

# Looking after the Poor in Deddington

*Buffy Heywood*

There has been a settlement at Deddington since Saxon times, with a Norman castle here from the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries. Deddington was split between three manorial estates and has never been a wealthy town. It was mainly an agricultural community but has sustained many trades and crafts over the centuries – there were 34 different trades in 1623. There is a market place and markets were held here probably from the twelfth century, when the borough was laid out with burgage plots, until the nineteenth century. A monthly market was restarted in 2000 and has traded extremely successfully since – but no longer for horses, pigs and sheep!

Before the Reformation the monasteries played a large role throughout the country in giving aid to the poor and sick, 2.5–10 per cent of monastic income being given to the poor. There was provision for a night's lodging for travellers, treatment for the genuinely sick and poor at medieval hospitals run by monks and nuns, and chapels for the care of souls and prayers for the founders. Tithes of 10 per cent of income were payable to the Church; in Saxon times one-third of this money had been used for the support of the poor, and parishes kept livestock for the common benefit. The Tudor period was a time of low wages and high prices, when the poor became poorer and yeoman farmers and copy-holders<sup>1</sup> got richer, which resulted in both great rebuilding and encouragement for charitable giving. This served the dual purpose of helping the poor and also giving the wealthy the opportunity to save their own souls by acts of charity

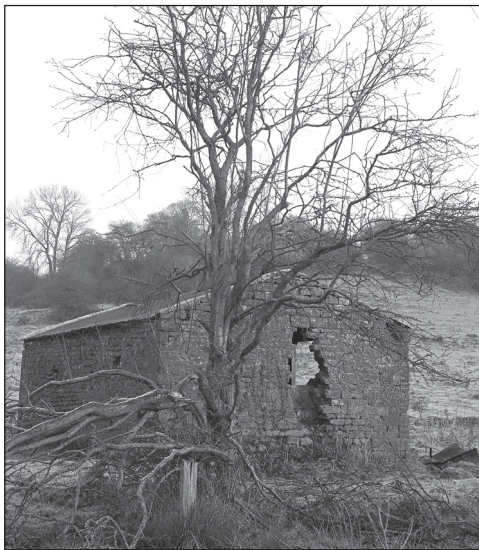
The Church impressed upon people the importance of leaving money in their wills for the benefit of the poor of their parish in order to ensure that after death their souls were destined for Heaven rather than Hell. Much of this assistance was to be channelled through the Church, however. The will of William Medyn of Deddington in 1499 illustrates this point: he left five separate bequests for repairs to various parts of the church, a wage of £5 6s 8d a year for two years to a priest to pray for his soul and say mass, and for five poor people to be present, to be paid 1d each time they attended. There was also to be an obite<sup>2</sup> at the Church monthly for one year and thereafter once a year for ten years when 6s 8d was to be distributed: 4d to the parish priest, 3d to every other priest, 2d to the organ player and to

<sup>1</sup> A copy-holder held land from the Manor Court. He was given a 'copy' of the Court Roll entry to prove entitlement; this could sometimes be held by inheritance, sometimes for life or lives.

<sup>2</sup> An obite is an anniversary service for the soul of the deceased.

the parish clerks, 1d to every child who read a lesson, 6d to the bell ringers and the 'overplus' to poor people. Five other local churches benefited to some degree, with the residue left to his wife and executor to dispose of as they thought best. Church courts were required to oversee such charitable giving and ensure that bequests were carried out.

Guilds and fraternities were set up, self-help groups formed mainly by tradesmen for the benefit of their local community. A Guild of Trinity in Deddington was founded in 1445 and dissolved in 1548. Charitable projects set up in Deddington by the Guild included the building of Almshouses, the purchase (or perhaps inheritance?) of various parcels of land, and the building of a Town (or Court) House in the market place with shops and stalls underneath. Rents from all of these went to support the poor. The properties and land were reacquired by the town following the dissolution of the Guild, and from 1612 were administered by the feoffees (as they still are today).<sup>3</sup> One of the fields was used for the construction of a Pest House where people with contagious diseases such as smallpox were housed. The following photographs, taken in 1980, show the remains of the Pest House. This has now completely disappeared but the



field to the north of Deddington is still known as 'Pest House Field'.<sup>4</sup>

The Town House was rebuilt in 1808 as the present Town Hall and the old Almshouses seem to have disappeared, for by 1822 the Feoffees had purchased a cottage and adjoining site and built new Almshouses, seen in this photograph in the 1970s. They are still in use today.

<sup>3</sup> See also history index, 'Articles and Documents: Feoffees'.

<sup>4</sup> See also history index, 'Deddington News Archive' Vol. 5, No. 3, November 1980.

An example of a further charity was that set up under the will of Richard Cartwright in 1637, when a rent charge of £6 1s 4d from Earl's Farm was given as a bread charity. The rent charge remained in force until the 1960s, and was still being distributed in bread by the vicar after Sunday services.

Following the Reformation and the dissolution of the monasteries in the sixteenth century, Parliament gave responsibility for poor relief to local parishes which, since their origins in the Middle Ages, had been administrative as well as ecclesiastical units. This was formalised by the Poor Law Act of 1601 which remained in force for over two centuries. Each parish was responsible for its own poor, and it was essential for people to have their own 'settlement' (or parish) where they were eligible for relief when in need. A 1691 amendment to the Settlement Act defined various criteria which determined the parish to which each individual belonged, and this could be changed by circumstances during a person's life. This influenced the movement of labour around the country, for people could return – or be sent back – to their place of settlement if ill or unemployed so that they would not be a burden to the parish in which they were working. If they were found begging as a 'vagrant' when away from their own parish, they were treated as criminals and liable to be whipped.

The administration of the Poor Law in each parish was placed in the hands of two Church Wardens and two Overseers of the Poor. These positions were voluntary and unpaid, and all yeomen, farmers, etc. had to take their turn, the officers being elected annually at a Vestry meeting. The Church Wardens were responsible for the collection of the Church Rate used for the upkeep of the church, while the Overseers of the Poor looked after the collection and distribution of the Poor Rate, a tax on land and used for the relief of the poor. There was a general belief that all families should help 'their own', but equally that the genuine poor had a right to poor relief in their own parish. Since the 1650s widows had been entitled to 'pensions' of 6d a week, and the Poor Rate was used to help widows and orphans, as well as those who were temporarily out of work or could not work. It also helped those who could work get back into employment and paid for apprenticeships for boys, etc. The Overseers had to keep accounts which were checked by Justices of the Peace at the end of each year, and JPs could also order payments which they felt were justified. The care of the poor was therefore a truly local concern, and the system worked well enough until about the end of the eighteenth century when poor harvests and rising unemployment caused such poverty that small parishes could not cope. It was also very difficult to operate in towns, where populations had grown enormously and the use of the 'parish' as a unit was not always practical.

By the late eighteenth century Deddington, by then known as 'dirty, drunken Deddington', was suffering from great poverty, its fields had not yet been enclosed, labourers had been driven in from surrounding closed parishes and the Vestry



had to impose one of the highest Poor Rates in Oxfordshire. However, the end of the 1700s saw the start of the formation of an extraordinary number of 'self help' societies in the town (34 in all over the century), beginning with Friendly Societies (five based on five different pubs), and including amongst others a Coal Club, Mendicity Society, Clothing Club, Reading Room and Lending Library, a Penny Bank, Medical Benefit Society, Volunteer Fire Brigade (still operating today) and, with two other local villages, a Building Society.

The Knatchbull Act of 1723 had allowed individual parishes to hire or buy premises to be used as a poor house or workhouse to house the sick, aged or infirm. In Deddington such a house consisted of five cottages – one for the overseer and the other four for inmates. This appears to have been in use until the Woodstock Union, to which Deddington was attached, set up its own workhouse under the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. Individual Parishes were then required



to dispose of such properties, and Deddington's was sold in 1840 by 'The Guardians of the Woodstock Union in the County of Oxford and the Churchwardens and Overseers of the Parish of Deddington' for the sum of £220 (incidentally to one of the Churchwardens!). It

remained as five cottages until 1969 when it was converted into one house. This photograph taken in the 1920s shows it still with five front doors.<sup>5</sup>

The new Poor Law Act of 1834 saw the amalgamation of parishes into Poor Law Unions, with responsibility for the poor removed from individual parishes and given to new Boards of Guardians. Rules were laid down by the Poor Law Commission in London, though until 1865 parishes were ultimately responsible to the Union for the cost of their own paupers. Relieving Officers went round to parishes each week to hear people who wanted relief and then reported to the Board of Guardians, one Guardian having been elected to the Board from each parish. The Board also met weekly to decide who should be given relief and there was no appeal to this decision. By this time the Union Workhouses were in operation, where very harsh conditions were imposed in order to discourage people from entering and thereby keep down the local rates. Families were separated, there was the stigma of 'pauperism', and most families would rather live on low wages than enter the workhouse, even though up to 30 per cent of families had income

<sup>5</sup> See also history index, 'Buildings: Deddington's Workhouse'.

less than their needs. 'Out-house' relief, i.e. helping people in their own homes, had been stopped, so that relief meant the workhouse or nothing.

Emigration schemes were supported by vestries as a method of, hopefully, helping people to a new life – and also saving the parish the ongoing cost of poor relief. In Deddington 50 local people were helped to set sail for America in 1831, though many of them died of cholera on the boat on the way there. A further total of 19 men, women and children left for Canada in 1845, and a document issued by John Scroggs, the Overseer of the Poor in Deddington, lists the amount of Parish Relief paid out for each of these men, women and children during the previous year – a total of £20 9s 8¾d. To finance this particular emigration the Parish Council had to borrow £150 from the Poor Law Commissioners, to be repaid in five instalments of £30.

Deddington fields were enclosed in 1808, but by the 1830s there was still considerable unemployment. In 1832 up to 60 men would meet at the Town Hall at 6 o'clock on a Monday morning to distribute their labour amongst the farmers, with half their pay being met from the Poor Rate; there were riots in the town in 1834. The Rev. William Cotton Risley<sup>6</sup> was Vicar of Deddington from 1836 to 1848, continuing to reside in the town thereafter and continuing as a JP. His Diaries give a good insight into conditions in the town at this time. He himself gave generous donations at Christmas time to the poor and also put pressure on the Union at Woodstock when he felt that conditions were particularly bad. In both 1840 and 1841 he had six of his own sheep killed and distributed to poor families, and in 1844 his gift was 1 cwt of coal to each family, with another 13 tons being distributed in 1848. In October 1844 he writes about a Vestry meeting called to consider the state of the poor and to take some steps for their employment during the coming winter, when it was agreed to allot the men work in proportion to the acres of each farm, one man to 30 or 35 acres according to circumstances. In both 1847 and 1854 he went round the town collecting money and setting up 'soup kitchens', some 60 gallons being distributed on one occasion.

The 1851 census for Deddington contains the names of 56 paupers, 23 men and 33 women, nearly all the women being widows (interestingly the adjoining hamlet of Clifton has no paupers at all). 1854 seems to have been a particularly hard winter: in January Risley wrote of a great quantity of snow falling and also the 'present high price of bread'. He wrote to the Chairman of the Union at Woodstock 'to suggest increasing the weekly payment to widows and other aged poor by 6d per week during present high prices', writing in similar vein again in December 1855 and January 1856. In March 1854 a parishioner came to him to complain that the Relieving Officer was refusing to help him bury his child. Risley wrote to the Relieving Officer and sent the man to the Guardian who agreed he deserved relief – he had earned only 16s in the previous three weeks. Risley then ordered

<sup>6</sup> See also history index, 'Articles and Documents: Rev. William Cotton Risley'.

and paid for a coffin for him. By 1855 he was talking to the Guardian about the 'abominable coffins made in Steeple Aston for the paupers here – he to mention it to the Board at Woodstock'.

Conditions do not seem to have improved for many of the farm labourers in the town, for, in a report of a Select Committee on Employment of Women and Children in 1867, the Assistant Commissioner reported that in Deddington there were about 240 cottages belonging to about 50 owners and that several were in a very bad condition. 'In Grove Lane, commonly called Hell Lane, are seven or eight houses with no back door, a sink in front of the cottages, and one water closet for the lot; the whole place has a horrid stench. Rent of these cottages 1s 2d a week; they belong to small tenement holders. The inspector of nuisances certainly does not do his duty'. By the early twentieth century Deddington was reported as being 'not merely decayed but positively bleak and forlorn, wearing a meek and hungry look'. However, it was by then established as a centre for the neighbourhood with postal services, local carriers and magistracy, and a settlement of professional people such as solicitors and doctors, as well as farmers and tradesmen.

Old age pensions were introduced in 1909, but malnutrition among the general population continued at least up until the First World War, with the army then having to maintain units to build up the strength of recruits. After the war the Housing Act of 1919 enabled local councils to build council housing and there was a growth of slum clearance. Deddington's council houses were built during the 1930s, with more after the Second World War. By then National Insurance and the National Health Service had arrived, to be followed by National Insurance Benefit, and poverty had become a national, and no longer a local concern.

And the twenty-first century sees Deddington with its market place, monthly farmers' market, hotels, pubs, restaurants, shops, primary school, health centre, sports facilities, clubs and societies as one of the most flourishing and sought after villages in North Oxfordshire.

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*Notes:*

\*This essay was written as classwork following a course of lectures given by Deborah Hayter (Oxford University Department of Continuing Education) entitled 'Almshouse, Parish and Workhouse: Looking after the Poor'. The main subject matter was taken from these lectures, with additions based on relevant information on Deddington's history.

*Bibliography:*

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*Picture credits:*

Pest House and the Almshouses: Colin Robinson

The Workhouse: Packer collection, Centre for Oxfordshire Studies, © Oxfordshire County Council Photographic Archive (see the history index for a link to the COS website).

*Layout:* Mary Robinson