poor person the parish thinks fit to place there'.<sup>33</sup>

For those labourers living in Inkberrow who were neither eligible for the workhouse nor squatters, the major indicator of their poverty in the overseers' accounts was the need for food, clothing and shelter. Today, payments for shoes, shifts, smocks, rent, lodgings and fuel might seem like acts of generosity to some historians, but they were essential requirements born of human necessity. When William Hart of Inkberrow received shoes in June 1800, they were not given as an extra, but because he either had none or those he had were so dilapidated as to be past repair. Without shoes Hart stood no chance of getting any kind of employment. Hart was often unemployed or underemployed, so the weekly payments he received covered some basic living costs, but would never have stretched to new shoes, however cheap and ill-made parish shoes might be.

Turning to Powick, there was a clearer correlation between the legislation of the 1790s and actual practice, particularly in relation to Gilbert's Act and the Workhouse Act of 1795. During the late 1780s and early 1790s Powick Workhouse was contracted out to two farmer-overseers, first Joseph Dalby and then Norgrove Evans. Evans was awarded a three-year contract in April 1792 with an annual salary of 15 guineas with the stipulation that he and his wife had to find their own tea and sugar.<sup>34</sup> Under this agreement, relief was distributed by the contractor via the workhouse, which was only to be used to house the sick, the elderly and women expecting illegitimate children.<sup>35</sup> During the 1790s there were never more than 15 parishioners with legal Settlement receiving weekly allowances. These consisted of eight widows, two to three illegitimate children and one or two men. Relief costs for 1794 to 1795 totalled £271.2s.7d, a low figure for a relatively large parish. At the height of the grain crisis of 1795 to 1796, however, numbers on weekly payments rose to 34. These consisted of seven widows, seven other women, two children and 18 men, some of whom must have been underemployed or unemployed. Making payments through the workhouse now became impractical

---

<sup>33</sup> WCRO: BA/818/5, Inkberrow Parish Book. See entry for April 7<sup>th</sup> 1800.

<sup>34</sup> WCRO: BA/3802/4, Powick: Vestry Minute Book entries for April 16<sup>th</sup> and April 22<sup>nd</sup> 1792.

<sup>35</sup> WCRO: BA/3802/1b, Powick Overseers Accounts.

and the overseers took back responsibility for paying out-relief. Payments rose to £350 for 1795-96, fell back to £340 for 1796-97, but soon rose to £381 in 1798-99. Part of the rise in 1798-99, however, was linked to the fact that, in December 1798, the overseers had to appeal to Quarter Sessions against an attempt by the overseers of Crowle to move Job Cooke, his wife and six children back to Powick. The appeal was successful, but it cost £10.17.2d just to keep Job and his family out of the parish.

Like Inkberrow, Powick's costs for poor relief also rose dramatically in 1800-01 indicating a significant crisis in what had been an apparently prosperous parish.

**Table 3.2: Cost of Poor relief, Powick, 1799-1803, extracted from  
Powick Overseers Accounts**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Cost of Relief</b>
1798-1799	£381. 17. 9.
1799-1800	£629. 4. 8.
1800-1801	£1,162. 5. 3.
1801-1802	£713. 14. 1.
1802-1803	£411. 19. 4.

When the crisis came in 1800 it probably had most impact on those labouring families who were already close to the edge of what we would now call 'the bread-line' and unable to subsist on their weekly incomes at a time of high prices. Records indicated that although numbers on weekly pay remained stable at around 40 people a week, numbers requiring casual pay rose dramatically from fourteen a week in April 1800, to 81 a week in May before falling back to 66 a week in September and 49 a week in January 1801. Significantly, in the first week of January, 1801, 41 people were all given money to buy flour, indicating they lacked basic food. Since all casual payments were made on the day the vestry met,

it was not surprising to find a stream of people calling on the overseers on a weekly basis between 1800 and 1801.<sup>36</sup> People were not, however, seeking assistance only for shoes, clothing or fuel. A number of men required help with their half-year's rent money, presumably because what had been saved had already been spent on subsistence. At least one man, previously referred to, the bigamist Samuel Matty, had pawned all his goods and was given a guinea to redeem them.<sup>37</sup> Unfortunately for Matty, he had no legal right of Settlement and a few months later he and his wife were removed back to Ashchurch, Gloucestershire. During the same period, more paupers were forced to enter the Powick workhouse and in February 1800 the overseers had to buy 47 pounds of mutton to distribute to the poor as out-relief, demonstrating that a significant number of families had run out of food completely.

The overseers' records for Powick were also interesting since they provided a picture of life in the workhouse during this period. Like the Inkberrow workhouse, the Powick building was quite dilapidated, suggesting previous neglect, and in regular need of repair. During the 1790s, the workhouse needed carpentry work, masonry work, wooden beds mended and windows replaced.<sup>38</sup> Whilst those who entered the house had their food, clothing and bedding paid for by the overseers, they were expected to mend their own clothes and those of others. The manager of the workhouse was responsible for heating the building and keeping it clean and also for ensuring that able-bodied women were employed at spinning. Any profits made from work done in the house went to the manager, but should anyone be found employment outside, those profits went to the overseers.<sup>39</sup> The manager of the workhouse was also paid an additional fee to run a Sunday school for boys from 1799 onwards.<sup>40</sup> Because of the impact of the Workhouse Act 1795, however, by 1796-98 there were only seven paupers in the house and one or two children. Others came and went for shorter periods of time. A few permanent residents were so feeble that they had to put to bed at night whilst one woman, Margaret Phillips, was subject to fits. Another Powick resident, Widow Wakefield, was forced to go into the workhouse in 1797 with her children because she was in

---

<sup>36</sup> WCRO: BA/3802/12. See monthly entries March 1800-January 1801.

<sup>37</sup> WCRO: BA/3802/12, See monthly entries from April 1800 – April 1801.

<sup>38</sup> WCRO: BA/3802/1b, Powick Overseers Accounts. See entries for April and June 1787.

<sup>39</sup> WCRO: BA/3802/4, Powick Vestry Minute Book entry for April 21<sup>st</sup> 1800. This implied that they were paying back the cost of their relief.

<sup>40</sup> WCRO: BA/3802/4, See entry for October 14<sup>th</sup> 1799.

want and Widow Turvey and her children joined her there in November 1799. By this time, the workhouse garden had been fenced in and cabbages were being grown to feed the residents. Bread, cheese and bacon formed the main part of the residents' diet, but they were also treated to special meals on St. Thomas' Day, Easter Day and Christmas Day.<sup>41</sup> In the crisis year 1800-01, however, the number of permanent residents in the workhouse swelled from seven to 18, another indicator of the impact a national crisis could have in a local setting. The overseers also apprenticed out more poor boys during this period, with six being apprenticed out in one day on June 1<sup>st</sup> 1802.<sup>42</sup> Interestingly, almost twice as many agricultural labourers died in Powick during 1801 than in any year from 1793 to 1800,<sup>43</sup> another indicator that food crises not only placed a major strain on local financial resources, they also led to malnourishment, illness and death.

A close study of the way the Old Poor Law operated in these three Worcestershire villages in the 1790s suggested, therefore, that although there were significant changes in national legislation, how such laws operated at local level depended on the social and economic make-up of each parish, the ability of local men and women to administer poor relief effectively and their capacity to raise additional money in times of bad harvests and high prices. For those who needed poor relief, other factors also had a direct impact upon their personal circumstances. Those who lived in a small prosperous 'closed' parish like Elmley Lovett might have little need of poor relief unless illness, fecklessness or old age caused them to seek help out of necessity. Those in a large 'open' parish like Inkberrow, however, were already living in a parish where wages were low and subsidised and underemployment or seasonal unemployment were long-standing features of everyday life. Yet although poverty was the norm here, the excellent management of poor relief ensured that the Old Poor Law could cope with the constant strain on its resources, even during the food crisis of 1800-01. What it could not do, however, was to bring more agricultural work to an already glutted labour market so, instead, parish officials used every means necessary to ensure that those who

---

<sup>41</sup> WCRO: BA/3802/1b, Powick Overseers Accounts. See various entries during the period 1798-1799.

<sup>42</sup> WCRO: BA/3802/4, Powick Vestry Minute Book entry for June 1<sup>st</sup>, 1802.

<sup>43</sup> WCRO: Parish Registers, Inkberrow, Microfilm 220/1: Burials 1793-1801.



could, worked, whilst others might be persuaded out of the parish into the militia, the navy or, through marriage, into the responsibility of another parish.

So far as Powick was concerned, the crisis of 1801 had a significant impact, although the reasons for the severity of the crisis remain unclear. This crisis, however, highlighted the important fact that whilst historians have placed much stress on life-cycle poverty, little has been done to assess the damage done to labouring families by bad harvests or major crises, presumably because of the difficulty in conducting a village by village analysis. Events at Powick between 1800 and 1801 suggested that in years when prices were relatively stable, the majority of labourers could get by on the wages they received. That said, some families were probably on marginal incomes. When food prices rose modestly, such families had to use more of their income to buy less food, but probably survived. When prices rose dramatically, however, some families were not only forced to spend their rent money in order to subsist, they also pawned or sold what tools or valuable possessions they had. In a worst-case scenario, during such crises other families were forced into the workhouse, on a short-term or long-term basis.

Cowherd, however, cited the fact that many contemporary thinkers during the 1790 saw growing population as the root cause of unemployment and that Pitt, at least, thought the problem could only be solved by more relief and more capital expenditure. Both were proposed in his Poor Law Reform Bill of 1796, but parish officials were so alarmed by the idea of extra expenditure that the Bill was abandoned.<sup>44</sup> Pitt also had more influential opponents in the writers of two influential publications of the late 1790s: Sir Frederick Eden's, *The State of the Poor* in 1796 and Thomas Malthus', *Essay on the Principle of Population* in 1798. Both books set the tone for the Poor Law debates of the early nineteenth century. Eden blamed the wretched living conditions of agricultural labourers on the very poor rates that were supposed to be helping them since all the compulsory payments for poor relief came from employers who could have used the money to improve wages and employ extra workers. He recommended a definite limit to

---

<sup>44</sup> Cowherd, *Political Economists and the English Poor Laws*: 14.

expenditure and looked forward to the day when Friendly Societies could be substituted for the Poor Laws.<sup>45</sup>

Of the two writers, however, Thomas Malthus was more interesting since the man and his work has been held in bad odour by many generations of historians. Malthus' arguments, however, were clear, simple and succinct at times, especially when he made a definite link between an increasing population leading to a glut in the labour market resulting in low wages and growing unemployment.<sup>46</sup> This, Malthus argued, led to increasing poor rates that did nothing to remedy the situation. He suggested there was no purpose in employing the poor in a workhouse either, because parishes had to pay for materials from the poor rates and those employed in the workhouse took work away from employed labourers, leading to yet more poverty.<sup>47</sup> What was needed, he argued, was for the poor to become responsible for their own behaviour and for wages to meet existing supply and demand without any interference through the Poor Law.<sup>48</sup>

Yet whilst Malthus' economic arguments seemed sound and clear enough, they were peppered throughout with social prejudice and, like so many of his contemporaries, they also embodied the fear of imminent revolution. The poor, in Malthus' eyes came exclusively from people referred to in his travel diaries as 'peasants' or 'the lower class' or 'the common people'.<sup>49</sup> He regarded them as being on that point of the ladder 'where education ends and ignorance begins'.<sup>50</sup> Worse still, they were also sexually promiscuous and morally irresponsible, ignorant of the fact that increasing their own population would cause damage only to themselves.<sup>51</sup> More worryingly, he argued, some were already using the expression 'the land is the people's farm' and their demands for land rights, added to their sexual promiscuity, threatened 'the fundamental laws of society: the

---

<sup>45</sup> Cowherd, *Political Economists and the English Poor Law*: 16-17.

<sup>46</sup> Thomas Malthus, *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798) (London: Dent and Sons, 1967): Vol.2: 49.

<sup>47</sup> Malthus, *Essay on the Principle of Population*: Vol.2: 59.

<sup>48</sup> Malthus, *Essay on the Principle of Population*: Vol.2: 190.

<sup>49</sup> Pamela James (ed.), *The Travel Diaries of T.R. Malthus* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1966): 81. 117. Interestingly, Malthus used this terminology while travelling in Scandinavia, but it was clearly the same language that he used about rural and urban labourers in England.

<sup>50</sup> Malthus, *Essay on the Principle of Population*: Vol.1: 236.

<sup>51</sup> Malthus, *Essay on the Principle of Population*: Vol.1: 14-15.

security of property and the institution of marriage'.<sup>52</sup> What, in any case, he asked was the purpose in appeasing such people through higher wages. These would only lead to higher prices, as did supplementing labourers' wages from the poor rates. Not that the poor cared, anyway, since they lacked a sense of frugality and preferred to live hand to mouth and spend any extra earning in the ale-house.<sup>53</sup> No, argued Malthus, what the poor needed was to accept personal responsibility for their own situation, rather than blaming government for their own unhappiness and expressing their discontent in mobs, riots and revolutionary activity.<sup>54</sup>

Malthus also pointed a finger at parish officials, reiterating the popular view that the reason there was so much distress, despite the vast amounts of money collected, was that overseers were either embezzling the money or churchwardens were using some of it for private purposes.<sup>55</sup> Having sowed the seed, Malthus then argued against these popular conceptions, but still periodically made digs at overseers' incompetence. The Poor Laws, he stated bluntly, had good intentions, but were not operated with enough discrimination. Overseers and churchwardens were often petty tyrants, but this fault should be blamed on the system not the people operating it. Tyranny needed to be replaced by 'scanty relief, grudgingly given' since this appeared to have persuaded some labourers to delay marriage. Malthus also praised landowners in some parishes for pulling down labourers' cottages. This counteracted early marriage because agricultural workers would have nowhere to live.<sup>56</sup>

Some of Malthus' views deserved quoting at length, partly because they revealed the social attitudes underpinning his economic arguments and indicated why such ideas were extremely popular with late eighteenth century 'middle England'. Marrying common-sense economics with fundamental prejudice created a heady mixture, but a successful one. Cowherd has pointed out that Malthus' arguments were widely accepted by 1807 and even more so after the subsequent

---

<sup>52</sup> Malthus, *Essay on the Principle of Population*: Vol.2: 36.

<sup>53</sup> Malthus, *Essay on the Principle of Population*: Vol.2: 42-49.

<sup>54</sup> Malthus, *Essay on the Principle of Population*: Vol.2: 190.

<sup>55</sup> Malthus, *Essay on the Principle of Population*: Vol.2: 38.

<sup>56</sup> Malthus, *Essay on the Principle of Populations*: Vol.2: 51-53. Malthus was therefore advocating relief being used as a form of social control to delay marriage and therefore reduce the risk of rapid population increase.

food crisis of 1810-11 and the period of Luddism that followed. By 1817, Cowherd argues, periodicals like the *Quarterly Review* were praising Malthus, with both Whigs and Tories concluding that after the post-war depression drastic change was necessary to stop the moral degeneracy of both urban and rural labourers.<sup>57</sup>

Turning back to the chosen parishes, events in Elmley Lovett between 1810 and 1815 bore out some of the popular opinions people had about corruption and mismanagement being synonymous with the Old Poor Laws. This was the period when the vicar, the Reverend George Waldron, was in dispute with the squire, George Forester, over parish lands and with his own churchwardens and overseers over tithes and his own poor rate assessment. Although the overseers' accounts for this period are missing, the impact of these disputes on how the Poor Laws were administered can be gauged by the fact that in 1816 the churchwardens and overseers took action against another overseer, Mrs. Elizabeth Williams, because the 1814 and 1815 accounts were 'deficient, erroneous and incorrect'. Having finished their dispute with Waldron in 1813, when the churchwardens and overseers turned back to their parochial duties they discovered that Mrs. Williams had not made the payments she was supposed to or, if she had, the amount was not specified in the accounts. There were also no accurate accounts of what Mrs. Williams had received through the poor rates and although £218 had been collected in rates between 1814 and 1815, only £105 had been distributed to the poor. Overall, the churchwardens and overseers discovered that various amounts of money had been missing for several years, something that might not have occurred if their battle with the vicar over tithes had not taken up so much of their attention.<sup>58</sup>

Because Elmley Lovett was a relatively prosperous parish, it was likely that the small number of people on weekly pay were unaffected by such disputes and mismanagement. What was clear, however, was that a quarrelsome, warring local oligarchy had become more interested in litigious disputes than they were in the fair and equitable distribution of poor relief and how well accounts were kept.

---

<sup>57</sup> Cowherd, *Political Economists and the English Poor Laws*: 45.

<sup>58</sup> WCRO: BA/110/623/90, Notice of Prosecution to Mrs. Elizabeth Williams, late one of the overseers of the poor in the parish of Elmley Lovett.

This had allowed mismanagement and misappropriation to occur which was only discovered after county magistrates ordered them to end their dispute with the vicar. Not surprisingly, when they focussed their attention back on the way poor relief was actually being managed, they found inadequate accounting, maladministration and possibly fraud.

At Inkberrow, the period 1802 to 1815 saw poor relief stabilise at around £1,169 per annum for a short period, rise to £1,286 by 1806 to 1807 and increase again to £1,350 in the crisis year 1810-11. Relief then dropped back to £1,137 in 1815-16. During this period, the vicar and his overseers conducted 'business as usual' with the same efficient accounting systems in place. Whilst the War was still in progress there were still opportunities to cut costs by getting men into the army, but despite this good housekeeping, underemployment and unemployment were still rising. From 1804 onwards there were noticeably more payments being made during April and May, when the agricultural year was well under way and by 1816-17 payments in some parts of the parish, such as Inkberrow itself, increased from August onwards. This indicated that the working year for some labourers was limited to the spring and summer months only, despite the fact that the parish continued subsidising labourers' wages.<sup>59</sup> In August 1813 employment opportunities were so limited that the vestry at Inkberrow stipulated 'Rules for employing the poor.' These stated that farmers renting land worth £20 to £50 a year should employ a parish labourer for one day a week and those paying higher rents should employ other unemployed labourers accordingly. Those whose rents were £150 to £200 a year were expected to employ a labourer for four days a week. The wages of all these labourers were to be fixed by the vestry.<sup>60</sup>

Although there was no evidence, apart from the accounts themselves, it was interesting to note that overseers at both Inkberrow and Powick during this period limited relief payments so that each year ended with cash in hand. For example, although Inkberrow overseers raised £1,431 in the crisis year 1810 to 1811, they only disbursed £1,350, leaving them with a year's surplus of £81. The

---

<sup>59</sup> WCRO: BA/818/5, Inkberrow Parish Account Book 1802-1805.

<sup>60</sup> WCRO: BA/818/10, Vestry Minute Book. See entry August 16<sup>th</sup> 1813. This idea was a precursor of the 'labour rate', which was eventually sanctioned in the 1832 Employment of Labourers Act.

same pattern appears at Powick where numbers on weekly pay remained stable at 38 during the period 1808-12. An increase in casual payments, however, meant that overall costs rose from £590 in 1805-06, fell back again to £449 in 1808-09, before rising to £738 in 1810-11 and reaching £994 in 1813-14. Only in 1811-12, however, were the overseers out of pocket by £16 and this situation was remedied the following year which ended with them being £45 in hand.

Although having cash in hand could have been due to lower food prices or good housekeeping, it also implied deliberate parsimony and a reluctance to spend everything raised on the grounds that the poor might want yet more. Indeed, there was some evidence at Powick, which suggested that overseers were taking measures to deal with those with legal Settlements but who were now regarded as the ‘undeserving’ poor. As early as 1802, the vestry at Powick began a policy of moving such people onto the parish waste, partly perhaps to have them contained in ‘a poor house without walls’ and probably to encourage them to cultivate the waste rather than be wholly reliant on parish relief. In July 1802, for example, the vestry bought George Holmes’ cottage and had it dismantled, re-erected on the waste and repaired at parish expense to make a home for Thomas White and his family. In August 1812, they ordered another cottage to be built there for Thomas Hollings, which also had land enclosed from the waste to make a garden.<sup>61</sup> This policy was taking place at the same time as the vestry was attempting to impose tighter conditions on freeholders’ common rights and banning any villagers from keeping pigs on the turnpike or by the roadside.<sup>62</sup> Crime was also becoming a problem in the parish and steps were being taken to try and apprehend anyone stealing hedges, rails, gates, stiles or agricultural produce.<sup>63</sup> Poor children were also a cause for concern and increasing numbers were being apprenticed by the parish because their parents could no longer support them. Eleven children were apprenticed out on April 23<sup>rd</sup> 1812 and fourteen on the 3<sup>rd</sup> April 1815.<sup>64</sup> Although each piece of evidence by itself seemed little, taken together they suggested that perhaps some of Malthus’ ideas had permeated down into local parochial life. The idea that

---

<sup>61</sup> WCRO: BA/5540/3, Parish Order Book entries for July 12<sup>th</sup>, 1802 and August 12, 1805.

<sup>62</sup> WCRO: BA/5540/3, Parish Order Book entry for October 19<sup>th</sup>, 1807.

<sup>63</sup> WCRO: BA/5590/3, Parish Order Book.

<sup>64</sup> WCRO: BA/5590/3, Parish Order Book entries for April 23<sup>rd</sup> 1812 and April 3<sup>rd</sup> 1815.

payments to the poor should be restricted was Malthusian; as was the idea that the poor should be provided with gardens on the waste in order to be self-supporting.

In 1814, however, all Worcestershire labourers had something to celebrate: the apparent end of the war with France. Many flocked into Worcester from rural villages nearby since the city had the most spectacular display of illuminations in the form of transparencies lit up from behind. There were transparencies over the china warehouse of Justice, Britannia, Discord and illuminated stars. The Star and Garter Inn, by way of contrast, had a transparency of the London Mail stagecoach drawn by eight grey-horses bringing the tidings of peace to Worcester. All the major buildings like the Guildhall and the Cathedral had their illuminations as well (usually of Peace and Plenty) and there were firework displays at night.<sup>65</sup> Celebrations continued in Worcester and elsewhere in the county for several days and are mentioned not just because they were an end in themselves, but because both national and local celebrations traditionally involved the poor being feasted by the rich. On June 16<sup>th</sup> 1814, for example, the wealthy occupants of St. Clement's parish Worcester bought an ox, roasted it and distributed the meat to 1,000 poor people. At Bromsgrove, in the same week, several sheep were roasted and meat and ale given to the poor.<sup>66</sup> Such 'patriarchal distributions', however, were not restricted to the large towns; there was a sheep roast at Witley followed by a dance on Woodbury Hill. A similar celebration was held at Stanford-on-Teme followed by an evening of rural sports, including donkey racing and wheelbarrow racing.<sup>67</sup> Labourers and village poor were also entertained at Abberley and at Stone with beef, mutton and ale.<sup>68</sup> Whilst occasions for such national celebrations were rare, they at least provided landowners, farmers and local clergy with an opportunity to organise something more joyful for the poor than limited weekly payments and doles of necessities like clothes, shoes and coal.

Such celebrations were short-lived and shortly afterwards Napoleon escaped from St Helena and the build-up to Waterloo began. After Waterloo, agriculture began to decline, so much so that by the late autumn of 1815 farmers

---

<sup>65</sup> *BWJ*: June 9<sup>th</sup> 1814.

<sup>66</sup> *BWJ*: June 16<sup>th</sup> 1814.

<sup>67</sup> *BWJ*: July 21<sup>st</sup> 1814.

<sup>68</sup> *BWJ*: July 28<sup>th</sup> 1814.

were having difficulty finding sufficient money to pay their rents. As a consequence, many were reducing their labourers' wages and seeking rent reductions from landowners for themselves. By the end of November 1815 magistrates in several districts were disallowing any relief to the sons and daughters of any labourers who had refused to work for the lower wages that farmers could afford to pay.<sup>69</sup> By December, however, *Berrow's Worcester Journal* commented that although landowners were generally reducing farmers' rents, the cost of poor relief was beginning to rise across the county, implying that lower rents were not resulting in higher wages or more employment.<sup>70</sup> By January 1816, the paper also noted a general reduction taking place in servants' wages.<sup>71</sup>

The immediate impact of this post-war depression cannot be ascertained in Elmley Lovett, because of lack of records, but it was clear that Inkberrow was faced with even more pressure on its relief system than ever before. Part of this may well have been due to soldiers and sailors returning to the parish now that the War was over. The overseers' response was to continue the same practice, although the amount of money paid in relief did not rise radically. Instead, the parish employed more able-bodied labourers as 'Roadmen' or 'Yardland' men and paid people for collecting sparrow heads.<sup>72</sup> This meant that some were employed to repair parish roads, while yardland men worked in rotation on ratepayers' farms for low wages. Because of these measures, the number of poor people on weekly pay in Inkberrow was kept stable at 72, although in 1818 increasing numbers of men came forward to have their wages made up from the poor rates. In September 1818, five men were given wage subsidies, but this rose to 15 in November, 19 by the end of December and 21 by the end of January 1819. These numbers did, however, include one or two men like Thomas Chattaway and Moses Bennett, who had been on permanent relief for many years.<sup>73</sup>

In Powick, apart from the crisis year of 1801-02, there were no significant numbers on weekly pay before 1815, but the situation altered

---

<sup>69</sup> *BWJ*: November 30<sup>th</sup> 1815.

<sup>70</sup> *BWJ*: December 14<sup>th</sup> 1815.

<sup>71</sup> *BWJ*: January 11<sup>th</sup> 1816.

<sup>72</sup> WCRO: BA/818/5, Inkberrow Parish Account Book 1815-1818.

<sup>73</sup> WCRO: BA/818/5, See 1818 accounts.



significantly. A maximum of 20 men and women received weekly payments in the crisis year of 1810-11, but in March 1817, the number was 72. Although this fell back subsequently, there were still 42 people on weekly pay in 1820, 18 of whom were designated as having 'no work' (11 men and seven women).<sup>74</sup> There was also some evidence that the attitude of the overseers had changed markedly since the crisis year of 1800-01. Where earlier the parish authorities had subsidised rents and gone out of their way to sustain the parish poor they now took a harder line. In November 1818, when John Hammond, a house owner, became chargeable, the vestry agreed to pay off his mortgage, but only so that the house could be sold. The vestry then used the proceeds to support the family.<sup>75</sup>

A year earlier, the Select Committee on the Poor Law reported that expenditure on poor relief in England was increasing rapidly, but the Committee did not believe that increasing labourers' wages would remedy the situation. Wages could only be determined by the natural laws of supply and demand.<sup>76</sup> It also recommended that parishes should not interfere with those laws by providing subsidised work for the able-bodied and recommended that the allowance system should eventually be eliminated. Using the workhouse as a deterrent was also recommended, as was removing the Justices' power to give relief and transferring this to parish vestries.<sup>77</sup> It was this thinking that led to Sturges Bourne's Poor Law Amendment Act 1818 which authorised parish officers to be discriminating in the relief they offered and to regulate amounts according to the character and habits of those seeking relief.<sup>78</sup> A year later, however, this Act was reinforced by the Select Vestry Act 1819, deemed necessary to make the 1818 Act workable.

The Select Vestry Act proved significant in parts of Worcestershire, so some key elements were worth repeating. Although the Act was permissive, it recommended that the power to grant relief should lie with a parish vestry to be elected from local ratepayers. An elected vestry was to be constituted of those who knew their parishioners best and were able to distinguish between the deserving and

---

<sup>74</sup> WCRO: BA/3802/2, Powick Overseers Accounts 1812-1820.

<sup>75</sup> WCRO: BA/5540/3, Vestry Minute Book entry for November 30<sup>th</sup>, 1818.

<sup>76</sup> BPP, 1817, VI, *Report from the Select Committee on the Poor Laws* (462). Quoted in Poynter, *Society and Pauperism*: 246-248.

<sup>77</sup> Cowherd, *Political Economists and the English Poor Laws*: 57-60.

<sup>78</sup> Cowherd, *Political Economists and the English Poor Laws*: 72.

the ‘undeserving poor’. Under the Act, those who were poor had to apply to the select vestry first for their relief and had no right of appeal to JPs unless the select vestry actually refused assistance. The select vestry was to meet every fourteen days to determine what relief was to be given and ‘to distinguish between the deserving and the idle, extravagant and profligate poor’. It also had the power to build workhouses again and set the poor to work if necessary. They were also entitled to employ a salaried overseer.<sup>79</sup>

Where select vestries were introduced, there can be no doubt that attitudes towards the poor changed further and became much more censorious and judgemental. In Bewdley, for example, the select vestry required all the poor receiving relief to attend the Town Hall periodically in order to check on their personal cleanliness and the cleanliness of the workhouse.<sup>80</sup> Later, when they discovered some poor people were keeping dogs, relief was stopped until they got rid of them. The vestry also published a list of all payments for illegitimacy, ostensibly ‘for the information of the ratepayers’ but predominantly to name and shame the parents of illegitimate children, particularly the fathers.<sup>81</sup> In Bewdley, the return of the workhouse was not simply a matter of recreating a place only for the elderly, the infirm, the destitute and the mothers of illegitimate children. It now became a deterrent, a means of making the poor work and an excuse for offering lower and fewer payments in out-relief. For example, in 1824 John Coombes and his pregnant wife were offered only 5s a week relief and if they refused this they would have to go into the workhouse.<sup>82</sup> Paradoxically, Humphrey Hunt and Roger Hammond were thrown out of the workhouse in 1825 for bad behaviour, presumably without out-relief, but were eventually ordered back in again ‘upon promise of their better behaviour in future’.<sup>83</sup> Indeed, everyone in Bewdley workhouse eventually became subject to increasingly narrow parsimony. In 1825 the select vestry not only ordered that casual payments would only be made at the workhouse on Fridays between 2.00 pm and 4.00 pm, thus limiting attendance time, but they also demanded a fortnightly report on all sick inmates in the workhouse

---

<sup>79</sup> Cowherd, *Political Economists and the English Poor Laws*: 72

<sup>80</sup> WCRO: BA/4600/962, Bewdley Vestry Notebook Tuesday 26<sup>th</sup> August 1823.

<sup>81</sup> WCRO: BA/4600/962, Bewdley Vestry Notebook. See entries of 11<sup>th</sup> May 1824 and 22<sup>nd</sup> June 1824.

<sup>82</sup> WCRO: BA/4600/962, Bewdley Vestry Notebook. See entry 6th July 1824.

<sup>83</sup> WCRO: BA/4600/962, Bewdley Vestry Notebook. See entry 30<sup>th</sup> August 1825.

and ‘the names of the persons that make use of sugar’.<sup>84</sup> This last request implied that sugar was a luxury item, something those in need of poor relief could manage well enough without.

Returning to Elmley Lovett, Inkberrow and Powick, only Elmley Lovett and Powick appointed select vestries, whilst Inkberrow still continued to operate its relief system as before. At Elmley Lovett the select vestry consisted of the same oligarchy of leading farmers, with James Whitehouse, a farmer and stalwart of the parish church paid £15 as standing overseer and William Lewis, the village schoolmaster, paid £3.3.0 a year as vestry clerk.<sup>85</sup> The Elmley Lovett select vestry resembled others in the county in that some individuals were subject to petty conditions and others singled out because they were seen as the ‘undeserving poor’ and regarded as a problem to the parish. William Painter, in particular, felt the pettiness of Elmley parish politics because he had his granddaughter living with him. In March 1825, it was agreed that he could have an extra shilling a week in relief ‘if he puts away his grandchild’.<sup>86</sup> Presumably, William’s family affections were greater than his need for an extra shilling, because almost a year later, the vestry was going to allow him half a ton of coal but only ‘after his grandchild has left him’.<sup>87</sup> There were also three men the vestry clearly wanted to evict from a house rented to them by the parish: James Kinglsey, John Taylor and William Bullingham. What their offence was is unknown, but they were ordered to leave the property on Lady Day 1826.<sup>88</sup> Interestingly, they were still there two years later, when the vestry required the village constable and overseer to demand possession of the house from its three tenants.<sup>89</sup>

The significance of both these incidents was that although select vestries might take moral attitudes against certain individuals, some poor labourers proved

---

<sup>84</sup> WCRO: BA/4600/962, Bewdley Vestry Notebook. See entries 7<sup>th</sup> July 1825 and 30<sup>th</sup> November 1825.

<sup>85</sup> WCRO: BA/9845/6, Elmley Lovett Parish Order Book.

<sup>86</sup> WCRO: BA/9845/6, Elmley Lovett Parish Order Book. See entry for 9<sup>th</sup> March 1825. This action appears to have been uncommon and did not occur in Powick or Inkberrow.

<sup>87</sup> WCRO: BA/9845/6, Elmley Lovett Parish Order Book. See entry for March 25<sup>th</sup>, 1826. The reasons why the overseers should react to Painter in this way are unknown, but they felt clearly that a pauper should not have another dependant, in this case a child with parents elsewhere.

<sup>88</sup> WCRO: BA/9845/6, Elmley Lovett Parish Order Book. See entry February 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1826.

<sup>89</sup> WCRO: BA/9845/6, Elmley Lovett Parish Order Book. See entry for March 5<sup>th</sup>, 1828.

stubborn and resistant. Resistance, however, was difficult if the vestry chose, as it sometimes did, to cut people's allowance at a stroke or change a money payment into a payment in kind. There were examples of both practices in Elmley Lovett. On July 14<sup>th</sup> 1824, pay was stopped for 'Field and child' and for 'Fowks's child'. A few weeks later, James Davenport's weekly pay was ordered to be stopped by a pound because the parish had to buy him two shirts, so presumably they thought that was payment enough.<sup>90</sup> During this period, although there was never a list of people on regular weekly pay, periodic payments were made to the same individuals. The vestry met fortnightly, but there were occasions when only one or two of the elected vestry were present and the meeting was not quorate. There were also eight meetings in 1825 when there were 'no complainants' and six with 'no complainants' in 1826.<sup>91</sup> By 1827, the vestry were making payments so that individuals could pay their club money; presumably they were members of a Friendly Society.

It was difficult to know whether the lack of people seeking relief on some occasions was due to the fact that Elmley was a relatively rich parish or whether the creation of a select vestry proved such a deterrent that the poor disliked appearing in front of the vestry in person. Certainly, there still exists inside Elmley Lovett Church porch a list of paupers resident in other parishes, which uses disparaging language to distinguish between those who were deemed industrious and those who were thought profligate wasters.<sup>92</sup> That said, there was no evidence that more people needed relief in crisis years or because unemployment and underemployment were increasing during the 1820s. Most of those on relief were either longstanding paupers like the Davenports, the Brays and the Lees or the several widows resident within the parish or elsewhere.

There was some evidence, however, that the gentry in smaller parishes near to Elmley Lovett sometimes acted in concert in order to keep paupers out of their prosperous parishes. John Amphlett of Dunclent, for example, was related to

---

<sup>90</sup> WCRO: BA/9845/6, Elmley Lovett Parish Order Book. See entries for June 14<sup>th</sup> and July 28<sup>th</sup>, 1824.

<sup>91</sup> WCRO: BA/9845/6, Elmley Lovett Parish Order Book. 'Complainants' appears to have been used to mean 'claimants'.

<sup>92</sup> It is hard to determine exactly when this list was created, but it appears to link with attitudes prevalent amongst the clergy and others in the parish in the early 1830s.

Francis Moule of Elmley Lovett by marriage. In the autumn of 1825 Amphlett wrote to Moule regarding the Settlement of a labourer, Thomas Griffin, about whom they had several previous conversations. Griffin had been living in Chaddersley Corbett, but had become chargeable and had recently been examined by the magistrates. The magistrates, however, were unsure as to whether they should remove Griffin to Stone, Amphlett's parish, or to Elmley, Moule's parish. Amphlett had called a meeting to see if his overseers would abide by the magistrates' decision and advised Moule to do the same. The tone of the letter, however, appeared to be similar to that of an 'old boys' network' with Amphlett giving Moule information in advance so that both vestries could object to Griffin's removal to either village in the hope that he would have to remain in Chaddersley Corbett.<sup>93</sup>

Inkberrow, however, continued to maintain the poor in its own particular way. In a parish where poverty had been a long-standing issue, the post-1815 agricultural depression and demobilisation created even more unemployment resulting in some labourers being employed on public works in the period 1816-18. In 1818, however, the parish adopted what appeared to be the equivalent of a cost-accounting system of bookkeeping so that they could plan payments in advance for men and women who were always unemployed in certain months. They also appointed overseers for each of the districts of Inkberrow, Morton, Egiok and Cookhill. This enabled overseers to plan their spending in advance and may explain why money dispersed in weekly pay fell significantly from £1,432 in 1816-17 to £1,128 in 1824-25 to £1,066 in 1828-29. Inkberrow overseers continued to have significant amounts of cash in hand at the end of each year, suggesting that the vestry was continuing to be thrifty. However, John Burnett has pointed out that prices were falling from 1820 onwards, so less money was needed to pay for food and other necessities.<sup>94</sup> That said, as late as 1830 the Inkberrow overseers were still making allowances for clothes, shoes, washing and mending, illness,

---

<sup>93</sup> WCRO: BA/11171/6(ix), Letter to Francis Moule from John Amphlett of Dunclent, 4<sup>th</sup> November, 1825.

<sup>94</sup> John Burnett, *A History of the Cost of Living* (Aylesbury: Harmondsworth, 1969): 202.

unemployment, property maintenance and agricultural labourers' lodgings, presumably because these were still necessary.<sup>95</sup>

Powick, however, demonstrated an entirely different pattern of poor relief (see Table 3.3.) and it was not until 1820 that the number of parishioners on weekly pay rose significantly, although, at first, the cost of relieving them did not.

**Table 3.3: Weekly Pay, Powick 1819-1830, extracted from  
Powick Overseers Accounts**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Number on weekly pay</b>	<b>Cost of relief</b>
1819 to 1820	42	£1,312
1822 to 1823	108	£916
1823 to 1824	108	£923
1824 to 1825	105	£908
1825 to 1826	109	£903
1827 to 1828	91	£1,312
1826 to 1827	112	£931
1828 to 1829	88	£1,170
1829 to 1830	71	£861

Powick, therefore, presented a puzzle since although numbers on weekly relief rose from 1822 onwards the cost of maintaining the poor was substantially less than in 1819-20. In fact when costs rose dramatically between 1828-29, there were fewer people receiving weekly pay than there had been in 1826-27. This rise was not attributable to more people entering the workhouse, since this was still only being used to house eight permanent residents. There were, however, extra costs for buying parish tools and cloth for workhouse paupers to make their own clothes. Higher costs were also incurred supporting paupers in other parishes or removing people from Powick to their original place of Settlement. For example, it cost £5 to settle the parish of Staunton's bill in September 1827 for the maintenance of

---

<sup>95</sup> WCRO: BA/818/5, Inkberrow Overseers Accounts, 1816-1829.

Richard Cole and his family and a substantial cost was incurred removing Mrs Huxley and her children from Powick to Exeter in November of the same year.<sup>96</sup> Such high payments, however, were unusual and it appeared that costs increased because casual payments were higher during winter periods when there were more able-bodied men out of work. This was not to say, that those in the workhouse were necessarily all feeble and elderly. Between 1822-23 ten able-bodied men had to enter for short periods of time. The result of this was that because the workhouse had not been in use for some time and it was in a worse state of dilapidation than before, it had to be completely re-roofed during 1823 and 1824.<sup>97</sup>

Rising costs made Powick's select vestry more punitive, which alienated parishioners. On the 15<sup>th</sup> January 1827 the vestry commenced a series of measures that took into account all the powers invested in them by the Select Vestry Act of 1819. Their first actions were to stop relief for Paston, a Birmingham man, and to order the enclosure of a portion of Old Hills Common in order that the poor could cultivate it. They also decided to appoint a Master and Mistress for the Workhouse and utilise the house more efficiently.<sup>98</sup> These orders were followed on 27<sup>th</sup> of March 1827 with the appointment of Richard Williams as Master, with orders to put the poor to work inside or outside the house. A check was to be kept on all paupers' behaviour and they were to have morning and evening prayers and to go to church on Sunday. Those who refused to obey the Master's rules were to be reported to the vestry and punished.<sup>99</sup>

The most significant vestry orders, however, came on 29<sup>th</sup> March 1827 when William Underhill was to be told to get out of his house by the following week because he was to be turned out of the parish. All paupers applying for casual relief were now to be referred to the vestry, where discretionary weekly payments of 1s to 3s might be made or the applicants sent to the workhouse. After 30<sup>th</sup> March, all illegitimate children were ordered to go into the workhouse, as were two married couples. John Ranford and Thomas Hemming, and wives, were also

---

<sup>96</sup> WCRO: BA/3802/2, Powick Overseers Accounts. See entries for 11<sup>th</sup> September 1827 and 14<sup>th</sup> November, 1827.

<sup>97</sup> WCRO: BA/3802/2, Powick Overseers Accounts 1822-24.

<sup>98</sup> WCRO: BA/5540/3, Powick Parish Order Book. See entry for 15<sup>th</sup> January 1827.

<sup>99</sup> WCRO: BA/5540/3, Powick Parish Order Book. See Minutes of 27<sup>th</sup> March 1827.

ordered into the workhouse with the provision that work was to be found for them there. Betty Adams' pay was stopped altogether. The weekly pay list was then put on the agenda for further consideration at the next meeting on June 5<sup>th</sup>.<sup>100</sup> Given the swingeing nature of this attack on the local poor, it was not surprising that a wagon of furze belonging to Richard Winnall, one of the overseers, was set on fire on Old Hills Common on 21<sup>st</sup> June. Firing Winnall's furze was both a protest at the partial enclosure that had taken place there and against the actions of a select vestry seen to have turned against the poor. The vestry, however, remained unrepentant and two years' later it also looked more closely at those receiving money from parish charities also under its control. It was agreed 'that a separate list be kept of such persons claiming the gifts who are leading idle and disreputable lives in order that they may be excluded from the benefit of them'.<sup>101</sup>

Given these three contrasting parishes, what conclusions could be made about how the Old Poor Law operated in Worcestershire between 1790 and 1829? To begin with, it was worth noting that agricultural labourers' lives were becoming increasingly vulnerable and disrupted. Although wages were relatively stable and wheat prices fell from the 1820s onwards, farmers reduced wages in years of low prices and a long agricultural depression began in the autumn of 1815. Families where wives and children brought in supplementary earnings might be able to survive the storm, but there were many other families where life-cycle poverty meant that individuals received more support from parish relief or had to seek poor relief for the first time. However, because many labouring families had minimal incomes to begin with, it was not surprising that reliance on the allowance system grew significantly from the mid 1790s onwards. Those families whose whole income went on food would naturally be reliant on the parish for clothes, shoes, bedding, fuel and help during illness, childbirth, old age and death, if such relief was available. For others, on the margins of poverty, sudden crises like those in 1794-96, 1801-02 and 1810-11 were so catastrophic that they beggared some at a stroke and no doubt forced others to spend whatever saving they had in order to survive. Evidence also indicated that poor relief costs rose in the period before the crisis and that this impact lasted for at least a year afterwards. At a local level what

---

<sup>100</sup> WCRO: BA/5540/3, Powick Parish Order Book. See Minutes of the 29<sup>th</sup> March, 1827.

<sup>101</sup> WCRO: BA/5540/3, Powick Parish Order Book. See Minutes of 10<sup>th</sup> December, 1829.



historians have often referred to as a one-year national crisis probably had a two to three year impact on the lives of village labourers.

How Worcestershire labourers fared under the Old Poor Law depended more on how local vestries interpreted parliamentary legislation rather than on the philosophical and social debates taking place at national level. Overseers' actions were also influenced by local politics and whether the parish was 'open' or 'closed'. As seasonal underemployment and unemployment became features of some geographical areas of the county, local economic factors also played their part. This study suggests that these varied from parish to parish and that more local studies will be necessary to determine whether or not Elmley Lovett, Inkberrow and Powick were typical. Cowherd has pointed out that evidence from the Committee on Labourers' Wages of 1823-24 indicated that poverty and unemployment were worst in the southern and south-eastern counties, especially in Bedfordshire, Sussex and Berkshire. Seen against this background, unemployment and falling wages in Worcestershire may not have been as widespread or so detrimental as elsewhere. The Committee also found a variety of relief practices across all English parishes and this was true of Worcestershire.<sup>102</sup> This meant that the Select Vestry Act of 1819 was never adopted by every parish in the county but, where select vestries were created, overseers appeared to regard their parish poor in a recognisably Malthusian way.

By the end of the period, Elmley Lovett was still a relatively prosperous parish with few dependent paupers. Once a select vestry was established, however, there was increased evidence of small-minded vindictiveness and the fact that there were no claimants on many occasions in the years 1822 to 1825 could be explained by labourers being afraid to come forward because overseers had put the fear of God in them. In reality, it was likely that the parish always had small numbers of individuals on poor relief and that only certain individuals were regarded as undeserving. The arrival of the Select Vestry Act simply provided overseers with an opportunity to single them out for punishment. Inkberrow, however, was probably unique and it would be difficult to find another 'open' parish in

---

<sup>102</sup> Cowherd, *Political Economists and the English Poor Laws*: 140-142.

Worcestershire with a history of poverty going back to the early 1700s. Given this situation, the steps taken by the Reverend William Heath and the overseers to manage the parish efficiently were laudatory within their historical context. The accounting systems put in place were probably amongst the best examples of their kind and, although the relief system was undoubtedly patriarchal, the parish managed to contain its problems. The majority of labourers never fell into total destitution.

Powick, conversely, was interesting because, not only did it experience two periods of apparent catastrophe from 1799 to 1802 and 1811-13, but also on each occasion the existing vestries simply implemented the letter of the law as it stood at the time. This culminated in the 1820s with the strict application of some of the worst features of the Select Vestry Act. There was evidence that the actions of the Powick parish authorities between 1827 and 1828, in particular, led to the vestry alienating itself from the poor and the arson attack on Richard Winnall's wagon of furze was symbolic of that alienation. However, to see the burning of one wagon of furze as evidence in Worcestershire of what Wells has called 'the polarisation of class and expressions of class antagonism' would be attaching too much significance to one event without further evidence from other parishes.<sup>103</sup> That said, when the attack on Winnall's wagon was seen alongside the quarrels between the vicar and churchwardens over tithes at Elmley Lovett and petty vindictiveness against individual paupers, it became part of a wider corpus of evidence, which supported Snell's belief that social relationships were changing during this period although not yet polarising.<sup>104</sup> A study of poor relief in the three villages, however, did not bear out another of Snell's suggestions that the Old Poor Law was generous in terms of relief. So far as the poor were concerned, clothing, shoes, coal and bedding were necessities and without them many would undoubtedly have been virtually naked. Without shoes a man or woman could not work in the fields or work as a farm servant. Since these necessities were, in any case, always the cheapest a parish could provide they could hardly be called acts of generosity.

---

<sup>103</sup> Wells, 'The Development of the English Rural Proletariat and Social Protest', 39-40.

<sup>104</sup> Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor*: 104.

Finally, there was some evidence at Powick to suggest that rising seasonal underemployment and unemployment, coupled with worsening social relationships, was not only leading to social protest, but also to a local increase in crime and criminal damage. With this in mind, it was important to investigate whether such incidents of protest and rising crime were mirrored in other parts of Worcestershire. If so, to what extent did any increase in crime fit into the modern view that offences could be categorised as ‘crime, necessary crime and social crime’. More importantly, did any increase in social protest and social crime influence Worcestershire agricultural labourers’ behaviour during the Last Labourers’ Revolt of 1830?