

# FAMILIES IN CRISIS AND THE ENGLISH POOR LAW AS EXEMPLIFIED BY THE RELIEF PROGRAMME IN THE ESSEX PARISH OF ARDLEIGH 1795-7

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**ABSTRACT:** *The aim of this paper is to measure the actual impact on the budgets of poor families of the financial assistance provided by the Poor Law, selecting as a case study the experience of one parish in Eastern England during and in the aftermath of an economic crisis at the end of the eighteenth century. Issues considered are the nature of the assistance provided, the proportion of families helped and the value of that assistance measured as a proportion of the income that members of a labourer's household of the same age and sex would have obtained as their share of the earnings of such a household. Comparisons have also been made with the situation of various disadvantaged groups within the population (for example lone widows, widows with children and young unmarried persons) in order to judge whether, allowing for differences in family size, particular groups or individuals were supported more or less generously.*

*The analysis reveals that in the middle of the 1790s the tentacles of the Poor Law ranged far and wide through the community. Nevertheless much of the support provided by the Poor Law was actually rather modest and social and economic inequalities remained between the income that the widowed derived from the Poor Law and that they in theory could have obtained from membership of a labourer's household. On the other hand, even if the Poor Law did not eliminate economic inequalities, it did initiate a considerable transfer of income from richer inhabitants to poorer and from men to women and children. The effects of patriarchy within the wage earning population were thus mitigated through the controls exercised by the community elders.*

## INTRODUCTION

It is widely accepted that the Poor Law in England had a major impact on both the economic and social life of the country. Malthus's strictures are well known. According to Malthus, the aid provided to the poor through the Poor Law encouraged labourers to marry when they lacked resources of their own to support a family, depressed the real value of labour (by increasing competition for a fixed supply of food) and discouraged families from saving to enable them to survive future crises. Any benefits obtained from the successful alleviation of some individual cases of distress were minor

compared with the social and economic evils that were produced elsewhere directly or indirectly as a result of the operation of the Poor Laws.<sup>1</sup> Malthus was thus arguing that the impact of the Poor Laws was so profound that they were capable in some circumstances of changing behaviour, as when they encouraged some persons to marry who would not otherwise have married (or at least would not have married as soon). Peter Laslett also considered that family and household patterns in England were profoundly influenced by the Poor Laws. Unlike Malthus, however, Laslett believed that in practice Poor Law officials worked within the existing family system of small nuclear family households rather than attempting to mould behaviour. Specifically Laslett argued that the Poor Law intervened to care for the 'casualties of the life-cycle' the orphans, the widowed and the elderly, when the family system failed to meet their needs, rather than attempting to change behaviour. The Poor Law was important, according to Laslett, not because it had created the family and household system as it existed in England (since the pattern of small households with children leaving the parental home for service and on marriage predated the initiation of the national system of parish based poor relief at the end of the sixteenth century) but because the Poor Laws helped ensure the system's continued viability. Without the financial support provided by the community through the Poor Law to poorer households, Laslett considered that the widowed and the elderly without either property or a skill would not have been able to continue heading their own households, on occasion on their own.<sup>2</sup>

Yet to demonstrate that the Poor Laws operated in accordance with the predictions of either Malthus or Laslett poses a considerable challenge. Indirect effects, such as those envisaged by Malthus between 'over-generous' poor law provision (as he defined it) and the level of wages are particularly difficult to establish since it is implicitly being assumed that the labour market would be reformed and not change in any other way once the 'pernicious' effects of the Poor Laws had been removed. Moreover, any comparison with the situation in other periods or societies when state welfare provision was 'less-generous' requires the further implicit assumption that all other factors can be held constant or at least that their impact can be accurately assessed. There are also some fundamental issues that need to be addressed if the investigation of such wide ranging hypotheses of those of Laslett and Malthus is to be at all productive. These issues concern the actual impact on the budgets of poor families of the financial assistance provided by the Poor Law. This is the purpose of the present paper. Consideration will be given to the nature of the assistance provided, the proportion of families assisted and the value of that assistance measured as a proportion of

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1 T. R. Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798) edited by Antony Flew (Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1970) chapter V.

2 My interpretation of Peter Laslett, 'Family, Kinship and Collectivity as Systems of Support in Pre-Industrial Europe: A Consideration of the 'Nuclear-Hardship Hypothesis'', *Continuity and Change* 1988, 3:2: 153-75, here 165-6.

the income that members of a labourer's household of the same age and sex would have obtained as their share of the earnings of such a household. This way of measuring the value of the benefits received by comparing the income of a labourer's household is adapted from David Thomson's work on the standard of living of the elderly.<sup>3</sup> Comparisons have also been made of the situation of various disadvantaged groups within the population (for example lone widows, widows with children and young unmarried persons) in order to judge whether, allowing for differences in family size, particular groups or individuals were supported more or less generously.

### A COMMUNITY STUDY

Until the reforms of 1834, a considerable degree of control over the operation of the Poor Laws was vested in the parish. The operation of the Poor Laws needs therefore to be studied at local level even though it is accepted that in other parishes (even perhaps in neighbouring ones) different local economies and different political pressures (from potential recipients or ratepayers) may have prompted different responses to welfare issues. There is also evidence of major shifts in poor law policy over time in response to modifications in the age structure of the population and consequent pressure on the standard of living. A community that is to be studied in detail therefore needs to be chosen with care and after some consideration the decision was taken to select for detailed study the large village of Ardleigh, just to the north of Colchester.

Some of the reasons for selecting Ardleigh were practical. In order to assess the value of the relief provided it is necessary to link the account books of the Overseers of the Poor to a local census. The Overseers accounts themselves name those persons who were to be assisted but frequently fail to indicate whether particular payments were intended to meet the needs of just the person named or of that person plus an unspecified number of dependents or even in some cases whether the intended recipient was not the person named in the accounts but some other member of their household.<sup>4</sup> Nor do the accounts indicate in what households the recipients were living.

3 D. Thomson, 'The Decline of Social Security: Falling State Support for the Elderly since Early Victorian Times', *Ageing and Society* 4, 1984: 451-82.

4 Tom Sokoll, *Household and Family among the Poor. The Case of Two Essex Communities in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries* (Universtätsverlag Dr. N. Brockmeyer, Bochum 1993: 68, 72. Snell and Millar make a similar point and recommend in place of the accounts, the use of settlement examinations (the examination of paupers to determine which parish was responsible for their maintenance) on the grounds that they documented the experience of an equivalent population. See K.D.M. Snell and J. Millar, 'Lone-Parent Families and the Welfare State: Past and Present', *Continuity and Change* 2:3 1987: 387-422, here 404. Examples of household heads receiving assistance on behalf of others can be found in the accounts of the Ardleigh Overseers. Some cases have been documented by Erith, for instance the assistance to James Bond, shopkeeper, for his father although in 1796 he was residing in the household of another relative, see F. H. Erith, *Ardleigh in 1796* (Hugh Tempest, East Bergholt 1978: 47. Other instances can be inferred from an obvious inconsistency between the socio-economic status of the named recipient and the need for assistance. For a case involving a farmer from Ardleigh aged 76 when the scale of assistance provided and later payments indicated the probable beneficiaries as two grandchildren from his household, see *ibid.*: 13, 86-7.

To identify these it is necessary to locate in a census the individuals listed as receiving assistance in the accounts.<sup>5</sup> In the case of Ardleigh this involves linking the Overseers accounts for 1796-7 to the census that was taken by the Vicar during 1796.<sup>6</sup> Many individuals listed in the census can of course be found in much earlier (and indeed in later) sets of accounts but the greater the distance from the census the greater the probability that membership of the household will have changed and/or the individual will have left one household for another. That the lists of persons in receipt of assistance (paupers) did not detail their household circumstances could in fact be interpreted as indicating that the Overseers did not consider that the needs of individuals would vary according to their household circumstances. Whether this was the case in practice is an issue that we will consider below by assessing whether the scale of assistance provided to widows varied depending on whether lived with their married children or in lodgings.

Another motive for choosing Ardleigh as the case study was that two scholars have already worked extensively on the parish. F. H. Erith's invaluable transcript of the census of 1796 with cross references to entries in the Overseers accounts saved months of arduous labour.<sup>7</sup> The contribution of Tom Sokoll has involved the analysis of the economy, social structure and family and household patterns in Ardleigh in 1796, distinguishing pauper from non-pauper households.<sup>8</sup> It is owing to his exploration of these issues, which include estimates of labourers incomes,<sup>9</sup> that have made it feasible to present below the detailed assessment of the value to the budgets of the poor of assistance from the Poor Law. Sokoll has also analysed the trends in poor relief expenditure in Ardleigh between the 1790s and the 1830s<sup>10</sup> and his findings provide two substantive reasons for basing a case study on poor relief practice in Ardleigh in 1796-7. The first is that Sokoll shows that during the course of 1796 Ardleigh was in the process of recovering from a failed harvest.<sup>11</sup> A study based on 1796-7 therefore enables a comparison to be made with the nature and effectiveness of the assistance provided in a time of economic crisis with that offered in more 'normal' times. The second important consideration is that poor relief practice in Ardleigh was in force just when Malthus would have been setting out his thoughts on the evils of the Poor Law.

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5 A point forcibly made by Sokoll, *ibid.*: 65,75.

6 The census was almost certainly compiled not on a single day but over a period of time. Sokoll dates it to the autumn of 1796, *Ibid.*: 93. The list omits the infant Samuel Pratt, whose mother's lying-in costs were met by the Overseers 2 July 1796 but includes Edmund Sharman who died 14 October 1796. Details from Erith 1978: 46, 80.

7 Erith 1978

8 Sokoll 1993: 93-181. See also Thomas Sokoll, *Household and Family among the Poor: The Case of Two Essex Communities in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries*, University of Cambridge PhD. 1988, and 'Large families, wheat prices and the Allowance Cycle: Poverty and Poor Relief in the Agricultural Community of Ardleigh, 1794-1801', unpublished paper 1992.

9 Sokoll 1992: 16.

10 Sokoll 1993: 124-53

11 Sokoll 1993: 143-4.

The Ardleigh Overseers had also adopted among other measures a system of allowances which increased in value depending on the number of dependent children, assistance of a 'Speenhamland' type which Malthus would have found particularly objectionable as in his view it simply depressed the level of a labourers' wages.<sup>12</sup>

### EARNINGS AND THE CALCULATION OF INCOME

In order to estimate the value to the poor of the assistance they received from the Poor Law, a number of assumptions had to be made which need explanation. The records of the Poor Law specify in detail the level and purpose of the payments they were willing to authorise but there is far less information about the earnings of families, which the contribution of the Poor Law was to replace or supplement. In the absence of any harder information, the estimates of the income of Essex labourers made by Tom Sokoll of £ 30 per year, averaging 11.53 shillings per week, have been accepted. About these estimates a number of points can be made. The first is that they are estimates. If they are too generous the contribution from the Poor Law is under-valued. If on the other hand the labourer households actually earned somewhat more then the contribution is over-valued. It is, however, by no means easy to establish their reliability. Eden's near contemporary report (published 1797) for the neighbouring but urban parish of Colchester All Saints gives the wages of common (i.e. non-agricultural labourers) as 1.5 shillings per day (or 9 shillings per week assuming a 6 day working week) and of agricultural labourers during the harvest (when their wages would be higher) as between 1.6 and 2 shillings per day (10-12 shillings per 6 day week).<sup>13</sup> Earnings of this order are not out of line with Sokoll's estimates given that the latter include the supplementary earnings of other family members.<sup>14</sup>

The second important point to make is that the estimates indicate the average experience. In reality there would have been considerable variations in income between one family and another arising from differences in age, skill, composition of the household and chance. Nor can the estimates accommodate reductions in income due to seasonal unemployment or under-employment, or variations in the demand for the part-time labour of women and children. Yet in this respect the estimates offered by Sokoll are no more deficient than the budgets collected by Davies, Eden and others which have been widely accepted as providing reliable indicators of the income of

<sup>12</sup> The designation of the practice as 'Speenhamland' (including the inverted commas) follows Sokoll, see Sokoll 1993: 146.

<sup>13</sup> F. M. Eden, *The State of the Poor*, J. Davis, London 1797, II: 177.

<sup>14</sup> Sokoll has not explained the basis for his estimates. If they were informed, at least in part by the data in Eden the validity of the estimates cannot be established by the comparison with the information provided by Eden. Snell and Millar report the average wage of the male labourer in the Essex parish of Terling in 1801 as 10.3 shillings per week and the income of a labourer's household as 11.3 shillings per week. This latter figure includes the earnings of the women and children. See Snell and Millar 1987: 411.

labouring families in the late eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth centuries.<sup>15</sup> Admittedly, advantages that these budgets do have over estimates of income like those of Sokoll is that they record both income and expenditure and can show variations in income and expenditure between families arising from their different earning power.<sup>16</sup> Just like Sokoll's estimates of income, however, the budgets collected by Davies and Eden do not indicate how the income (or indeed the expenditure) of a particular week might have differed from that in any other. The significance of this in the present context is that it is evident that assistance from the Poor Law contributed a larger share of the budget and was more vital to well-being when it was provided to a labourers family whose head was old, sick or temporarily without work than if it had been provided to a fit labourer in full-time employment.<sup>17</sup> That of course was why assistance was offered in some circumstances and not in others, or provided only in the form of a contribution towards expenses that had been incurred (the part payment of rent for example). Estimates of the income of labourers in the analysis below of the significance of financial support from the Poor Law should be viewed therefore simply as an indicator of the value of that contribution (measured against a common 'standard' the average weekly income of a labourer) and not as signalling the specific percentage of the budget that a labourer, widow or anyone else, derived from the Poor Law.

Another issue that had to be confronted was the nature of the division of the income received (whether in the form of earnings or as Poor Law assistance) among the various beneficiaries. Two estimates have been provided (see below Tables 6 and 8). The first measures the financial contribution of the Poor Law relative to the income of an Essex labourer (as estimated by Sokoll). The second uses a weighted index of the income of a member of a labourer's household. It is very common to calculate weighted indexes when analysing the income and expenditure patterns of different families in order to control for differences in family size and age structure by calculating the incomes of 'adult equivalents.' For example, Horrell, Humphries and Voth assign a weight of 1.75 to married couples, 0.43 to all children and 1.0 to all other adults whether related or not to other members of the household where they resided.<sup>18</sup> There is, however, no agreement as to the precise weights that ought to be applied. Indeed different weights might be appropriate for different populations.

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15 As for example in the calculation of the income of female headed households relative to married couples households by Sara Horrell, Jane Humphries and Hans-Joachim Voth, 'Stature and Relative Deprivation: Fatherless Children in Early Industrial Britain', *Continuity and Change* 1998, 13:1: 73-115.

16 As indeed does the survey of weekly earnings of the labouring population of Corfe Castle which the current researcher has used elsewhere. See Richard Wall, 'The Contribution of the Poor Law in England towards alleviating the Economic Inequality of the Elderly at the End of the Eighteenth Century', Paper presented to the European Social Science History Conference, Amsterdam 1998.

17 Cf. the remarks of Snell and Millar 1987: 406.

18 Horrell, Humphries and Voth 1998: 79.

The approach in the present paper is similar to that of Horrell *et. al.* but adds an additional dimension, that of gender, to allow for the probability that adult males, and husbands in particular, consumed a larger share of the resources of a household than was possible for married women.<sup>19</sup> This is only to be expected given the importance of food in the total budget of the household, the differences in physique and the consequences of male economic power but it should be noted that the assumption made that a married man consumed 150 units of household resources for every 100 by his wife involves considerably less inequality in levels of consumption than would have arisen had each had to rely solely on their earning power, given the extent of the wage differential between men and women. If, however, married women and children actually consumed a somewhat greater proportion of the income of a labouring household than I have assumed, then the estimates offered in Tables 6 and 8 of equivalent incomes for widows and the unmarried, who had fewer dependents than many labourers (and sometimes none) would need to be adjusted downwards. For example if the income of a married woman resident in a labourer's household was on average some 25 per-cent higher than estimated, the equivalent income of a widow with three dependents and a regular allowance from the Poor Law of 2.5 shillings would be 24 per-cent and not 30 per-cent of the income of a consumption unit of the same size and composition in the household of a labourer.<sup>20</sup> Conversely of course a greater degree of inequality within labourers' households between men and women or between adults and children than has been assumed would imply that the equivalent incomes of widows and the unmarried have been under-estimated.

One further observation is in order at this point. Another assumption that has been made is that in estimating the value to the recipient of the payment from the Poor Law it was decided to regard each beneficiary as an individual claimant except when co-residing with a spouse or unmarried children. This follows Poor Law practice when identifying recipients<sup>21</sup> and means that individual lodgers and even widows residing with their married children have been assessed in the analysis below as separate 'benefit units.' In reality widowed mothers and even some lodgers were probably more or less fully integrated into the household economies where they resided.<sup>22</sup> For the purpose of calculating the economic value of the contribution of the Poor Law they are, however, best viewed as separate economic units.

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19 The various weights that were applied are listed in the note to Table 6 below. A similar set of weights were used in an earlier analysis of the income of labouring women in Corfe Castle, see Richard Wall, 'Some Implications of the Earnings, Income and Expenditure Patterns of Married Women in Populations in the Past' in John Henderson and Richard Wall eds., *Poor Women and Children in the European Past*, Routledge, London 1994: 332, note 16.

20 Case 7 in Table 6 (a widow of 45 with 3 children) has been selected for the purposes of illustration.

21 Sokoll 1993: 65, 72-4

22 The case for viewing lodgers as members of the households (and household economies) of the poor is forcibly made by Sokoll 1993: 76-89.

Table 1. Expenditure by the Ardleigh Overseers of the Poor 1796-7

Category	£ <sup>1</sup>	%
Administration and overheads	170	16
Poor House	303	29
Prosecution of fathers of illegitimate children	20	2
Arranged marriages	7	1
Out relief	534	52
Total	1034	100

<sup>1</sup> Rounded to nearest £.

Source: Adapted from Erith (1978): 10

Table 2. Expenditure on out relief by the Ardleigh Overseers of the Poor 1796-7

Category	Shillings <sup>1</sup>	%
Clothes and shoes	888	8
Boarding out children	1085	10
Clothing and shoes for boarded children	86	1
Rent assistance	526	5
Maternity cases	222	2
Nursing of neighbours	18	0
Meals and lodging for travellers	13	0
Pauper burials	279	3
Child allowances	840	8
Regular allowances	2562	24
Occasional relief	2877	27
Smallpox crisis	965	9
Ardleigh poor resident elsewhere	164	2
Drinks account	168	2
Total	10693	100

<sup>1</sup> Rounded to nearest shilling.

Source: Calculated from Erith (1978): 10-18

### EXPENDITURE BY THE ARDLEIGH OVERSEERS

We may begin consideration of expenditure on the poor by the Overseers of the Poor in Ardleigh by reviewing the major categories of expenditure during 1796-7. The breakdown provided by Erith,<sup>23</sup> from which the summary presented in Table 1 has been compiled, suggests that just over half of all expenditure was devoted to out-relief, that

<sup>23</sup> Erith 1978: 10



is to the care of the poor in their own homes. Another major cause for expenditure was the workhouse which accounted for 29% of the total expenditure. Much less expenditure was devoted to the prosecution of the fathers of illegitimate children, and on the cost to the Overseers of arranging marriages of women who otherwise threatened to become a burden on the Poor Rates (with their child) for some considerable time. Expenditure of this type has been distinguished here on the grounds of its distinct nature; its importance in financial terms relative to other support provided to the poor is considered later (below Table 7).

Sixteen per-cent of all expenditure was absorbed by administration and overheads. The detailed breakdown provided by Erith (not reproduced here) shows that some major items of expenditure under this head, such as payment of the Surveyor's bill for repair of local roads was unconnected with provision for the poor.<sup>24</sup> The Poor Rate was used for this purpose for convenience and as it constituted a 'common need.' Other major items of expenditure incurred during 1796-7 were occasioned from finding two men to serve in the navy (the largest single item of expenditure classed by Erith as 'administration' payment of the county rate, the bills presented by the Churchwarden and by the Constable, the cost of finding substitutes for the militia, meeting expenses and the writing off of rates due from ratepayers deemed too poor to pay. Certain items reveal the flexibility and others the thoroughness and principles underlying the system. An example of the former is that the Vicar of Ardleigh, the nominal head of the Vestry that in each parish administered the system of poor relief, had the Land Tax due on his glebe paid out of the proceeds of the Poor Rate.<sup>25</sup> An example of the latter is the payment of 'responsible' persons (i.e., persons of some social standing) who were prepared to swear on oath that the rents of the poor which the Overseers were considering meeting, in full or in part, had been accurately reported.

A detailed breakdown of the expenditure on out-relief, again derived from Erith, is provided in Table 2.<sup>26</sup> The number of different categories of expenditure document the all embracing nature of the service provided to the poor out of the Poor Rate, running literally from cradle to grave. The two major items of expenditure have been termed (by me) regular allowances and occasional relief. A more detailed consideration of expenditure under these heads follows below (Tables 6 and 7). However, some points need to be clarified here. In Ardleigh, regular allowances were paid weekly to specific recipients (although they are not always identified separately in the accounts of the Overseers) at the local village shop. It is possible therefore that they were paid

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*: 11.

<sup>25</sup> Erith (*ibid.*: 6) briefly outlines the administrative structure. The Ardleigh Vestry consisted of the Vicar, the two Churchwardens and at least two Overseers of the Poor, the latter appointed annually at a meeting which was open to all ratepayers although usually only the wealthier inhabitants attended. Women with property could participate and several served as Overseers of the Poor for Ardleigh in the period between 1767 when the records begin and 1837.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*: 10.

in kind although the allowance is invariably documented in terms of cash.<sup>27</sup> Other scholars have used the term 'pensions' to describe such allowances and my choice of 'allowances' was designed to minimise any possible confusion with more modern pension systems.<sup>28</sup> Regular allowances in the past, unlike pensions today, could fluctuate in value, down as well as up, and even be withdrawn altogether as the Overseers perceived needs had changed. Nor as is made clear below (Table 6) were they restricted to particular age groups. The category of 'occasional relief' also requires a brief comment. The distinctive feature was that this relief was intended for a specific purpose (see Table 7). Such relief could also be provided, for example in the case of illness for a considerable period of time, thereby blurring the boundary between occasional and regular relief, and some payments were reclassified as 'regular' in the compilation of Tables 6 and 7.<sup>29</sup>

The other less substantial forms of expenditure on the poor at home also need clarification.<sup>30</sup> A second type of allowance constituted a form of support to families with children during the harvest crisis at the latter part of 1795 and during the early part of 1796. As they were paid on a sliding scale based on the number of children under 12, these payments are referred to below as child allowances (see Table 5).<sup>31</sup> A considerable amount was also spent on clothing and shoes with one tradesman, John Buss, submitting monthly accounts, supplying the poor annually with at least 200 pairs of shoes.<sup>32</sup> Children who were boarded out at the expense of the Poor Rate might also be provided with clothing and shoes. Some of these children were placed as servants in the households of farmers while others were described in the census of 1796 as lodgers.<sup>33</sup> The payments made by the Poor Law on behalf of these children will be discussed further below but it should be noted here that there were a number of beneficiaries of this policy, other than the young people themselves who received a

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27 This interpretation follows Sokoll 1993: 145.

28 To cite one example of many see Richard Smith, 'Charity, Self-Interest and Welfare: Reflections from Demographic and Family History' in Martin Daunt ed., *Charity, Self-Interest and Welfare in the English Past* UCL Press 1996: 37. In the seventeenth century pensioners would have been designated 'collectioners', see Tim Wales, 'Poverty, Poor Relief and the Life-Cycle: Some Evidence from Seventeenth-Century Norfolk' in Richard M Smith ed., *Land Kinship and Life-Cycle*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1984: 351-404.

29 Sokoll reaches a similar conclusion based on the steady rise in expenditure on 'occasional relief' between October 1794 and January 1803. Sokoll 1993: 147, note 45.

30 Other than the cost of burying paupers. The care devoted to the victims of smallpox also seems self-explanatory but may include in addition to the costs of nursing, some compensation for lost employment.

31 The scale of payments is detailed in the notes to Table 5.

32 The calculation is that of Erith who in fact provides two conflicting estimates, 300 pairs and 200 pairs, see Erith 1978: 13,49. If the shoes were made available to families who received crisis relief (see Table 5) in addition to those persons receiving a regular allowance, each family would receive annually (on the basis of the lower estimate) between two and three pairs of shoes, not enough to provide each family member with one pair of shoes each year.

33 Other analogies between the position in the household of servants and lodgers are reviewed by Sokoll 1993: 78 although his conclusion appears to be that major differences remained in that lodgers had to pay for their accommodation and were less likely to be subjected to the quasi-parental discipline of the head of the household, *ibid*: 82. Both reservations would seem not to apply to the servants and lodgers whose accommodation was subsidised by the Poor Law.

degree of care plus in some cases work and some training in work skills. In the first place the parents of the adolescent (only a minority in Ardleigh were full orphans) were spared the (increasing) cost of raising an adolescent. Secondly, the employer (in the case of a servant and possibly also in the case of some lodgers) received what was in effect an employment subsidy in return for finding a place for the adolescent in his household.

Table 3. Involvement of Ardleigh householders<sup>1</sup> with poor relief system in Ardleigh prior to 1797

Type of Contact <sup>2</sup>	N	% <sup>2</sup>
Official <sup>3</sup>	44	19
Supplier	27	12
Care subsidy	29	13
Work	25	11
Regular allowance	20	9
Occasional relief	94	41
Other <sup>4</sup>	22	10
None	61	26
All householders <sup>1</sup>	230	100
Poor House	20	-

1 Household heads and lodgers not related to members of the host household and resident in Ardleigh in 1796.

2 Percentages do not sum to 100 as each type of contact has been recorded separately.

3 Overseer of the Poor, Constable, Keeper of the Poor House.

4 Examination for settlement, prosecution as father of illegitimate child, and other (unspecified) misdemeanours.

Source: Calculated from annotated transcript of list of inhabitants of Ardleigh in 1796 in Erith (1978)

Table 4. Other contacts with poor relief system by recipients of regular allowances and occasional relief in Ardleigh 1796-7

Type of contact	Regular Allowance		Occasional Relief	
	N	% <sup>1</sup>	N	% <sup>1</sup>
None	11	50	65	68
Supplier	1	4	5	5
Care subsidy	1	4	7	7
Work	3	15	12	13
Official	2	12	7	7
Other	3	15	8	8
Total	22	100	95	100

1 Percentages do not sum to 100 as each type of contact has been classified separately.

Source: Calculated from Erith (1978)

Nursing and maternity care were two other services that could be provided by the Poor Law, the latter including both linen and the wage and board of the midwife (see Table 7). In many cases the nursing, both maternity and general, was undertaken by the wife of a neighbour. The principle underlying the Poor Law was clearly that if a service was provided, it had to be paid for and some neighbourly care was underwritten by the Poor Law. However, as there is of course no way in which we can determine how much care was undertaken on a voluntary basis, it would not be appropriate to conclude that a calculative ethos (as Michael Anderson might put it) was necessarily characteristic of community life in this village at the end of the eighteenth century.<sup>34</sup>

Two of the categories of expenditure did not involve the residents of Ardleigh in 1796. The first were payments that the Overseers of the Poor were obliged under the Poor Law to make to soldiers (and/or their wives) who needed food and accommodation as they passed through Ardleigh on their way to their homes. The second type of payment was to meet the needs of former residents of Ardleigh now living elsewhere and whom the Ardleigh Overseers had decided to support where they now lived rather than to meet the considerable costs involved in arranging their return to Ardleigh where they would have had to find them some accommodation. Their needs would have been of a similar nature to those of current Ardleigh residents but would have been assessed by the Overseers of the parish where they resided and the details exchanged by correspondence rather than being specified in the accounts when the Ardleigh Overseers were asked to meet the costs. More populous parishes might employ agents to visit and assess the needs of Essex paupers who had for example moved to London.<sup>35</sup> And finally there was the drinks account submitted by wheelwright, innkeeper and intermittently Overseer and Constable, Jonathan Bull. The alcohol was consumed on a variety of occasions: some at the workhouse, some at a burial, some on a travelling soldier's wife who was taken ill while lodging with Bull, and some to ease the labour pains of a widow, the mother-to-be of an illegitimate child.<sup>36</sup> When the administration of the poor relief system was largely the responsibility of each parish, it seems to have been possible for payments for and on the poor to be made in a somewhat unorthodox manner and reimbursed later. Apart from the drinks account just mentioned, Erith notes small cash payments made by the village shopkeeper to soldier's wives who had been unable to find the Constable, and the reimbursement of the Reverend Lugar, a large farmer and curate at one of the Colchester churches, for

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34 The behaviour that Anderson thought he could identify in urban Preston in the mid-nineteenth century involved social (and only indirectly) monetary rewards see Michael Anderson, *Family Structure in Nineteenth Century Lancashire*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1971: 162-9.

35 As did Chelmsford, see Tom Sokoll, 'Negotiating a Living: Essex Pauper Letters from London, 1800-1834' in Lawrence Fontaine and Jürgen Schlumbohm eds., *Household Strategies for Survival 1600-2000: Fission, Fact and Cooperation*, *International Review of Social History*, 45, Supplement 8, 2000: 27.

36 Details from Erith 1978: 18, 47.

the guinea he had given to the parson of a third parish for the maintenance of former inhabitants of Ardleigh who were now settled there.<sup>37</sup>

### ARDLEIGH HOUSEHOLDS AND THE POOR LAW

The linking of the census of Ardleigh of 1796 with the Overseers accounts provides the opportunity to assess just how many households in Ardleigh were (or had been) associated in one way with the Poor Law while resident in Ardleigh. A variety of contacts were possible and these are listed in Table 3. Apart from those households whose members had benefited from regular or occasional assistance, others had supplied the Poor Law with goods (flour, wood and clothes for example), undertaken a variety of casual work (for example the nursing of the sick) for which they had been paid by the Poor Law, employed or cared for adolescents and children whom the Overseer of the Poor wished to board out, or served as salaried officials (Overseer, Constable or Keeper of the Poor House). The most common association was that of receipt of occasional relief with more than four in every ten householders and lodgers benefiting in this way.<sup>38</sup>

Almost a fifth, however, had experience of working in some official capacity for the Poor Law. Some of these officials were prominent members of the community but at least two posts, that of Constable and Keeper of the Poor House, seem in the 1790s to have been reserved for men who in the absence of this employment would, together with their families have appeared on the lists of those receiving occasional or even regular relief.

Only just over a quarter of the households present in 1796 had no previous connection with the Poor Law in Ardleigh. Yet involvement with the Poor law may have been even more widespread than this suggests. Some households had only recently been formed and some members of these households might have had considerable experience of the Poor Law while living with their parents or elsewhere. Moreover, in many cases a connection with the Poor Law developed only after the census<sup>39</sup> while others may have been involved with the Poor Law while living in other parishes.

Persons involved with the Poor Law in one way might of course become involved in others, for example serving as an official and receiving occasional relief.

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*: 16, 18.

<sup>38</sup> Lodgers unrelated to the household head have been added to the count of households on the basis that they probably constituted separate economic units, as discussed above in the section 'Earnings and the calculation of income'. A more radical revision would have been to try and replicate the Poor Law's definition of a 'benefit unit by including widows living with married children, and servants as separate economic units. There is some justification for this and the impact would be to increase the proportion of 'economic units' receiving occasional relief. Residents of the Poor House are listed in Table 3 but have been excluded from all calculations.

<sup>39</sup> There would be little point in enumerating these later contacts, first because the number of households moving to Ardleigh after the census and their degree of involvement with the Poor Law is unknown, and secondly because it is only earlier contacts with the Poor Law that can have influenced the attitudes towards the Poor Law of those resident in 1796

This issue is explored through Table 4 for the recipients of both regular allowances and occasional relief. Any type of contact was possible from serving as an official to supplying the Poor Law with goods and payment for providing care but with no one type of contact dominant. Those households receiving occasional relief had rather fewer contacts than the households in receipt of a regular allowance. Two thirds of the households receiving occasional relief had no other contact with the Poor Law in Ardleigh.<sup>40</sup>

Table 5. Benefit to Budgets of the Poor of Crisis Relief provided by Ardleigh Overseers 23 December 1795-31 March 1796

Benefit	Value (shillings per week) <sup>1</sup>	% of Weekly Income <sup>2</sup>
Child allowance	3.16	27
Flour subsidy	3.02	26
Coal	0.20	2
Total	6.38	55

Essex wheat price averaged 87shillings per quarter between October 1795 and April 1796 (read from graph in Sokoll 1988: 169), which represented an increase of 71% over the price in September 1795.

1 Cost of relief provided per household per week. Child allowances were paid between 23 December 1795 and 31 March 1796 to 62 households with children under 12 at a rate of 1 shilling per child. At the beginning of April 1796 the allowance was increased to 1.16 shillings per child, reduced to 0.5 shillings per child in mid April 1796 and discontinued at the end of April (Erith 1978): 17). It has been assumed that the price ceiling on flour (2 shillings per peck) and the free supply of coal was available both to these households and those in receipt of regular allowances who did not qualify for the child allowance.

2 Household of an Essex rural labourer at this time. I have followed Sokoll (1992): 16 in estimating the income as £ 30 per annum (11.53 shillings per week).

Sources: Erith (1978): 17; Sokoll (1992): 16; Sokoll 1988: 169

## SUPPORT FROM THE POOR LAW DURING AN ECONOMIC CRISIS

Essex wheat prices rose steadily during 1794 and dramatically during 1795 to peak during the winter of 1795/6.<sup>41</sup> Faced with this crisis the Ardleigh Overseers introduced a system of child allowances, subsidised the price of flour when it exceeded two shillings per peck, and bought in 12 chaldrons of coal 'to be taken away when it may suit the parishioners.' Estimates of the value of this support, measured against the weekly income of a labourer, are set out in Table 5.<sup>42</sup> Some margin of error is inevitable here as it is not entirely clear who precisely benefited from the free supply of coal. If it was

40 It was also possible for the recipients of regular relief to receive further help if the Overseers identified a particular need that could not be met from the allowance. The majority in fact were helped in this way. A much lower proportion of the recipients of occasional relief of course received a regular allowance.

41 Inferred from the five month moving average graphed by Sokoll 1993: 143.

42 The allowances paid to families with children under 12 are detailed in note 1 to Table 5. For the flour subsidy and the purchase of coal, see Erith 1978: 17.

the parishioners in general rather than the specifically the poor a small reduction in these estimates of the value of the support to the poor during the crisis of 1795/6 would be necessary. Even as they stand, however, the calculations suggest that the Poor Law did not entirely compensate for the rise in wheat prices. Between October 1795 and April 1796 these were on average some 71 per-cent higher than in September 1795 whereas Table 5 indicates that the support provided by the Overseers to the poor during the crisis contributed 55 per-cent of their 'average' income. However, as it is likely that their normal income fell considerably during the crisis as their employers retrenched, the contribution of the Poor Law to their well-being was even more vital than these estimates imply.

### THE VALUES OF REGULAR ALLOWANCES FROM THE POOR LAW

As mentioned above (section on expenditure by the Ardleigh Overseers), the boundary between regular and occasional relief is somewhat arbitrary. Most of the widows visited the local shopkeeper to collect their allowance but the lists of recipients was only specified intermittently and scrutiny of the Overseers accounts indicated that some additions needed to be made to cover instances where a regular allowance commenced during 1796/7.<sup>43</sup> In particular it was felt that allowances paid to the employers and carers of adolescents and children who they boarded at the Poor Law's expense should be considered as a regular allowance since it covered their maintenance, sometimes for as long as a year but usually for at least six months.<sup>44</sup>

Defined in this way altogether 33 residents of Ardleigh received a regular allowance during 1796/7. Of these 16 were widows (48 per-cent). Half of these had dependent children (see Table 6). Young unmarried persons were the other major group assisted in this way representing 42 per-cent of all recipients receiving a regular allowance. Females easily outnumbered males. Among the adults there were only two men (out of a total of 19) while 10 of the 14 young unmarried persons assisted were female. It is evident that it was overwhelmingly females who needed regular assistance. The presence of so many young females boarded out by the Poor Law implies that the number seeking work exceeded the supply. Altogether, 17 per-cent of the females in service in Ardleigh were supported by the Poor Law. By contrast, none of the 61 male servants present in Ardleigh in 1796 had their contracts subsidised. The few younger males who were supported by the Poor Law were living with their parents, with relatives or in lodgings.<sup>45</sup> The support provided to older women indicates that their earnings and those of their children could not compensate for the income that they had

43 Sokoll 1993: 145.

44 The duration of specific contracts for boarding both young and old persons are specified by Erith 1978: 14.

45 Two with parents, one with grandparents and one 7 year old was a lodger, see Table 6.

lost on the death of their husband. The Poor Law was in this respect attempting both to counteract weaknesses in the family system as Peter Laslett alleged<sup>46</sup> and to lessen gender based inequalities in the labour market.

There was considerable variation in the amount of the allowance (see Table 6). The largest was six shillings per week awarded to a widow with four children whereas at the other end of the scale the employers who boarded the girls who they employed as servants each received one shilling per week irrespective of the age of the girl. Widows who lived with a married child also seem to have been supported on a standard basis (at least judged from the four cases of support during 1796/7) but at the slightly higher rate of 1.5 shillings per week. Larger allowances were paid for the two young children placed in lodgings, presumably because there was little prospect of their working in return for the care provided. However one of the two boys still living with his parents received even more. The implication is that the amount of some allowances was decided following an assessment of needs, which cannot always be deduced from the age and household circumstances of the recipient, the only information the census provides. In general it is evident that larger allowances were awarded to older widows and those with more dependants but there is no strict correlation between age or number of children and the size of the allowance, which again implies that needs were assessed on a case by case basis.<sup>47</sup>

In order to take account of differences in family size and age, a weighed index has also been produced in which the value of the assistance provided by the Poor Law is measured relative to the income available had the person concerned been resident in the household of a labourer without any Poor Law support. The procedures followed to produce these estimates are explained in detail above and embody assumptions about inequalities within the household on the basis of gender and age.<sup>48</sup> The results indicate that assistance from the Poor Law significantly lessened these inequalities but did not remove them. Only the most disadvantaged received more from the Poor Law than the estimates indicate they would have obtained from the budget of a labourer's household. Often the support was worth much less. More than four out of ten received less than half of the income they might have expected in the household of a labourer. On the other hand fewer than one in ten received less than 30 per-cent of that income.<sup>49</sup>

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46 Laslett 1988: 165-6.

47 Snell and Millar 1987: 405 give 3.6 shillings as the average weekly cash payment by the Poor Law to women with children in a group of Yorkshire parishes in the 1810s and 1820s. In Ardsleigh only 7 widows with children received a regular allowance in 1796/7. Of these, three received more and four less than 3.5 shillings.

48 Section on earnings and the calculation of income.

49 Using different assumptions Snell and Millar 1987: 408 estimate adult equivalent income for widows with children in Terling in 1801 as 61 per-cent which is considerably higher than Table 6 suggests for the median equivalent income of widows with children (39 per-cent).



Table 6. Recipients of regular allowances received by Ardleigh poor indicating value of allowance relative to weekly income of Essex labourer

Marital Status	Sex	Age	House hold Position	Amount (Shillings per Week)	% House hold Income Labourer <sup>1</sup>	Consumption Units	Income Equivalent (Labourer =100) <sup>2</sup>
Married +Child	M	40	Head	5.0	43	4.5	43
Widower	M	86	Grand father	3.0	26	1.25	94
Widow +4child	F	36	Head	6.0	52	3.5	66
+5child	F	36	Head	4.0	35	4.0	39
+5child	F	33	Head	5.5	48	3.75	56
+1child	F	84	Head	2.5	22	2.0	48
+3child	F	45	Head	2.5	22	3.25	30
+2child	F	49	Head	1.0	9	3.25	12
+1child	F	57	Lodger	1.5	13	2.25	26
Lone Widow	F	64	Head	2.0	17	1.0	77
	F	62	Mother-in-law	1.5	13	1.0	58
	F	69	Mother-in-law	1.5	13	1.0	58
	F	50	Mother	1.5	13	1.0	58
	F	60	Mother	1.5	13	1.0	58
	F	45	Sister	2.0	17	1.0	77
	F	62	Housekeep	1.0	9	1.0	38
	F	70	Lodger	2.5	22	1.0	96
	F	80	Lodger	3.0	26	1.0	115
Deserted Young Unmarried	F	22	Daughter	1.0	9	1.0	38
	M	9	Son	1.0	9	0.5	77
	M	11	Son	2.5	22	0.75	125
	F	15	Grand daughter	1.0	9	1.0	38
	M	11	Grandson	1.0	9	0.75	50
	F	19	Servant	1.0	9	1.0	38
	F	18	Servant	1.0	9	1.0	38
	F	15	Servant	1.0	9	1.0	38
	F	14	Servant	1.0	9	0.75	50
	F	12	Servant	1.0	9	0.75	50
	F	11	Servant	1.0	9	0.75	50
	M	7	Lodger	2.0	17	0.5	154
	F	16	Lodger	1.25	11	1.0	48
	F	3	Lodger	2.0	17	0.5	154
	F	21	Inmate	1.0	9	1.0	38
			Poor House				

<sup>1</sup> I have followed Sokoll (1992): 16 in estimating the income as 11.53 shillings per week.

<sup>2</sup> In relation to share of household income of person of the same age and sex resident in a labourer's household. The sum received from the Poor law was divided by the number of consumption units and then expressed as a ratio of the income available for the same number of consumption units within a labouring household. The following weights were adopted: male head, 1.5; other male over 15, 1.25; female over 15, 1.0; male/female aged 10-14, 0.75; children under 10, 0.5. See Wall in Henderson and Wall (1994): 332, note 16.

Table 7. Value of specified goods and services provided in 1796-7 to the poor by the Ardleigh Overseers

Need	Assistance	Amount (Shillings)	% Household Income (Week)	Sex	Age	Marital Status	Household Position
Illness	(Week)	1	9	M	63	Mar	Head
	10 weeks	10	87	M	25	Mar	Head
	Lame	2	17	M	50	Mar	Head
	Smallpox	41.75	362	F	36	Widow	Head
	Smallpox	24.75	215	F	20	S	Stepdaughter
	Airing in smallpox	22.5	195	F	19	S	Daughter
	Smallpox	6	52	M	15	S	Servant
Treatment	Inoculation	5.25	46	F	16	S	Servant
	Wooden leg	10.25	89	M	14	S	Son
	Tea	0.6	0.6	M	14	S	Son
Maternity	Gin and brandy	4.25	37	F	10	S	Daughter
	Nurse	3	26	F	40	Mar	Wife
	Board of Nurse	3	26	F	40	Mar	Wife
	Put to Bed	3	26	F	33	Mar	Wife
	Lying in <sup>1</sup>	5	43	F	33	Mar	Wife
	Lying in	6	52	F	24	Mar	Wife
	Childbed Linen	10.5	87	F	40	Mar	Wife
Burial	Lying in (workhouse)	40	347	F	21	S	Daughter
	Laying out	1	9	M	Infant	S	Son
	Laying out	2	17	M	70	?	Poor House
	Laying out <sup>2</sup>	3	26	F	67	Mar	Wife
	Burial	6.6	57	-	Infant	S	-
	Burial and coffin	10.5	91	M	Infant	S	Son
	Digging grave, coffin, baize	22.0	191	F	80	?	Poor House
Services	Housework (week)	0.5	4	F	67	Mar	Wife
	Cleaning	1.0	9	F	67	Mar	Wife
	Nursing	2.0	17	F	25	Mar	Wife
	Sheet and blanket	8.6	74	M	13	S	Son
Bedding	Bedding	21.0	182	M	35	Mar	Head
	Bed+bedding	50.0	434	F	33	Widow	Head
	Bed+furniture	63.0	546	M	41	Mar	Head
Clothing	Gown	1.5	13	F	25	S	Daughter
	Stays	1	9	F	13	S	Daughter
	Shoes <sup>3</sup>	3	26	F	15	S	Daughter

	Breeches	4	35	M	10?	S	Son
	Breeches	6.5	56	M	10	S	Son
	Coat	6	52	F	45	Widow	Head
	Coat	25.0	217	M	55	?	Servant
	Things	5.7	49	F	12	S	Stepdaughter
	Things	8.7	75	F	19	S	Servant?
	Things+making	10.5	91	F	15	S	Servant
	Clothes <sup>4</sup>	19.75	171	M	12	S	Son
	Clothe 1 year	21.0	182	F	8	S	Daughter
	Things	26.25	228	F	20	S	Servant
	Clothing+gown	31.5	273	F	20	S	Daughter
Unemploy ment	-	5	43	M	15	S	Servant
	-	1.5	13	F	25	S	Poor House
Rent <sup>5</sup>	Part	10	87	M	76	Widow?	Lodger
	Part	25	215	M	36	Mar	Head
Social engineering	-	42	364	M	61	Mar	Head
	Setting off <sup>6</sup>	4	35	F	40	Mar	Wife
	Shift of himself <sup>6</sup>	3	26	M	60	Mar	Head
	Arranged marriage	60.5	525	F	21	S	Daughter
	Apprenticeship	83.5	724	M	14	S	Son

1 Paid to husband 'when his wife lay in'.

2 Had previously been helped with housework and cleaning.

3 This was the standard price for adults. The shoemaker (John Buss) submitted monthly accounts to the Overseers and supplied about 200 pairs per year (possibly 300) at a cost of £ 30, see Erith (1978): 13, 49.

4 Hat, jacket, waistcoat, pair of breeches, 2 pairs of stockings

5 Usually only a contribution towards the rent. In 1796-7, 12 households received such assistance. Almost all were headed by married men (just two by widows). The maximum payment made was 54.5 shillings which may have covered a longer period than a year. The minimum payment was 10 shillings and the median 24.5 shillings.

6 The precise meaning of these terms is not clear. The phrasing suggests some form of emergency aid, presumably designed to restore the family economy to a position where it could be self-supporting.

## OCCASIONAL RELIEF

In addition to regular allowances, the Overseers were prepared when they deemed it necessary to meet short-term emergencies by paying for particular goods and services. Examination of the accounts of the Ardleigh Overseers enabled ten different 'needs' to be identified and these are listed in Table 7. The list illustrates the range of services that the Poor Law could provide: cradle to grave as was pointed out above. The emphasis here should be on the fact that these were services that *could* be provided. It was unlikely that any one individual even if they were fortunate to live a very long life would receive more than a small proportion of the services that might be available. For example there is only one instance during the year when the Overseers authorised one neighbour to 'do' for another, that is to undertake her housework. Later events reveal

the exceptional circumstances of this case in that the neighbour who had been helped in this way died a little over a month later and was laid out by the same woman who had done her housework.<sup>50</sup> There must also have been considerably more illness among the poor during the year than was covered by payments from the Overseer. In the case of smallpox, however, in addition to the payments to particular individuals as documented in Table 7, a great deal more was spent at the village shop during the epidemic. Neither the recipients nor the precise purpose of this expenditure was specified<sup>51</sup> but it would seem likely given the amount and that it was spent at the shop that the payment was for food while the sufferers were unable to work, rather than for nursing.

In some areas the Overseers were prepared to expend a considerable sums on a particular individual. One might even term them strategic investments as in acting this way the Overseers were hoping to avoid long-term dependency on the Poor Rate on the part of the individuals concerned. The largest single sum authorised came to over £ 4 and was for an apprenticeship. The one marriage during the year that they subsidised cost them more than £ 3 once they had paid for the marriage license, the marriage service, the fee of the clerk, the reception and some transport. Generally, however, the sums expended were much more modest, for example three shillings for a pair of shoes, one shilling for two weeks housework, another shilling for a week's illness.<sup>52</sup> Some needs were clearly not met in full. This is stated explicitly when some families were assisted with the payment of rent and may be inferred in other instances, for example maternity and burial cases, as the costs varied so widely.<sup>53</sup> It would, however, be unwise to use the evidence of Table 7 to indicate how the Overseers apportioned their expenditure on occasional relief between different purposes. The information in Table 7 is derived from the links between the census and the accounts which Erith added to his transcript of the census. Yet comparison with the figure Erith gives for the total expenditure on occasional relief by the Overseers (above Table 2) indicates that just 36 per-cent of this expenditure has been listed in the form of payments to specific individuals in Table 7.<sup>54</sup> To resolve this issue it will be necessary to undertake further work on the accounts.

Of those Ardleigh residents who have been identified as recipients of occasional relief, Table 7 shows not surprisingly that they covered a much broader section of the population than the recipients of a regular allowance. In the first place almost half of the recipients of occasional relief were male (46 per-cent) compared with just 18 per-cent of those with a regular allowance (see Table 6). Of course where male heads of

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50 Erith 1978: 20, 81.

51 The total expenditure authorised amounted to £ 48 5 shillings and 1 penny, see *ibid.*: 13.

52 For the housework payment *ibid.*: 81.

53 *Ibid.*: 14-15, and see note 5 to Table 7.

54 Inferred from the breakdown of expenditure provided by Erith and summarised above in Table 2.

household were assisted, for example through a contribution from the Poor Law towards their rent, then the members of their families also benefited. If these nine cases were to be excluded then only 38 per-cent of a smaller pool of beneficiaries of occasional relief would have been male. The argument, however could be challenged on the basis that that the entire family also benefited from the maternity relief provided to married women.

Most age groups were represented among the recipients but younger people were particularly prominent. More than half of the females receiving occasional relief were adolescents or in their twenties. Nearly a third of the males assisted were aged between ten and twenty. By contrast just over a fifth of the males and 12 per-cent of the females were over the age of 60. There are again striking differences between those assigned regular relief and those receiving it only occasionally. Whereas widows had constituted 48 per-cent of those in receipt of a regular allowance and young unmarried persons 42 per-cent, widows represented just 8 per-cent of the receivers of occasional relief and young unmarried persons 52 per-cent. Regular relief was directed principally towards persons aged 10-19 and over 60 while occasional relief was offered more equitably across the age range although with a shared focus on the needs of adolescents.<sup>55</sup> In terms of household position, it is evident that occasional relief was primarily family support: almost a third of the beneficiaries were household heads with families, almost another third were children and 18 per-cent married women. Servants, most of them recent members of the parental household, constituted another 11 per-cent, which leaves just 8 per-cent in other situations, lodgers and inmates of the Poor House.

Table 7 also attempts to measure the value of the assistance to the recipients, expressed as a ratio of the weekly household income of a labourer's household. A ratio of 100 thus indicates that the relief given was the equivalent of a week's income, a ratio of 50 half of a week's income, and one of 500 that it would take a labourer 5 weeks to find such a sum even if no expenditure was required elsewhere. Looking first at the occasions where the relief provided was in excess of a week's income, we can see that from two to more than three weeks income might be necessary in the case of smallpox. A lying-in could also be as expensive although there might have been additional costs, for accommodation for example, for the woman who was admitted into the Poor House in order to give birth. Other expensive items were bed and bedding: four or even five weeks of income with bedding on its own coming to almost two weeks income. A coat provided to a middle-aged servant was worth another two weeks income as was some of the clothing that the Poor Law provided for adolescents. The type of clothing was not always specified, instead being designated sometimes just as

<sup>55</sup> All calculations in respect of the receivers of regular allowances have been derived from Table 6.

'things' but where its value approximated a couple of weeks income of a labourer, it probably comprised a complete outfit as in the case of the boy of 12 who received a hat, jacket, waistcoat, pair of breeches and two pairs of stockings at a cost of 19.75 shillings, the equivalent of in excess of a week and a half's income of a labourer.<sup>56</sup> These clothes were purchased primarily for adolescents, sometimes by their employers, and it is possible that new clothes were required to symbolise an important step towards adulthood in conjunction with new work responsibilities.

Even much smaller payments, for example three shillings for a pair of shoes (26 per-cent of a week's income) or even one shilling for a pair of stays (nine per-cent of the weekly income of a labourer), could present too much of a burden for a limited budget. Budgets collected in 1795 by Frederick Morton Eden from five families in Hinksworth in the neighbouring county of Hertfordshire show that 80 per-cent of the budget of a labourer would be devoted to the purchase of food.<sup>57</sup> Without the support of the Poor Law or some other form of 'charity' it is difficult to see how the poor could afford even some basic necessities such as bedding, the fee and board of the maternity nurse, or 'outfits' for their children, let alone the extraordinary costs involved in acquiring an apprenticeship or marrying. In the absence of Poor Law support, their budgets would have registered a large permanent deficit, as indeed do the budgets collected by Eden which show expenditure and earnings.

It is difficult to know for certain whether the Ardleigh Overseers met all the essential needs of the poor through the system of regular and occasional relief as there is no way in which those needs can be accurately assessed. The amounts spent by the Overseers on the treatment of illnesses as opposed to nursing, and on unemployment do look meagre but it is possible that such assistance was hidden in other items of the budget such as 'illness' and the doctor's fee.<sup>58</sup> However, it does seem likely that there must have been more illness and a greater demand for clothing than was met by the amount spent on occasional relief by the Ardleigh Overseers,<sup>59</sup> and where such support from the Poor Law was not forthcoming, some families may have had to economise in other areas of their budget or reneged on the payment of rent or other debts.

The final Table in the series brings together the information on regular and occasional relief to ascertain whether in combination they succeeded in eliminating inequalities of income between the widows whom they assisted and the income widows of a similar age and circumstances would have enjoyed as residents in labourers

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<sup>56</sup> See note 4 to Table 7.

<sup>57</sup> Eden 1797 II: cccxliii.

<sup>58</sup> Listed by Erith 1978: 12 as part of the budget of the Poor House.

<sup>59</sup> Admittedly Table 7 covers only a proportion of the sums spent on occasional relief by the Overseers but the overall sum (Table 2) is not huge given the number of potential candidates for assistance. Erith documents the refusal of assistance to Henry Oxley in 1821 on the grounds that he was not a pauper. Erith 1978: 89.

households without the support of the Poor Law. A glance at Table 8 shows that this was rarely achieved with a quarter of widows receiving less than half of the income available in a labourer's household although half received more than 60 per-cent. The pattern in fact is not that different from that suggested by the analysis of those widows receiving a regular allowance (above Table 6). This is scarcely surprising as although a few widows received substantial support from occasional relief to augment what they obtained from their regular allowance, almost half received no occasional relief.

Table 8. Assistance provided in 1796/7 to widows by the Ardleigh Overseers indicating value relative to income of an Essex labourer

Household Position	Weekly Allowance (shillings)	Total Annual Assistance (shillings)	% Annual Income (Labourer) <sup>1</sup>	Consumption Units	Equivalent Income (Labourer =100) <sup>2</sup>
Widow+5	4.0	247	41	4.0	46
Widow+5	5.5	390.5	65	3.75	78
Widow+4	6.0	353	59	3.5	76
Widow+3	2.5	151	25	3.25	35
Widow+2	1.0	52	9	3.25	12
Widow+1	2.5	133	22	2.0	50
Lodger	1.5	81	14	1.0	60
Head alone	2.0	104	17	1.0	77
Mother-in-law	1.5	79	13	1.0	58
Mother-in-law	1.5	79	13	1.0	58
Mother	1.5	78	13	1.0	58
Mother-in-law	1.5	94	16	1.0	70
Sister	2.0	104	17	1.0	77
Housekeeper	1.0	54.5	9	1.0	40
Lodger	2.5	130	22	1.0	96
Lodger	3.0	156	26	1.0	116

<sup>1</sup> I have followed Sokoll (1992): 16 in estimating the annual income as £ 30.

<sup>2</sup> In relation to share of household income of person of the same age and sex resident in a labourer's household. The following weights were adopted: male head, 1.5; other male over 15, 1.25; female over 15, 1.0; male/female aged 10-14, 0.75; children under 10, 0.5. See Wall in Henderson and Wall (1994): 332, note 16.

## DISCUSSION

It can be clearly established, therefore, that in the middle of the 1790s the tentacles of the Poor Law ranged far and wide through the community. The involvement of so many of the households one way or another with the Poor Law system (Table 3 shows that three quarters of all households resident in Ardleigh in 1796 had experience of

contact with the Poor Law as beneficiaries, suppliers of goods or officials), may help to explain why the system was left fundamentally intact for so long despite the rising cost of relief. There were many beneficiaries and money to be made from supplying their needs. The system therefore continued to operate even though there was a mounting tide of protest from aggrieved ratepayers.

It is much more difficult to determine whether in spite of its looming presence in society, the Poor Law actually met all the essential needs of the persons it was intended to support. Tom Sokoll has recently published the voluminous correspondence between paupers and their home parishes. These were the paupers who held a settlement in one parish (that is the right to relief) but were resident elsewhere and many of their letters complain about late payment and inadequate maintenance.<sup>60</sup> As non-resident poor they may of course have been in a particularly difficult situation. When the poor were living in their home parish, they could communicate easily with the Overseers and Constable. It was also perhaps less easy for the Poor Law officials to ignore instances of hardship which occurred almost on their doorstep. Yet just because the Poor Law network was so pervasive, one should not assume that relations between pauper and official were consequently harmonious. The accounts of the Overseers are likely to be far less revealing on these matters than letters addressed to the Overseers by the poor. Nevertheless there are documented instances of friction. One woman was noted in the Overseers Memorandum book in 1821 as 'very saucy' while her husband fought the Constable outside the Red Lion. In the same year John Arthey told the Constable that there was no point in his approaching the magistrate about getting a house as he 'may as well go to an old woman.'<sup>61</sup>

Moreover, as was demonstrated above (Table 7) much of that support was actually rather modest and social and economic inequalities remained between the income that the widowed derived from the Poor Law and that they in theory could have obtained from membership of a labourer's household (Table 8). The 'average' widow, according to the estimates made, had just 59 per-cent of the income that an individual in the same situation would have derived from her share of the income of a labourer's household. However, if the income of the labourer household or the share of that income available to women and children has been under-estimated by say 25 per-cent, then the income of the 'average' widow reliant solely on the Poor Law would be only 47 per-cent of that obtainable in a labouring household. On the other hand if, as Snell and Millar noted for Terling in the first decade of the nineteenth century, those in receipt of Poor Law benefits were more likely to be in employment than the wives and children in households who were not on benefit, the estimate of an

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60 Thomas Sokoll ed., *Essex Pauper Letters 1731-1837*, Oxford, Oxford University Press for the British Academy 2001.

61 Cases from Erith 1978: 45, 49



equivalent income of 59 per-cent would need to be revised upwards although only marginally.<sup>62</sup> The estimates of equivalent income would thus almost always lie well below the income available from residence in a labouring household rather than usually exceeding it as do the estimates constructed on a different basis by Snell and Millar.<sup>63</sup>

The issue though remains of the impact of all this activity by the Overseers of the Poor on the broader social structure. Even if the Poor Law did not eliminate economic inequalities as argued by Snell and Millar, it did initiate a considerable transfer of income from richer inhabitants to poorer and from men to women and children. In this way the Poor Law was seeking to compensate for inequalities in the value that the work of men and women received in the labour market and the impact this had on living standards when women were deprived of access to male earnings. The effects of patriarchy within the wage earning population were thus mitigated through the controls exercised by the community elders. However, while the Poor Law may have eased economic inequalities it may have had far less of an impact on social ones. When it intervened to correct income differentials the Poor Law did not pay women the equivalent of a labourer's wage for housework or nursing but instead helped perpetuate their dependence on the Poor Law when the family economy was in crisis.

Whether as Malthus argued, the Poor Law thereby effected a major modification in the family patterns of a section of the population is another matter. Admittedly, some individual instances of effective intervention in family life on the part of the Poor Law can certainly be documented, as when the Overseers promoted a marriage or arranged an apprenticeship. The Ardleigh Overseers also subsidised a section of the market for female domestic labour. The more significant point though is that, as stressed above, benefits were not awarded automatically. The size of allowances could be changed or withdrawn which would make it unwise to develop family strategies that relied on the constant support of the Poor Law. Nevertheless, the support that might be forthcoming from the Poor Law undoubtedly constituted one of the factors that the poor would take into consideration when developing a survival strategy and this could on occasion engender a culture of dependency. As one Ardleigh resident told the Overseer in 1821, 'he will never try and hire a house (and therefore achieve a measure of independence) but will be a trouble to the Parish.'<sup>64</sup>

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62 Snell and Millar 1987: 408.

63 *Ibid.*

64 Overseers' Memorandum Book, quoted by Erith 1978: 49.

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