

# Changing Attitudes to Poverty in Thame c. 1600 - c.1700 <sup>1</sup>

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At the beginning of the 17th century the enactment of poor law legislation had a substantial impact on the poor and those who gave to the poor. Alms-giving took two primary forms during this period. The first involved voluntary gifts to the poor by individuals or through the establishment of local charities, and the second was through parish poor relief, a compulsory levy charged at parish level which emerged and spread throughout England after 1601. The Poor Law Act of 1601 amalgamated previous poor law legislation and established a relief system which was to be administered at parish level. As a result, each parish was to take responsibility for the helpless, aged and sick within its catchment area. The relief was to be administered by elected overseers within each parish. These overseers were given the responsibility for seeing to the needs of orphans, widows, the maimed and the elderly. At the same time, those able-bodied who were idle or reluctant to work were to be put to work, while rogues and vagrants were to be punished by local JPs. <sup>2</sup>

This study examines the changing attitudes of Thame's <sup>3</sup> inhabitants towards the poor during the 17th century, using 345 wills which have recently come to light, and the churchwardens' accounts for Thame. Under ideal circumstances the local poor rate-book should be used to provide an insight into those who gave to the poor and those who received poor relief, but unfortunately only 11 pages of Thame's rate-books survive. <sup>4</sup> These reveal that between 80 and 90 ratepayers gave between 2d. and 1s. a week to the poor. The number of people in receipt of poor relief varied from 28 to 33, receiving an average 3s. 5d. a week.

The aim of this study is to review the existing surviving evidence on poverty in the parish and reassess the extent to which the information contained in the wills confirms our existing understanding of the issue. In specific terms, the study will examine how and why voluntary alms-giving changed during the 17th century, using the occupational status specified in the wills to construct five distinct social groupings based on the criteria of employment activity and gender. The second part of the paper will use this evidence and the relevant information contained in the churchwardens' accounts to demonstrate how the proportion of wealth donated to the poor changed over time. The paper will pay particular attention to those who received poor relief and the criteria used to provide it.

Before outlining the current literature on poverty in Thame it is important to define some terms which are used in the paper. Given that poverty is a relative concept, influenced by time and geographical location, it is difficult to give any precise quantitative measure. It is, however, sensible to assume that each individual has some basic needs, such as food and shelter, to survive. From year to year, the number living above or below this notional point, which we could call the poverty line, are likely to remain relatively constant. But during periods of temporary crisis, such as bad harvests, epidemics of disease, employment slumps and trade disruptions, this line is likely to move upwards, increasing the number of those living below the poverty line. Alternatively, during periods of economic prosperity or good harvests, this line is likely to move downwards, decreasing the proportion of those needing poor relief. A more complete picture of poverty emerges if we take into account the intensity of poverty, which can be measured using Slack's concepts of shallow and deep poverty. 'Some people in poverty were much more deprived than others. The spectrum could stretch from starvation to insufficient fuel and clothing.' <sup>5</sup> Therefore those individuals who were starving could be said to be living in deep poverty while those lacking fuel and clothing were more likely to be living in shallow poverty. The numbers of people in deep and shallow poverty during the 17th century are difficult to calculate because of regional variations influenced by local economic and social factors such as the quality of harvests, employment prospects and local attitudes.

Slack, however, suggests that into 5% - 20% of the population <sup>6</sup> fell between the two categories outlined above.

Two further terms also need to be explained. During the 14th century, the poor were segregated into the deserving and undeserving poor. The Statute of Labourers in 1349 discouraged alms-giving to the able-bodied in the hope of forcing them back to employment. At the time, it was argued that the poor who were in need of relief as a result of their own decision to avoid work were to be punished and forced back to employment. They were described by contemporary writers as the "undeserving poor". This opinion gained support during the 14th and 15th centuries as labour became scarce. The large number of deaths sustained during the plagues of these centuries resulted in a shortage of labour, and created a belief that work was plentiful and available. As a result, the attitude emerged that everyone who wanted work could find it and those who did not work had deliberately decided to remain idle. <sup>7</sup> At the other end of the spectrum, poor orphans, widows, the lame, the elderly and those affected by natural and man-made disasters such as floods and fires were regarded as the "deserving poor", who deserved to receive alms. <sup>8</sup> The text relating to the poor in the Bible was used to justify this distinction.

The process of leaving money to the church and the poor had its roots in the 13th century when the Catholic church encouraged alms-giving and linked it to notions of salvation. Following the Reformation, the process of alms-giving was reformed by the protestant faith to convey notions of respectability and acceptable modes of behaviour during one's time on earth. <sup>9</sup>

The process of alms-giving within the parish was an open practice, visible to one's peers. V. Bainbridge <sup>10</sup> argues that providing for the poor in wills or in the street was possibly a gesture by the donor to gain respectability within the community. She contends that giving to the poor was not so much an expression of concern for their plight by the testator, but a desire to speak the right language and behave in a way which commanded respectability, and gained the approval of peers. In some instances this notion even continued after death, since bread and money were handed by the executors to the known poor of the community at the funeral. The wills show that there were at least five families which gave to the poor on a regular basis between 1600 and 1680. The extent to which these families gave to the poor because they were concerned about their plight or about the family image within the community is open to question at this stage and requires further research.

### **Poverty in Thame**

During the last 120 years several works on Thame have been published. Lupton, Pugh and Brown and Guest have all written about the parish using many primary sources. One of the most significant contributions was made by the Rev. Lee in 1883. In relation to poverty, Lee argued that:

***'... almost all the squires, gentlemen and yeomen of the town ... in making their wills left donations to the church and the poor and small gifts to the alms people ... gifts of 40s to the church and 20s to the poor, commonly distributed in gifts of Ltd or in loaves of bread at the funeral.'*** <sup>11</sup>

Lee's suggestion that 'almost all the squires, gentlemen and yeomen' gave to the poor overlooked the valuable contribution made to the needs of the poor by women. This study will show that voluntary alms-giving in wills varied between the sexes, and suggest that women were more generous in giving to the poor than men when measured as a proportion of all money donations made in wills.

Lee's assertion also needs to be re-assessed in the light of conflicting empirical evidence. Lee's suggestion that many of the wealthiest members of the parish were concerned about the poor is undermined by the decision of the Court of Frankpledge in October 1649. The court ordered that:

***'....no inhabitant of New Thame should erect any new tenement or take any inmate into the house unless the landlord was prepared to guarantee the parish against any consequent expense.'***<sup>12</sup>

Two years later, in June 1651, the churchwardens' accounts showed that active parishioners used their influence to prevent the churchwardens from providing relief for those in need. At a meeting of the parishioners it was ordered that:

***'...if any churchwarden or overseer of the poore shall put any per(sons) into the collection book without the consent of the parish at ye Stone, that he or they so doing shall pay such per(son) or per(sons) himself.'***<sup>13</sup>

These contradictory pieces of evidence provide a good basis for reviewing the issue of poverty in Thame. The availability of 345 wills also provides an ideal opportunity to do this.

Before discussing the evidence, it should be noted that wills are a valuable source of information but they also contain some weaknesses as a historical source and need to be treated with caution. The following analysis used the occupational labels stated within the wills analysed to construct five distinct occupation groupings (see table 4), determined by occupational activity and gender. A detailed discussion of this issue has been published elsewhere<sup>14</sup> but other methodological issues relating to this study are discussed below.

### **Inflation**

The outcome of any quantitative analysis relating to money needs to take into account the influence of inflation. The wage rates of builders in the south of England constructed by Phelps-Brown and Hopkins<sup>15</sup> reflect how purchasing power changed during the 17th century. To overcome the problem of inflation, an alternative approach has been adopted. The methodology used in this analysis measures the amount of money given to the poor in wills against other money gifts to family members, relatives and friends. By doing this, the impact of inflation is almost removed. A similar process is also used when analysing the churchwardens' accounts. Here the money given to the poor is measured against the total expenditure for the same year.

### **Churchwardens' Accounts**

The churchwardens' accounts provide a valuable insight into the Church's contribution to the poor outside the formal relief system. Between 1625 and 1689 the accounts show that payments were made for burials, apprenticeships and to victims affected by fire. The extent to which the accounts are reliable is open to question. These doubts are reinforced by the following example. During the 1630s the vicar's name in the accounts underwent a change of spelling. Between 1636 and 1638 the accounts showed the vicar of Thame to be a Mr. Thomas Hennant, but in 1639 and 1640 the vicar's name was entered as a Mr. Thomas Henwood.<sup>16</sup> Given that the churchwardens could not even get the name of their vicar entered into the accounts correctly, other entries must be treated with caution. The possibility of fraud by some of the churchwardens is also something which needs to be taken into account. The expenditure entries for 1636 and 1638, for example, were not itemised and those that were itemised for other years could have been invented by the churchwardens to balance the books and hide any embezzlement taking place.<sup>17</sup> An example of embezzlement in Thame occurred in July 1717 when the churchwardens presented John William to the peculiar court

and accused him of stealing. They said that 'about for or five Yeares ago [he] Did Convey away a Parcell of Lead belonging to the church of Thame & offered the same for sale.<sup>18</sup> The delay in accusing William suggests that old scores were being settled amongst the churchwardens.

### **Briefs**

Briefs were collections held in church for deserving causes. Briefs were usually read out during the service on Sunday, and donations were collected at the end as the parishioners left the church. Most briefs tended to be collected for church repairs and losses sustained by fire.<sup>19</sup> Many of the briefs collected in Thame were either not recorded in the parish accounts or have been lost over time. The only brief entries surviving are those for a ten year period starting from 1660. The analysis is also limited since briefs received from other parishes to benefit Thame's inhabitants are not included in the accounts. Further research is required on this aspect.

### **The Civil War**

Both probate records and the churchwardens' accounts were affected by the Civil War. Between 1642 and 1648 there are no income and expenditure entries in the churchwardens' accounts, while the number of wills and inventories approved increased. Part of this increase is likely to have come about as victims of the Civil War were fatally injured. During the summer of 1643, however, about 140 people, representing one-ninth of Thame's population, became victims of a typhus and dysentery epidemic.<sup>20</sup> The war also disrupted trade in the parish. This sudden disruption to supplies and the growth of demand for foodstuffs by the royalist and parliamentary armies forced prices up. The price of wheat, for example, increased from 48s. a quarter in 1641 to 60s. 2d. in 1642, and then fell back slightly to 59s. 10d. in 1643.<sup>21</sup> Other grain and commodity prices in the parish would also have increased to reflect the relative scarcity of supplies. The sudden rise in the cost of basic food commodities would have added pressure on the demand for poor relief, as more people fell into shallow and deep poverty.<sup>22</sup> The demand for poor relief would also have increased as victims maimed during the war became less capable of being employed. Families that had lost the main income earner would have become more dependent on local poor relief.

Widows, however, would not have received the same level of poor relief as their husbands since many men who published tracts on the management of the poor certainly thought that adult women ate less than adult men. So did the Justices of the Peace who set maximum wage levels for agricultural labourers. Women labourers received between one half and three fifths the food allowance of men, even when they were doing heavy work like reaping alongside the men.<sup>23</sup>

These additional burdens on relief may help to explain the judgement of the Court of Frankpledge in October 1649 and the wishes of the parishioners in June 1651. The Civil War and the epidemic of 1643 both had the effect of artificially increasing the number of those needing poor relief. At this stage it is not possible to quantify the extent of this increase without further research.

### **Wills**

The following section focuses on the results emerging from the wills analysed. The two main areas examined are the number and occupational type of those who gave to the poor (see Table 4), and the amounts they gave as a proportion of all money donations in their wills.

Taking the issue of numbers first, the top line of Figure 1 shows the total number of wills analysed while the lower line shows the actual number of wills which gave money donations

to the poor. Two donors have been excluded from this analysis since their donations could not, with any degree of accuracy, be translated into actual financial amounts. In 1649 William Smith<sup>24</sup> gave '30 dozen loafs of bread' to the poor, while in 1631 Hugh Evans<sup>25</sup> asked his executors to give something to the poor from his estates at their discretion. The amount the executors gave is not known.

The lower line in figure 1 shows that between 1600-1629 the actual number of wills which gave money to the poor increased from 17 to 21, and then dropped slightly to 19, while the total number of wills per decade increased from 29 to 43, and then dropped slightly to 41. After 1630 the total number of wills examined per decade fluctuated between 29 and 36 with the exception of the period 1670-79 when it rose to 43. The number of wills which gave to the poor during the same period, however, decreased to single figures with the exception for the period 1640-49.

Before discussing the reasons for this change it should be noted that figure 2 shows that between 1600 and 1639, a number of wills from each of the 5 categories constructed gave to the poor. Slack argues that during the 16th century giving to the poor at parish level was an expression of collective responsibility.<sup>26</sup> One example of the collective responsibility was expressed through church-ales, a communal festival used to raise funds for individuals who had fallen on hard times or for church repairs.<sup>27</sup> During the 1550s, for example, the ales in Thame were held at Whitsuntide.<sup>28</sup> Here the church-wardens

***'.....laid in quantities of flour and malt and meat, indulged in orgies of baking and brewing and roasting, and the whole parish, no doubt largely reinforced from outside, gave itself up to merry-making.'*<sup>29</sup>**

A further expression of communal collective responsibility for the poor was through giving alms in wills. The views and attitudes of those who gave to the poor during the first three decades of the 17th century would have been shaped and formed by the values of the previous two to three decades, when a formal compulsory system of poor relief did not exist.

It is interesting to note that during the first three decades, the number of wills which gave to the poor increased. John Trinder, the vicar of St. Mary's between 1589 and 1629, does not seem to have disapproved of indiscriminate voluntary alms-giving even though Parliament had tried to discourage it with various acts since the 1530s. Trinder acted as a witness in 21 out of 57 wills which gave money to the poor between c.1590 and 1629. Brown and Guest have argued that Trinder's willingness to collect 'the alms of the faithful'<sup>30</sup> and the continuation of church-ales show his sense of collective responsibility in action. Trinder's will,<sup>31</sup> however, left everything to his wife and nothing to the poor, which raises questions about his true attitudes towards them.

Local and regional changes in the economy would have been one major factor in shaping the views of those who gave to the poor, either while they were alive or as they made their will. Between 1571 and 1621 the population of England increased from 3.2m. to 4.7m.<sup>32</sup> As urban and rural areas experienced population growth at different rates, the number of landless labourers not capable of providing for themselves and their families, especially during periods of bad harvest and trade depressions, is likely to have increased. In the south of England, the income of those in employment fell in real terms as labour became surplus to demand. As a result the number of families needing poor relief after c.1570 is likely to have increased.

The sums of money given to the poor in Thame through wills between 1600 and 1630 could be viewed as a barometer, expressing the concerns of the relatively wealthy within the parish at the plight of those below, who were less fortunate than themselves. The total amounts given to the poor increased from 315 s. in 1600-09 to 526s. in 1620-29 (Table 2). The sums

given by testators to the poor ranged from 10s. to 40s. The increase in money donation to the poor between 1600-09 and 1610-19 is partly explained by a 48% increase in the number of wills making gifts to the poor between the two decades. However, as a proportion of money given to other members of the family, relatives and friends, gifts to the poor during the same period decreased from an average of 2.8% during 1600-09 to an average of 1.4% between 1610-49 (see Table 3).

The recipients of these donations were usually referred to by the testator as the 'poor' with one or two exceptions where they were described as 'widows' or 'almsmen'. The names of the poor were not specified by the testator and the executors were left to identify the so called 'poor' using their own criteria and judgement. It is very likely that this process followed a particular pattern, and mainly benefited those who resided in the parish or neighbouring parishes. In many cases the executors would have used their notions of 'respectable' and 'deserving' to determine which of the poor received alms. The poor who fell outside the above criteria would probably have been excluded from alms.

The notion of gaining respectability by giving to the poor, however, does not seem to have been at the forefront of a majority of those who left wills between 1600 and 1640. It is likely that many of these individuals deliberately decided not to provide for the poor since compulsory poor rates were being collected in the parish. These individuals may have decided that they had adequately discharged their responsibilities towards the poor while they were alive.

The sharp fall in voluntary alms giving after 1630 may also have been due to the views of the new vicar, Thomas Hennant, who took over from John Trinder. Hennant was a puritan minister, linked by marriage to several puritan families.<sup>33</sup> His sermons would not have encouraged indiscriminate alms-giving since many puritans believed that it encouraged idleness. Hennant's views would have informed the opinions of those who subsequently made their wills in the parish. However, it is also important to note that many puritans were not opposed to providing for the deserving poor. Slack's research shows that many puritans played an important part in influencing social policy towards the poor. During the 1620s, for example, as unemployment increased, many puritans sought to establish municipal workhouses where the able-bodied could be put to work<sup>34</sup> to support themselves and their families. In 1637, Hennant also witnessed the will of Thomas Springall, yeoman, who left 20s. to the poor.<sup>35</sup>

Hennant's influence may have been significant but it did not extend to a residue of individuals who continued to give to the poor after 1630. The amounts they gave varied from 10s. to 40s. but a closer examination of these benefactors shows that giving was practised within particular families for two, three or four generations. For example, between 1602 and 1680 seven members of the Cotton family gave something to the poor in their wills. Three other well known families<sup>36</sup> continued to give to the poor after 1630.

Without further research it would be difficult to draw any firm conclusions about the motives of these families and their inclination to continue giving to the poor even though compulsory poor rates were being collected within the parish. Their sense of communal responsibility seems to have been strong, and their awareness of family practice may have led them to carry on providing for the poor since it conveyed a sense of continuity and responsibility.

After 1640, however, the notion of collective responsibility for the poor in Thame seems to have disappeared amongst the five groups constructed. The amounts given by each group became more erratic, varying from decade to decade. With the exception of two large donations of £25 and £50,<sup>37</sup> the total amount given to the poor through wills decreased in real terms.

The overall picture indicates two specific trends which deserve further comment. Firstly, even though group 2 members were the richest of all the five groups constructed, when measured against all money donations in their wills, they were not as generous to the poor as group 5 members. Widows and spinsters accounted for 28% of the wills analysed, but during six of the ten decades they gave either the highest or second highest proportion of their money donations to the poor when measured against donations to other family members and friends (see Table 3). Part of the explanation for this may be the fact that many husbands who made wills catered for the needs of their children, giving their wives more flexibility to dispose of their wealth and property later.

### **Churchwardens' Accounts**

The churchwardens' accounts are another valuable source of information about the poor, providing a useful insight into the thinking of those who helped administer poor relief within the parish.

Between 1625 and 1650 the accounts show that most of the churchwardens avoided making any major financial contributions to the poor using church funds, with the exception of gifts made from parochial charities under their responsibility.<sup>38</sup> Part of the reason for this must be the existence of poor rates within the parish. The churchwardens' primary area of responsibility would have been the maintenance of St. Mary's Church and its estates. Between 1620 and 1640, however, small amounts of church funds were given to the poor and these tended to be directed to one or two individuals who were described in the accounts as 'a poor woman', '... a poore minister' or for the burial of children and adults.<sup>39</sup> The amounts given varied from 6s. 8d. in 1610 to 6d. in 1632, but as a proportion of total church expenditure during the year these gifts amounted to less than 0.1%.

This evidence clearly indicates that the churchwardens did not deliberately set out to provide for the poor in the parish during their term of office. But the itemised expenditure shows that some churchwardens used their own discretion to provide for a selected few. In 1641, for example, the accounts show that 10d. was paid to a 'maimed soldier'<sup>40</sup> who was sent to them by Mr. Hennant, while six years earlier a 'poor minister',<sup>41</sup> by the name of Griffith Tomson, who was travelling to Wales, was given 2s. Even though these individuals were favoured by the wardens, there is no evidence to show the criteria used. There is, however, room for speculation on this issue.

During the 1630s and 1640s the vicar and the parishioners were inclined towards the puritan faith. The church-ales, for example, which had taken place in the parish for at least a hundred years ceased after c.1640, probably on the basis that they encouraged idleness and excessive drinking. Perhaps both the soldier sent by Hennant and Griffith Tomson were inclined towards the puritan faith. If this assumption is true, it would have given them favourable access to church funds.

There is more certainty about some of the others who received church funds in the form of relief. In 1610 over 18s. 0d. was paid out for the burial of 'Mr Saunders child', 'Mrs Ellis' and 'Mr Way'.<sup>42</sup> Unlike the passing minister or the maimed soldier, these named beneficiaries resided in the parish and were known to the wardens. So we can deduce that one of the selection criteria used by the churchwardens when giving to the poor was the length of residency within the parish. The use of this criterion alone would have excluded non-residential people whose needs may have been greater than those who lived in the parish.

During the 1650s the duties of the churchwardens seem to have extended in scope. Part of the accounts were used by the wardens to show relief payments to the poor. The sums paid were probably used to supplement the parish poor rates. The account entries for 1653 and 1654 show that all relief payments were made by men who resided in the parish. Their names

were entered alongside the payment they made, which varied from 2s. 0d. to 15s. 6d. The recipients of this relief were described in the accounts as the 'poor' of Old and New Thame without having their names or amounts they received being specified in the accounts.

In a few instances the names of recipients were recorded alongside the amounts they received. In 1653 'Widow Bradford' <sup>43</sup> received £1. 4s. 0d. for the payment of her rent to Edward Lauseurs, who also contributed 6s. in the same year towards the poor rates. This example illustrates the close linkages between those who paid the rates and the poor. Tate argues that some of the named individuals selected for preferential treatment by the wardens were respectable members of the community who had fallen on hard times. <sup>44</sup> In 1653 and 1654 90% and 78% of the monies collected, respectively, for the poor were subsequently given to them. The remaining balances of 4s. and 14s. respectively were not accounted for in the accounts during subsequent years. Tate and Slack have both argued that during the 17th century some churchwardens embezzled charitable funds, but in this instance it would be premature to make such a judgement. There are two reasons for this. Firstly the events of June 1651, when some of the parishioners in Thame demanded that the churchwardens should not put any new residents into the rate-books without their consent, suggest that the wardens were trying to discharge their duties to the best of their abilities but were prevented from doing so by some of the parishioners who no doubt were rate payers who did not want to increase their poor relief payments. Secondly, the balances could have been transferred to the rate-books which do not survive.

Further entries between 1656 and 1659 show that £2 a year was given to the 'poor' in early April and a further £2 was also paid for apprenticeships. In at least two instances the apprentices were boys, probably orphans, and in the third, the gender is not specified. No specific mention is made of female apprenticeships in the accounts but this does not exclude the possibility that they were placed within households in and around the parish to receive training in domestic skills.

The inclusion of only male apprenticeships in the accounts shows the importance placed by the wardens on the primacy of men in their role as bread-winners. One contemporary reason for putting male orphans into apprenticeships was to improve their future employment prospects. The placement of orphans was a deliberate strategy adopted by many churchwardens throughout the country to reduce the burden on the rates. <sup>45</sup>

In some parishes orphaned girls were provided with a dowry from the rates to enable them to get married. This strategy had two objectives. Firstly, marriage and family life were linked with notions of respectability and the churchwardens' hope to prevent orphan girls from falling into a life of prostitution and moral degradation by offering a dowry. Secondly it was also seen as a strategy that would lessen the burden of poor relief within the parish.

## **Briefs**

Briefs were probably collected in Thame throughout the 17th century but only 22 entries made during the 1660s survive in the churchwardens' accounts. In September 1660 a brief was issued for the fire at Brill, a village 5 miles from Thame, which raised £1. 11s. 0d. and in October of the same year a brief for the advancement of the fishing trade raised £1. 2s. 0d. The most distant brief was collected for the protestant kingdom of Lithuania in October 1661 and raised 12s. 0d. <sup>46</sup> Most of the briefs listed were collected for church repairs and the inhabitants of towns and villages in Berkshire, Dorset, Hertfordshire, Lincolnshire, Norfolk, Northumberland, Suffolk, Yorkshire and Southampton. The sums raised varied from 6s. to 16s. with the exception of those mentioned above.

There does not seem to be an obvious link between name and many of the places the briefs were destined for. Thame's historic ties with the bishopric of Lincoln probably account for the



briefs collected for Grimsby, Grantham and Gainsborough. The sums raised for church repairs in Dorset, Southampton and Northumberland <sup>47</sup> may reflect a returned favour by St. Mary's Church for monies collected on its behalf by those distant churches in the past, but this needs to be cross checked.

The number of briefs varied during the year with no more than two collections in any single month. With the exception of one instance in April 1661, the second collection during the same month tended to be lower than the first. Given the limited number of entries analysed, it would be premature to draw any firm conclusions without looking at a much larger sample. The limited evidence from Thame, however, suggests that there may be a close correlation between the amounts raised, the location of the cause, and the intended beneficiaries. For example, the brief for the fire in East Hampstead, Berkshire in 1664 raised one-sixth of the amount collected for the fire at Brill in 1660. <sup>48</sup> Ten years later, without a brief being issued, Thame's parishioners raised £4. 12s. 0d. for 'christian captives out of Turkish slavery in ye parish of thame' and a further £17. 5s. 0d. for the same cause in 1689. <sup>49</sup>

The extent to which the briefs actually benefited the victims they were intended for is open to question. Tate argues that after the Restoration the process of collecting briefs was farmed out to professional 'undertakers', who retained at least 50% of the briefs for fees and other expenses. <sup>50</sup>

One firm conclusion which can be reached, however, is that briefs were discriminatory in nature. The processes of collection and distribution were formalised through the local church until it was farmed out. The sums raised were targeted at the church itself or specific individuals and families who were probably close to the church and its activities. These individuals and families would also have been viewed as 'respectable' and 'deserving' members of the community by church officials administering the briefs.

In conclusion the evidence emerging from this analysis suggests that Lee's assertion that 'almost all the well-to-do inhabitants of Thame gave to the poor' in their wills needs revising. The surviving evidence shows that only a minority of Thames wealthiest inhabitants gave to the poor in their wills during the 17th century, and over time this proportion decreased. Furthermore, as a proportion of all money donations in wills, widows and spinsters were more charitable in giving to the poor than their menfolk.

It is, however, important to point out that alms-giving through wills formed only one part of a much wider process which responded to the growing needs of the poor during the 16th and 17th centuries. Some of the older communal methods of providing relief, such as church-ales, ceased in Thame after c.1640, but individual benevolence through clothing, housing and apprenticeship charities, which had existed before 1601, continued throughout the 16th and 17th centuries.

By 1600, Thame's response to the growing needs of the poor was progressive when compared against other parishes in England. The almshouses in Thame had already been established during the mid-15th century and rates for the relief of the poor were being collected by 1601. At national level only one in ten parishes had almshouses by 1600 and poor rates were not collected outside cities and market towns until the mid-17th century. <sup>51</sup>

The time lag between parliamentary legislation on voluntary alms-giving and actual practice at parish level seems to have taken at least 100 years in Thame since indiscriminate alms-giving continued throughout the 17th century but at a decreasing rate.

During the 15th and 16th centuries contemporary religious notions about charity and the responsibilities of the rich towards the poor slowly gave way to more discrete forms of alms-giving, influenced by political and economic factors. This shift resulted in the segregation of

the poor, with relief being provided for those who were perceived as the deserving poor, and punishment for those who fell outside this category. The criteria used to segregate the two groups were subjective and reflected the value systems of the overseers, the churchwardens and donors within a parish.

The poor relief system used the criteria of respectability and residential status to determine who received poor relief, which allowed many of the deserving poor to move out of shallow poverty and reduced the intensity of those living in deep poverty. Some of the residents of Thame benefited from this relief system while others, those perceived as the undeserving poor by Thame's inhabitants, were excluded from its advantages. In effect, the poor relief system sometimes excluded the poorest of the poor from receiving alms.

By 1700 almost every parish in England had a compulsory rating system which had the effect of transferring some wealth from the richest section of the community to the poorest households. The poor law legislation of the 16th and 17th centuries enabled England to establish a unique state-led welfare system which no other European country had developed by 1700.

## References

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- 1 This paper is an updated version of my MA dissertation which was first written between April and June 1992. Many of the ideas expressed in the original dissertation are reproduced here in summary. To date over 485 probate records for the parish of Thame between c.1600 and c.1700 have been transcribed by the Thame Local History Group. I would like to take this opportunity to thank its members for their hard work over the last six years in transcribing these records. Without their work this paper would not have been written.
  - 2 B. A. Holderness, *Pre-Industrial England* (1976), p.190.
  - 3 Thame is a market town located 15 miles east of Oxford on the Oxfordshire/Buckinghamshire border.
  - 4 Pugh, R.B. (ed.), *Victoria County History of Oxfordshire*, Vol.6 (1962), p.195.
  - 5 P. Slack, *Poverty and Policy in Tudor and Stuart England* (1988), pp38-39
  - 6 *Ibid.*, p.4.
  - 7 C.G.A. Clay, *Economic Expansion and Social Change: England 1500-1700*, Part I (1984), p.223
  - 8 Slack, *op.cit.*, pp.22-23
  - 9 A.G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (1964), pp.1-14.
  - 10 V. Bainbridge, *Charitable Provision and Rural Society in later Medieval Cambridge-shire*, paper at seminar on 'Charity and Community c.1350 - c.1700', 13-15 March 1992, Department of Continuing Education, University of Oxford.
  - 11 F.G. Lee, *History and Antiquities of the Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Thame* (1883), p.167.
  - 12 Pugh, *op.cit.*, p.195
  - 13 Churchwarden' Records, Ref. MSS Thame 30b, Oxford County Records Office, p.311
  - 14 Oxfordshire Local History, Vol.4, No2 (Spring 1993), pp.62-65
  - 15 Clay, *op. cit.*, p.29.
- 1450-85 - 100 units  
1600-09 - 42.5  
1610-19 - 38.2  
1620-29 - 42.9  
1630-39 - 40.2  
1640-49 - 45.1  
1650-59 - 47.5  
1660-69 - 46.7  
1670-79 - 49.1  
1680-89 - 54.1  
1690-99 - 51.3

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- 19 Ibid., p.130.
- 20 J. Bell, 'The Mortality Crisis in Thame and East Oxfordshire 1643', *Oxfordshire Local History*, Vol.3, No.4 (Spring 1990), p.137
- 21 Ibid., p.148
- 22 Slack, op.cit., p.72.
- 23 A.L. Erickson, *Women and Property in Early Modern England* (1993), p.50.
- 24 William Smith, *Yeoman*, 1649, PEC 51/2/50.
- 25 Hugh Evans, 1631, PROB 11/161 4.
- 26 Slack, op.cit., p.130
- 27 J.M. Bennett, 'Conviviality and Charity in Medieval and Early Modern England', *Past and Present*, No.134 (Feb. 1992), pp.20-22.
- 28 J.H. Brown & W. Guest, *A History of Dame* (1935), p.71.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Ibid., p.103
- 31 John Trinder, *Vicar/Clerk*, 1629, PEC 52/4/5.
- 32 EA. Wrigley & R. Schofield, *The Population History of England 1541-1871 A Reconstruction* (1981), pp.208-209
- 33 Lee, op.cit., pp.83-84
- 34 P. Slack, 'Poverty and the Poor Law in early Modern England', paper at a seminar on 'Charity and Community c .1350 - c.1700', 13-15 March 1992, Department of Continuing Education, University of Oxford
- 35 Thomas Springall, *Yeoman*, PEC 51/2/29.

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- 36      Alice Cotton, 1602, 20s.  
         William Cotton, 1611, 20s.  
         Richard Cotton, 1613, 10s.  
         Richard Cotton, 1627, 20s.  
         Jane Cotton, 1657, 40s.  
         William Cotton, 1667, 20s.  
         Robert Springall, 1606, 10s.  
         Thomas Springall, 1637, 20s.  
         Richard Springall, 1645, 10s.  
         Edward Tomlinson, 1607, 20s.  
         Margaret Tomlinson, 1632, 20s.  
         Peter Tomlinson, 1678, 40s.  
         Thomas Groom, 1627, 6s.  
         Thomas Groom, 1670, 6s.
- 37      George Burrowes, Merchant, 1693, PROB 11 415 105
- 38      Pugh, op.cit., pp.195-196.
- 39      Churchwardens' Records for Thame, op.cit., pp.311-314.
- 40      Ibid.
- 41      Ibid.
- 42      Lee, op.cit., p.82.
- 43      Churchwardens' Records for Thame, op .cit., pp.311-314.
- 44      Tate, op.cit., p.113
- 45      Clay, op.cit., p.223.
- 46      Churchwardens' Records for Thame, op.cit., p.176c.
- 47      Ibid.
- 48      Ibid.
- 49      Ibid.
- 50      Tate, op.cit., p.122.
- 51      Slack, op.cit., p.170