

SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS IN KENT 1480-1660

IV. THE STRUCTURE OF CHARITIES IN THE PARISHES

THE charitable interests of almost all the donors of our period were centred upon a particular parish and its needs. The parish was throughout these years the most important unit of social and institutional organization ; within it the powerful solvents of cultural change were introduced by the great charitable endowments whose accumulation we have been considering. Hence the social and cultural metamorphosis of Kent was accomplished not in the larger scene of the county as a whole but rather by a slow and ultimately pervasive transformation of successive parishes within the whole which was the county. Consequently much depended upon local traditions ; on the quality and wealth of the local gentry ; on the vision of a substantial yeoman or a far-seeing clergyman ; or on the accidental fact that a native son of the parish had made a fortune in trade in London ; or, quite as commonly in Kent, that a London merchant was seeking to purchase the approbation which was not automatically conferred when he appeared in the closing years of his career as the new lord of the manor which his agents had purchased for him and his heirs. Thus the morphology of social change within the parishes was most uneven, subject to what can only be described as genetic accident, and and it was by the close of our age to present quite startling contrasts as between parishes even within the same hundred.

Yet it must be observed that Kent had by 1660 achieved a far more mature structure of parochial charities and the institutions which they supported than any other rural county examined in our study, with the possible exception of Norfolk. As we shall note, every one of the 395 parishes comprising the county had received at least some charitable benefaction and there were within the county perhaps fewer areas of social blight than in any other essentially rural county in the realm.

We are now concerned with the way in which the very large sum of £251,766 12s. was spread across the face of this large and populous county ; with the beneficent consequences in terms of new opportunities and aspirations which this enormous investment in the betterment of mankind was to evoke as it was translated into institutions dispersed amongst the almost four hundred parishes of the county. It should be noted, however, that the whole of this capital was not vested for the specific benefit of particular parishes. Very substantial sums were given for the needs of other counties,<sup>1</sup> and an even larger total was provided, often by wise benefactors, for the uses of the whole of the

<sup>1</sup> *Vide post*, 139-140.

county, or large areas within it, rather than for particular communities.<sup>1</sup> But the great sum of £234,033 ls. may be assigned for the uses of particular parishes in the county, which in the almost meaningless terms of an average suggests the very high total of about £592 for each parish.

We have concluded that any parish which in our age had accumulated charitable funds of £400 or more was possessed of social and institutional resources which set it apart as highly favoured indeed. Such funds, yielding as they would about £20 p.a. for charitable uses, were quite sufficient to create in such a parish the instrumentalities of opportunity, to provide new horizons of hope and pride. Whatever the form may have been, whether a grammar school, an endowment for the relief of poverty, an apprenticeship scheme, or an almshouse, a parish so blessed was thereby lifted into a new stratum of life and culture. Such communities took great pride in the institutions thus created, and almost invariably we can begin to see at once a betterment of the lot of mankind in the parishes thus favoured. These, then, were the "areas of opportunity" created by the benefactions of substantial and responsible men who translated their aspirations into the institutions which were to undergird the liberal and the secular society they wished to build. These men were building a new England as truly as they were creating a new and more hopeful age. We should now analyse in some detail the topography of these communities in which so large a proportion of all charitable funds came for a variety of reasons to be vested.<sup>2</sup>

There were eighty-five of these favoured parishes in Kent, disposing the impressive total of £205,953 ls. of charitable funds. Numbering somewhat more than a fifth (21·52 per cent.) of all the parishes of the county, they were vested with 81·80 per cent. of its charitable wealth, a proportion, it may be noted, almost precisely that possessed by the favoured parishes of Norfolk. All the principal towns were of course included in this group of communities, with particularly heavy concentrations of charitable endowments in Canterbury, Rochester, Greenwich,

<sup>1</sup> The totals by the large charitable heads may be compared for the county as a whole and by parishes :

	<i>County Totals</i>			<i>Parish Totals</i>		
	£	s.	%	£	s.	%
Poor	102,519	7	(40·72)	95,669	5	(40·88)
Social rehabilitation	12,043	4	(4·78)	12,040	6	(5·14)
Municipal betterment	11,558	15	(4·59)	10,847	14	(4·64)
Education	58,255	16	(23·14)	57,595	6	(24·61)
Religion	67,389	10	(26·77)	57,880	10	(24·73)
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	£251,766	12		£234,033	1	

<sup>2</sup> *Vide* Appendix, Table II, for the list of these parishes and for the details of their charitable funds.

and Faversham which alone amounted to a third (34·07 per cent.) of the charitable funds of the county.<sup>1</sup>

But there were also upwards of fifty favoured parishes which were either rural communities or farming areas dominated by a small market town, which had been blessed either by a consistent tradition of giving for charitable causes or had been helped by a London benefactor who had family roots in the community. These favoured communities were well dispersed over the whole of the county and, it is very evident, tended to raise the standards of responsibility in a considerable area by inspiring donors in nearby parishes to emulate the institutions which had been created by private charity.

In a qualitative sense, too, these favoured communities may be said to have possessed a quite disproportionate strength. Their benefactors had armed them with almost the whole of the funds given in Kent for various schemes of social rehabilitation, the mark of a lively and an aggressive inclination to attack the problem of poverty directly and fruitfully by expanding the areas of opportunity. They possessed as well almost 87 per cent. of all the amounts given for various plans for municipal betterment in Kent. And perhaps most significantly, these eighty-five communities had been endowed with slightly more than 97 per cent. of all the resources provided for the extension and strengthening of educational opportunities in the county, as compared with only 68 per cent. of the whole of the county funds given for religious uses. In other words, the enormous charitable wealth held by these communities was well and strategically disposed and was calculated to give these parishes precisely the institutions and the strength required by the modern world.

It may likewise be remarked that these eighty-five favoured parishes were relatively very rich indeed in their charitable funds. Thus the three "middling" parishes in the group were all small rural communities having nearly £1,000 each in charitable resources. These were East Peckham, lying to the east of Tonbridge, in which twenty-seven donors in the course of our period had left a total of £993 10s. for philanthropic uses; Lee, in the hundred of Blackheath, where thirteen benefactors had provided £955 16s. of charitable funds, of which, it should be noted, however, almost the whole was London wealth; and Boxley, lying just to the north of Maidstone, and the seat of the Wyatts, in which twenty-nine donors in the course of our period had provided endowments totalling £922 4s.

There were in addition 105 parishes in the county possessing quite

<sup>1</sup> Kent had three municipalities, Canterbury, Rochester, and Greenwich, which ranked among the first twelve (London aside) in aggregate charitable wealth among all those noted in the counties dealt with in this study. But it should be said that much of these totals came from London benefactions.

considerable charitable funds ranging in amount from £100 to £400. All these parishes, numbering well over a quarter of the whole, were with only six exceptions typically rural parishes of the era with no urban complex larger than a small agricultural village. These endowments ranged from the £100 3s. given by fourteen donors in Westwell, of which £28 14s. was for poor relief and £71 9s. for religious uses, to the total of £389 18s. which seventeen donors had provided for Ightham, of which £289 was for the care of the poor, £30 for educational purposes, and £70 18s. for the church. In all, these parishes possessed charitable funds totalling £19,915 1s., or an average for the entire group of £189 13s. 4d., the median being £164 14s. It seems very probable that these parishes, too, their population and stable economy being taken into account, possessed sufficient funds to care for their poor in normal seasons and to provide a range of social benefit which would permit us to consider them also as "areas of opportunity".

In total, then, there were 190 parishes in the county which we may regard as specially favoured. These were communities, with few exceptions almost entirely rural, which had gained during our period charitable funds in excess of £100, an amount probably normally sufficient to smooth the grinding edge of poverty and to give hope to the men and women who inhabited them. These parishes comprised not quite half of the total number in the county, yet it must be said that they had been vested with a staggering proportion of the charitable resources of the whole of Kent. In all, these parochial units which we have been discussing held charitable funds with a total value of £225,868 2s., or about 90 per cent. of the whole.

None the less, Kent is remarkable for the dispersal of its charitable funds over the whole face of the county. There was likewise a very large group of parishes, numbering 131, all thinly populated rural communities, with charitable resources ranging from £10 to £100, which deployed the remarkably high average of charitable wealth of £56 11s. 4d. each, or a total of £7,410 of such assets. These were, so to speak, marginal parishes, spread all over Kent and comprising about a third of the total number, which were by no means blighted areas but which were in the process of accumulating the resources to enlarge opportunity and extend hope. Such a parish was Kennington, lying just to the north of Ashford, where in the course of our period eighteen local donors were to make benefactions totalling £80 4s., of which £7 5s. was for religious uses and the whole of the remainder, £72 19s., for the relief of the poor of this rural parish. There was no London benefactor to Kennington, and save for one small bequest in 1605 by the then clergyman, John Brainforth, there was no gift made by any person of a social rank superior to that of the yeomanry. The manor had been held by the abbey of St. Augustine (Canterbury) until

the Dissolution and had then been granted to John Dudley, Earl of Warwick, only to escheat to the Crown on his attainder, where it remained until 1629 when it was granted to Sir Thomas Finch, later Earl of Winchilsea. There was, then, no strong and responsible gentle family in the community; there was no clergyman during the whole of our period who seems to have exercised any particularly salutary influence; and there was no local son who remembered his native community after having made his fortune in trade in Canterbury or London. But here a strong and a persistent local tradition of giving by the husbandmen and yeomen of the parish did develop, eleven benefactions having been recorded for the general uses or repair of the church from 1483 to 1569, these gifts, as we have noted, totalling £7 5s. Then beginning in 1572 a steady interest arose in the needs of the poor, most of the bequests being small outright doles, but three, dated 1603, 1624, and 1637, being endowments with a capital value of £20 each, which gave the parish an annual income of £3 after 1637 with which to minister to the needs of its destitute men and women.

There remain fifty-eight parishes in which the total of charitable contributions during the whole of our period was very small, and another sixteen in which the charities were no more than nominal. These seventy-four parishes, comprising 19 per cent. of the whole number, were the areas of true social blight and backwardness. These were communities without strong leadership and with internal resources so slender that the tradition of giving never got itself well or surely established. Though they are to be found in almost every part of the county, they tended to be grouped in thinly populated and marginal hill areas or in regions then still heavily timbered. These were regions which had simply failed to raise themselves across the threshold of modernity.

We may well believe that the best measure of the social attainments of any parish in our age was the way in which it addressed itself towards the care of poverty: the great and over-riding problem with which the conscience of mankind grappled so persistently in the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. We have concluded that any parish which had amassed as much as £400 of endowments, whether for household relief or for the maintenance of an almshouse, had girded itself with sufficient resources for meeting its obligations at least to the unemployable poor. Those parishes which possessed endowments of from £200 to £400, unless they were heavily populated urban areas, probably enjoyed sufficient resources to care for their poor in normal times without the imposition of rates. And, finally, those parishes with capital for poor relief ranging in amount from £10 to £200 had at least made a fair beginning towards meeting the grim necessities of the care of the desperately poor and might, in fact, if they were uncomplicated and stable rural areas, actually possess sufficient resources to

care for their abject poor in all save periods of acute agricultural depression.

It will be remembered that in the whole course of our period the great sum of £102,519 7s. was provided by benefactors of the county for its poor, of which no more than £5,486 3s. was in the form of outright gifts or doles. In all, the very large sum of £73,283 9s. was vested in endowments for poor relief and almshouses in forty-six communities, which as a group held about 71 per cent. (71·48 per cent.) of all funds devoted in the county to poor relief. These were the communities with upwards of £400 of such capital sums, of which seventeen held endowments of more than £1,000 each. Among the largest were Canterbury with the great total of £13,969 5s., Greenwich with £8,785 6s., Faversham with £6,011 2s., Rochester with £4,000 14s., Aylesford with £3,685 7s., and Tonbridge with £2,497 8s. The median community in this group of most highly favoured towns was Woolwich, which by 1660 had amassed £725 16s. of funds dedicated to poor relief, of which, it may well be noted, £629 had been London gifts. Every large town and every considerable industrial complex in the county is to be found in this group, but it is very doubtful indeed that these most favoured towns, disposing as they did nearly three-fourths of the capital for the succour of the poor, could have included as much as a third of the whole population of the county. They were at once the communities in which the spectre of industrial poverty most haunted men and in which the burgher conscience had raised impressive bulwarks against the dreaded evil.

There were, in addition, thirty-three rural or village parishes, Folkestone being the only considerable community in the group, with endowments for poor relief ranging from the £207 13s. held by Beckenham to the £396 which had been provided for Snave by a London merchant. These fortunate parishes as a group held endowments for poor relief totalling £9,079 13s., which without doubt was sufficient for the maintenance of unusually high standards of social responsibility in these communities.

More typical, and in some ways more interesting, were the 161 parishes, all rural or village communities, with endowments for poor relief ranging from £10 to the quite substantial sum of £200. These parishes, comprising a major fraction of the total number in the county, possessed a total of £13,174 4s. of such endowments, affording a surprisingly high average of £81 16s. 6d. for each of this large group. These were almost without exception uncomplicated rural parishes which had in the course of our period built up sufficient endowments, usually from local sources, for the care of at least the hopelessly destitute within their boundaries.

There were in aggregate, then, 240 of the parishes of the county,

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numbering almost two-thirds of the whole, which had made at least reasonably adequate provision against the incursion of abject poverty. These communities disposed the huge total of £95,537 6s. of the funds given for the care of the poor by benefactors of our period, leaving only £6,982 1s. which was distributed among the remaining 155 parishes of the county. It was in these latter parishes that private charity had failed to make even remotely adequate provision for relief. But even so the achievement of the county at large had been memorable indeed. It would seem reasonably certain that the two-thirds of the parishes in which tolerably sufficient institutions had been created for the care of poverty, including as they did all the considerable towns and all the heavily populated rural areas of the county, must have embraced something like four-fifths of the then population of Kent. An age had acquitted itself honourably and well in meeting responsibilities of an exceedingly complex nature whose causes and whose impact were not as yet even well understood. Men had at last come to grips with the ghastly reality of poverty.