

THE TREATMENT OF POVERTY IN NEWENT:

1768 to 1820

For many centuries the responsibility of caring for the poor rested on the parish. In 1768 the basis of this responsibility was still the Elizabethan Poor Laws of 1597 and 1601. These Acts ordered that each year the churchwardens and a few substantial householders should be nominated overseers of the poor and should maintain the poor and set them to work, the funds being provided by local taxation, the poor rate. In 1722/3 an Act of Parliament authorised the parish officers to buy or rent a workhouse and to contract with enterprising businessmen to lodge, maintain and employ the poor. Paupers refusing to enter the workhouse were to receive no more relief.

Newent, in 1768, had a population of about 1,500, and writers agreed that it had been a place of "considerable importance". The people of Newent must, in the main, have relied for their livelihood on farming, and local trade, for, although coal had been discovered at Bouldson and a canal planned to link Hereford and Gloucester which would carry the Newent coal, little came of the enterprise.

Nationally, at the end of the eighteenth century, rural poverty was becoming a real problem. To help meet this problem Newent possessed almshouses given by Giles Nanfan and Randolph Dobyns. Both Bigland and Rudder agree that the almshouses consisted of ten twellings with gardens, and in the early nineteenth century the Charity Commissioners reported that the almshouses contained accommodation for twenty persons. The occupants, "such poor persons which should be orderly and fitly placed therein", were to be chosen by the vicar and churchwardens. There were other resources available, donations, and the rents from land which had been given to help the poor.

These resources were quite inadequate, and on September 22, 1768 a vestry meeting was held to draw up the rules for the recently established workhouse. It was agreed that an annual parish meeting should appoint governors of the workhouse and that the governors should meet monthly when the workhouse accounts would be examined. From the body of governors two inspectors would be chosen, to serve for a fortnight, although this was soon changed to a month. The inspectors were to "examine the several articles brought into the House, see that they are bought at reasonable rates and take care that cleanliness, order and sobriety is kept up, which is so essentially necessary in all establishments of this sort."

The first master of the workhouse was William Hooper, who was engaged at an annual salary of £10. He was to "buy the necessary articles of the House, direct the work and employment of the poor, keep up regularity and order, teach the children to read, write and say their Catechism and the girls to spin sow or knit, read prayers to them every night and keep a Day Book wherein are to be entered the expenses of the House, state of sick and poor, and an account of the work done." Hooper remained master of the workhouse until 1773 when he demanded that his salary should be doubled to £20. An advertisement was placed in the

Gloucester Journal and in August 1773 Edward Godsall became workhouse master at a salary of £15 per year.

Workhouse meals consisted of breakfast, a dinner "with hot meat every Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday, with garden stuff and a pudding on Sunday and the other days rice milk, toast and cider hasty pudding, broth, bread and chees and the like." Supper was to consist of bread and cheese and broth.

Admissions to the workhouse were to be on Mondays only, and those admitted were to bring all their goods with them. If the pauper died, the goods belonged to the parish "in lieu of maintenance and burial"; if he left the workhouse his goods were returned to him. All workhouse inmates were to work from six in the morning until six in the evening in Summer months; in winter from seven in the morning until five in the evening. The master was to send some of the inmates out to work at "country business" and their pay was to go directly to the master.

Discipline was to be maintained by the master and without his permission no one was to leave the workhouse. He could punish small offences by the loss of a meal or by extra work, and was to report grave offences to the inspectors. Those who worked hard and behaved well were to be rewarded; 1d. in every shilling earned was to be allowed them as a reward for their diligence.

Once the workhouse had been established work had to be found for its occupants, and although the Vestry Minute Book gives little detail of the work done, providing work for the Newent poor appears to have been a difficult task. On June 16th 1769 it was decided to use the separate room in the workhouse as a storeroom for wool and flax. On April 14th 1771 Mr. James Bamford of Gloucester agreed to employ the poor of Newent workhouse in spinning wool and also agreed to teach the poor how to spin. In May 1790 it was decided to buy spinning sheels and to teach boys and girls in the workhouse how to spin. A remark in the margin of the Vestry Book - "Not done" - shows the gap between intention and reality.

Another workhouse occupation was heading pins. The accounts for the year 1818/19 include expenses of £10 1s. Od. "to the woman for instructing the children in heading pins", and in the same year £44 13s. 5d was received for heading pins. In addition many of the poor must have been employed repairing the roads of the parish. The 1818/19 expenses include a sum of £52 2s. 3d. "the wages of paupers employed on the highways." Another source of employment was farm work. On August 19 1772 it was decided to send Charles Fitt "and all other that are able" out to "harvest work hop poling."

One way of combatting poverty was to apprentice pauper children. On June 13 1773 it was decided that "all poor children in the parish that are of age and fit to go out apprentice be put out quickly and bound apprentice to such farmers as are able to take them." There must have been some opposition from parents to the apprenticing of their children, for in February 1800 it was decided that all parents of children who had been drawn by ballot to be put out as parish apprentices, who refused to allow their children to go should be struck from the

parish list and denied relief. Apart from these general decisions there are cases in the Vestry Book of individual children being apprenticed, as on February 19 1773 when Hannah Taylor was bound apprentice to Mr. John Hatton of Baldwins Oak and was to be taken immediately to her master by the overseer.

The extent of poverty in Newent is difficult to assess. The Vestry Book gives details of the running of the workhouse but not of the number of inmates, gives details of the casual payments made to the poor, but not the regular payments made. In addition there is a gap in the records from 1800 to 1804 during which time the workhouse appears to have been closed, for the Abstract of Returns relative to the Expenses and Maintenance of the Poor for the year 1803 shows that no money was spent on maintaining the poor inside the workhouse, while £1221 17s. 8½d was spent on maintaining the poor outside the workhouse. In 1803 there were 108 poor people receiving regular relief and 89 casual relief. In 1811 the parish spent £1159 9s. 11d. on relieving the poor and by 1820 this sum had risen to £1537 11s. 4½d. During these years the poor rate, and the rents for the charity lands, were both increased.

Throughout the period 1768 to 1820 there was concern at the extent of poverty in Newent and the cost of relieving the poor. On April 12, 1783, at a very full parish meeting it was unanimously agreed that a committee should be set up to examine the accounts and form a plan to reduce the expenses of the parish "which have of late years been increasing at so rapid a rate as to threaten the most alarming and serious consequences to the ratepayers". A year later the committee's plans were accepted. No pauper was to be relieved except in case of sudden emergency unless he agreed to have his children apprenticed out. Articles used in the Newent workhouse were to be brought from Newent ratepayers and paupers who received regular relief were to wear the parish badge on their shoulders. In 1798 the Vestry Meeting again tackled the problem, setting up another committee and electing a steward, with a salary of £25, who was to provide work for the poor and supervise their work. He was also given other tasks, including the detection of all persons likely to become chargeable to the parish, and was also to "seek early confirmation of all single women in a state of pregnancy."

For there were some paupers whom the parish would not maintain. Illegitimate children were to be supported by their fathers and not become a charge on the parish. Thus on January 8 1769 Mr. Hooper was instructed to take Mary Pritchard to her father James Harper and tell him that unless he maintained her and kept the parish free from expense according to his bond he would be taken before a magistrate and prosecuted. On February 12 in the same year Hooper was sent to Farkham in Herefordshire, "there to take James [?] Summers who stands charged with a bastard child". Finally, in November 1790 the Vestry Book records the decision that "every woman that have a bastard and not sworn, to have their pay stopped until they have and the father to be taken."

Another category of pauper whom the parish would not maintain were paupers from other parishes. The Law of Settlement dated from 1662 when it was enacted that anyone coming to settle in a parish in a house of yearly value below £10 might, if considered likely to become chargeable to the parish, be removed by order of 2 JPs to the place where

he was legally settled "either as a native, householder, sojourner, apprentice or servant." Thus, on March 8 1772 it was decided that all persons who were not legal parishioners of Newent should be immediately removed to their own parishes. In October of the same year the decision was restated: "Ordered that every person residing in the parish that are not parishioners shall be removed within a month unless they produce Certificates of Settlement". On June 27 1775 the parish decided to send Elizabeth Humphreys "a widow, late of Bristol, lately come to this town and applied for relief", back to Bristol as it appeared that her late husband had been in service in Bristol for many years.

Yet, in the main, Newent seems to have treated its poor with humanity. Workhouse children were to be allowed an hour in the morning and one in the evening in which to receive instruction "in reading and in their catechism" [March 15, 1772], and on July 12 1772 it was decided that anyone sick in the workhouse should be allowed "something extraordinary as wine panader or tarts at the discretion of the inspectors and workhouse master." Outside the workhouse those reduced to poverty by old age, illness or unemployment were shown similar kindness as the Vestry Book shows:

December 13, 1772

"Ordered that Anne Spiller be allowed 2/6d a week till the next Parish Meeting supposing that she continue ill so long."

May 3, 1785

"Ordered that Widow Parsons be allowed occasionally an additional sixpence."

"Ordered that Mary Drews' child have proper medicine provided at the expense of the parish."

The parish even provided inoculations against smallpox at parish expense. In April 1775 "the gentleman employed to inoculate the poor" was paid one guinea for inoculating every five people, and in April 1809 it was agreed that free inoculations "with the cowpox" should be given to parishioners.

Much of the humanity was probably inspired by the genuine concern felt for the poor by the vicar, John Feley. On occasions of real hardship the parish made a real effort. In January 1800 when the hard weather was causing great distress to the poor Feley proposed that hot soup should be sold to the poor every Tuesday and Thursday between 10.30 a.m. and 2.00 p.m. The soup was to cost 1d. per quart irrespective of how much it had cost to make, and although Feley felt that soup was "a more cheap, more palatable and more wholesome and nutritious diet than bread", rice, potatoes and bread should also be sold to the poor at reduced prices. Not everyone shared Feley's enthusiasm for soup and "many idle and wicked reports having been raised to prejudice the minds of the poor against the soup", he invited parish officers and even the poor themselves to inspect the soup being cooked. If funds allowed, the parish hoped to supply the poor not only with soup, but fuel and warm flannel waistcoats at reduced prices as well.

Another crisis came in 1816, when the demobilisations at the end of the Napoleonic Wars caused unemployment. On this occasion the parish exhorted its principal inhabitants and landowners to sign an agreement by which they would, in rota, find employment for six days at a time for poor parishioners at a rate of wages between 1/- and 1/6 per day.

R.P. Ricketts

Sources

Glos. R.O., P 225 VE 2/1 and 2 Newent Vestry Minute Books
Abstract of Returns Relative to the Expense and Maintenance of the
Poor; 1803
Charity Commissioners Reports for Gloucestershire (1819-1837)