

Pauper Policies: Poor Law Practice in England 1780-1850

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Author: Samantha Shave

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Samantha Shave's new book assesses how policies under the old and new poor laws were conceived, implemented, and the effect that they had on poor relief. The book is an excellent addition to the historiography. It is well written and researched and contains important new findings on several key topics that have largely been ignored by historians.

The research concentrates on the counties of Dorset, Hampshire, Somerset, Wiltshire and West Sussex in the south of England. Shave contends that this is because historians have tended to focus on the south-east, meaning that other southern counties have been understudied. In addition, Shave argues that this area is important as poor relief expenditure in the south was some of the highest in England and because the Poor Law Commissioners hoped to have the most effect on this area.

The book takes a 'policy process' approach to research the poor laws from the 1780s to 1850s. Developed in the social sciences, the methodology is used to identify the problems/issues that poor law officials had, which policies were implemented to address the problems, and how the policies were subsequently monitored, developed and changed. As such, the book is refreshing and different to most other recent studies as it focuses on policies and sources that were made by authorities such as minute books, rather than the lived experiences of paupers and sources that contain the voices of the poor such as pauper letters. This stimulating approach allows Shave to develop a more nuanced understanding of poor law policy and how it was implemented and perceived on the ground. The chapters are arranged thematically and concentrate on aspects of poor relief that have received little attention in the historiography.

Chapter two examines the southern parishes that adopted Gilbert's Act of 1782, which enabled parishes to form workhouses solely for the vulnerable poor, unite with neighbouring parishes, and appoint Guardians and visitors to manage the institution. This chapter is highly original and the rich examples that Shave uses help to address a significant gap in the literature, as historians have frequently underplayed the role of Gilbert's Act and have neglected to study how it worked on the ground. Scholars have often based their estimates on the numbers of parishes that chose to adopt this policy based on government records, meaning that our understanding of the Act is only partial and little additional research has been done on the legislation. Shave does not claim to offer a precise number of parishes that implemented the Act, but using

archival sources in addition to government records she shows that the legislation was more widely adopted than previously thought. The remainder of the chapter assesses the populations of the workhouses formed under Gilbert's Act and how they were accommodated by authorities. This research is interesting and helps to show that these institutions were workhouses and not poorhouses, as inmates were expected to work in some way.

Sturges Bourne's Act of 1818-19 helped the rich to tighten their control over poor relief by allowing parishes to form select vestries which were made up of chief inhabitants that owned property and appoint waged assistant overseers to better manage the distribution of relief. The third chapter of Shave's book examines the extent to which parishes in the south implemented this Act and the effect that this had on individuals' and families' entitlement to relief. Again, the chapter helps to erode ideas in the historiography that the legislation failed and had a limited effect on relief practices. Instead, it is found that when the practice was applied it helped to reduce parish expenditure, made parishes more rigorous with relief administration, and re-drew the lines between being 'deserving' and 'undeserving' of relief. With select vestries, for example, there was a greater reliance on judging applicants' character based on a range of factors such as church attendance, behaviour and sobriety. Most of these criteria will be familiar to people who have read the work of early-modern scholars such as Steve Hindle (1); yet, Shave's findings are nonetheless important as they show that these factors continued to be important during the crisis years of the old poor law.

Historians have long found that welfare could vary from one locality to another and that parishes were often 'welfare state[s] in miniature' due to the considerable range of flexible practices that each adopted.(2) Chapter four adds further weight to these arguments by examining how parishes would exchange ideas and information with each other on 'best practice' (150), resulting in a patchwork of poor law regimes. Although this research is original, most welfare historians will probably not be surprised to find that ideas were passed between fellow overseers and other officials. Nevertheless, the section is important as it offers empirical evidence which illustrates the nature of these exchanges and gives us insight into which issues officials wanted advice with. Exchanges between overseers about food and clothing in the workhouse, for example, were common and ideas were exchanged through personal letters, visits and publications. More significant are Shave's findings that these exchanges continued to be important even after the passing of the new poor law in 1834, when there was a central authority that was supposed to implement the law consistently. Local officials would again exchange information through letters and visits. Even the central Commission helped to spread local knowledge and practices (such as with suggestions on how to employ workhouse inmates), leading to uneven patterns of poor relief on the ground.

In the penultimate chapter, Shave examines how scandals in Bridgwater (Somerset) and Andover (Hampshire) unions led to changes and developments in pauper policies related to medical relief and workhouse labour. Shave highlights the lack of medical relief stipulations that lawmakers made and how this resulted in numerous difficulties and huge variations in the quality of medical attendance that people received. At Bridgwater, for example, one-third of the workhouse population died in the winter of 1836-37 from enteric infections. Medical relief to people on outdoor relief was inadequate and poorly funded, and one medical man was even convicted by authorities for botching a surgical procedure after he lied about his qualifications. At Andover workhouse (and numerous other workhouses in the south), the able-bodied poor were made to crush bones by authorities, resulting in numerous injuries and the legitimisation of 'the abuse of the poor through work' (221). These scandals helped to create 'policy strain' (232) and led to changes in legislation. In 1842, a General Medical Order was issued which set out criteria parishes had to abide by for the satisfactory medical relief of the poor, and in 1845 a General Order was issued which prohibited bone crushing. Some unions resisted these changes and continued to issue insufficient medical help and employ the poor in bone crushing, but it was nonetheless a step in the right direction. Perhaps unions continued to resist because, as Shave and others have pointed out, 'the Commission created a climate in which maltreatment, neglect and abuse were more likely to occur, not least through the implementation of the principle of less eligibility' (197).(3)

Shave relates the implications of her core findings to the wider historiography in the conclusion. The chapter is a fascinating read and she outlines many ramifications that scholars will find difficult to disagree with. For example, Shave points out that historians have placed too much emphasis on outdoor relief during the crisis years of the old poor law (such as with Speenhamland) and not enough on indoor relief. She also argues that historians need to pay more attention to national legislation as well as local context, and that the old poor law was a flexible system. Some of her other arguments, however, are much more contentious. Most notably, Shave suggests that because parishes would exchange information freely with one another (often over great distances), that there were not regional differences in poor relief administration as historians like Steve King have argued.⁽⁴⁾ Instead, there were ‘islands of parishes dotted throughout England that were providing relief in similar ways’ (250).

The evidence for the book is pieced together from many disparate records which originated from diverse parishes and unions in the south. There is, however, little consideration of interregional, urban and rural differences. The sample also raises inevitable questions as to how representative Shave’s results are and whether further case studies would highlight further nuances or help to alter her conclusions. For example, Shave argues that workhouses formed under Gilbert’s Act for vulnerable inmates would admit more able-bodied men during difficult times such as economic hardship. Yet, the evidence for this is slender as she only uses a handful of examples and it is unknown how typical or atypical these are. This is largely not the author’s fault as she was constrained by sources and I suspect that her overall conclusions are correct, but some arguments will inevitably remain tentative until additional work is conducted. Nevertheless, with the book being very original, I am confident that there will not be a shortage of people who want to undertake further research on the issues that Shave highlights. It would be very interesting, for instance, to undertake a ‘policy process’ methodology to assess northern counties, where poor relief expenditure was lower and possibly less ‘generous’ ⁽⁵⁾, to see whether there was a perceived ‘need’ for select vestries there or assess the rates at which parishes implemented Gilbert’s Act in the north. The ‘policy process’ methodology can also be used to study other public policy issues which affected the poor such as health, education and work (264-265).

In sum, Shave’s book is a valuable addition to the historiography. Using a ‘policy process’ methodology, the book helps to develop a more nuanced understanding of poor law policy and how it was implemented and perceived on the ground. It examines key Acts that have largely been ignored in the literature and helps us to further understand a range of important issues such as entitlement, social relations and policy making. It is hard to find fault in the book: the arguments are largely convincing, well-researched, and will act as a strong platform for further research on pauper policies.

Notes

1. Steve Hindle, *On the Parish? The Micro-politics of Poor Relief in Rural England c.1550–1750* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 379–98.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Mark Blaug, ‘The poor law report reexamined’, *The Journal of Economic History*, 24 (1964), 229.
[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Bernard Harris, *The Origins of the British Welfare State: Social Welfare in England and Wales, 1800–1945* (Basingstoke, 2004), p. 50; U. Henriques, ‘How cruel was the Victorian Poor Law?’, *Historical Journal*, 11 (1968), 365–71.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Steven King, *Poverty and Welfare in England 1700–1850: A Regional Perspective* (Manchester, 2000).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. *Ibid.*[Back to \(5\)](#)

The author is grateful for this review of her monograph and declines to respond further.

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