

THE POOR LAW RECORDS OF BITTON

1771 - 1821

The parish of Bitton has several claims to distinction. Its ancient church has one of the finest towers in Gloucestershire. From Hanham, then within the parish, thirteen-year-old Tom Cribb set out in 1794 for London where, as The Black Diamond, he won fame as the greatest of all the old prize-fighters. In the 18th and early 19th centuries the parish was the home of the notorious Cockroad Gang whose exploits were described in Volume IV of Gloucestershire Historical Studies. Its remarkably well-preserved parish records have been studied to find out something about the background of this gang and the social conditions which engendered such a criminal society.

At that time the parish of Bitton was unusually large. The census of 1801 recorded its population as 4,992 and by 1821 this had risen to 7,171. It included in its boundaries the chapelries of Hanham and Oldland and it was in Oldland that Cockroad lay. These chapelries had their own chapelwardens, overseers and other officials but, unfortunately, their records have not been preserved. The records studied refer only to the Hamlet of Bitton but there are many references concerning members of some of the criminal families, particularly the notorious Caineses. So far, it has not been possible to establish the exact relationship of these individuals but there is sufficient evidence to suggest that pauperism and illegitimacy predisposed them to a life of crime. At least 20 members of the Caines family received some kind of parish relief within the period.

The population of Bitton Hamlet in 1801 was 1,094; by 1821 it had risen to 1,788. The hamlet had a mixed economy. Rudder, writing in 1779, said that the soil was rich and fertile, partly arable but mostly meadow and pasture, both arable and pasture being farmed partly in enclosures and partly in common fields. An Enclosure Act for some of the meadow land was passed in 1819. Coalmining employed many men, others were engaged in feltmaking. The only industrial premises assessed for rates within the hamlet in 1771 were The Mill and the Little Mill, both occupied by a Mr. Tyndall. There were two inns: The White Hart and The George.

By 1820 there were three more inns; The Swan, The Chequers, and the Crown and Horseshoe, and a number of industrial concerns. These were probably not large. The rateable value of each is given below and may be compared with that of Beach Farm, £480; Fifteen Acre Farm, £148; and the White Hart Inn, £12.

Hole Lane Colliery	£233
Brain & Co's Colliery	£81
Logwood Co. - Logwood Mills & Little Mills	£58 (Making dyes from logwood)
Copper Co. - Copper Mills	£58
T. Bevan's Paper Mill	£46
Prothero and Co. Hat factory	£18 (for Felt Hats)

There were other large industrial concerns in the neighbourhood, notably the brass works at Warmley. Probably there was little employment for women. Rudder says that the manufacture of pins employed a large number of hands in 1779 but the industry appears to have died out soon afterwards. The factory known as The Pinhouse was used as a workhouse. Pauper children were employed in some manufacture for the records show that their work was sold. Possibly they were employed there in the making of pins. In 1790, however, the Pinhouse was converted into three tenements.

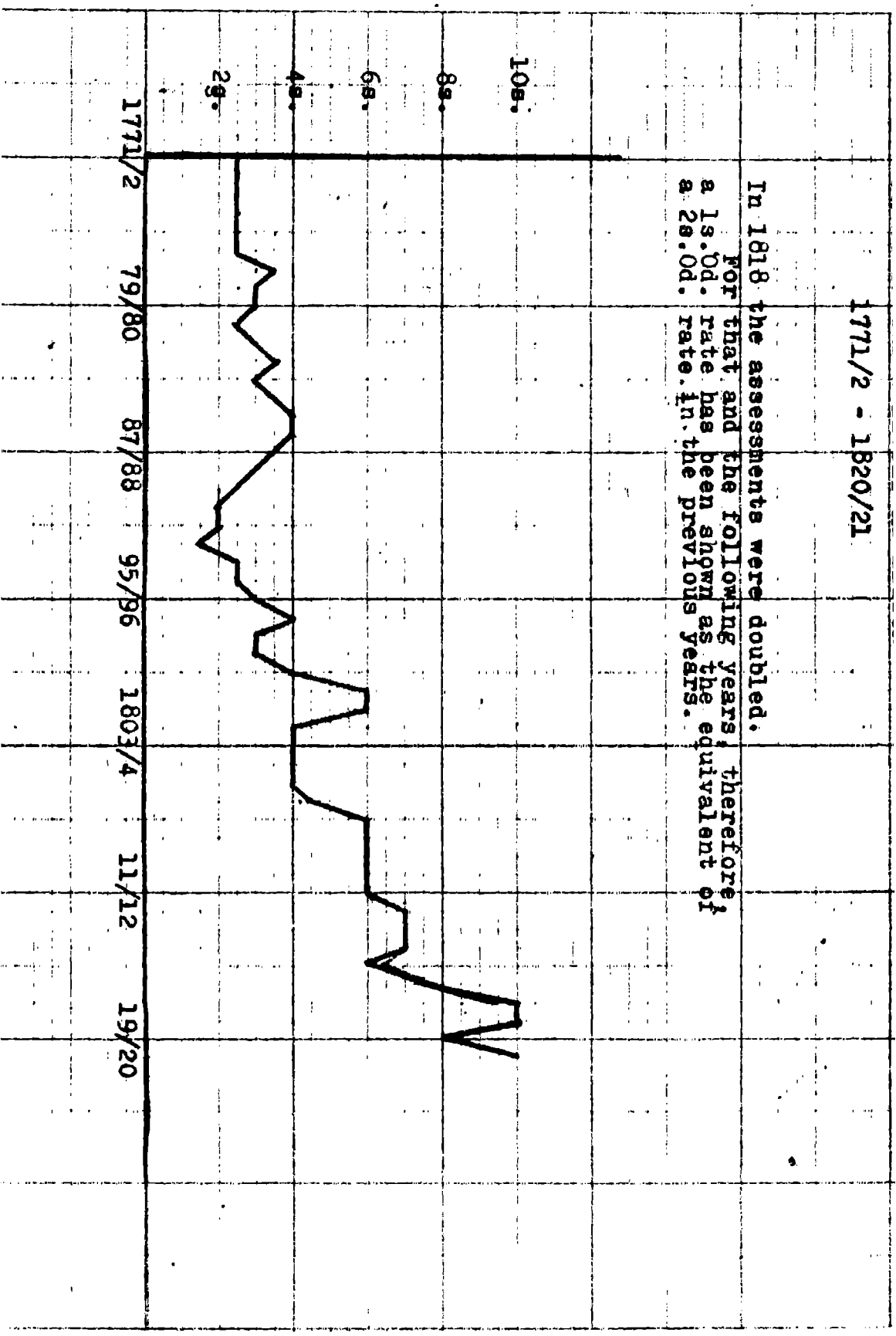
For administrative purposes the hamlet was divided into two tithings, Bitton Side and Upton Side (Upton Cheney), of almost equal rateable value. Normally one of the two Overseers of the Poor took the rates and administered relief in Bitton Side while the other did likewise for Upton Side. Each year every rateable property was assessed for a rate of 6d. in the pound. In the year 1771/2 that yielded £26 3s. 4d. from Upton Side; £24 9s. 1d. from Bitton Side, making a total of £50 12s. 5d. The rates were not levied as now in two half-yearly instalments at a pre-determined rate in the pound. Up to 1810 a 6d. rate was levied as and when required. In 1771/2 five rates were levied, in 1777/8 seven, in 1792/3 only three, but in 1800/1, a year of dearth and widespread distress, twelve rates were levied. From 1810 onwards, presumably to avoid such frequent collection, the rates were levied at 1s. in the pound. In 1817 a rate of 1s. in the pound brought in £115 2s. 3½d., little more than two sixpenny rates in 1771. In the following year all properties were re-assessed, the assessments being exactly doubled for almost every property. To all intents and purposes therefore a shilling rate after 1818 was equal to two shilling rates previously yet a shilling rate in 1820/21 brought in only £219 4s. 1d., very little more than four sixpenny rates fifty years before. Obviously there can have been little, if any, building of houses for fifty years and as the population rose by 43% between 1801 and 1821 alone, there must have been considerable overcrowding, a factor conducive to immorality and crime. Nationwide at this time there was great reluctance by parish officers to countenance the building of cottages for the poor which, it was thought, would attract to the area persons who might become "chargeable to the parish" and a burden on the rates.

The chart on the next page shows the variations in the rates levied during the period (the shilling rates levied after re-assessment in 1818 being regarded as two-shilling rates). It reflects the nationwide increase in the burden of the poor rates after about 1795. Considering that the population, and consequently the number of the aged and impotent, had increased by 43% in twenty years - and probably almost 100% in the full fifty years - while the amount of rateable property had remained almost static, the increase in the poor rates is less remarkable. One wonders how far this is true for England as a whole.

Usually two Overseers were appointed in Bitton by the Vestry but often the actual work was done by a paid Deputy or Acting Overseer, the appointed Overseers only signing the accounts at the end of the financial year. In 1771/2 only one Overseer was appointed and Thomas Proctor, a churchwarden, was paid £7 13s. as Deputy Overseers for the

1771/2 - 1820/21

In 1818 the assessments were doubled.  
For that and the following years, therefore,  
a 1s.0d. rate has been shown as the equivalent of  
a 2s.0d. rate in the previous years.



whole hamlet. The same procedure was adopted in the following two years. Thomas Hopes, Overseer in 1774/5 was unable to sign the accounts but made his mark. From 1775 to 1777 two unpaid Overseers held office but from then until 1786 Thomas Proctor was again Acting Overseer for the whole hamlet at a salary of £15 a year. After that two Overseers were again appointed for each year until 1812 though ~~in some~~ years a Deputy acted for one or both of them. Robert Hussey, an Overseer for 1811/12 was unable to sign his name. From 1813 till 1818 Stephen Jones was paid £20 a year as Acting Overseer for the whole hamlet. Then William Matthews took over until 1823 at a salary of £30. In the earlier part of the period it is probable that paid deputies were necessary because of difficulty in finding a rota of men of sufficient education and standing to perform the duties and keep the accounts. From 1813 onwards the work of the Overseers had increased to such an extent that it was an almost - if not complete - full-time occupation.

Although termed the Poor Rates, the rates were not devoted solely to the benefit of the poor; from them was taken the County Rate, or Bridge Money, (£63 in 1820/21) and the expenses of the parish constable, and also legal expenses chiefly concerned with bastardy and disputes arising from the Settlements Acts. Travelling expenses of the Overseers and the constable were sometimes considerable and there were many miscellaneous expenses such as:

1779	March 25	"To Expenses taking 3 men by a press Warrant" £2 8s. 11d.
1785	April 18	"To John Naish for Iron and revets and Nails for mending the Stocks at Bitton" 3s. 2d.
1800	Feb. 28	"To Send <sup>g</sup> for ye Curinger and Expenc for a boy kild in ye pit" £1 2s. Od.
1820	May 19	"Forged £2 Bank of England Note" £2

The Overseers administered the Gift Money. This was derived from rents of various properties left by benefactors of the poor in Bitton and neighbourhood and amounted to £5 16s. 4d. a year. It was distributed between about forty to fifty of the deserving poor in amounts varying from one to four shillings.

At the beginning of each financial year a list was prepared, presumably by the Vestry, of persons to whom regular weekly payments were to be made throughout the year. Obviously these were people who were not expected to be able to support themselves during the year because of age, infancy, or infirmity, as distinct from those persons who were in temporary distress as a result of illness, accident or unemployment. There were 25 names on the Weekly Payments list in 1771/2, 39 in 1795/6, 78 in 1814/15, and 73 in 1820/21. Unfortunately, the lists give only the names of recipients; their ages or the reasons why they needed parish relief are not stated though sometimes the Overseer made a note against a name which gives some clue. Sometimes the number of dependents is stated and if a man was married "and wife"

is added to the name, but frequently the children are given as "and family". Hence the exact number of persons "on the parish" cannot be determined but, by the most conservative estimate, there must have been more than 100 in 1814/15 and 1820/21 and these were typical years for that period.

An analysis of the list for 1820/21 shows that 18 men, 34 women and more than 51 children were receiving permanent relief. The men were, presumably, all aged or infirm. Of the women 13 were widows, 2 were mothers of illegitimate children and one was insane. Thirteen of the children were illegitimate.

Typical weekly payments in 1771/2 were: Rich<sup>d</sup>. Acreman 4s., Samuel Prigg 4s., Joyce Long 2s., William Hawkin's family 2s., Jane Brain 1s. 6d., Sarah Brain 1s. By 1814/15 the scale of payments had risen considerably in accordance with a rise in the cost of living (The Schumpeter-Gilroy Price Indices for consumer goods including cereals are: 107 for 1771, 209 for 1814). Typical payments for 1814/15 are: George Bush and family 10s., John Bell's wife and children 7s., Widow Cripps and her 4 children 7s., Francis Strong and wife 5s., John Cains (a cripple) 4s. 6s., Samuel Short's widow 1s. 6d. Interesting entries in that year's list are:

"Trotman's child by Hathway's Wife. 2s. Od."

"Susanah Palmer 2/6. Lef the Poor House with a Man Aug. 20th."

"Samuel Cains 2s. Od. Augmented 6d. Feby 11th getting Aged & more Infirm."

Weekly payments in 1820/21 were about the same as in 1814/15 though the cost of living had fallen (Schumpeter-Gilroy Index, 162).

Following the list of Weekly Payments in the account books come the records of the Casual Payments made by the Overseers during the year. These include: cash payments to those deemed in need of temporary relief; payments for clothing, medical attention, funerals, apprenticeship premiums, etc., the constable's expenses, legal fees and other items. In 1820/21 Casual Payments were made to 56 people. If their dependents are included at least 76 people received some kind of help from the Overseers in that year in addition to more than 100 who received benefit from the Weekly Payments. Most of these people received cash payments but some received only clothing or medical attention. Furthermore, the funerals of 4 persons were paid for either in full or in part and 1 boy's apprenticeship premium was paid. At a fair estimate two hundred of Bitton's seventeen hundred inhabitants received some help from the Poor Rates in that year.

Some of the people who received Weekly Payments were in the Poor House and many of the Casual Payments concern repairs to or equipment for it such as bedding. Clothing materials, needles, thread, etc., were also bought for the use of the child inmates. It is not clear from the evidence obtainable from the Account Books how the Poor House or Poor Houses were administered and organised. The Vestry Order Books, which have been preserved for the years 1761 to 1836, would supply

more information and it would be better to postpone any account of the Poor House until they have been studied.

Apart from a solitary entry in 1818 the accounts give no evidence that the Speenhamland system of supplementing wages from the Poor Rates was in operation, though the Gloucestershire magistrates had authorised such a scheme in 1795 and had drawn up a sliding scale of payments in accordance with the price of bread. This one entry concerns Joseph Cowley. He had been taken ill in Bath in May, 1818, and the Bitton Overseer had paid for his lodgings and supported his family. On July 18th the Overseers paid £1 2s. 6d. for "Batheing Lodgings &c" and brought him back to Bitton. On August 21st occurs the entry "Joseph Cowley to make up his Wages 3s. Od." There are no further entries concerning him until "Sept 25. Joseph Cowley in Distress 1s Od." At the beginning of October the Overseer paid him 2s. Od. "towards shoes" and in January 1819 he was ill again and he and his family received relief. Though, apart from the one entry, there is no evidence in the account books that the Speenhamland system was in operation, one cannot state categorically that it was not. The Vestry Order Books would probably give more definite information.

In the autumn of 1816 and spring of 1817 unemployed men, were set to work on the roads. In May 1817 as many as 17 men, plus the families of two others, were so employed. The scheme however ended in July of that year.

Were the weekly payments made the Overseers adequate? The scale of payments authorised by the Gloucestershire magistrates in 1795 allowed for 8 lbs. of bread, then costing 1½d. a lb., for each member of a family, plus 1s. for the man and 8d. for the wife for other necessary expenditure. This made the minimum weekly income for a man and wife 3s. 8d.; for a man, wife and 4 children 7s. 8d. when bread was at the price then prevalent. The national average price of wheat in 1795 was 75s 2d. a quarter. In 1771 wheat cost only 48s. 7d. a quarter so bread must have been considerably cheaper. In 1814 the average price was 74s. 4d. and for 1820 it was 67s. 10d. so bread should have been, if anything, slightly cheaper than in 1795. Judging by the scale laid down by the magistrates the weekly payments were sufficient to keep body and soul together and perhaps slightly above what the justices considered to be the absolute minimum. It would be interesting to make an analysis for the years 1800, 1801 and 1812 when the price of wheat was exceptionally high.

It will be noted that the scale allowed a family only 1s. 8d. for such expenses as clothing, rent coal, light, drink, or any other food except bread. Thus over any extended length of time the allowances were most decidedly inadequate. The Overseers evidently recognised this for the weekly payments were often supplemented with payments for these purposes. In 1800, John Caines - a cripple - received 2s. 6d. a week from the Overseer who also paid 13s. for a flannel shirt and two pairs of trousers for him. The following year he received 3 shirts. In 1805 he received 2 blankets, bed tick to repair his bed, a jacket, trousers, shoes and stockings. In 1772 Molly Battman received two shifts, a pair of shoes; a pair of stockings and

three yards of kersey at a cost of 15s. 7d. when she went into service. When the Overseers paid for the burial of Samuel Bush in 1808 they bought three yards of serge for M. Bush, presumably so that he or she could be decently attired at the funeral. Frequently the Overseers bought cloth to be made up into clothing either by a tailor or by the poor themselves. e.g. 1820 "Nov. 9. 24 yds Serge for the Poor. £2 4s." Two days later appeared the entry "Clothes for Little Pope at Mrs Tidman's £1." Women were paid for doing the washing for those unable to do it themselves. For years the Overseers were paying 6d. a week for John Caines's washing.

An interesting entry occurs on Sept. 4th 1780: "To the Widow Davis for her sons Books and Soport for her Self 10s. 6d." In May 1782 the Overseers paid 4s. 2d. for pens, ink and paper for her son Robert.

Medical attention was generously provided. From at least 1814, possibly earlier, until 1821, Dr Wingrove was paid £14 a year and he received other fees for inoculating the poor, etc. As early as 1772, when Betty Batman was in labour with an illegitimate child not only was the midwife sent for but the doctor was called in twice. In 1771 Ann Pierce, evidently a nurse or "wise woman" was paid 12s. "for the Cure of Robt Gunning's leg." In September 1884 she was paid 8s. 6d. for curing the children in the workhouse of "Anthony's fire." (Erysipelas). Women were paid for sitting up with the sick and for washing and cleaning them. Sometimes little delicacies were bought; 7d. was paid for lamb's head for Ann Jones's boy ill with smallpox in 1809, and 3s. 6d. for wine for James Butler's wife ill in 1821. In 1819 a Mrs. Gill, a stranger to Bitton was in labour and taken to the Poor House. The following entries concern her:

Jan. 18.	Mrs. Gill ill in the Poor House	1s. Od.
Jan. 23	Box to bury Mrs Gill's Child	1s. Od.
Jan. 28	Coal, Candle and Relief Mrs Gill	4s. 6d.
Feb. 5	Nurseing Mrs Gill seting up by Night	5s. Od.
	Candles for Ditto	1s. 1d.
	Sundries for Mrs Gill	1s. 6d.

There are further entries for nursing and relief until Mar. 8  
Pd Mrs Gill's carriage to London in Waggon. 10s. Od.

It is not surprising that the child died. Mrs Gill was probably lucky to survive herself for the following entries were made when she was in the Poor House.

Feb. 2.	Tobacco for Fumigation in Poorhouse.	11d.
	Vitriol Nitre &c for Ditto	1s. 6d.

Subscriptions of 2 guineas a year were paid to Bath Hospital and Bristol Infirmary and patients were taken there. In May, 1785 Sarah Prigg was taken to Bristol Infirmary to have her leg amputated and a wooden leg fitted at a cost of £2 8s. 4d. In September the Overseers paid 1s. Od. to have the wooden leg mended. John Caines, the cripple, was taken to Bath Hospital in June 1789 and the Overseers paid £3 for him. Two visits to the hospital by the Overseer cost 4s. 6d.; a horse

and cart to bring him back in January cost 3s. 6d. In March, 1800, 9s. Od. was paid for "stuf from a pottecary" for him and a further 10s. 6d. for medicine in May and June. The treatment was evidently unsuccessful for the following September the Overseer took him to Bristol Infirmary at a cost of 3s. 3d. A guinea was paid to his surgeon and in October 8s. Od. was paid for a horse and cart to bring him home. He remained a cripple and was supported by the parish for years with relief in money, clothing, bedding, and surgical shoes.

In May 1807 the Overseers paid £3 for John Bryant's fees in Bath Hospital. At the end of that year's accounts, among the monies received appears the entry "By Cash Charged Jno. Bryant being at Bath Hospital when no such thing took place. £3."

Patients were occasionally sent to Dr Bompas's private Lunatic Asylum at Bristol.

Small-pox was endemic in Bitton though more prevalent in some years than in others. In January 1784 James Bryant's wife, son and daughter died of it. The Overseers then made a Removal Order against him and on March 2nd paid Robert Bryant 8s. Od. for two days' hire of his horse and cart to take James and the remainder of his family to Stratton Foss.

Much money was wasted on legal disputes arising from the Settlement Acts and in shuttling paupers backwards and forwards to and from their place of settlement. Overseers frequently made journeys to search parish registers for evidence of settlement. The following is an extreme, rather than typical, case of a settlement dispute but is by no means unique.

In 1783 Ann Hicks and her two children were removed by order from Isleworth, Middlesex to Bitton. The Overseer of Bitton gave notice of appeal against the order at Middlesex Quarter Sessions. In the meantime he paid £1 for two week's board and lodging for Ann Hicks and her children and afterwards 5s. Od. a week for their maintenance. In May the trial was held in London. The expenses were heavy. Two guineas was paid for a chaise to take two people - the lawyers, no doubt - and another guinea to take a third. A coach to bring them back cost another three guineas. £1 10s. was paid for the wagon to take the Hicks family to London, £10 15s. 9d. for the maintenance of them and the witnesses while there, etc. In total the expenses came to £22 18s. 3d. The case was settled out of court, the authorities at Isleworth having given in and agreed to pay 17 guineas towards the costs to which Bitton had been put. The 17 guineas, however, was all paid to lawyers in Bristol. Together the parishes of Bitton and Isleworth must have spent at least £50 on the case, enough to support Ann Hicks and her children for nearly four years at 5s. Od. a week. The story has a tragic end. An entry in the accounts dated July 4th, 1783 reads: "To the officers of Calne for the Buryal of Ann Hicks Child 15s. 1d."

A dispute with the neighbouring Somerset parish of Kelston in 1818 was recorded in the following entries:



"April 7. Expences Coach Hire, Counsel &c with witness's to Wells Quarter Sessions to Try Abm Brimble's Case. £22 6s. Od."

"May 4 Pd for the Caravan with Witness &c to Bath (for Trial at Wells) 6s. Od."

Judgement was given in favour of Bitton.

"May 7. By Cash of Kelston Overseer for Abm Brimble and family's maintenance. £13. 10s. Od."

Even when there was no legal dispute the cost of removing people to their place of settlement could be heavy. In 1821 James Butler, a hatter, whose legal settlement was at Polstead, Suffolk was living with his wife and three children in Bitton. Presumably he was working at Prothero's Hat Factory. His wife was taken ill and became chargeable to the parish and, though the accounts do not state this, it is evident that she died. It seems that when the mother of young children died, if the father was not legally settled in Bitton the authorities sent him and family back to his place of settlement so that the children would not have to be taken into the workhouse for care and attention. (Note the removal of James Bryant mentioned previously). The removal of the family via Bath, Mitchell's Waggon to London and Wilson's coach to Polstead, cost about £12. It is to the credit of the Overseers of Bitton that they bought new shoes for all three children before they set out.

The Overseers made other efforts to keep people "off the parish" by helping them to go away, to seek employment or to keep them in their trade in difficult times:

1817 July 7.	Wm Jarrett to support his Family in his Trade & keep them of the parish	£1 0s. Od.
1818 Feb 13	Robt Haslet to help him to London	13s. 6d.
1819 Jan 9.	Chas Webly to assist him and family to go to Dudley to get employ	£1 0s. Od.
1820 Mar 25	Robert Jay's Wife to buy some articles to sell on her way to Glasgow	£1 0s. Od.

Evidently she came back to Bitton for -

1820 Nov 20	Robert Jay's Wife to take her to London	9s. Od.
1820 Aug 4	Jos. Cooper to keep his Goods from Seizure	8s. Od.

There were Friendly Societies or Sickness Clubs at four of Bitton's five Inns by 1805. On Nov. 25th 1818, the Overseer paid 5s. Od. to James Baln and his son, both injured in the pit. Two days later he paid up Baln's Club money, 8s. Od. - a prudent measure for there were eight people in Baln's family and he was able to keep their relief down to 5s. Od. a week. On August 22nd the Overseers lent James Whippey 10s. Od. to "keep him in Club" and in the following February advanced him another 12s. Od. "he haveing a large family."

Bastardy was the cause of considerable expense and much activity for both Overseers and Constables. It was a national problem at the time and parish officers made various efforts to reduce its incidence. When a single woman was found to be pregnant she was taken before a magistrate and ordered to swear the child's paternity. Refusal to do so was punished by imprisonment in the House of Correction. The constable, armed with a warrant, then went to arrest the putative father - not always successfully.

1804 Oct. 8. To expenses with Ann Joy to swear the Child &  
warrant. 5s. Od.  
To D<sup>o</sup> and Constable to Dodington and other places  
after The Man but could not find him. 15s. Od.

When the man could be found, if he was single, pressure was brought to bear to force him to marry the girl. There are frequent references in the Poor Books to men being kept in custody until the marriage ceremony.

1784 Oct. 7. To expences takeing up Thos. Osborn & keeping  
him in Custody all night and next day before  
marriage. 11s. 6d.

The Overseers paid for a seemly and sometimes convivial wedding, often paying the parson, buying the ring, and providing a wedding breakfast of bread, cheese and beer. They paid as much as 9s. 6d. for this purpose at the "shot-gun" wedding of Charles Williams and Sarah Bush in 1787 and a lot of bread, cheese and beer could then be bought for 9s. 6d.

When the man could not be forced to marry he had to pay the Overseers for the child's maintenance. In 1814/15 Bitton was supporting 13 illegitimate children but was recouping the money for at least 7 of them from the fathers. The Overseers paid for the midwife and the doctor, if he was called in, and relieved the mother while she was incapacitated. These expenses were sometimes heavy.

1801 Jan. 16. To a Bill for Expenc<sup>s</sup> in London for Mary Jefferis  
lying in with a Bastard Child £7 1s. 8d.

An entry in 1819/20 concerning Dinah Brimble's child by William Berry reads, "W Berry paid his arrears due and demanded the Child of the Mother to provide for it himself & the Child was delivered to him."

In 1821, in accordance with the law, Charlotte Brain who was receiving 3s. 9d. a week for two illegitimate children was sent to prison for six months for having a third. An entry on 28th June, 1821 records payment for the "Funeral of Charlote Brain's Bast. in the Lawford Gate Prison." In the same year Ann Jeffries, receiving 3s. 6d. a week for two illegitimate children was imprisoned for three months for having the second.

The records rarely, if ever, refer to illegitimate children by name but as the father's or mother's bastard. This practice continued even when the child was old enough to go to work. Such entries as

these seem very inhuman:

1773 Aug 22. Pd for the burial of Betty Battman's bastard 10s. 6d.  
1778 Mar. 20. Sarah Woodington's bastard, she going to service 6d.  
1819 Sept 24. .... Slaughter's Bast<sup>d</sup> hurt at Pit 2s. Od.

Probably it was insensitivity rather than inhumanity that caused parish officers to stigmatise these children and set them apart from their fellows by denying them the dignity of a Christian name; but such insensitivity could arouse deep anti-social feelings in the child which would be liable to develop into criminal tendencies in later life.

The shortage of housing, by discouraging marriage, tended to promote promiscuity; the binding of boys to long apprenticeships during which marriage was forbidden may well have had a similar effect. Under the Elizabethan Poor Law boys were apprenticed until they were twenty-four years of age, though after 1788 the age was reduced to twenty-one. Girls were apprenticed until the age of twenty-one or marriage, whichever occurred first. Apprenticeship usually began at the age of seven and sometimes even earlier. When the child was bound to a good master and learnt a skilled trade, apprenticeship was obviously highly beneficial but if a child was apprenticed to a bad master or to a trade which he disliked his only escape from unhappiness was to run away. If he did this he was breaking the law and runaway apprentices were a great source of vagrancy and juvenile crime.

Apprenticeship indentures for 33 children are preserved in the Bitton records; 24 for boys, 9 for girls; an interesting though incomplete collection. They date from 1733 to 1823, though mostly from 1760 to 1780, and almost all refer to pauper or parish apprenticeships. The ages of the children when apprenticed were: 8 years, 3; 9 years, 3; 10 years, 8; 11 years, 2; 12 years, 4; 14 years, 7; 15 years, 1; 17 years, 1. The ages of three are not stated. In accordance with the law, up to 1788 the boys were apprenticed until twenty-four years of age. They appear to have been given genuine apprenticeships to a skilled trade: feltmakers, 2; cordwainers or shoemakers, 5; barbers and peruke-makers, 4; butchers, 2; carpenters, 2; farmers, 5; and one each to a tailor and a brightsmith. One feels less happy about the girls who, with one exception, were apprenticed to learn "huswifery or some other useful art or mystery" and may well have been condemned to years of household drudgery. They were not taken into large houses but into the homes of farmers or artisans. One girl, Ann Bryant, was bound to Edward Baggs, mariner of Bristol to learn to be a laundress. The list of Weekly Payments for 1820/21 records that Rachel Bryant was "taken to Service by Farmer Mayne but ranaway and was committed to Prison one Month."

About half of the children were apprenticed outside the hamlet of Bitton, many in Bath or Bristol. Parish officers did this whenever possible, for when a child had completed only forty days of apprenticeship in another parish he or she gained a settlement there and had no further claim to maintenance in the parish of birth.

The road from Bristol to Bath ran through the hamlet and the

Bristol-London road skirted it on the north. Along these roads wended a constant stream of vagrants, pedlars, and poor travellers of every description. Many of these carried what was termed a "free pass." This was a document signed by Justices of the Peace authorising the bearer to ask for alms or assistance on his or her journey, either from the Overseers or from private persons. Such passes were commonly issued during the period to discharged soldiers and sailors, ship-wrecked mariners, sufferers from fire, or other poor persons tramping back to their parish of settlement. Soldiers' wives usually accompanied their husbands when their regiment was stationed in England but if it went abroad only a quota of the women was taken; the others were given passes back to their place of settlement. These passes were only valid along a specified route and within a specified period of time. They had no legal validity and there was no legal obligation on the Overseers of the parishes along the route to relieve these travellers. Some parishes refused to give aid; the Vestry at Dursley in 1738 ordered that nothing should be given to such travellers from the parish account and a similar order was given at Brislington in the following year. Bitton was more generous: in 1811/12 rather more than 227 such foot-passes were given relief; 48 men, 93 women, 77 children, and 9 persons whose sex and age were not stated. The number was greater than normal that year. Among the passes were 5 soldiers, 10 soldiers wives and 12 soldiers children; 25 sailors, 5 sailor's wives and 1 sailor's child. Twelve "passes" were described as being ill on the road and nineteen as being "in Distress."

The amount of relief given was usually small and totalled only £4 9s. 6½d. These entries are typical:

1811.	May 2.	To Man & Wife in Distress	6d.
		To 7 Saylor's in D <sup>o</sup>	1s. Od.
	July 15.	To a Saylor & Wife being Ill	1s. Od.
1812	Mar. 2.	Woman & 6 Child <sup>ren</sup> with Pass	1s. 3d.
	Mar. 6.	2 Soldiers with a Pass.	4d.

Sometimes, however, the expenditure was much more:

1812	Jan. 31.	Man & Wife being Ill on Road	8s. 6d.
	Feb. 7.	To the Woman Ill in the Poor House	3s. Od.
	Feb. 10	To Edith Cripps looking after Woman in Poor House	4s. Od.
	Feb. 14	To the Woman Ill in D <sup>o</sup>	3s. Od.
		To Gave the Woman to go Home to her Parish	2s. Od.
		To Ann Cripps to Carry her Bundle	1s. Od.
		To Widow Cripps looking after ye Women	2s. Od.

Other examples of generosity to the stranger within the gates are:

1810	Nov. 2	To Expenses at Hart Inn for a Traveller	7s. Od.
------	--------	---	---------

1820 July 17. Pd Lodgings & Nurse for Soldiers' Wife £1. Os. Od.

The account books make occasional reference to inhabitants of Bitton being sent home by pass under the Vagrancy Laws.

1811 June 14. Hannah Bryant B<sup>t</sup> with a Pass in Distress 3d.  
To taking D<sup>o</sup> Home in a Cart 5s. Od.

Mary - or Moll - Caines was brought back with a pass in July 1785. She was relieved by the Overseer with 1s. 6d. a week until 5th September when she was given 5s. Od. "to buy shoes & go away" but was back again and receiving relief in 1778. In that year, too, Elizabeth Caines was "brought from London with a pass in the foul'd disease." At the risk of being uncharitable one may guess the nature of the "foul'd disease" and how Elizabeth had been earning her living in London.

The pauper funeral, described in poem and prose, has become almost a legendary symbol of the final degradation of the poor. Watching one in Harrow churchyard is said to have aroused Lord Shaftesbury that sympathy with the poor and oppressed which inspired his life-long struggle on their behalf.

In the chancel of Bitton church lies the body of Berkeley Seymour and beside it the body of his brother William who robbed and murdered him and was hanged in Gloucester in 1742. Outside in the churchyard are buried the Caines brothers, Francis who was hanged at Ilchester in 1804 and Benjamin who suffered the same fate at Gloucester in 1817. Bitton gave even its criminals a Christian burial and, as far as one can tell from the records, its paupers were laid to rest with decency and dignity.

The usual expenditure on a pauper funeral about 1820 was twenty-seven or twenty-eight shillings. This expenditure is usually not itemised but one can estimate what kind of funeral was provided from the entries concerning the burial of Samuel Bush in 1808 which cost £1 9s. 6d. It provided for coffin, shroud, bell and grave at £1 1s.; pall, 2s. Od.; four bearers at 5s. 6d. and 1s. Od. for "putting him in the coffin". There are frequent references about this period to the provision of bread, cheese and beer at pauper funerals.

Early in October 1810, Jonas Watson of Bitton was taken ill in Bristol. The Overseer relieved him and on 7th October paid 10s. Od. to bring him home to Bitton. Sarah Ellis was paid 1s. Od. on three occasions for looking after him and 6d. was paid for washing his shirts. He died about the middle of the month. The Overseer paid £1 for his coffin, 4s. Od. for four bearers, and 2s. 8½d. for beer "&c" at the funeral.

The Overseers occasionally laid out a little money on entertainment. On 6th September 1813, they spent 3s. Od. on 2 gallons of beer for the local Militiamen when they were disbanded. Beer was also provided for men joining the Royal Navy, and even in 1820, when the rates were high, they expended about £1 1s. on beer for the poor on "Turnover Day" - 25th March - when the new Parish Officers took office.

The documents studied are of absorbing interest and give a comprehensive picture of life in Bitton at that time. We would like to analyse the accounts more fully and complete the research to the year 1834 when the old Poor Law was abolished. The study so far completed indicates that at Bitton that law was administered with compassion and at least a measure of generosity.

Irene and John Wyatt

Sources:

Bitton Overseers of the Poor Accounts 1771-1821.

Settlement Papers 1700-1830.

Apprenticeship indentures 1700-1800.

[All kindly lent for study by the Vicar of Bitton]