

The ecology of poor relief

Overview

On 18 July 1821 the overseer of Kingswood parish (Gloucestershire) received a letter from George Lewis of Bristol. Asking for ‘Some preasant relife’, Lewis claimed that he was sick and ‘almost intirely from my Worck’. He was

in a verrey Weacke State my self i have a verrey Soare throat as i am afraide as i am getting the Same Disorder as my family we am harekening Every moment to be the Last of one Chyld the Lords best to put is end to its Breath the biges bot was tacken ill Later day Last which i have five that is very bad ... which have not one to give aney assistance with the family for there is great Danger in Cathing the Disorder as i have no body as a friend to come to do aney thing for us ...¹

This wonderfully orthographic letter, dripping with the desperation that might be occasioned by individual and familial illness, lays bare the core questions that frame the current study. What was wrong with Lewis and how does his sickness elide with a wider picture of the frequency and intensity of illness among the poor? Where did this particular episode fit into a life-cycle of ill-health? If he or his children did die, as Lewis prefigured, what would have happened to the body and the family left behind? Why did Lewis use the rhetorical vehicles that we see in his letter and why did he ask for present relief rather than the services of a doctor? How important as an element of expenditure was relieving sickness under the Old Poor Law? And how would local officials have viewed the letter and the predicament it encompassed?

Answering the latter question in particular is problematic. The English and Welsh Old Poor Law provided the legal basis for the

provision of welfare at parish level until the advent of the New Poor Law in 1834.² While the 1601 Act is more complex than is often allowed, its essence was to require parishes to punish vagrants and the undeserving poor, put the unemployed to work and relieve the 'impotent' (later 'deserving') poor using the proceeds of a local property tax.³ Yet at no point did the 1601 legislation definitively establish which people should be seen as deserving and at what level and with what regularity their poverty should be relieved by the elected or selected, and for most of the Old Poor Law period amateur, parochial overseers of the poor.⁴ The decisions of such men and the vestries which sometimes (and increasingly from the 1800s) stood above them were not, however, completely unconstrained. The Act also enshrined for the poor a right of appeal to a supra-local body (the Quarter Sessions and from 1691 individual magistrates) where they felt that their legitimate requests had been unfairly denied. This right of appeal became a more powerful commodity once the settlement laws of the 1660s and 1690s established that every English and Welsh person had a 'place' in which they were settled – to which they 'belonged'.⁵ The settlement laws did nothing to clarify who was to be regarded as 'deserving', but they did establish a right for paupers to apply for poor relief in, at or to their parish of settlement, and thus grounds for contesting local decisions. Against this backdrop, it has been argued that we should read the combination of a right to apply and an avenue of appeal as conveying rights to receive relief on the part of paupers and an obligation on parishes to provide it.⁶ Other commentators have not seen rights to relief, but have suggested that uncertainty over how magistrates would react to local decisions shaped, or rather constrained, the actions of officials.⁷ For Peter King the individual decisions of magistrates coalesced into a powerful body of justice-made, 'local', law which constituted a remaking of justice from the margins.⁸

Yet empirical evidence on either perceptions of rights or the attitudinal impact of magistrate decisions is surprisingly slim. Paupers certainly had rights of appeal, but it is unclear how many used them.⁹ Even where they did appeal, some studies have questioned how far magistrates were willing to go in supporting the poor.¹⁰ More widely, it is striking that the language of 'rights' to receive, or obligations to give, relief is almost completely absent from pauper letters, vestry minutes and overseers' correspondence. While the poor might use yardsticks

of dignity as a way of asserting parochial obligations, these and other claims-making strategies were clearly conceived of by paupers as part of a *negotiation* of their eligibility for relief as well as its level, form and longevity. In fact, it could be argued that by the early 1800s the 'law of the Old Poor Law' had become such a complex constellation of obligatory legislation (much of it involving only partial re-interpretation or repeal of previous laws), enabling Acts and case law, that no one really understood it.¹¹ The ultimate impact of these multiple levels of 'the law' was a very considerable grey area in the minds of both officials and paupers over eligibility. In this space it was possible for custom rather than law to shape relief practice and for officials to vary their practice from year to year irrespective of continuity or change in the underpinning conditions of poverty.¹² Some of these issues are revisited in Chapter 3.

It was also possible for parishes and officials to construct relief mechanisms – the Speenhamland system or the out-parish relief network – for which the legal basis was either questionable or non-existent.¹³ In the end, much of the day-to-day practice of the English and Welsh Old Poor Law was underpinned by actual, perceived or claimed discretion on the part of officials.¹⁴ Dorothy Marshall suggests that there 'was an enormous gulf between theory and practice ... the latter was a miserable travesty of the former'.¹⁵ While this view is heavily value-laden, the fact of the 'gulf' is reflected in work by Joanna Innes and others suggesting that national legislation frequently had to catch up with what was already happening at local level.¹⁶ Against this backdrop, detailed empirical consideration of relief practice has suggested considerable intra-regional and local variation over both short and long terms.¹⁷ This state of affairs began to break down in the early 1800s under the dual impetus of the statisticalisation of the poor law by central government and an increasing appetite on the part of vestries for knowledge about comparable practice elsewhere.¹⁸ By this time, however, historians have conventionally come to trace a loss of official, public and rate-payer confidence in the Old Poor Law – a so-called 'crisis' – and a rapid waning of humanitarian sentiment towards the poor.¹⁹ Indeed, Lynn Hollen Lees suggests that by the early nineteenth century 'the destitute had lost much of the legitimacy that they had earlier enjoyed in communal eyes'. The poor, she argues, 'were pushed to the margins of their communities well before' the New Poor Law, and there were persistent attempts to tighten eligibility to relief.²⁰ Whether one in fact

sees such a draining of sentiment by the early 1800s is a matter to which this study returns on a number of occasions.²¹

Reflecting and driven by diversity in local practice, the historiographical literature on the Old Poor Law has become increasingly rich. Administrative and institutional histories have dwindled in favour of attempts to reconstruct the world of poor people like George Lewis. Top-down approaches have been superseded by studies, such as that of Innes, which put a dynamic interaction between state and locality at their heart.²² London has been transformed from a backwater of the Old Poor Law literature as large-scale studies have portrayed it as a microcosm of policy and practice across the country.²³ More widely, sustained work on the economy of makeshifts has begun to unpick the key issue of the extent to which local poor law practice was contingent – on the scale of informal and endowed charity, the presence or absence of self-help initiatives, the depth of petty earning and the degree of familial support networks – or self-contained.²⁴ Further research is needed on these important issues, not least to observe the shifting role of the poor law over the life-cycle of paupers and families.²⁵ Such work would usefully feed through to the wider question of how one should think about the geography of the Old Poor Law in its later phases. For some commentators practice was so situational – inexorably conditioned by the scale of local poverty and resources, as well as the personalities of overseers, paupers and vestrymen, and therefore fluid – that intra-regional and local variation defies any attempt to discern patterns of experience, practice and sentiment.²⁶ By contrast, I have argued that if one works within broad limits of tolerance for local (often short-term) variation it is possible to see regional patterns of expenditure and practice, themselves underpinned by distinct regional sentiments towards paupers on the part of officials and to the poor law by the poor.²⁷ More recently, I have refined and extended this argument, suggesting that it is possible to classify and organise local studies across Europe into ‘welfare regimes’ which span administrative, linguistic, religious and state boundaries.²⁸ Rather than focus on ‘national’ narratives of the character of welfare systems or the state of attitudes towards the poor, I argue, we must focus on the nature and longevity of local welfare practice as it was constructed and experienced. Such modelling is not uncontentious but it is informed by a sense that to understand a welfare system one must focus not on

the noise of everyday practice and short-term variation, two of the core rationales for individual micro-studies, but on the key yardsticks by which ingrained *local* sentiment can be judged.

The poor and the Poor Law

The need to make sense of diversity and to locate the individual stories of paupers like George Lewis has informed four trends in the historiography of the Old Poor Law that are central to this study. The first has been to place the pauper experience at the centre of an analytical agenda, fusing together issues of belonging and agency. Keith Snell, for instance, has sought to disentangle the issues of settlement and belonging for the dependent poor. While in practice settlement played a much larger part in defining the identity, 'place' and 'belonging' of the poor and potentially poorer than it did for other groups, even for paupers the question was more complicated than this.²⁹ Belonging was multi-layered – the legal status of belonging created by settlement law; the custom of belonging created by long residence; a belonging created by participation in local institutions, by paying taxes or receiving charity³⁰ – and could be bestowed, inherited and earned. It might be fragile or contested, stronger at some life-cycle points or in some socio-economic contexts than others. For groups like married women belonging could be very complex.³¹ In turn, work on pauper letters or other ordinary writing reveals that the dependent poor had a keen appreciation of how belonging was claimed, maintained and lost.³² And while the fact that some paupers were treated appallingly under the Old Poor Law is ever present,³³ this must be balanced with evidence of compassion, humanity and recognition of 'belonging' by parochial officials, neighbourhoods and communities.³⁴ This complex patchwork suggests the limitations of focusing on national narratives of sentiment towards the poor.

Of course, asserting, claiming and maintaining an acknowledgement of belonging was no easy matter for those at the sharp end of the relief system. One of the most powerful developments in recent historiography, however, has been a rethinking of the matter of pauper agency. The voices of paupers like George Lewis have been increasingly rediscovered, reproduced and re-interpreted. Early work by James Taylor and Thomas Sokoll revealed intriguing caches of letters from or about

paupers in Westmorland and Essex.³⁵ We now know that these represent a small sample of those available across England and Wales, and an even smaller sample of those written but which have not subsequently survived.³⁶ Such documents explode the complex world of pauperism. We are faced with paupers who varied in literacy terms from word-perfect to those like Lewis who employed basic orthographic spelling. These writers adopted complex rhetorical modes and systematically exploited the grey areas of the law over entitlement and parochial obligation by melding together arguments about respectability, gender,³⁷ fatherhood and motherhood,³⁸ familial duty, contribution, honesty, custom, duty, humanity and belonging. In contrast to deferential petitions, such narratives reveal paupers who by and large felt that they had a right to try and shape their relief.³⁹ Sometimes their 'familiar letters' were supplemented or substituted with appearances at the door of the overseer or the correspondence of epistolary advocates, or, as Steve Hindle has shown for an earlier period, by literally occupying liminal spaces within the parish community such as the church porch.⁴⁰ Questions over the limits of pauper agency and whether it translated into better relief outcomes for the poor remain to be fully answered.⁴¹ Nonetheless, a new focus on the words and lives of the poor has suggested the existence of an alternative Old Poor Law: one in which paupers like George Lewis were not simply subject to the unconstrained will of parochial officials and vestries. It seems unlikely in this context that positive sentiment towards the poor ebbed in any uniform way across time and space.

Meanwhile, a second broad trend in the historiographical literature has been to juxtapose questions of agency with attempts to understand the nature of the power relationships into which poor law structure and practice was inscribed and which the poor law itself partly embodied. For the middling sorts who might dominate vestry politics, the relief system was about more than simply reconciling the demand for and supply of welfare. It provided an opportunity to weigh oneself against other people in the parish, to establish a collective identity and to construct and impose behavioural and attitudinal norms upon the poor. In this sense, the issue of what was dispensed to whom and for how long was anything other than a mechanistic decision. Rather, it was tied up with the micro-politics of poor relief and wider questions of social order and stability. During the early modern period such power relations seem to have given the initiative to officials. French and Barry,

for instance, suggest that the poor had to continually work to 'establish their honesty, or their social and moral autonomy' and that there was an inherent bias on the part of parish officials against 'claims of truthfulness and honesty' by the poor.⁴² Hindle has argued persuasively that dependence in this period came to be associated with the loss of dignity and submission to a relationship in which ongoing entitlement was closely linked to obedience of moral codes, the rhetorical and behavioural norms of deference and gratitude and subjection to the will of the donor.⁴³ Such perspectives resonate with some of the writing on the crisis decades of the Old Poor Law. The Webbs, for instance, saw the central purpose of the Old Poor Law as 'repressing the freedom and regulating the conduct' of the poor.⁴⁴ John Broad suggests that the gentry regarded the poor law as 'a personal fiefdom', while Tomkins portrays female paupers as 'not just short of money; they were also short of influence'.⁴⁵ For Lees 'The welfare bargain was a local one between givers and receivers in a particular political context. Negotiated among unequals, it defined the limits of social obligation and of communal membership in a hierarchical society.'⁴⁶ In their turn, parochial officials 'had little hesitation in intervening in the lives of parishioners ... across a positively kaleidoscopic range'.⁴⁷

How far the Old Poor Law and its decision-making structures *actually* institutionalised expectations of deference and certain, moral, forms of behaviour is unclear for the post-1750 period. Poor law administration may have been a forum for the creation of middling identity, but the personalities of parochial officers and splits within vestries on policy matters periodically compromised exercise of the power that such social identity might confer.⁴⁸ On the other side of the welfare bargain, pauper letter writers often used the rhetoric of deference in their initial claims-making. We see this in the example of George Lewis. Yet over a sequence of letters from the same pauper such rhetoric usually slipped, and with no great impact on the outcome of the negotiation. The poor did not behave in workhouses, and readily (often successfully) contested decisions which vestries saw as final.⁴⁹ This picture, developed at length in Chapter 3, should not perhaps surprise us; the period from the 1780s to the 1830s was one in which ordinary people increasingly sought to engage with and confront the local and national state through rioting, rural unrest, petitions to Parliament, rallies, machine-breaking and innumerable acts of everyday resistance. Whether as expressions

of class, popular radicalism, a sense that the powerful ought to adhere to customary norms or wider attempts to establish what Isaac Land has called 'street citizenship', these very visible acts changed the landscape in which power might be exercised.⁵⁰ As we will see, sick paupers like George Lewis posed acute moral problems for ratepayers, hedging their notional power and undermining the sorts of structures of deference to which other groups might have been subject. Their plight also generated advocacy on the part of friends, neighbours, clerics, doctors, magistrates and even the gentry, bringing multiple understandings of power, obligation and the malleability of the local state into confrontation at parochial level.

A third and related development in the recent historiography has been the tendency to move away from analysis of the simple mechanics of poor relief (broadly, who got what, and with what regularity and longevity) towards a deeper understanding of the relief process. If we concentrate on the character and scope of relief as evidenced by overseers' accounts, the mainstay of most early studies of the Old Poor Law, a suite of problems emerge. These include the absence for most places of age-related data that would facilitate an analytical link between allowances and life-cycle stage, and the fact that the operation of the out-parish relief system from the 1780s means that one cannot be sure that all of those named in overseers' accounts were resident in, or paid for by, the community concerned. More importantly, recorded payments represent the final step of a process during which demands might be modified, amalgamated or dropped and claims accepted or rejected. These matters are discussed at greater length in Chapters 2 and 3. In part reacting to such complexities, there has been a tendency to rethink the scale of analysis – particularly the investigation of contiguous or proximate parishes as opposed to single parochial or township units⁵¹ – and to link poor law data more systematically with other local sources. Thus, Richard Smith, Barry Reay, Pam Sharpe, Henry French, Samantha Williams, Barry Stapleton, Susannah Ottaway and myself have all linked overseers' accounts to family reconstitutions.⁵² Such exercises collectively reveal a different kind of poor law from that seen by early commentators such as Dorothy Marshall,⁵³ one in which *inter alia* women tended to dominate the relief landscape measured by value for much of the eighteenth century;⁵⁴ officers were sometimes acutely sensitive to need; parishes sought partnerships with families;

small groups of paupers proved extraordinarily expensive; attitudes towards regular pensions (size, duration, etc.) might vary markedly; inter-generational poverty was growing; and parochial officials were often finely attuned to the local economy of makeshifts. It is doubtless this alternative structure that Lees saw when noting that while ‘The price of relief was acknowledged dependence and a submissive air’, the poor law tied claimant and parish into a ‘morris dance of interlocking obligation’.⁵⁵ Focusing on the process of poor relief, then, refigures our understanding of parochial administration. It suggests that rather than practising a reactive parsimony or a deep adherence to the remedies emanating from national debates over Malthusianism and individual versus societal causes of destitution, vestries and overseers were sensitive to the situational needs of the poor, flexible in their relief strategies and less able to exercise discretion in cases such as that of George Lewis than has often been supposed.

Following from this observation, a final, and fundamental, trend in the recent historiography of the Old Poor Law has been to dissect the lumpen category of ‘the poor’.⁵⁶ The elderly (however defined) have been foremost in this development. We now know that the aged poor were often seen as having definitive moral and customary claims on parochial poor relief, such that they could absorb a considerable proportion of local welfare resources. Ottaway’s study of Terling in Essex and Tollpuddle in Dorset, for instance, reveals a long-term and remarkably robust focus of poor law resources on the aged poor.⁵⁷ Smith’s analysis of the number and proportion of ‘pension weeks’ devoted to the aged poor in fourteen parishes adds a further dimension, suggesting that parochial administrations came to systematically support older men excluded from the labour force.⁵⁸ More widely, both Pat Thane and Lees have suggested that the elderly poor maintained their legitimacy in the eyes of ratepayers for much longer than other groups in the closing decades of the Old Poor Law.⁵⁹ Sokoll is more circumspect, arguing from the letters of Essex paupers that age alone was not a basis for poor relief. Entitlement in advancing years was often linked in the minds of both officials and paupers with sickness, decay, kinship deficit and the changing capacities for work.⁶⁰ In turn the moral dilemma that old age imposed on officials and communities allowed the aged poor to employ particular rhetorical strategies in their letters that were not available to other life-cycle paupers, and their success rates were high.⁶¹

Similarly, the problem of what to do with orphaned or abandoned children or the large families of poor parents created a thorny dilemma for parish officers. Sending them to an institution like the foundling hospital or workhouse could quickly curtail the problem given the high death rates.⁶² Yet most dependent children did not end up in such places.⁶³ Meanwhile, this 'anatomisation' of the poor has also extended to those with mental and physical impairments, and recent commentators have questioned an ingrained view from new disability histories that communal support for such groups was threadbare and episodic.⁶⁴ Such experiences speak to a widespread local assumption that some groups of the dependent poor could not be held responsible for their own poverty and to the long-term survival of paternalistic attitudes towards certain groups of the poor, notwithstanding a national narrative which, as we have seen, might suggest a narrowing of eligibility and a renewed focus on constraining allowances given the spiralling costs of welfare from the 1790s.⁶⁵

To weigh up the broad thrust of the recent historiography of the Old Poor Law is a heroic task. Signs of parsimony, inconsistent policy and a tendency to engage in periodic slashing of the relief lists are regular features of empirical studies. Scandals, though not as well documented as they would be under the New Poor Law, were common.⁶⁶ Such experiences play powerfully to wider contemporary commentary which called into question the moral status, deservingness and even humanity of the poor. On the other hand accumulating evidence of pauper agency and the fact that some groups garnered widely understood and acknowledged customary rights to relief offers a more optimistic sense of the final decades of the Old Poor Law. Paul Slack's reading of 'signs that English society's threshold of tolerance of deprivation was always low' might easily be applied to many of the parishes whose archives underpin this study.⁶⁷ The way in which parishes treated sick paupers like George Lewis is one such sign.

The sick poor

The character, scope and scale of medical welfare under the Old Poor Law are issues that have attracted relatively little historiographical attention in comparison to the post-1834 period.⁶⁸ In some ways this is surprising. The period encompassed by this volume was one in which

older diseases (such as smallpox) retained a hold on the population while new ones (such as cholera) were emerging and others (typhus, strokes and tuberculosis) were being reinvigorated. At the same time the rise of institutional medicine and a more frequent engagement of patients with doctors of various stripes were driving in the general population an increased medicalisation of conditions that might previously just have been 'lived with'. While increases in the range and effectiveness of surgery were at best incremental and the curative potential of drugs remained limited, there is a clear sense by the 1800s that conditions could be and were remediable. Against this backdrop of rapid change in understandings of health and ill-health for the wider population, it would be very unusual not to see percolation of language, demands and ideas down to the expectations and actions of the poor law.

In other ways, however, the lack of work on medical welfare is less surprising. The 1601 Act imposed no absolute obligation on parishes to recognise the sick poor as 'deserving' and to care for them.⁶⁹ Since the state did little to either monitor or regulate local practice, definitions of sickness and the resources devoted to combating it could vary substantially even between adjacent parishes. For historians the very process of defining medical welfare, let alone tracing it in sources such as overseers' accounts, is a complicated process. We return to these matters in Chapter 2. Meanwhile, much of the secondary literature on the Old Poor Law has followed the lead of the Webbs,⁷⁰ assuming that sickness was such a 'normal' part of the poverty life-cycle that there is little point in trying to disentangle medical from other forms of relief.⁷¹ Many studies thus dwell only briefly on the question of the sick poor and their particular experiences or place in the poor law system. Of those medical and welfare historians who have moved further, Martin Gorsky and Sally Sheard suggest that the poor law tended to 'differentiate its health care from its relief duties', a view echoed by Tomkins in her study of Northampton, Shrewsbury and York.⁷² E. G. Thomas similarly concludes that sick paupers in Berkshire, Essex and Oxfordshire received 'sympathetic and humane consideration'.⁷³ More widely, the scale and scope of medical welfare under the Old Poor Law appear to have been somewhat better than that to be had in the initial decades of the New Poor Law. Anne Digby, for instance, concludes that 'Both the comprehensive nature and the overall quality of the medical help given under the Old Poor Law were impressive.' She concurs with Loudon

that before 1834 paupers had access to medical care of equal quality to other parishioners.⁷⁴ Likewise Tomkins contrasts medical relief under the New Poor Law – ‘at best undesirable and at worst repellent’ – unfavourably with that available in the final decades of the Old Poor Law.⁷⁵

The questions of what Thomas’s ‘consideration’ meant in terms of the range and depth of medical care, whether it was uniformly offered across the country, how medical relief was negotiated and the mechanisms for its delivery have prompted a series of important but contradictory studies. Hilary Marland, for instance, argues that medical relief for the northern poor was ‘limited’, comprising in most places less than 5 per cent of total outdoor relief. Indeed ‘poor law medical relief was the least important form of medical provision in existence for the poor throughout the nineteenth century’. French concludes for Terling that medical welfare in the form of *ad hoc* allowances absorbed 8.6 per cent relief resources over the period 1762–1834.⁷⁶ By contrast, Joan Lane suggests that the Old Poor Law provided a ‘comprehensive welfare service’ for the sick poor and identifies an upward spiral in medical expectations of the parish from the later eighteenth century. In fact there was ‘no area of medical or welfare provision that the ... authorities did not undertake’.⁷⁷ Crowther’s characterisation of the ‘chaotic and overlapping medical services’ of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries similarly reserves a key place for the Old Poor Law.⁷⁸ As Dorothy and Roy Porter remind us, vestries in even the most parsimonious communities recognised that small sums spent on treating sickness or alleviating its knock-on effects could save substantial bills in the long term.⁷⁹ Within this general context, medical and welfare historians have seen an increasingly central role for doctors. Samantha Williams, for instance, traces a late eighteenth-century upsurge in the practice of parishes contracting doctors as opposed to using them on an *ad hoc* basis.⁸⁰ Doctors themselves appear to have embraced such contracts,⁸¹ and Roy Porter is in no doubt that for the poor ‘being treated by the doctor became a way of life’.⁸² Even in the notionally harshest of poor law counties, as we shall see, there is evidence of doctors extending their sway over the medical lives of poor people.⁸³ The intertwining issues of the changing nature of the engagement between parishes and medical people (doctors, fringe practitioners, nurses) and of the quality of the care they provided are revisited in Chapter 5.

In the meantime, the range of benefits encompassed by 'medical welfare' expanded from the late eighteenth century.⁸⁴ As well as employing doctors on contracts, paying extra cash allowances to families and buying food and drink for the sick, some parishes began to send their poor to specialist medical men.⁸⁵ Indeed, Lane suggests that the Old Poor Law provided '[medical] services from the cradle to the grave'.⁸⁶ Local studies suggest a willingness on the part of parochial officers to invest considerable sums in restoring individual and familial health, paying for midwives, rent arrears occasioned by sickness, false limbs, fuel, nursing care and sojourns in a wide variety of medical institutions.⁸⁷ Moreover, the range of what was recognised as 'sickness' also appears to have expanded, with Tomkins for instance arguing that parishes recognised melancholy by the early nineteenth century.⁸⁸ In the case of groups such as the insane (revisited in Chapter 8) or those with physical impairments, officers often proved particularly sensitive to their moral and practical obligations.⁸⁹ Indeed, Dorothy Porter even claims that it is possible to see the evolution in the nineteenth century of a definitive 'health citizenship'.⁹⁰ Whether range and variety in medical welfare were matched by depth is taken up from Chapter 4 onwards.⁹¹ In the meantime, the question of how to interpret increased parochial engagement with sickness relief is complex. Such patterning may reflect a tightening of the definition of who was properly eligible for relief in the last decades of the Old Poor Law. Paupers as a group may have been losing their legitimacy in the eyes of ratepayers, as welfare historians focusing on national commentaries have often argued, such that parochial officers sought to increasingly focus resources on those traditionally seen as deserving. On the other hand, we may be witnessing responses to an increasing tide of sickness, a vibrant pauper agency or a positive sense that the sick poor had valid and substantial claims on parochial resources.⁹²

However we interpret the broad picture, it is important to acknowledge that these perspectives arise out of a mere handful of empirical studies covering individual communities or (much more rarely) county samples. They remain to be tested against a large-scale database of evidence on medical relief drawn from parishes across the typological, chronological and geographical spectrum. There is also much that we do *not* know. While the literature on voluntary hospitals has become ever richer, our understanding of the medical aspects of the

institutional infrastructure of the Old Poor Law itself – workhouses, fever hospitals, nursing homes – is to say the least threadbare. Nor do we have a firm grasp on the medical economy of makeshifts. The voluntary hospital system, allied with increasing self-help provision through the growth of friendly societies and burial clubs, gave some paupers real alternatives to the poor law. So did the fact that, as Porter notes, medical practitioners themselves increasingly treated poor people free of charge, or at reduced cost, from charitable or other imperatives.⁹³ And, of course, irregular practitioners, dispensing druggists and quacks could increasingly claim the poor and very poor among their customers.⁹⁴ The question of how – or given the work of Tomkins on the discrete constituencies of infirmaries and workhouses, whether⁹⁵ – the sick poor like George Lewis assembled a medical economy of makeshifts at fixed points in time and over the life-cycle requires much further work.

Addressing these lacunae for such an important sub-group of the poor is a vital task. Yet the sick poor also matter for another reason. People like George Lewis posed, as we will go on to see, the most acute moral dilemma for the parochial officials. Sickness could be faked, and the unemployed and morally suspect could build a legitimate case for relief by appropriating the rhetoric of sickness, something which, if widely adopted, ought to influence our reading of quantitative trends in medical welfare spending. We return to this issue in Chapters 2 and 3. Even if genuine, sickness might be caused and exacerbated by moral failings such as heavy drinking. In this sense, parochial intervention invited sustained moral hazard. More generally, treating sickness could be extremely expensive, but not doing so might reduce individuals and families to long-term penury and lead to much higher relief costs than an engagement with the illness would have incurred. Failing to treat sick children or to throw enough resources at problems such as epidemics or accidents could foster both lifelong pauperism and its inter-generational transmission. Genuine, sickness placed ratepayers and their officials firmly in the territory of what we now understand as the moral economy, and studies of pauper letters have begun to point to an ingrained belief among the epistolary advocates of the sick poor that parishes had an absolute duty to act at times of sickness.⁹⁶ A bedrock of custom, intertwining by the late eighteenth century with the inexorable subjection of the labour market to exogenous shocks (trade

depression, war or harvest failure), demographic instability,⁹⁷ and evidence of rising background medical standards, proved a challenging framework for officials. Yet recognising sickness as a moral basis for relief would give the poor a fixed reference point in navigating the rules of relief systems where the actions of officials were underpinned by discretion and individual case analysis. It was in these grey areas over entitlement that the sick poor and their advocates could potentially apply an agency greater by far than for any other paupers. To reject claims meant accepting prolonged negotiation, repeated application, public discussion inside and outside the parish and potential damage to reputations where officials were seen or characterised as uncaring, inhumane, unchristian and penny-pinching. This is not to say that officials were immune from reacting summarily, slowly or negatively to the claims of the sick poor. It is to observe, however, that such actions were, and were often seen to be, contentious. Thus, while studying the sick poor and medical welfare in their own right is important, these matters also offer a wider lens onto bigger issues about the nature, purpose and sentiment of the Old Poor Law and the traction of 'national' debates about eligibility and deservingness at local level. In this sense, one of the central arguments of this study is that those who became poor because they were sick or became sick when or because they were poor constitute *the* iconic sub-group of 'the poor'. Their treatment at the individual and collective level can and should be used as a key yardstick by which one might judge the sentiment of the Old Poor Law in its final 'crisis' period.

Looking forward

In this context the current study has five interweaving aims. The first is to construct a broad comparative picture of the scale of medical welfare in England across the period 1750–1834. A second is to analyse the range, depth and constellation of medical welfare in different parochial, regional and typological settings, and through such an analysis to explore the everyday experiences of the sick poor. A related and third aim is to locate poor law support within the wider medical economy of makeshifts. Fourthly, the study aims to come to a better understanding of the agency of sick paupers like George Lewis in shaping the incidence, character and duration of medical welfare. Finally, the study will

question the sense that the poor – or at least the sick poor – lost their legitimacy in the eyes of ratepayers and officials, seeking to rethink the sentimental architecture of the Old Poor Law in its final decades.

Exploring these issues in a meaningful way requires a large-scale comparative dataset, and my study draws on four sets of sources. Firstly, I use operational data (overseers' accounts, vestry minutes, correspondence, bills, vouchers, correspondence) from 117 parishes across the counties of Berkshire, Norfolk, Wiltshire, Northamptonshire, Leicestershire, Lancashire and West Yorkshire. The Appendix provides further analysis of the reasons for choosing these counties and the socio-economic and demographic complexion of the sample. Meanwhile, Chapter 4 focuses on the methodological and practical issues involved in constructing a chronological, typological and spatial overview of medical welfare from this empirical core. Secondly, I draw episodically (and particularly from Chapter 5 onwards) on material from a second tranche of communities where operational data is more fractured. Comprising 146 parishes both within the core county envelopes and much more widely in England, these places provide a window onto the experiences of medical welfare across a wider spectrum. Once again, the Appendix provides more detail on this sample. Thirdly, the study draws (particularly in Chapters 2 and 5–10) on a set of miscellaneous sources collected and analysed as part of prior projects. These include the records of coronial courts for Lincolnshire, Midland and Wiltshire circuits, printed diaries and memorandum books, contemporary pamphlets, advertising material for irregular practitioners, notes on patient cases kept by voluntary hospitals and workhouse medical staff, newspaper articles, friendly society certificates, pre-1841 census material and parochial registers. Finally, I use in most chapters data from the tri-partite epistolary world of the parish: letters from poor claimants, their advocates and officials. Covering every county in England, the dataset comprises 12,904 narratives by or about the poor, and Chapters 2 and 3 deal at greater length with the sickness component of this material and also its wider methodological and substantive complexities.⁹⁸ Collectively, these datasets represent the most extensive and intensive corpus ever brought to bear on the Old Poor Law.

An important prior step in using this data is to understand the scale and character of sickness that the parochial welfare system had to

cope with and to construct a working definition of medical welfare. Chapter 2 takes up these matters. It argues that the frequency and duration of sickness among the poor increased even as the impact of epidemic disease fell away from the later eighteenth century. The chapter also argues that our definition of medical welfare should be driven by the practice of contemporary overseers and vestries. They often did not confine themselves to narrow definitions centred on the provision of doctors and medicines. Rather, they funded (and recorded as a coherent whole) a range of needs when confronted by sickness episodes, including rent payments, funerals, institutional sojourns, cash, and consequential relief for bereaved families. This evidently raises problems of measurement, record linkage, source coverage and official recording policy. Chapters 2 and 4 take up these questions and the practical application of a wide definition of medical welfare. Chapter 3 completes Part I. At its core lie questions about the scope for and effectiveness of the agency of the sick poor on the one hand and the receptiveness of officials on the other. While the sick poor rarely claimed definitive rights to relief, the chapter will suggest that there was an accepted ground of contestation which points ultimately to the fluidity and flexibility of local policy even in the crisis years of the Old Poor Law. Chapter 4 opens Part II of the study, which is centrally concerned with the complexion of medical welfare and everyday experiences for the sick poor. It reviews the methodological and procedural issues involved in using and interpreting analysis of the data, ultimately arguing that medical welfare became a more and more important part of overall relief spending during the last decades of the Old Poor Law. There were important spatial nuances to this picture, but typological variation will be seen to be muted. Chapters 5–7 (focusing respectively on medical people, wider forms of parochial medical welfare, and last illnesses and pauper funerals) offer a dissection of the broad quantitative picture. Combining summative analysis and more detailed perspectives on emblematic parishes or paupers, the chapters reconstruct an Old Poor Law that was willing and able to respond inventively to the needs of the sick

Part III of the study moves our focus away from issues of complexion, place, community typology and chronological change and to wider questions about the place of parochial support in the life-cycles of paupers and the wider medical market in which they engaged.

Chapter 8 focuses on the particular role of institutional care. Perhaps not unexpectedly given the proliferation of voluntary institutions, private asylums and workhouses in the later decades of the Old Poor Law, it argues that institutional sojourns became a more common part of the parochial response to sickness, albeit with marked differences of emphasis in certain counties. Chapter 9 sets the resources offered by the parish into the wider infrastructure of medical care available to the poor at points in time and over the life-cycle. Painting a rich picture of the medical economy of makeshifts, it argues that paupers individually and collectively navigated a complex assemblage of shadow, supplementary and substitute sources of medical care. Finally, Chapter 10 turns to the questions of how we make sense of spatial chronological and typological diversity and what such a synthesis can offer to our understanding of the character and role of the Old Poor Law in its final years.

A starting point

Jack Langton has suggested that welfare historians must recover the overarching 'human ecology' of poor relief. This includes, *inter alia*, the subjective experiences of being poor; pauper agency; the words and sentiments of the poor and their advocates; the micro-politics, personal enmities, jealousies, hopes and fears that drove both sides of the interaction between officials and paupers in the process of poor relief; and above all the impact of underlying socio-economic, topographical and cultural systems on policy.⁹⁹ It is particularly important to undertake such an exercise for the sick poor. This group inspired local sentiments on a spectrum from absolute loathing to a sensitive acknowledgement of Christian duty. Treating the 'plight' of paupers like George Lewis brought parochial officials into sustained contact with the stories of the desperate, the hopeless and hopeful, the honest, the crafty, the skilled and clumsy narrator, the mean and the generous, and the out-and-out charlatan. To build the human ecology of poor relief involves starting with this group rather than seeing them as part of the historiographical wallpaper.

That said, my study has not set out to engage with every sub-group of the sick poor. The Irish, Welsh and Scottish, black seafarers and ex-slaves, the Dutch and the Spanish all appear in the underlying

data, but I have not been centrally concerned with ethnicity, not least because parishes themselves often appear to have been blind to origin or colour.¹⁰⁰ And while issues of life-cycle are considered throughout, my study does not have individual chapters on particular life-cycle groups. In practice the sickness of one person often enmeshed whole families, neighbourhoods and kinship groups, and it makes more sense to talk about the sick poor collectively. Even so, sick children were ubiquitous in the underlying sources and they thus make frequent appearances. The study also has spatial and chronological limitations. It focuses, and was intended to focus, on England. This is not to say that Scotland is unimportant, but to acknowledge that the sources for studying medical welfare are radically different for the country, as they are for Ireland.¹⁰¹ While Wales notionally shared the same laws as England, the character of its Old Poor Law was so distinctive as to demand a study in its own right. Within this broad spatial context, the parochial sample is substantial and (see the Appendix) designed to cover the typological spectrum from tiny rural parishes, town hinterlands, industrial and proto-industrial communities and coastal parishes to larger towns, both growing and decaying. I do not, however, claim that this is a systematic sample. London is under-represented though not absent; many pauper letters were written from the metropolis. The very largest towns are also under-represented, a reflection of both the scale of the task and associated problems of source coverage and depth. This is not, however, a study of rural England. Some twenty-three of my 117 base communities are 'urban' on conventional definitions of the term. Meanwhile, the chronological focus is firmly on the final decades of the Old Poor Law. This is partly for pragmatic reasons of source creation, preservation and depth. It also reflects, however, a desire to engage with wider questions of 'national' sentiment towards the poor and the poor law, which, as we have seen above, is constructed as waning at any time across the period from the 1750s. In this sense, my study will offer a more favourable reading of the relief system than has often been given, suggesting that the substantial tide of illness confronted by parishes in this period generated an essentially humanitarian response. We should thus construct the 'crisis of the Old Poor Law' as a rhetorical and strategic exercise that had limited impact on the lives of key groups such as the sick poor.

Notes

- 1 GRO, P193 OV/7-1, letter.
- 2 The Old Poor Law represents the only *constant* legally enshrined and national European welfare system before 1800: J. Innes, 'State, church and volunteerism in European welfare 1690-1850', in A. Cunningham and J. Innes (eds), *Charity, Philanthropy and Reform from the 1690s to 1850* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), pp. 15-65; and J. Innes, S. King and A. Winter, 'Settlement and belonging in Europe, 1500-1930s: Structures, negotiations and experiences', in S. King and A. Winter (eds), *Migration, Settlement and Belonging in Europe, 1500s-1930s* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2013), pp. 1-28.
- 3 43 Eliz. I c. 2 (1601). On the need to read this statute alongside the Statute of Charitable Uses, see S. Hindle, "'Good, godly and charitable uses": Endowed charity and the relief of poverty in rural England, c.1555-1750', in A. Goldgar and R. Frost (eds), *Institutional Culture in Early Modern Society* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), p. 164.
- 4 S. Webb and B. Webb, *English Poor Law History Part I: The Old Poor Law* (London: Cass, 1963), p. 406.
- 5 For a case study in the Lancashire context see J. Healey, 'The development of poor relief in Lancashire, c.1598-1680', *Historical Journal*, 53 (2010), 567-72.
- 6 L. Charlesworth, *Welfare's Forgotten Past: A Socio-Legal History of the Poor Law* (London: Routledge, 2009). This work echoes similar claims by R. Mitchison, *Coping with Destitution: Poverty and Relief in Western Europe* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), pp. 45-8, and L. H. Lees, *The Solidarities of Strangers: The English Poor Laws and the People 1700-1948* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 39, who argues that 'citizens with parish settlements had a right to relief, and they knew it'. Dorothy Marshall in *The English Poor in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Longman, 1926), p. 252, has argued that 'The poorer sort took relief as their right whilst the ratepayers despised them for their indolence and insolence, and even for their very misery.'
- 7 P. Dunkley, *The Crisis of the Old Poor Law in England 1795-1834: An Interpretive Essay* (New York: Garland, 1982), pp. 54-6 and 78.
- 8 P. King, *Crime and Law in England 1750-1840: Remaking Justice from the Margins* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) and P. King, 'The rights of the poor and the role of the law: The impact of pauper appeals to the summary courts 1750-1834', in P. Jones and S. King (eds), *Obligation, Entitlement and Dispute under the English Poor Laws* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2015), pp. 235-62. See also

- D. Eastwood, *Governing Rural England: Tradition and Transformation in Local Government 1780–1840* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), pp. 44, 106, 112 and 133.
- 9 S. King, 'Negotiating the law of poor relief in England 1800–1840', *History*, 96 (2011), 410–35. Officials found ways of preventing appeals. See S. Broadbridge, 'The Old Poor Law in the parish of Stone', *North Staffordshire Journal of Field Studies*, 13 (1973), 11–25, at p. 12.
 - 10 P. King, 'Social inequality, identity and the labouring poor in eighteenth century England', in H. French and J. Barry (eds), *Identity and Agency in England, 1500–1800* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2004), pp. 60–87; G. Morgan and P. Rushton, 'The magistrate, the community and the maintenance of an orderly society in eighteenth century England', *Historical Research*, 76 (2003), 54–77.
 - 11 S. King, "In these you may trust": Numerical information, accounting practices and the poor law, c.1790 to 1840', in T. Crook and G. O'Hara (eds), *Statistics and the Public Sphere: Numbers and the People in Modern Britain, c.1750–2000* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 51–66.
 - 12 See S. Shave, 'The dependent poor? (Re)constructing individual lives "on the parish" in rural Dorset 1800–1832', *Rural History*, 20 (2009), 67–98; S. Ottaway, *The Decline of Life: Old Age in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 42–86.
 - 13 M. Neuman, *The Speenhamland County: Poverty and the Poor Laws in Berkshire 1782–1834* (New York: Garland, 1982), pp. 76 and 164. The out-parish relief system comprised bi-lateral and multi-lateral deals between settlement parishes and host communities whereby the poor 'out of their place' at the time they applied for relief were relieved in host communities, obviating the need for removal: S. King, "It is impossible for our vestry to judge his case into perfection from here": Managing the distance dimensions of poor relief, 1800–40', *Rural History*, 16 (2005), 161–89. S. Hindle, 'Power, poor relief and social relations in Holland Fen c.1600–1800', *Historical Journal*, 41 (1998), 67–96, at p. 87, argues that there was considerable hostility on the part of host parishes to the non-settled poor. For a contrary view see Broadbridge, 'The Old Poor Law', p. 16, who notes that Stone (Staffordshire) had relief arrangements with more than sixty parishes by 1820.
 - 14 Webb and Webb, *English Poor Law History*, p. 149.
 - 15 Marshall, *The English Poor*, p. 250.
 - 16 J. Innes, 'The local acts of a national parliament: Parliament's role in sanctioning local action in eighteenth-century Britain', *Parliamentary History*, 17 (1998), 23–47; J. Innes, *Inferior Politics: Social Problems and Social Policies in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press,

- 2009); R. Connors, 'Parliament and poverty in mid-eighteenth century England', *Parliamentary History*, 21 (2002), 207–31.
- 17 J. Langton, 'The geography of poor relief in rural Oxfordshire, 1775–1832', in Jones and King (eds), *Obligation, Entitlement and Dispute*, pp. 193–234.
- 18 D. Eastwood, 'Rethinking the debates on the poor law in early nineteenth-century England', *Utilitas*, 6 (1994), 97–116.
- 19 Historians differ considerably over the timing of this waning sentiment. For D. Valenze, 'Charity, custom and humanity: Changing attitudes to the poor in eighteenth century England', in J. Garnett and C. Matthew (eds), *Revival and Religion since 1700: Essays for John Walsh* (London: Hambledon, 1993), p. 78, the poor lost their legitimacy in the later eighteenth century; Eastwood, *Governing Rural England*, pp. 101–2 and 118, sees a softening of attitudes from 1750 systematically reversed in the 1790s; A. Tomkins, 'Women and poverty', in H. Barker and E. Chalus (eds), *Women's History: Britain 1700–1850* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 166, suggests that favourable sentiment towards female paupers had disappeared by 1810. For a wider discussion, see A. Tomkins, *The Experience of Urban Poverty, 1723–82: Parish, Charity and Credit* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), pp. 7–8.
- 20 Lees, *Solidarities of Strangers*, pp. 20 and 82.
- 21 For more positive views see J. Taylor, *Poverty, Migration and Settlement in the Industrial Revolution: Sojourners' Narratives* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1989), pp. 4, 9, 105 and 173; Mitchison, *Coping with Destitution*, p. 33; P. Thane, *Old Age in English History: Past Experiences, Present Issues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 107–8, 112–13; M. Daunton, *Progress and Poverty: An Economic and Social History of Britain 1700–1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 452; D. Eastwood, 'The republic in the village: Parish and poor at Bampton 1780–1834', *Journal of Regional and Local Studies*, 12 (1992), 17–28, at p. 25. J. Broad, 'Parish economies of welfare 1650–1834', *Historical Journal*, 42 (1999), 985–1006, at p. 989, suggests that 'parish histories profoundly influenced the dynamism of local provision for the poor'. Contemporaries likewise held very divergent views. See, for instance, the plan for a national, government-funded, network of asylums for the aged and sick outlined in *Common Sense*, 'Rights of the poor asserted', *Monthly Magazine*, 34 (1812), 231, pp. 123–7.
- 22 Innes, *Inferior Politics*.
- 23 D. Green, *Pauper Capital: London and the Poor Law, 1790–1870* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010); J. Boulton and L. Schwarz, "'The comforts of a private fireside": The workhouse, the elderly and the poor law

- in Georgian Westminster. St Martin-in-the-Fields, 1725–1824’, in J. McEwan and P. Sharpe (eds), *Accommodating Poverty: The Housing and Living Arrangements of the English Poor, c.1600–1850* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2011), pp. 221–45; J. Boulton, “‘The charity of our life and healthful years’? Approaches to inter-vivos giving to the poor in the Metropolis 1600–1720’, in Jones and King (eds), *Obligation, Entitlement and Dispute*, pp. 20–52; E. Murphy, ‘The metropolitan pauper farms 1722–1834’, *London Journal*, 27 (2002), 1–18.
- 24 S. King and A. Tomkins (eds), *The Poor in England 1700–1850: An Economy of Makeshifts* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003); Tomkins, *The Experience of Urban Poverty*, pp. 204–29; and S. Lloyd, *Charity and Poverty in England, c.1680–1820: Wild and Visionary Schemes* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009).
 - 25 For an excellent example see H. French, ‘How dependent were the “dependent poor”? Poor relief and the life-course in Terling, Essex, 1762–1834’, *Continuity and Change*, 30 (2015), 193–222, at pp. 215–16.
 - 26 S. Hindle, *On the Parish? The Micro Politics of Poor Relief in Rural England 1550–1750* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), pp. 282–99.
 - 27 S. King, *Poverty and Welfare in England 1700–1850: A Regional Perspective* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000). For different regional models see M. Lyle, ‘Regionality in the late Old Poor Law: The treatment of chargeable bastards from Rural Queries’, *Agricultural History Review*, 53 (2013), 141–57, and K. Price, *Medical Negligence in Victorian Britain: The Crisis of Care under the English Poor Law 1834–1900* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015).
 - 28 S. King, ‘Welfare regimes and welfare regions in Britain and Europe, c.1750–1860’, *Journal of Modern European History*, 9 (2011), 42–66.
 - 29 K. Snell, *Parish and Belonging: Community, Identity and Welfare in England and Wales 1700–1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
 - 30 Lloyd, *Charity and Poverty*.
 - 31 P. Sharpe, ‘Parish women: Maternity and the limitations of Maiden Settlement in England 1662–1834’, in Jones and King (eds), *Obligation, Entitlement and Dispute*, pp. 168–92.
 - 32 See contributions to A. Gestrich, E. Hurren and S. King (eds), *Poverty and Sickness in Modern Europe: Narratives of the Sick Poor* (London: Continuum, 2012).
 - 33 D. Feldman, ‘Migrants, immigrants and welfare from the Old Poor Law to the welfare state’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 13 (2003), 79–104, at p. 102, suggests that parochial officials had a ‘moral disdain’ for paupers. For other negative commentary see E. Murphy, ‘The metropolitan pauper farms’, p. 4.

- 34 K. Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor: Social Change and Agrarian England, 1660–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 105–7, argues that for those with settlement in southern England the Old Poor Law was ‘flexible and humane’; D. Thomson, ‘Welfare and the historians’, in L. Bonfield, R. Smith and K. Wrightson (eds), *The World We Have Gained: Histories of Population and Social Structure* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 370, likewise argues that the poor law did not simply provide minimal and miserly relief. See also Daunton, *Progress and Poverty*, pp. 450–2, and J. Taylor, *Poverty, Migration and Settlement*, p. 51.
- 35 T. Sokoll, *Essex Pauper Letters 1731–1837* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); J. Taylor, ‘Voices in the crowd: The Kirkby Lonsdale township letters, 1809–1836’, in T. Hitchcock, P. King and P. Sharpe (eds), *Chronicling Poverty: The Voices and Strategies of the English Poor, 1640–1840* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), pp. 109–26. Such work should lead us to doubt that the voices of ordinary people were ‘increasingly less audible’ by the end of the early modern period. See R. Esser, ‘“They obey all magistrates and all good lawes ... and we thinke our cittie happie to enjoye them”’: Migrants and urban stability in early modern English towns’, *Urban History*, 34 (2007), 75.
- 36 S. King, T. Nutt and A. Tomkins, *Narratives of the Poor in Eighteenth Century Britain* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2006).
- 37 P. Sharpe, ‘Survival strategies and stories: Poor widows and widowers in early industrial England’, in S. Cavallo and L. Warner (eds), *Widowhood in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (London: Longman, 1999), pp. 220–39; S. King, ‘“The particular claims of a woman and a mother”’: Gender, belonging and rights to medical relief in England 1800–1840s’, in A. Andresen, T. Grønle, W. Hubbard, T. Rymin and S. Skålevåg (eds), *Citizens, Courtrooms, Crossings* (Bergen: Bergen University Press, 2008), pp. 21–38.
- 38 J. Bailey, ‘“Think Wot a Mother Must Feel”’: Parenting in English pauper letters c.1760–1834’, *Family and Community History*, 13 (2010), 5–19.
- 39 L.-H. van Voss (ed.), *Petitions in Social History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). On the transition from early modern petitions to different sorts of narratives, see P. Jones and S. King, ‘From petition to pauper letter: The development of an epistolary form’, in Jones and King (eds), *Obligation, Entitlement and Dispute*, pp. 53–77.
- 40 S. King and P. Jones, ‘Testifying for the poor: Epistolary advocates and the negotiation of parochial relief in England, 1800–1834’, *Journal of Social History*, 49 (2016), 351–82; S. Hindle, ‘Destitution, liminality and belonging: The church porch and the politics of settlement in English

- rural communities, c.1590–1660’, in C. Dyer (ed.), *The Self-Contained Village? The Social History of Rural Communities, 1250–1900* (Hatfield: Hertfordshire University Press, 2006), pp. 46–71.
- 41 For sceptical voices see P. King, ‘Social inequality’, pp. 66–74, and Tomkins, ‘Women and poverty’, p. 169.
 - 42 H. French and J. Barry, ‘Identity and agency in English society, 1500–1800: An introduction’, in French and Barry (eds), *Identity and Agency*, pp. 1–37, at pp. 26 and 31.
 - 43 S. Hindle, ‘Civility, honesty and the identification of the deserving poor in seventeenth century England’, in French and Barry (eds), *Identity and Agency*, pp. 38–59, at pp. 40, 47 and 52.
 - 44 Webb and Webb, *English Poor Law History*, p. vi. In the North Riding such sentiments seem to have become ingrained after 1815. See R. Hastings, *Poverty and the Poor Law in the North Riding of Yorkshire 1780–1837* (York: Borthwick Institute, 1982), p. 32.
 - 45 Broad, ‘Parish economies of welfare’, p. 989; Tomkins, ‘Women and poverty’, p. 169.
 - 46 Lees, *Solidarities of Strangers*, pp. 7, 22 and 36.
 - 47 D. Eastwood, *Government and Community in the English Provinces 1700–1870* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), p. 48.
 - 48 On the importance of overseer personality, see Eastwood, *Governing Rural England*, p. 40. See also A. Kidd, *State, Society and the Poor in Nineteenth Century England* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), p. 4, who argues that the Old Poor Law demonstrated ‘paternalistic and comparatively generous philanthropy’.
 - 49 D. Green, ‘Pauper protests: Power and resistance in early nineteenth-century London workhouses’, *Social History*, 31 (2006), 137–59.
 - 50 I. Land, ‘Bread and arsenic: Citizenship from the bottom up in Georgian London’, *Journal of Social History*, 45 (2005), 89–110, at p. 90.
 - 51 Building on older works such as E. Neuman, ‘The Old Poor Law in Kent 1606–1834’ (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Kent, 1979); N. Hopkin, ‘The Old and New Poor Law in East Yorkshire, 1760–1850’ (unpublished MPhil thesis, University of Leeds, 1968); V. Walsh, ‘Poor Law administration in Shropshire, 1820–1855’ (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 1970). More recent comparative surveys include J. Hill, ‘Poverty, unrest and response in Surrey, 1815–1834’ (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Roehampton, 2006).
 - 52 B. Stapleton, ‘Inherited poverty and life-cycle poverty: Odiham, Hampshire, 1650–1850’, *Social History*, 18 (1993), 339–55; B. Reay, *Micro-Histories: Demography, Society, and Culture in Rural England, 1800–1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); R. Smith, ‘Ageing

- and well-being in early modern England: Pension trends and gender preference under the English Old Poor Law 1650–1800', in P. Johnson and P. Thane (eds), *Old Age from Antiquity to Postmodernity* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 64–95; S. Williams, *Poverty, Gender and Life-Cycle under the English Poor Law 1760–1834* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2011); P. Sharpe, *Population and Society in an East Devon Parish: Reproducing Colyton, 1540–1840* (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 2002); S. King, 'Reconstructing lives: The poor, the poor law and welfare in rural industrial communities', *Social History*, 22 (1997), 318–38; S. King, 'Pauvreté et assistance: La politique locale de la mortalité dans l'Angleterre des XVIII et XIX siècles', *Annales*, 61 (2006), 31–62; H. French, 'An irrevocable shift: Detailing the dynamics of rural poverty in southern England, 1762–1834. A case study', *Economic History Review*, 68 (2015), 769–805.
- 53 Marshall, *The English Poor*, p. 11, argues that parishes had 'blindness to all interests but their own'.
- 54 See S. Williams, 'Malthus, marriage and poor law allowances revisited: A Bedfordshire case study, 1770–1834', *Agricultural History Review*, 52 (2004), 56–82, at pp. 64–7.
- 55 Lees, *Solidarities of Strangers*, p. 36.
- 56 S. Williams, 'The experience of pregnancy and childbirth for unmarried mothers in London, 1760–1866', *Women's History Review*, 20 (2011), 67–86; T. Evans, 'Unfortunate objects': *Lone Mothers in Eighteenth-Century London* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005).
- 57 Ottaway, *The Decline of Life*. More recently, Henry French, 'An irrevocable shift', pp. 784–6, has argued that the thrust of relief in Terling moved firmly towards men of working age in the early nineteenth century as the importance of short-term allowances to supplement income grew exponentially.
- 58 R. Smith, 'Ageing and well-being', pp. 90–5.
- 59 Thane, *Old Age in English History*; Lees, *Solidarities of Strangers*, pp. 58–60.
- 60 T. Sokoll, 'Old age in poverty: The record of Essex pauper letters, 1780–1834', in Hitchcock, King and Sharpe (eds), *Chronicling Poverty*, pp. 127–54.
- 61 T. Sokoll, 'Negotiating a living: Essex pauper letters from London, 1800–1834', *International Review of Social History Supplement*, 8 (2000), 19–46.
- 62 A. Levene, *Childcare, Health, and Mortality at the London Foundling Hospital, 1741–1800: 'Left to the mercy of the world'* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).
- 63 A. Levene, *The Childhood of the Poor: Welfare in Eighteenth Century London* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2012).

- 64 A. Borsay, *Disability and Social Policy in Britain since 1750: A History of Exclusion* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005); D. Turner, *Disability in Eighteenth-Century England: Imagining Physical Impairment* (London: Routledge, 2012); S. King, 'Constructing the disabled child in England, 1800–1860', *Family and Community History*, 18 (2015), 56–89.
- 65 On these debates see J. Poynter, *Society and Pauperism: English Ideas on Poor Relief, 1795–1834* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969); G. Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty: England in the Early Industrial Age* (London: Knopf, 1983); and Innes, *Inferior Politics*.
- 66 On later scandals, see contributions to J. Reinartz and L. Schwarz (eds), *Medicine and the Workhouse* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2013).
- 67 P. Slack, *Poverty and Policy in Tudor and Stuart England* (London: Longman 1988), p. 207.
- 68 For a summary see S. King, 'Poverty, medicine and the workhouse in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: An afterword', in Reinartz and Schwarz (eds), *Medicine and the Workhouse*, pp. 228–52. See also R. Hodgkinson, *The Origins of the National Health Service: The Medical Services of the New Poor Law 1834–1871* (London: Croom Helm, 1967); M. Flinn, 'Medical services under the new poor law', in D. Fraser (ed.), *The New Poor Law in the Nineteenth Century* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1976), and M. Crowther, *The Workhouse System 1834–1929* (London: Batsford, 1981). Nor did the matter attract sustained contemporary attention through the Royal Commission into the Operation of the Poor Laws of 1832 or in F. M. Eden's *The State of the Poor: Or, an History of the Labouring Classes in England, from the Conquest to the Present*, 3 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). The latter frequently notes, however, that a short illness was enough to bring dependency on the parish.
- 69 See M. Gorsky and S. Sheard, 'Introduction', in M. Gorsky and S. Sheard (eds), *Financing Medicine: The British Experience since 1750* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 1–20, at p. 3.
- 70 Webb and Webb, *English Poor Law History*, p. 170.
- 71 See A. Tomkins, "'Labouring on a bed of sickness": The material and rhetorical deployment of ill-health in male pauper letters', in Gestrinch, Hurren and King (eds), *Poverty and Sickness*, pp. 51–68, pp. 51–2.
- 72 Gorsky and Sheard, 'Introduction', p. 2; Tomkins, *The Experience of Urban Poverty*, pp. 120–62.
- 73 E. Thomas, 'The Old Poor Law and medicine', *Medical History*, 24 (1980), 1–19, at p. 1; A. Tomkins, "'The excellent example of the working class": Medical welfare, contributory funding and the North Staffordshire

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- 75 Tomkins, 'Women and poverty', p. 164.
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- 77 J. Lane, *A Social History of Medicine: Health, Healing and Disease in England 1750–1950* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 49, 51 and 54.
- 78 M. Crowther, 'Health care and poor relief in provincial England', in O. Grell, A. Cunningham and R. Jütte (eds), *Health Care and Poor Relief in 18th and 19th Century Northern Europe* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 206.
- 79 D. Porter and R. Porter, *Patient's Progress: Doctors and Doctoring in Eighteenth Century England* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989), p. 8. For similar points see A. Brundage, *The English Poor Laws 1700–1930* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2002), pp. 17–18, and A. Borsay, *Medicine and Charity in Georgian Bath: A Social History of the General Infirmiry* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), p. 212.
- 80 S. Williams, 'Practitioners' income and provision for the poor: Parish doctors in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries', *Social History of Medicine*, 18 (2005), 159–86.
- 81 I. Loudon, 'Medical practitioners 1750–1850 and the period of medical reform in Britain', in A. Wear (ed.), *Medicine in Society: Historical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 242; Digby, *Making a Medical Living*, p. 119, notes that by the early nineteenth century at least one doctor in five held poor law office, while two out of five may have held such office at some point in their careers. See also S. Cherry, 'General practitioners, hospitals and medical services in rural England: The East Anglian region, 1800–1948', in J. Barona and S. Cherry (eds), *Health and Medicine in Rural Europe (1850–1945)* (Valencia: Seminari d'Estudis sobre la Ciència, 2005), pp. 17–41.
- 82 R. Porter, 'The patient in England 1660–1800', in Wear (ed.), *Medicine in Society*, pp. 91–118, at p. 100.
- 83 Crowther, 'Health care and poor relief', p. 209. See also M. Fissell, 'The disappearance of the patient narrative and the invention of hospital medicine', in R. French and A. Wear (eds), *British Medicine in an Age of Reform* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 106.

- 84 This was recognised in early historiography. See G. Oxley, *Poor Relief in England and Wales 1601–1834* (London: David and Charles, 1974), pp. 72–3.
- 85 Borsay, *Medicine and Charity*.
- 86 Lane, *A Social History of Medicine*, p. 54.
- 87 Marland, *Medicine and Society*, pp. 53–67.
- 88 Tomkins, “‘Labouring on a bed of sickness’”.
- 89 Borsay, *Disability and Social Policy*, p. 148, suggests that benefits granted to the disabled were ‘parsimonious in the extreme’. This view is revisited in later chapters of this study, but for some groups of the physically impaired at least the picture is opaque. See G. Phillips, *The Blind in British Society: Charity, State and Community, c.1780–1930* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004).
- 90 D. Porter, ‘Health care and the construction of citizenship in civil societies in the era of the Enlightenment and industrialisation’, in Grell, Cunningham and Jütte (eds), *Health Care and Poor Relief*, pp. 15–37, at p. 26.
- 91 Tomkins, *The Experience of Urban Poverty*, pp. 121, 135, 141–55, suggests that while range was impressive, the chance of individual paupers accessing the full spectrum of potential treatments was slim.
- 92 Thomas, ‘The Old Poor Law’, pp. 14–17; Digby, *Making a Medical Living*, p. 225.
- 93 R. Porter, ‘The patient in England’, pp. 94 and 100.
- 94 I. Loudon, ‘The vile race of quacks with which this country is infested’, in W. Bynum and R. Porter (eds), *Medical Fringe and Medical Orthodoxy, 1750–1850* (London: Wellcome Trust, 1987), pp. 116–17.
- 95 A. Tomkins, ‘Paupers and the infirmary in mid-eighteenth century Shrewsbury’, *Medical History*, 43 (1999), 208–27; Tomkins, *The Experience of Urban Poverty*, pp. 135–55.
- 96 S. King, “‘Stop this overwhelming torment of destiny’”: Negotiating financial aid at times of sickness under the English Old Poor Law, 1800–1840’, *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 79 (2005), 228–60.
- 97 R. Smith, ‘Charity, self-interest and welfare: Reflections from demographic and family history’, in M. Daunton (ed.), *Charity, Self-Interest and Welfare in the English Past* (London: UCL Press, 1996), pp. 36–41.
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- 99 Langton, ‘The geography of poor relief’. Steve Hindle, *On the Parish?*, pp. 282–94, also refers to the ecology of poor relief as a vehicle for linking variation in poor law practice to intensely local conditions. Langton’s understanding of ecology is rather wider, even running to a call for us to relate practice to underlying soil structures.
- 100 Though see also N. Myers, ‘Servant, sailor, soldier, tailor, beggarman: Black survival in white society 1780–1830’, *Immigrants and Minorities*, 12 (1993), 47–74, and S. Braidwood, *Black Poor and White Philanthropists: London’s Black and the Foundation of the Sierra Leone Settlement 1786–1791* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1994).
- 101 Irish welfare has received comprehensive consideration. See V. Crossman and P. Gray (eds), *Poverty and Welfare in Ireland, 1838–1948* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2011); M. Cousins, *Poor Relief in Ireland, 1851–1914* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2011); V. Crossman, *Poverty and the Poor Law in Ireland 1850–1914* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013).