

THE ACCOUNTS OF THE OVERSEERS OF THE POOR, COLN ST. DENNIS
1776 - 1812

This survey of the overseers' accounts of Coln St. Dennis from 1776-1812 formed part of a general study of the village, and it was not anticipated that anything exceptional would be found. In fact the accounts follow the general pattern of poor law relief in country areas. However it may be that a detailed study of one Gloucestershire parish is of interest, especially if compared with the larger examination of vagrancy in the county, and the work on the poor in Mitcheldean undertaken by members of earlier classes.

Coln St. Dennis is an agricultural parish in the North Cotswolds, seven miles from Cirencester, and three from Northleach. According to Atkyns, the population at the beginning of the eighteenth century was 60, with 16 houses. Rudder gives the number of inhabitants in 1779 as 112, with 28 houses, and the Census of 1831 numbers 176 inhabitants, 37 houses, and 39 families. Of these, 20 families were employed in agriculture; 5 occupied land and employed one or more labourers, but none occupied land which they worked themselves with the help of the family, and there were 22 labourers. Eleven men were occupied in trade or handicraft, 2 (including the clergy) were professional, 2 were non-agricultural labourers, 21 were male servants, and 3 "others". This may be compared with the Enclosure Award of 1798, where there are 4 large landowners (including the rector), 8 occupiers of small-holdings ranging from 10 - 80 acres, while 12 other persons (including 3 widows) are listed as owners or occupiers of houses and cottages with adjoining gardens and closes.

When we turn to the overseers' papers, it will be seen that a high proportion of this small population received poor relief in some form or another, and that a considerable number had permanent relief; also that the number of paupers and the money spent rose sharply as the period went on. There was no poor-house or school in the village, and all relief was "out-door". In 1776 the total expenditure was £28. This rose gradually to £70 in 1788, £134 in 1795, £209 in 1799, and in 1801 it reached the staggering total of £392. For the next few years it gradually declined, and in 1809 it was £165, 1811 was £162, and 1812 was £170. This rise in expenditure was common throughout the country, and resulted in part from the notorious Speenhamland system of 1795 which regulated relief to the price of bread.

The first charge noted in the annual accounts is for the weekly pensions, which increased in number and amount during the period. In 1776 there were 3 pensioners getting 6d. or 1/- a week. These had risen to 10 persons in 1785, 15 in 1795, 18 in 1797, and 20 in 1812. By this time the majority of the pensions had been stepped up from 1/- to 3/- a week, and in some cases 4/- or 5/-. The rate also varied, a number of weeks being greater than others - presumably with the season.

Another regular item was for house rents: thus William Agg was regularly paid the rents of Shepherd Morris, and Sarah Agg (a poor relation?) of £2 and £2. 9. 0. a year. Five persons had rent paid for them at the beginning of the period, 11 by 1794, and some, like George Arnold (a cripple who had payment for a "brass for his arm") had part rent in certain years. There were also bills for repairs to houses, such as "Mr. Coal for thatching Finchin's and Mills houses 6/-" in 1793.

Those who fell ill had a great deal of help from the parish. A number of different Doctors were called (we have the names of seven!) and some of their bills have survived in the miscellaneous papers. For example:-

"Dr. Child.

Journey	2/6
12 Fever bolus's	3/-
a fever mixture	2/6
journey	2/6
mixture repeated	2/6
mixture repeated	2/6
mixture repeated	2/6
the bolus's repeated	3/-
a bark mixture	2/6
the mixture	2/6
Total	£1. 9. 0."

There were also payments of 5/- to a Mrs. Sly "for medicine" and the parish paid regularly for attendance, soap, food and wine. Perhaps the most interesting is for 1788, headed:-

Account of expenses of Wm. Eiles wife and child in the small pox

Feb 4th, To bread	8. 6.
To 11½lb of cheese at 5d. per lb.	4. 9½.
To 2lb bacon	1. 4.
To 24lb. mutton at 4½d. a lb.	9. 0.
¾ peck of flour	1. 3¾.
¼ peck of flour	6.
1 lb. shuger	10.
2½ lbs. "	1. 8.
tea	1. 8.
wine	1. 3.
brandy	1. 6.
oil and thread	5½.
oate meal	11¾.
salt	1¾.
currens	3½.
salts and manna	4½.
mixt bear	4. 0.
6 gallons ale	8. 0.
wood	2. 0.
candle	8.

milk	6.
nutmeg	6.
Paid the nurse for nursing Wm. Eiles wife and child	£1. 15. 0.
lime and whitewashing the house	2.
Drs. bill for same	17.

Cash payments were made to victims of accidents or indisposition, and in old age or infirmity. So Joseph Butlin was paid 1/6 a week for 11 weeks in 1795 "for waiting on his mother", and in the next year he had 52 weeks at 2/- for the same purpose. We wonder whether he was the same Joseph Butlin who appears as overseer in other years.

Apart from illnesses, the parish also helped to pay for births among the poor. Thus "Mary William for waiting on Eiles wife when she lay in - 5/-" is an example for 1796. Some of these births were of course of illegitimate children, and from some of the bastardy papers we find the father ordered to pay a share. In 1810 R. Hobbs had to pay £2. 1. 6. towards the lying-in, and 1/9 a week. This presumably accounts for the receipt of £3. 15. from Hobbs entered in 1812, and the same year gives a similar payment from Wm. Bloss. As these bastardy orders were made in 1804, and this is the first mention of payment, it looks as if the overseers for that year were doing some checking up.

Payments for the marriages of paupers were probably made not out of charity, but in an effort to put the responsibility on someone else's shoulders. After payments from 1776 for Mary Nash "when she was ill", we read in 1779:

"Francis Richards for Marrying Mary Nash £4. 4. 0."

In 1786 the parish got rid of Mary Finchin (the Finchin family figure regularly through all the accounts) by marrying her to Richard Sutton, who had no settlement in Coln St. Dennis:-

"Taking Mary Finchin to Cirencester, her examination and oath.	2/6
A warrant to take Richard Sutton & expenses, taking him to Cirencester	
swearing him to his parish, his oath and expenses	8/4
The marriage of Richard Sutton & Marry Finchin	£2/2/6
Taking him to Bibury, his oath, order and expenses	7/-
Taking them to Brize Norton	8/-
The boarding of Richard Sutton and Joseph Butlin 1 week at	
Mr. Elcombe's	£2/16/-
Joseph Butlin being 8 days with Richard Sutton	16/-"

Funerals were a more frequent charge on the parish than marriages or births. Thus the Robins family buried several children on the parish, and in 1793 there are the accounts for the burials of Joseph Robins and his wife. He was a blacksmith. The cost was usually about the same:-

Coffin	10/-
shroud	5/6
laying out and affidavit	2/6
carrying to church	4/-
bread cheese and beer	4/2

There is only one instance where an inventory was taken after a pauper had died. This is in 1788 when William Hall's home contained:-

"One chest	One round tea table
Two boxes	One bed
One iron bed	Three tubs
Five whole bottom chairs	One round table
One square table	Three putur (pewter) dishes
Nine putur plates	One warming pan
One coppard (cupboard)	One shelf and dresser
One iron pott	a paire of hand irons
a paire of tonges	a fire shovel
a bellows	one box
one tea cuttle (kettle)	three candlesticks
one iron grate"	

Clothes for the poor form the most numerous and perhaps the most interesting items in the books; shirts, breeches, coats for the men and boys, gowns, handkerchiefs, aprons and hats for the women, shoes and bedding for both. A certain Betty Lovesey appears every year, and by the end of the period we feel we know her well. She seems to have done quite well out of the parish, for apart from her weekly pension, she had one or more pairs of shoes each year (as well as shoe repairs), gowns, shifts, stocking, petticoats, bedcase, sheets, blankets, and stays are perennial items. Her new shoes were usually about 5/-, and her mending was also paid by the parish - 1790 "pd. new topping Betty Lovesey's gownd 3/9. Mending Betty Lovesey's stays 4/6." She received relief for 46 years, but she was obviously active (witness the shoes!) for she was also given cards for spinning.

Clothes were also supplied to boys on being apprenticed, or girls going into service. In 1788 "A pair of shoes for Farmer Tomb's servant girl allowed by the parish at Easter. 4/2" seems an example of the parish paying for things which should properly have come out of decent wages - out of a disastrous policy which the Speenhanland system opened up throughout the country. On the other hand two boys were apprenticed to proper trades (one to a blacksmith, and one to a hatter) and we hope that these were genuine arrangements for training, and not, as often happened, a device for ridding the parish of the upkeep of children, and at the same time providing cheap labour.

"Firing for the poor" averaged £2 a year. This was usually for wood, but in 1807 coal is mentioned and appears several years later.

Payment towards shelter, food, clothes and fires may have been good enough for temporary misfortune, but must have been demoralising over a long term. In 1795 the overseers adopted a new, and more constructive expedient in spinning work. There had been a payment of 7/6 in 1783 to the "spinning master", but it was not until 12 years later - perhaps because of additional distress through the French war - that spinning work appears as a major item. In 1795 they bought "ropes to the scales to weigh the wool" and "paid John Spencer as spinning house to weigh the wool 7/-" They also paid for

"lodging the wool at Northleach 4/6" The next year Mr. Collier was paid £7. 0. 7½d. for spinning work - the first of a series of increasing payments to Messrs. Coxeter & Collier of Witney - some of the actual bills have been preserved among the miscellaneous papers. In 1798 the wool cost £25. 1. 3., £36 the following year, and £42 in 1800; thereafter the amounts drop sharply. It was only £3 in 1808, and does not re-appear in the books under review. John Spencer's bills (sometimes Sarah Spencer) of about 9/- annually have also survived, and show that the wool was weighed every three weeks. At the same time various women were given money for cards.

Nothing is given in the accounts to show what became of the work when finished. The 1807 "Return relative to the Maintenance of the Poor" gives the same amount as the Overseer's book for the purchase of material, and it also returns nothing under the heading "money earned by the labour of the poor", so presumably the workers must have disposed of it themselves.

From Elizabethan and Stuart times the problem of poverty had been treated parochially. Each parish was responsible for its own poor, and a great deal of time and energy was expended by parish officers to see that relief was given only to those who had legal settlement. Those who could not prove this were moved to their last place of settlement, and the poor wretches were shunted back and forth across the country, often separated from the other members of their family by the chance working of the settlement laws.

Behind the bare records of removals and settlements, we can sometimes trace a tragic human story. The record of expenses for the removal of Dinna Selby from Bibury back to Coln St. Dennis can be supplemented by the bastardy papers, which show she was pregnant at the time - no doubt the reason why she had left the village. There are many settlement and removal expenses given, and these are sometimes enlivened by the original bills.

"1797.	Chaise to Gloucester & Back	£1. 6. 0.
	2 Turnpicks	2. 0.
	Paid postboy	3. 0.
	Horse & Groom Glos.	
	2 Breakfasts	1. 8.
	3 dinners	6. 0.
	liquor	3. 6. "

These bills are connected with the extraordinary case of Robert and Hannah Swinford, whose settlement involved the parish of Coln St. Dennis in a protracted dispute with the parish of Shipton Sollers. The story can be traced from a bill for £12. 0. 8. from Messrs. Fitt & Daubeney, solicitors, of Cirencester in 1796.

"To attending and advising with respect to a notice of appeal being given by the parish officers of Shipton Sollers touching the removal of Swinford and touching instructions to defend the appeal 6/8.

Mr. Lewis at Northleach attending Mr. Poole and the Pauper at least two hours taking his evidence and reducing the same to writing 6/8

Writing to Mr. Poole desiring he would send the Pauper to Gloucester to attend the sessions 3/4

Journey to Gloucester to attend hearing of the appeal when order was quashed. Appeal heard Wednesday.

Chaise hire etc.	£2. 2. 0.
Paid Robert Swinford 4 days	8/-
Pd. Wm. Swinford 3 days	6/-
Their expenses	7/-
Paid to take them home	2/6
Attending and examining Samuel Forter as to Swinford's Settlement	6/8
His journey and expenses	6/-
Examining the two Swinfords	6/8
Paid their expenses and loss of time	13/-
Faid old Swinford	£1. 1. 0.

Attending Mr. Poole with respect to putting the Paupers in a house in another parish so that they might be again moved to Shipton Sollers when he promised to prevail on Mr. Millington to put them in a house at Coln Rogers."

We wonder whether Coln St. Dennis got away with this apparent piece of sharp practice; perhaps it was only just that an entry in the books shows a payment of £2. 10. 0. towards the expenses of the overseers of Shipton Sollers in this case. There may have been a special reason why Coln St. Dennis went to such lengths to rid themselves of the Swinfords. In other cases they appear to have accepted responsibility for poor persons living in other parishes. Thus for several years Widow Curtis was sent money in London.

The condition of the poor as here shown was no doubt similar throughout the county, and the country as a whole, but we must remember that in small parishes in rural areas, where the poor were still part of the village community and were relieved in their own homes, their lot must have been much more tolerable than in larger areas where they were sent to the dreaded work-houses, soon to be multiplied and perpetuated under the 1834 Poor Law.

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References

Glos. R.O., P97 Coln St. Dennis parish records, especially vestry minutes and overseers' accounts (P97/VE 2/2,3,5,7), settlement papers (P97/OV 3/1-5, OV4, OV5), and census return (P97/OV 7/1).