

THE POOR OF CHEDWORTH 1762 - 1769

by M. Powell

Overseers were appointed at Easter and Michaelmas for a six month period of service. As one reads the Account Book the variety of styles of account is very obvious. Some Overseers would detail each payment to the last farthing, whilst others would merely state name, date and amount of money paid out. As Overseers were 'people' it must be that their response to and judgement of an appeal for assistance would vary; some would naturally be more sympathetic than others in their attitudes, it would be easier for the pauper to speak of his material needs to some Overseers than to others. One could surmise that some would be more ready to give assistance than others. There are accounts within some six month periods of a heavy paying out, such as during March 1769, so it could be that either there were serious economic factors governing, or the Overseer was more kindly disposed.

An account was kept of the giving of poor relief exactly to the last penny, and the books balanced monthly. Some people were relieved on a regular basis each week, and received the same amount each time. However, some were given more than others so obviously each case was judged individually. The money was raised by the rating of landowners and householders, who were rated as to their properties' value. This was the main source of income. A very minute but interesting source came at the event of a pauper's death; if there were no dependents, by the sale of his goods. There are a few entries showing this, but there was one of note. A certain Jane Belcher died after receiving a total of £2. 8. 1. from the parish, which was detailed over a period of about three months as - wood purchased for her fire - the attendance on her of Sarah Williams - and a weekly sum of 2/- for her maintenance. - When her goods were sold they raised £2. 18. 6d - so the parish benefited by 10s. 5d.

It is possible to build up a picture and put names to the people of the village through examining the Accounts Book. For example, one learns that there was a sort of 'Home Help' service - the parish paying someone to regularly care for another person. Ann Agge (or Egg) looked after Mary Clemens for at least twenty three years, while she herself received Parish relief. There are regular accounts of the village midwife performing her duties around the village - Mrs. Hendries was followed by Mrs. Jane Sherman, who was succeeded by Mrs. Sly. They not only cared for the women of the village, but we read of the account of a tinker and his wife, who were supported by the parish from March to October 1793, then after Jane Sherman had attended the wife at the birth of her child, there was no further record. So it seems that the parish would care for a passing stranger while they were in need, but possibly for no longer. There was also an account of a man taken ill on the side of the road in March, 1789, he was given 2/6 and cared for overnight at the cost of 1/-, and then presumably sent on his way.

Paupers' funerals often appear in the records, so one is able to glean knowledge, not only of the unfortunate one who had died, but also names of who had made the coffin, who had made the shroud

and who had tolled the bell. It would seem that John Taylor was succeeded by his son Richard, for the accounts name them as the carpenters from 1762-1784. The cloth merchant and seamstress not only produced the shrouds, they provided clothes for the children of the poor. Little mysteries emerge such as in 1762 Philip Glover provided cloth for Sarah Glover to sew shrouds, but by 1775 Mary Taylor was his seamstress, so where was Sarah? Had she died or retired? And who was Mary? a relative of the Taylors' who made the coffins? It could have been quite a little family concern! That the children of the poor were clothed as necessary from the poor relief fund is detailed in various parts of the Account Book, for example in 1784 the children of Mary Robins, a widow were given: 2 Hankerchiefs 1/-, 2 Aprons 2/-, Strip & Tipatt 1/9, Frock, coat & making 4/6, 2 Shirts 4/11, buttons and thread and making 1/2.

It is sometimes interesting to see the variance in the spelling, often suggesting the way the local people would speak, words appear written down in the way they would be spoken as in the account of the attention of a certain Henry Newman recieved in September, 1787. The account reads thus:-

'laid out for Henry Newman at Gloucester

a Blanckut	4.	6.
a shirt	4.	6.
a waskut	5.	0.
a pear of stockings	1.	0.
for soap and wood	1.	9 $\frac{1}{2}$.
for Cleansing him	4.	0.'

There appears to be quite a rapid turnover of doctors for six names are recorded in the Account Book between 1778 and 1791, and their fees were always quite high, often as much as £5. 5s. 0d per consultation, especially when they had to deal with contagious cases. There was a smallpox outbreak between March and May 1788 and there are accounts of Charles Robins, for one days' work attending the smallpox 1/- and Joseph Wilson, paid 2/1 for white-washing the smallpox house. It is interesting to note that here and in another entry concerning the repairing of a Church House, the ordinary working man's wage was low in comparison with his outgoings. For example - in February/March 1783 Giles Bridges submitted his account and the entry of the Overseer was as follows -

'Paid Giles Bridges four days work	6.	0.
Do four Bushels of lime	3.	4.
Do for stones, and carriage	4.	0.
Do for glaziers bill	16.	8.'

So it seems for a days labour he was only paid 1/6, while a pair of shoes at that time cost 2/9, so he would need to work for two days in order to buy one pair of shoes.

The accounts reveal various everyday details such as that wood was regularly 'Cleaved and hauled' by various persons, for distribution to the poor. Cheese and bread were bought. Ale was drunk at a funeral. House rents were paid. A guinea was paid every year to 'the Infirmary'. A letter from Gloucester cost 8d. One can feel sorry for poor Sarah Tilling for there was 'a journey to Cirencester with Sarah Tilling, she being a brooding, 1. 6. Paid for her oath 1/-. Paid for a warrant to take the man 1/-. The Accounts Book teems with the life and deaths of the poor.

It would seem that the job of the Overseer of the Poor was to provide the basic essentials which were lacking, while at the same time not being over-generous because he would have to consider the necessity of not spending more money than was available at any one time. There was a movement in the latter part of the 18th Century to abolish the Poor Law. Those against it, many of them of the clergy, saw the pathetic dependence of the pauper on the Overseer, so would have preferred a system of private contributions. Whilst those for it, many of them from the upper classes, thought that not enough people would remember to care for the poor. But, to the pauper, in the ultimate, all he would care about was whether he was cold and hungry, or whether he was not cold and hungry.

Bibliography

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