

THE RELIEF OF SUTTONS POOR

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Background

Prior to 1500, poor relief was generally regarded as being the moral duty of the church. Almsgiving was carried out by monastic houses, guilds, parish clergy and pious laity.

During the early 16th century, the population of England began to increase. Food supplies and employment opportunities did not keep pace and prices began to rise. Increasing numbers of unemployed people added to the vagrants already roaming the countryside, thus posing a threat to public order. Coupled with these developments, the dissolution of the monasteries between 1536–39 had destroyed much of the institutional fabric which, hitherto, had provided charity for the poor. Therefore, it became necessary, for the state to intervene both in an attempt to co-ordinate provision and for the protection of society at large.

Some of the legislation enacted during the period 1530–1800 was influential in shaping local provision for relieving the poor until well into the 19th century. Sixteenth century legislation was largely concerned with the control of 'sturdy vagabonds and beggars'. The Acts of 1597--98, in particular, provided the legal framework for the Act of 1601, For the Relief of the Poor (43 Elizabeth I).

This Act (known as the Old Poor Law) made every parish in England and Wales responsible for the relief of its own poor. It drew a clear distinction between those who were able to work and those who could not:

The Able-bodied Poor – the reasons for their poverty were very varied (eg. unemployment, low wages, under-employment) but the duty of the parish officers remained the same – to tide the victims over a difficult phase and to facilitate their early return to independence.

The Impotent Poor

The impotent (or deserving) poor were given Parish relief on a regular basis. These included the sick, the elderly and one-parent families.

Parishes were expected to accumulate stocks of raw materials which could be distributed to the poor in order that they could be gainfully employed at home. Although the Act of 1601 referred to 'necessary places of habitation' for the impotent poor, it made no provision for the erection of a special building, or 'workhouse', intended for the paupers who were to be set to work.

In principle, 'outdoor' relief [payment made to paupers living at home] was to be made either in cash or in kind. However, the payment of a regular cash 'dole' or 'pension' became the commonest way of giving relief because it was the simplest and most convenient way for overseers and offered recipients maximum spending choice.

Sutton Workhouse

Demands for relief continued to increase during the early 18th century and, as a means of coping with this, individual parishes began to establish workhouses.

In 1722, The Workhouse Test (or Knatchbull) Act, was enacted in an attempt to reduce the number of paupers. Parish officers were empowered to buy or rent workhouses. The poor had to apply for relief either through the parish's Overseers of the Poor or the parish vestry [the regular meeting of ratepayers]. Those who declined to enter the workhouse or who, having entered, refused to submit to its regulations, were not given any relief (this was the Workhouse Test).

This Act was successful insofar as many who had previously received pensions then preferred to depend upon their own exertions rather than to enter the workhouse. As a result, expenditure on poor relief fell markedly, despite the increasing population.

In 1727, the Sutton Corporation allocated £400 to build a workhouse, but it was not until ten years later that a resolution was passed to demolish the old Almshouses and to utilise the materials to build a workhouse on the site of the old school (St Mary's Hall) in Mill Street (1). At a vestry meeting in 1739, it was decided to fence a piece of waste ground called The Blabbs [in Ryland Road], the income from which could then be used for the benefit of the poor (2).

There are no separate vestry minutes until 1819, therefore we can only assume that the churchwardens and Overseers of the Poor were responsible to the general vestry for the day-to-day running of the workhouse and relief of poor people in the parish, as was the usual procedure elsewhere. Particular problems beyond the officers' brief appear to have been referred to the Warden and Society and, once resolved, duly entered in the minutes of its meetings. For example:

5th December 1775 – a balance of £50. 8. 0 was paid to members of the Corporation to be distributed among the poor inhabitants, 'in such proportions to each person as each member shall think proper, not exceeding the sum of two guineas to be disposed of by each member'.

17th May 1780 - 'Ordered that the Warden do pay into the hands of Mr Thomas Cooper [a member of the Society] the sum of Twenty Guineas to be applied according to his direction for the relief of Widow Savage'.

'Ordered that the Warden do pay into the hands of Mr Walter Peyton [another member] the sum of Six Pounds and Six Shillings to be applied according to his direction towards the relief of Richard Green'.

'Ordered that Mr Henry Curzon [also a member] do purchase a cow at the expense of the Body Corporate, and that the same be lent to Thomas Hughes for the use of his family'

7th October 1803 the annual returns of the Overseers of the Poor [normally submitted to and approved at a

meeting of the general vestry] 'being adjudged imperfect', the Overseers were summoned before the Corporation. After several adjournments, the accurate returns were eventually presented and sworn on 10th December 1803.

29th April 1808 – an unspecified sum was allowed for the improvement of the workhouse in 'A Scheme for the Application of the increased Revenue of the Corporation of Sutton Coldfield'.

The Select Vestry

Nationally, the colossal rise in the Poor Rates, from about £2 million in 1785 to more than £10 million in 1817–19, led to the appointment of select committees by both Houses of Parliament to consider the working of the poor laws. The recommendations of the Commons Committee, under the chairmanship of Rt Hon Sir William Sturges Bourne, led to the passing of two Acts in 1818 and 1819. These drastically revised the procedures for vestry meetings, including the keeping of minutes, and authorised any parish that wished to do so to establish a standing committee (a Select Vestry) to deal solely with poor relief. The general vestry was allowed to retained its other powers (3).

As from 1819, meetings of Sutton's select vestry and general vestry are recorded in the same minute book. At a general vestry meeting on 17th December, it was unanimously agreed that a select vestry should be established and that its members for the first year should be: Francis Beynon Hacket Esquire, Mr Benjamin Browne, Mr Samuel Kempson, Mr William Twamley, and Mr Charles Cooper. Other resolutions included:

'That another levy for the relief of the poor be forthwith applied for and immediately collected by the Overseers and all arrears collected'. (4)

At this time, the Poor Rate was collected quarterly. There were five honorary Overseers of the Poor, elected annually, one for

each quarter of the parish: Great Sutton; Hill and Little Sutton; Moor and Ashfurlong, Maney and The Wild, and Beyond the Wood [Walmley]. The select vestry also stipulated:

'That the poor of the Workhouse be not allowed to work for any person whatever without the consent of the select Vestry or whom they may appoint and that all Labour be paid for and regularly brought to account'

Initially, the select vestry had intended to appoint a Workhouse Master. However, at the general vestry meeting on 21st January 1820, it was resolved to farm' the poor instead. An advertisement was placed in Aris's Gazette and William Browning of West Bromwich was awarded a three year contract. He agreed to take the whole of the poor of the parish and to pay the weekly bills and all charges, except law charges and the county rate. He would be paid £61. 10. 9 per fortnight for his services. It was agreed that Browning should covenant £10 for ten fortnights to provide a surety of £100 to the Corporation.

Settlement and Removal

In the select vestry minute for 1820, there are several entries relevant to The Settlement Act of 1662. Under its provision, any stranger settling in a parish could be removed by the justices unless he rented a house worth more than £10 a year or found security to discharge the parish of his adoption from all expenses it may incur on his behalf – for example poor relief (5). After 1697, Settlement certificates were introduced. These became binding legal instruments and certification covered not only the certificate holder but his family. Any children subsequently born might, if they became paupers, be sent back to their father's parish of origin, and so on from generation to generation. As a result of the settlement laws, the poor became a class apart:

28th April 1820 'That Dorothy Green, single woman, having returned to this parish after order, be apprehended and

proceeded against if she will not return to Packington her parish'.

19th January 1821 'That the Order of Removal to Middleton of Mrs Kendrick and family be left to Mr Charles [Overseer], the Middleton parish officers signifying their consent subject to the approbation of Mr Palmer their solicitor'.

21st February 1821 That the parish officers of Belper near Derby be written to for maintenance for the child of Cooper's wife born before marriage'.

Income and Expenditure

The arrangements for farming the poor appeared to work very well for a time. Mr Browning was responsible to the select vestry which met on Friday mornings every fortnight.

However, by June 1822, in consequence of the great change in the times', he had agreed to give up his contract at Michaelmas (and be repaid his £100). A new proposal was drawn up and Mr Samuel Kempson from Sutton then agreed to manage the poor for £1200 per year (later increased to £1400).

There was a policy change in March 1825 when the select vestry decided to appoint an Assistant Overseer at a salary of £40 per year. His duties were: to collect the levies; to manage the workhouse: 'to reside therein' and to do the general business of the parish. Mr James Sharred (sometimes referred to as Sharratt in the minutes) was duly appointed.

It was the duty of the select vestry to offer relief to the poor, on behalf of the ratepayers, in as cost-effective a way as possible. A summary of expenditure of the Overseers of the Poor between 1818 and 1826 shows that some savings had been made during that period:

| Year ending March 25th | Total Expenditure |
|--|---|
| [under the management of the General Vestry] | |
| 1818 | £2621. 9. 10 ³ / ₄ |
| 1819 | £2630. 7. 6 ¹ / ₂ |
| 1820 | £2987. 1. 10 ³ / ₄ |
| [under the management of the Select Vestry] | |
| 1821 | £1918. 19. 10 ¹ / ₂ |
| 1822 | £2047. 18. 2 ¹ / ₂ |
| 1823 | £1799. 9. 1 |
| 1824 | £1543. 8. 5 ¹ / ₂ |
| 1825 | £1802. 4. 4 ¹ / ₂ |
| 1826 | £2086. 12. 3 ¹ / ₂ |

It seems that, for the ratepayers of Sutton, its Select Vestry had managed to achieve what the Sturges Bourne Acts of 1818–19 had intended. The system was constantly under review and, after considering tenders for farming the poor, in April 1827, it was decided that it was cheaper to continue employing an Assistant Overseer.

Working at the Workhouse

The accounts show that some income was derived from paupers being hired out to work although the majority would be occupied with general domestic duties and gardening. An entry in the minutes for 4th April 1833 records that the mills had been cleaned and repaired for the employment of paupers [to grind pig meal] in bad weather.

When opportunities arose, sons of paupers were bound apprentice. For example, in 1822, John Robinson was placed with Thomas Hughes, a cooper of Bradford Street, Aston parish. In 1828, John Keatly, aged 12, was apprenticed to William Cotterill, a tailor in Walsall.

The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834

One of the main drawbacks was its great reliance on the parish as a unit of government and upon honorary administrators. This resulted in the creation of a vast but

rather inefficient system of social welfare. Generally speaking, Overseers were distrusted and complaints about their 'partiality' in giving relief, their 'laxity' and 'misconduct' mounted to such an extent that, in 1832, Parliament ordered an enquiry into administration of the Poor Law (6). In consequence of its damning report, the Poor Law Amendment Act (the New Poor Law) was passed in 1834. The independence of parishes was taken away and they were united in Unions and the whole system was centralised under the Poor Law Commissioners.

The Aston Union

The overall responsibility for the care of the poor was transferred from the Overseers of the Poor appointed by individual parishes to a group or 'Union' of parishes. Each union was placed under the management of a Board of Guardians whose members were elected annually by the ratepayers. The parish of Sutton Coldfield became part of the Aston Poor Law Union together with the parish of Aston (which incorporated Bordesley, Deritend, Duddeston, Nechells, Castle Bromwich and Erdington), also Curdworth, Minworth and Wishaw.

Initially, members of Sutton's Select Vestry were unhappy with these arrangements. The following is recorded in the Vestry minutes for August 27th 1836:

'Resolved that Messrs Holbeche, Son and Willoughby [solicitors] take immediate steps under the direction of the Church Wardens and Overseers for ascertaining whether the parish cannot be exempted from the operation of the New Poor Law Act so far as respects being united with any other parish'.

However, after a letter from Mr Earle, Assistant Poor Law Commissioner for the area (7), they were persuaded otherwise.

The Aston Board of Guardians was constituted on 12th October 1836. It held its first meeting at 11.00 am on Tuesday 8th November 1836 in the Board Room at the Erdington Workhouse (8).

The Aston Board of Guardians resolved that the use of Sutton Workhouse should be discontinued at the next quarter day and that its remaining inmates should then be transferred to the Union's Workhouse at Erdington. Mr Chester of Birmingham was retained to draw up a valuation of the premises and its contents. Eventually, the auction sale was set for 6th June 1837 and a minute for a meeting held later that month records that the premises had been purchased by Sir Francis Lawley Bart. The Sub-Committee of Guardians responsible for the sale arrangements made an agreement with him that contracts would be completed and exchanged by Michaelmas of that year.

After one hundred years, the building in Mill Street had fulfilled its purpose as shelter for Sutton's poor. Thereafter, indoor relief was offered to them in the Aston Union's Workhouse in Erdington (which stood on the site of the Public Library) or outdoor relief which was supervised by the Aston Union's Relieving Officer.

References

1. Minutes of the Warden and Society of Sutton Coldfield, 1722-1776, 6th March 1737, pp 126-127.
2. Warden and Society Minutes, 2nd November 1739, page 136.
3. Tate, W. E. (1983) The Parish Chest, Phillimore, pp 21-22.
4. Parish of Sutton Coldfield, Vestry Minutes 1819-1833, 17th December 1819.
5. Tate, op. cit, p. 192.
6. Marshall, J.D. (1968) The Old Poor Law; 1795-1834, Macmillan.
7. Parish of Sutton Coldfield, Vestry Minutes 1834-1862, Copy of letter from Richard Earle, 11th September 1836 .
8. Minutes of the Aston Board of Guardians of the Poor, 1836- 1839, Birmingham DRO.