

AN EARLY POOR LAW ACCOUNT

By A. F. ALLEN

THE parish church of Shorne, near Gravesend, has in its vestry an interesting collection of parish documents, most of which (including Registers which begin on 22nd September, 1538) are already recorded in *The Parish Registers and Records of the Diocese of Rochester*, published by the Society in 1912. A few documents, however, appear to have been overlooked when that book was prepared.

An important omission came to light recently when twenty-seven sheets of foolscap paper, roughly stitched in an old parchment deed of the 33rd year of Elizabeth, were found between the leaves of a vellum register of "Removals and Certificates" compiled in the 18th century. Upon examination these sheets of paper proved to be the Poor Law accounts of the parish for the period 17th April, 1598 to 1607.¹ These accounts rival in age those of Chiddingstone, and are older than any other poor law accounts recorded in the Diocese of Rochester. They also, of course, antedate the famous Poor Law Act of 1601 by three years.

The makeshift format of these accounts is a reminder that the Poor Law Act of 1597 (the first Act to apply Poor Law arrangements to rural areas) was expected to be but a temporary expedient to tide over a year or so of bad trade and unemployment. How little could the Shorne parish officers foresee the future and how surprised they would be to learn that their roughly-kept accounts have survived for over three hundred and fifty years.

The pages, protected by their parchment cover, are in good preservation, and although there are signs that some have been cut out, the accounts themselves are in consecutive order for each of the years between the first and last dates without any obvious gaps or omissions. Thus it may safely be assumed that the accounts are as they were left by the clerk who laid them aside after Sir William Page, the local squire and magistrate, signed the last account on the 22nd day of April, 1608.

¹ It should be noted that in about 1840 these accounts were known to Cruden the author of a History of Gravesend published in 1843. He refers to an entry in these accounts in his book.

AN EARLY POOR LAW ACCOUNT

The first page of the accounts is headed

“ Kent Concerning the Articles of charge (?)
Shorne by Sir Jhon Leveson Knight and William
17th April Lambard Esqr to the Churchwardens and Overseers
1598 of the poore in the pr̄she of Shorne we answer
 p̄ticularly and the proceedings thereupon
 register as ffolloweth.”

The names of the two justices who gave the “ Articles of charge ” are noteworthy. Both left their mark in other spheres, and William Lambard, the well-known antiquarian, was, in his day, perhaps better known as the author of *Eirenarcha*, a textbook upon the powers and duties of Justices. No parish officers could start with better guidance. It is therefore interesting to find on the last page of the accounts what appears to be a copy of a circular sent to Overseers in the district which reads as follows:¹

“ A brief note sett down by Sir Jhon Leveson Knight concerning the articles for the order to be observed by the ovseers of the poore for their direction in their proceedings as followeth : ”
(Then in another ink follow the words “ By me God save the Kyng.”)

“ Vizt :—

1. ffirst the names of the poore are to be sett downe.
2. You are to assess all the inhabitants for their abilities only without respect of their areas of land in their ocupacion. Yff yt will not serve or suffice then you must assess all the occupiers of land as well p̄shioners as foreyners and therein you must assess p̄shioners and foreiners alike. The assess so made ys to be yerly written into thys booke.
3. Thirdly the employment of the assess & of the stock.
4. ffourthly what apprentices you have placed are to be sett down & showed & what they cost placyng.
5. ffifthly what dwelling places for the poore you have p̄vided anew or otherwise repayred and mayntayned.
6. sixthly what yet remayne of your colleccion & stock.
7. seventhly whom you have allowed to begge. (Another hand adds the words ‘ Layed out.’)
8. eighthly who have defaulted in the monthly meeting.
9. lastly who have defaulted in paymt towards the assesse and the names of those who are newly elected to be churchwardens and overseers for the poore.”

¹ There are also what appear to be similar instructions copied on to a blank space on the parchment deed, but the writing is too faded to decide whether they differ in any material degree from those given above.

AN EARLY POOR LAW ACCOUNT

Guided by this "brief note" the Overseers set out their accounts as follows :

"To the first Article wee answer yt we find the hereafter named to be poore aged & impotent psons necessarily to be relieved with continual almes being such as have already usually received relief from our poore boxe.¹

Vizt :—

Elizabeth Morrice Wyddowe of the age of lx years for blindness unable to gett her living without almes.

(There is a note to this entry in another hand 'Placed in Cobham.')

Jhon Saunders of the age of lx years lame unable to gett hys living without almes.

Rigeden Mock Wyddowe of lx years of age unable to gett her living without almes.

Guyn of the age of lx years lame unable to gett her living without relief.

(In another hand there is a note 'died Jan 28 1601.')

Mother Watchan of 90 years of age unable to work ys to be relieved with almes she hath a sonn Thomas Watcham att Colling able to kepe her.

(In another hand there is a note 'died 1601.')

Mother Carroll of L years of age lame unable to get her living without relief.

(In another hand there is a note 'placed in Cobham new College.')

Agnes Horsley Wyddowe of the age of 45 years lame unable to live without charitable relief.

Agnes Usher a lame wenche of the age of 50 years wanting relief.

Mother Carter of the age of 70 years unable to live without relief.

Foxe of xiiij years of age a lame boy going with stiltes living wholly upon the almes of the pshe.

Jhon Adams a boy of xi years of age so greivously tormented with the stone it he ys not able to work but needs daylye relief.

Also we finde those hereafter named to bee poore able labouring folke ; yett thereby not able sufficiently, being by any sickness or other hynderance visited to helpe them selves butt are comonly relieved by our almes boxe. Vizt ;

Anthony Frauncys Thomas Streaton Robert Reignolds Stockwells children Farnes Wyddowe Mother Watty.

¹ It is interesting to observe the close connection of the new relief with the old, previous help from the Poor box being made the criterion of the need under the new regime.

AN EARLY POOR LAW ACCOUNT

Also we answer to the second Article yt we finde the hereafter named of years able to bee putt to be apprentices vizt.
Salomon Farne of xij years of age.
Agnes Farne of the age of ix years.
Jhon Saunders of the age of 9 years.
George Adams of the age of xiiij years.
Prudence Horsley a girl of the age of 9 years.
Jhon Lark of the age of xij years.
One of Stockwells children we have putt out to be apprentice to a taylor of Chalk."

It may here be observed that this list of poor is only repeated twice in the later accounts—in the years 1601 and 1602. The accounts 1598 to 1602 are signed by Sir John Leveson, but those after 1602 are not, so perhaps the list of poor was his idea. After the lists of destitute, or potentially destitute comes:—

"An assessment made the xxij of April 1598 by way of land scott for a stock to bee provyded and relief to be given to and for the poore of the Pshe of Shorne."

This consists of a list of names and amounts, of interest only to the student of the parish history, which is omitted here. Each item mentions the acreage held by the ratepayer, but only in one or two places is the actual name of the property given. The "scott" appears to have been at the rate of 1d. an acre. This method of assessment hardly complies with Article 2 of the Justices' directions to "assess all the inhabitants for their abilities only without respect of their areas of land in their occupacion." Apparently Sir John Leveson had to bow to a deep-rooted local prejudice in favour of an assessment upon an acreage basis, a system which was still in use for the church rate a generation later. There are, however, traces of adjustments in the collection. For instance in the 1598 account in the middle of a list of assessments at 1d. an acre, there is an item

"Off Wm Ilford for Bullam Marsh for 80 acres
salte iijs. vijd."¹

which works out at nearer $\frac{1}{2}$ d. an acre. The total year's assessment is £8 14s. 1d.

After the collection follows

"The names of those wh have nott payd to the foresaid assessment" followed by a list of nine names which may also be omitted except for the interesting and informative item which reads

¹ This item is interesting in itself as an indication of a considerable change in the riverside part of the parish. Today there is no more than five or six acres of saltings.

AN EARLY POOR LAW ACCOUNT

“ John Armstrong was assessed at iis. vd. who after he had manifested his poore estate wee thought it good to spare hym the cess iis. vd.”

The total amount uncollected is stated to be 10s. 9d.

Having recorded the amount collected, the Overseers then set out their expenditure as follows :

“ We thereof layd out weekely and monthly according to the necessity of the poor before mentioned in [sort ?] as hereafter appeareth : the p̄ticulars whereof as they were severally and necessarily payd to long here to dylat are abridged as followeth.”

“ To Elizabeth Morrice Wyddowe in support of her Blyndness weekly allowed xijd. hath had in all	xxxvjs.	vid.
Mother Carroll by weekly allowance of viijd.		
̄ week hath had in all	xxijs.	iiijd.
Mother Watcham hath had in all		xijd.
John Saunders by weekly allowance of iiijd. the week hath had in all	viijs.	iiijd.
Adam his boy troubled with the stone hath had	viijs.	iiijd.
Agnes Usher hath had		vjd.
Mother Mocke hath had	iijs.	viijd.
Gwynn hath had	viijs.	iid.
To the Queens Bench poor prysoners	vjs.	vjd.
Agnes Horsley hath had		xijd.
To Thomas Allyn the second of July in full payment of iijL wh he hath had for the keeping of one of Pullyners children who was borne in Shorne whereof he hath p̄mysed to discharge the pishe of Shorne	xxs.	
To Stockwells wyfe		xijd.
To Streaton	viijs.	
To the house of correction and to maymed souldiers	xiijs.	
To a shirt for ffox		xvjd.
To the widdow Farne	ijs.	
Sum layd out	viiL	viijd.
So remayneth by thys accompt of the money already assessed to be p̄d over to the new overseers for the poore of the Prsh of Shorne	xlijs.	viijd.
To be allowed for this booke		vd.

AN EARLY POOR LAW ACCOUNT

We the Churchwardens and overseers for the poore of the Pische of Shorne appoynted by Sir Jhon Leveson Knight and Wm Lambard Esq the xxij of April 1598 follow hereunder written

Edward Armstrong					
George Reignold			}	Churchwardens	
George Page	Gent		}	Overseers appointed for the poor of the Prische of Shorne."	
Wigan Burston	Gent				
John Barnard					
William Munn					

The status of the four overseers should be noticed. Two were local gentry and two the most substantial yeomen in the village. Clearly Sir John Leveson and William Lambard had been selective in their first appointments and it is only fair to say that the standard soon falls off to the more normal yeomanry and small tradesmen of the village.

So ends the first year of poor law in a Kentish village. The remaining years represented by these accounts follow in a general way the form of the first, and to repeat them might be tedious. It is perhaps permissible to add some notes upon the treatment of the poor as revealed in these early accounts.

The main concern of the overseers was the "impotent" poor. The "poore able labouring folke" only come into the story occasionally, and are perhaps most notable for the way in which they tend, as the years pass, to change from "Able labouring folke" to "Impotent." There is nothing in the accounts suggesting any attempt to put the able-bodied poor to work, and it must be supposed that they were expected to find their own work, being granted a few coppers a week whenever they were incapacitated by sickness.

The "Impotent" poor are relieved in a variety of ways, and a study of the accounts gives a broad picture of their place in village life. The principal method of relief of course was the "weekly allowance." Throughout the ten years covered by the accounts the amounts range from 2d. to 1s. a week. Generally speaking only exceptional cases like Elizabeth Morrice, who was blind, received anything like 1s. a week. Cripples and even aged people seem to have been less generously relieved because presumably they could hobble around and pick up a few coppers at what the modern social system calls "light labour." Thus, in 1602, Widow Mock received 6d. a week for the whole year, but received an additional shilling "when she was sick." In most accounts indeed the weekly payments are not for a complete year, being normally restricted to about ten months or less out of the year,

AN EARLY POOR LAW ACCOUNT

suggesting that the pauper was expected to support himself at certain times of the year—perhaps harvest time and the like.

The problem of the amount paid to the destitute is complicated by the fact that throughout the ten years covered by these accounts, private charity is inextricably mixed with parochial poor relief. In the accounts for the year 1598 to 1602 the Churchwardens and Overseers regularly record the receipt of gifts of money from the Archbishop of Canterbury and the local gentry, which was distributed among the poor “besydes their weekly allowances” as the accounts put it. This money even had a special name “devocon money,” and the amounts received though they vary, were often substantial. For instance, in 1602, the amounts are set out as follows :

“ More \overline{wh} my Ls grace of Canterbury gave	xxs.
“ More \overline{wh} my L. Cobham gave	xxs.
“ More \overline{wh} ys given by the last will of Reingnold Hawke yearly.	xxs.
“ More \overline{wh} ys yerly given for Hutchynis gyft	xs.
“ More \overline{wh} ys yerely given by Mr Cheyney of London ad bene (?)	xxvjs. viijd.

An amount of £4 16s. 8d. so added to the poor rate meant a considerable addition to the total sum available, for the total rates received and distributed average only about nine pounds per year throughout the whole period.

This “Devocon money” was distributed on St. Thomas’s day, and at Easter time. The St. Thomas’s day distribution at least seems to have been at a special ceremony for in 1600 Harry Jameson received “for towling ye bell 4d.” The intricacies of accountancy in Roman numerals and Court hand, plus the ravages of time make it hard to say exactly what each of the poor received each year from this source, but in 1601 the amount paid on St. Thomas’s day is clearly stated to have been 2s. 10d. per head. It should also be mentioned that among the recipients of “devocon money” there are some who are not mentioned in either of the lists of impotent or able-bodied poor, and who otherwise receive no relief from the parish. One must assume that there were besides the named paupers, a fringe of people whose means were such that, though they were not “on the rates”, they were considered to be deserving of some occasional charitable assistance.

Apart from weekly payments, there were other methods of providing relief. For instance the housing of the poor was one of the Overseers’ responsibilities. From the outset the overseers did not hesitate to take advantage of Lord Cobham’s new foundation of Cobham College Almshouses. Shorne parish had (and still has) two vacancies in the almshouses which were filled immediately after the establishment of

AN EARLY POOR LAW ACCOUNT

In 1602 and 1606 there is a higher incidence of sickness relief than usual, and some sort of pestilence may well have visited the village in these years. In 1606, indeed, there is an unusual payment

“ It for the reliefe of the poore of Cobham in the
sickness time xxs.

Whether this was the plague does not appear, but the later parish poor accounts record a similar (though larger) payment to the “ visited parishes of Milton and Gravesend ” in 1665 when the plague is known to have ravaged those parishes.

The treatment of children in these early years of poor law should be mentioned. Apprenticeship was of course the standard practice, and the putting out of Stockwell’s child to a “ taylor ” of Chalk in 1598 has already been noticed. In Shorne, however, the practice of apprenticeship seems to have been rare in the years under consideration, for only three apprentices (including the somewhat exceptional case of Foxe) are noted, and although six children are mentioned in the “ Articles ” of 1598 as “ Fit to be apprenticed ” the accounts bear no trace of any attempt to apprentice any of them except Solomon Farnes who was bound out in the following year. One of the expenses of an apprenticeship was the fitting out of the child with clothes and this has preserved one glimpse of the apprentice lad’s new-bought finery in an entry in 1599

“ It. for apparell for Solomon Ffarnes a jerkin,
hose and shoes and doublet shirt and other
necessaries when we put him out to be an
apprentice viijs.

Normally, however, the overseers simply answer the article about apprentices “ Nyther have we bounde any one apprentice.”

The entry in 1598 about “ Pulleyners child ” is ambiguous, but in 1602 the overseers were confronted with a “ parish bastard.” In that year there is an entry among the list of parish poor

“ Pettits bastard kept wholly by ye poore stock which may be remedied by your worship.”

Apparently “ your worship ” did not choose to remedy this matter, or the remedy proved useless, for in the following years there are entries like those in 1604

“ It. to Goodwife Birchard for nursing of one
Pettit base born thirtie weekes xls.

“ It. to Thomas Blackford for keeping Pettits
child aforesaid xxi weekes xxjs.

and the child is kept by different people at the parish expense during the remainder of the period of the accounts.

AN EARLY POOR LAW ACCOUNT

All the foregoing is, of course, closely circumscribed parish history, and only here and there does one find a reference to the outside world. There were, however, three regular annual payments to outside authority

“ It to ye queens bench the 11th August
It to ye marshalsea even ye same time
It to ye gaole and house of correction and maymed
souldiers xvij*s.* iiij*d.*”

In one form or another these items appear in each account. The money was apparently paid to the constable of the Hundred and does not seem to have been very popular in parochial circles. At any rate after the entries in 1600 the antipathy between the local and central government comes out strongly when the Overseers add after the entry of payment

“ We pay this mony wholly to ye constable and their and their (*sic*) acquittances can show.

How it is distributed we know not.”

There are, of course, many other entries of a routine nature in these accounts, but they belong to a fuller study of poor law in general rather than a note upon what must be one of the earliest rural poor law accounts in existence. Perhaps sufficient has been said to justify the claim that a document of some importance in local, social, and economic history lies otherwise unrecorded in the parish chest of Shorne.