

MINUTES OF THE 82nd MEETING OF AYNHO HISTORY SOCIETY HELD AT THE VILLAGE HALL, AYNHO ON WEDNESDAY 28th OCTOBER 2015

Present: - Rupert Clark – Chairman & Treasurer
Peter Cole - Secretary.

1. Chairman's Report

Rupert reported the sad death of one of our early members, Bernard Scott-Deness.

2. Secretary's Report

During the last month he had given three tours of Aynho.

3. The Poor Law in C18th England: The Crisis in the Parishes, by Deborah Hayter

Most people know about the Victorian workhouse, but less has been written or understood about what preceded them.

In 1601, for the first time at a national level the provision of poor relief was codification. This Poor Law was not changed until 1834. It was based on two main ideas. Firstly that the 16,000 (ecclesiastical) parishes, the smallest unit of local government, would be responsible for maintaining law and order, including taking care of the poor. The second was that individuals had the right to parish relief if they were sick, elderly, orphaned or unable to work. Payment of the Poor Rate by anybody who owned land or had income was compulsory. Each parish had to elect unpaid "volunteer" officials called overseers from those who contributed to the funds; usually local farmers and tradespeople. This duty was readily accepted in a fundamentally Christian society.

The system had several provisions: Vagabonds i.e. beggars and vagrants who should have been capable of working, were punished and sent back to where they came from. Secondly parishes were required to set the labouring poor to productive work, being the forbearer of the workhouses. The recipients could do spinning or weaving or whatever was suited the local environment. These schemes were never very successful or financially viable. Had they been the local workforce would have objected that they were undercutting them. Thirdly those unable to work had to be looked after by the community.

Overseers' accounts show both regular levies charged, and payments made, as and when required. Some of these were made regularly for up to 20 years in some cases. Parents were supposed to support their children, and in turn the children were expected to support their parents when they became too old to work.

Parishes were allowed some discretion in how they performed these duties. This system worked pretty well for 200 years. Everybody knew nearly everyone else in the community, and there was generally enough work for all available workers. The Poor Law took 95% of all parish income and expenditure. The system was unique in Europe. If the French had had a similar system there might not have been a French Revolution.

Over time problems arose regarding the distinction between the deserving poor and the undeserving poor. Some parishes in prosperous areas claimed that they were flooded with other people's poor, which was financially crippling them. So in the second half of the 1600s there was a succession of Settlement Acts. A Settlement is a right to parish relief under the Poor Laws. . These codified the rights of individuals. A pauper (i.e. someone receiving parish relief) could be removed to his or her own relieving parish, or moved on (unless they were living in a tenement worth £10 a year or more.) They could be removed if they were likely to become chargeable, but only if the overseer applied to two J.P.s. People could be given a Settlement with some kind of surety from someone else. Later on somebody could be given a Settlement after residence of 40 days, but only if they had previously notified the overseer in writing before the 40 days started. Incomers had to give notification of the numbers of their children. 80% of Settlements derived from a year in service, or 7 years of apprenticeship. Similarly payment of parish rates, church rates or poor rates for a year gave this entitlement. Bastards had a Settlement in the parish where they were dropped, which led to many heavily pregnant women being moved on very quickly, to prevent this liability. If none of these applied Settlement was where your father or you were born. A person would be required to appear before a J. P., and he or she would be closely questioned to establish whether they had a Settlement, and if not which parish would be liable for their relief. Women lost their Settlement entitlement when they married, and took their husband's entitlement. A person with a Settlement could get a Certificate to this effect. This enabled him to seek work elsewhere, since this Certificate would prove that the new parish would not be liable if he fell on hard times. This is one of the reasons why Britain had an Industrial Revolution before other countries, since these certificates gave us a mobile work force where people could travel to where work was, knowing that if everything went pear-shaped, they could return to their home place and get relief. There were also similar Bastardy Bonds. When a claimant had been examined by a J. P. and the legal Settlement had been determined he or she could be removed by a Constable under a Removal Order.

Everything changed soon after the start of the 1800s. Firstly there had been a huge rise in the number of poor seeking relief, and the consequent cost of supplying funds to support them. This was compounded by a vast increase in the population of England. Then with the ending of Napoleonic wars many soldiers and sailors returned to find very few jobs available to them. There were a succession of poor harvests and this led to farmers becoming bankrupt, which led to even more unemployment and fewer men available to pay for poor relief. By 1830 poor relief amounted to 20% of all national expenditure.

There were three main problems. One was defining the limits of Settlement – there were lots of court cases between parishes to decide which was liable to support certain people. Secondly how to restrict relief to the deserving poor, and how to devise a safety net to prevent the destitute dying in the gutter without making it too easy for the lazy and feckless to get by. It was a problem then, much as it is still a problem today. The third problem was the too generous overseer, who was too willing to give poor relief for an easy life.

To some extent these problems were solved in the second half of the 19th century by the rise in industrialisation. Many people who had scraped a living in villages by doing simple work at home such as wool spinning, cloth weaving, hat, dress or glove making, etc., moved away to work in the burgeoning factories. Many people emigrated to the USA between 1820 and 1850.

Poor relief began to support older family men at a younger age. Fewer youngsters were going into yearly service. There was a reduction in seasonal work such as threshing. Corn used to be harvested and stored, and then in winter men and women would thresh it by hand. With new threshing machines this winter occupation ceased overnight. The Enclosure Act too had an effect on the amount of work available and on how folk could supplement their living. Various local schemes were tried which offered small amounts of relief to workers depending on their number of children. Other schemes supplemented earnings to ensure a living income.

As so often in history, the situation at present is a repeat of what has happened in the past. The recurring themes of the lecture were hitting the headlines in this very week, October 2015.

4. Forthcoming meetings

November 25th – A. G. M. followed by “Royalty, Religion and Relics” – 20 more things you did not know about Aynho.

Rupert offers himself as Chair and Treasurer but is happy to stand down should anyone else like to take the lead. Anyone wishes to do so or to join Peter and Keith on the Committee (not an onerous task!) please contact Peter

For the record Rupert has a new email and phone number,
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