

Charity, poor relief and poverty in eighteenth-century rural England: a two county case-study

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Abstract: The English Old Poor Law has received considerable scholarly attention in recent decades from a number of different historical sub-disciplines. Economic and social historians of poverty have highlighted the relative generosity of England's precocious rate-based system of universal parochial relief in comparison not only with England's European rivals, but also with the 'harsher' post-1834 English welfare regime. Recent work by demographic historians, meanwhile, has suggested that the Poor Law may have contributed to England's escape from famine in the early modern period with the result that the Poor Law was an institution that was peculiarly favourable to economic development. Both these views, it should be noted, run counter to the largely negative assessments of the Old Poor Law's effectiveness from Malthus through to the Webbs, and beyond.

Yet one consequence of recent scholarship's more positive appraisal of the Old Poor Law has been the neglect of the larger 'mixed economy of welfare' of which the poor law was a constituent part. In particular, the comprehensive rejection of W. K. Jordan's controversial claim that by the mid-seventeenth century 'in all parishes where rates were levied they were regarded as no more than supplementary to the permanent charitable provisions which private donors were creating in every corner of England' (1959:139) has meant that private charitable endowments have receded almost entirely from view in the historiography of post-Restoration welfare. Even in the few instances where private charity has been considered by eighteenth-century historians, the focus has been squarely on innovation, especially in urban centres (eg subscription charities and the charity school movement), rather than on the survival and persistence of permanently endowed charities across rural England.

This paper seeks to reverse the scholarly neglect of endowed charities by presenting preliminary results from a pilot study of the so-called 'Gilbert returns': a nation-wide parliamentary inquiry into parochial charities that was undertaken in 1786-88 alongside a similarly comprehensive inquiry into poor rate expenditure. As well as providing data on the chronology of charitable endowments, the returns also indicate to whom benefactions were entrusted, the purpose and intended recipients of the charity, together with estimated annual yields of endowments.

By linking this information to contemporaneous poor rate and population returns at parish level, it will be possible to quantify for the first time the relative importance of private and public charity at the close of the eighteenth century. Our findings are based on a newly constructed dataset, containing around 1,200 parochial charities from over 300 parishes and townships in Suffolk and Staffordshire. These two counties have been chosen to reflect contrasting regional economies: while Suffolk was in the midst of de-industrialization as textile production moved northwards, Staffordshire enjoyed rapid population growth in response to the expansion of mining, ceramic and metal-working industries. The two counties also differed in terms of their agriculture: whereas Suffolk was dominated by arable grain production, Staffordshire was home to a sizeable pastoral sector. The size and scope of this dataset allows us to investigate a number of important issues in unparalleled depth, including a) the practicality of eighteenth-century calls to abolish tax-funded welfare; b) the geographical, economic and social contexts of private charity; and c) the extent to which benefactors used charity to inculcate a particular moral vision on the poor.