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Poor Relief, Gender and Life-cycle Poverty in two
Oxfordshire communities under the Old Poor Law:
Charlbury and Spelsbury, 1799-1815.

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ABSTRACT

This study examines poor relief in Charlbury and Spelsbury, two adjacent but very different settlements in north-west Oxfordshire, between 1799 and 1815. In line with much of the current historiography on the Old Poor Law it focuses on the people who needed poor relief rather than the administrative policies behind such relief. In particular, it tests the argument forwarded by some historians that poverty affected more women than men, and especially those in old age, by assessing the extent to which poor relief in each community was influenced by the gender and life-cycle stage of its paupers.

An initial overview of each place draws on a mix of qualitative and quantitative evidence to give context to the study area. Following this, a detailed analysis of the overseers' accounts from each settlement, drawing on a total of around 30,000 payments, discusses the type, frequency and amount of relief given to each gender. These results are then linked with research into the families of paupers to identify what sort of people were given poor relief, and at what stages in their life-cycle.

The study concludes that assigning poverty to broad sectors of people, such as women rather than men, or the elderly rather than the young, is in this case too simplistic. The differences in the types and amounts of poor relief given in Charlbury and Spelsbury, and in the people to whom it was given, suggest that, at least in this part of Oxfordshire, varying circumstances and practices in individual settlements could be as significant to poverty as the gender or life-cycle stage of paupers.

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PERSONAL STATEMENT

I declare that this dissertation is my own, unaided work and that I have not submitted it, or any part of it, for a degree at The Open University or at any other university or institution. Parts of this dissertation are built on work I submitted for assessment as part of A825.

1. INTRODUCTION

This study responds to a plea by Susannah Ottaway and Samantha Williams for more research at community level into the nature of poor relief and experience of poverty under the Old Poor Law.¹ In particular, it tests the hypothesis forwarded by Williams that ‘Poverty was gendered and overwhelmingly life-cycle related’, by examining poor relief in Charlbury and Spelsbury, two adjacent but very different Oxfordshire communities, over a sixteen-year period between 1799 and 1815.² Several questions pertinent to current historiographical issues will be addressed: What type of poor relief were people given? What sort of people needed relief? Were men or women more prominent recipients of poor relief? Were paupers mainly relieved at certain life-cycle stages or over the whole of their life-course? And how typical were Charlbury and Spelsbury of other places, and each other?

The period of the study was dictated by being the only years for which overseers’ accounts for both settlements survive. However, these years coincide with being ones of particular interest to poor law historians. A series of failed harvests, problems importing corn due to the Napoleonic Wars, and rapid population increase led to widespread economic hardship throughout Britain. Food prices and unemployment soared, consequently so did the costs of maintaining the poor.³ As Chapter 2 explains, Oxfordshire, being largely rural, was one of the most harshly affected counties.

¹ Susannah Ottaway and Samantha Williams, ‘Reconstructing the Life-Cycle Experience of Poverty in the time of the Old Poor Law’, *Archives*, 23 (1998), 19-29 (p.29).

² Samantha Williams, *Poverty, Gender and Life-Cycle under the English Poor Law 1760-1834*, (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2013), p.101.

³ Michael Rose, *The English Poor Law 1780-1930* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles Ltd, 1970), p.19.

Secondary sources covering the period have moved through various phases. Early twentieth-century historians like John and Barbara Hammond, then Sidney and Beatrice Webb, took the lead from the 1834 Poor Law Report and declared the Old Poor Law was harsh and inflexible, relief was meagre, and poor relief actually added to the problem of poverty.⁴ This mainly political framework was followed in the 1960s and 1970s by a more economic focus, in which historians such as Mark Blaug and Daniel Baugh contended that outdoor relief had helped, not hindered, rural labour markets through introducing various allowances-in-aid-of-wages schemes.⁵ In recent decades, studies on the Old Poor Law have shifted again, in favour of more localised studies that focus on the people who were relieved, rather than the system.

This study, with its emphasis on the gender and life-cycle stage of those on poor relief, takes this latter approach. Several similar investigations have been carried out in other areas of Britain. Samantha Williams' research into the Bedfordshire parishes of Shefford and Campton between 1760 and 1834 will be especially widely drawn on as Shefford, similarly to Charlbury, was a small market town and Campton, more like Spelsbury, a rural agricultural community.⁶ Amongst others, Steven King's study on poor relief in southern and eastern England from 1780 to 1820 provides a contrasting view. Whereas Williams found most relief went to women, particularly those in old age, King found a steady increase in the number of males relieved during the period.⁷

⁴ Lynn Hollen Lees, *The Solidarities of Strangers, The English Poor Laws and the People, 1700-1948* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1998), p.8; Steven King, *Poverty and Welfare in England 1700-1830, A Regional Perspective*, (Manchester: M.U.P., 2000, p.50.

⁵ Lees, pp.8, 103.

⁶ Williams, *Poverty*, p.25.

⁷ Williams, *Poverty*, p.101; King, *Poverty*, pp.141-180.

The main primary sources used in the study are the account books kept by the overseers of the poor. The Spelsbury overseers' accounts have been in the county archives for many years, but those for Charlbury are still held in Charlbury, by the Town Council. The survival of the Charlbury material is not widely known, and no evidence has been found of it previously being used for research purposes other than brief mention in the *Victoria County History* in the 1970s.⁸ This adds a unique dimension to the study. Both sets of accounts are arranged chronologically and list each payment made as outdoor relief, as well as expenses incurred through the settlement or removal of paupers, overseers' administrative costs, and workhouse expenses. The total income derived from the poor rates is also given.

Using a top-down historical source to investigate history from below has presented some challenges, as have certain weaknesses in each set of records which became apparent after starting the project. Most problematic is that, as Chapter 3 will explain more fully, the study is compromised by consistent adoption by Charlbury, and occasionally by Spelsbury too, of the system of farming out some poor relief to a contractor. Any records that may have been kept by these contractors no longer survive, which consequently limits the accuracy of any research into outdoor poor relief. Each place also shows inconsistencies in the detail given, and accuracy of spelling. This is not surprising given that the role of overseer was at this time voluntary, taken on for one year at a time, but can make it difficult to now positively identify some individuals. If spelling and handwriting are any guide, some overseers appear to have been barely literate. Although others were seemingly more educated,

⁸ Crossley, Alan, ed., *A Victoria History of the County of Oxford, Vol. 10, Banbury Hundred* (Oxford: O.U.P., 1972), p.147.

none will have been likely to have in mind that they might be keeping the records for the purposes for which they are now being used. Yet, in the absence of local primary sources which directly recover ‘the genuine voices of the poor’, the sources still allow an unrivalled glimpse into ‘the real-life experience of the people themselves’ which more than compensates for their imperfections.⁹

The study will in Chapter 2 set the scene by carrying out a contextual investigation into the physical, social and economic profile of both places and their relationship with the wider area. This will also put poverty and the Old Poor Law in the context of each place by looking qualitatively at how poverty in the study area was influenced by external factors, and quantitatively at how numbers of paupers locally compared with county and national levels.

The next two chapters will present the main research findings. To analyse the overseers’ accounts as systematically and thoroughly as possible, details of each outdoor relief payment listed in the overseers’ accounts for each place were entered into Excel spreadsheets. Across the sixteen years of study, this involved tabulating roughly 30,000 payments. Each entry noted the name of the pauper, the amount and type of their relief, and the month and year it was given. The resultant data allowed analysis by place, name, gender, relief type, amount, or frequency. Chapter 3 uses these results to assess the first part of Williams’ statement by examining the impact of gender on the various types of poor relief.

⁹ Paul Lawrence, ‘Introduction’, in Block 6: Poverty and Welfare’, *A825 MA History Part 1*, (Milton Keynes: The Open University, 2009), p.9; Kate Tiller, ‘England’, in Block 1: Historiography of local and regional history’, *A825 MA History Part 1*, 2nd edn (Milton Keynes: The Open University, 2016), p.27.

Family details of each pauper named in the overseers' accounts were then reconstructed, using parish registers and following the guidelines issued by Ottaway and Williams.¹⁰ Clearly not everyone was identifiable, either because they may have moved to the area from an unknown location, or because some families had too many people with the same name to ascertain who was actually relieved. However, for those who were identified, their age, marital status and family structure could then be linked with the data from the overseers' accounts. The combined information enabled identification of the life-cycle stages at which paupers were claiming relief. Chapter 4 discusses these results in order to assess the second part of Williams' statement.

The final chapter collates the research results and concludes that, whilst agreeing with many of Williams' findings, the differing nature and experiences of gender and life-cycle poverty in the two study settlements suggests that the poverty of a family or individual was influenced as much by 'the circumstances of the particular community in which they lived' as by their gender or life-cycle stage.¹¹

¹⁰ Ottaway and Williams, pp.26-27.

¹¹ John Broad, 'Parish economies of welfare, 1650-1834', *Historical Journal*, 42 (1999) 985-1006 (p.986).

2. PLACE, PEOPLE, AND POVERTY IN CONTEXT

Oxfordshire, as several historians have commented, was one of the English counties most affected by poverty in the early-nineteenth century. C.R. Oldham, for instance, deems it unlikely that after 1800 there were many Oxfordshire labourers who did not get poor relief, Richard Dyson that in 1802 about one-fifth of Oxfordshire inhabitants were receiving relief, and Mark Blaug that the cost of relief per head of population in the county in 1812 ranked fifth highest in England.¹ Yet, as Peter Dunkley points out, the level of poverty level, and need for poor relief, was not evenly spread through the county.² Oxfordshire's varying geology, soils and topography divides it into five landscape zones – the Cotswold Hills, Oxford Clay Vale, Oxford Heights, Gault Clay Vale, and Chiltern Hills – and each of these impacted differently on how the lives of those who lived and worked in that area evolved.³ This chapter provides context to the study by assessing the physical, social and economic background specific to the area of Charlbury and Spelsbury, before briefly comparing poverty here with the rest of the county and country.

Charlbury and Spelsbury are in north-west Oxfordshire, at the eastern edge of the Cotswold Hills (see inset map in Figure 2.1 for location of Charlbury). The landscape here is hillier than the rest of the county and dissected by the River Evenlode and its valley; Charlbury is located in this valley, and Spelsbury two miles

¹ C.R. Oldham., 'Oxfordshire Poor Law Papers', *Economic History Review*, 5 (1934), 87-97 (p.94); Richard Dyson, 'The extent and nature of pauperism in five Oxfordshire parishes, 1786-1832', *Continuity and Change*, 28 (2013), 421-449 (p.422); Mark Blaug, 'The Myth of the Old Poor Law and the Making of the New', *Journal of Economic History*, 23 (1963), 151-184 (pp.178-179).

² Peter Dunkley, 'Paternalism, The Magistracy and Poor Relief in England, 1795-1834', *International Review of Social History*, 24 (1979), 371-397 (p.375).

³ Frank Emery, *The Oxfordshire Landscape* (London: Hodder and Stoughton Ltd, 1974), pp.7, 25.

to the north.⁴ Arthur Young, who surveyed Oxfordshire in 1807, described the area as one where farming was mixed arable and pasture, especially suited to growing turnips and wheat.⁵

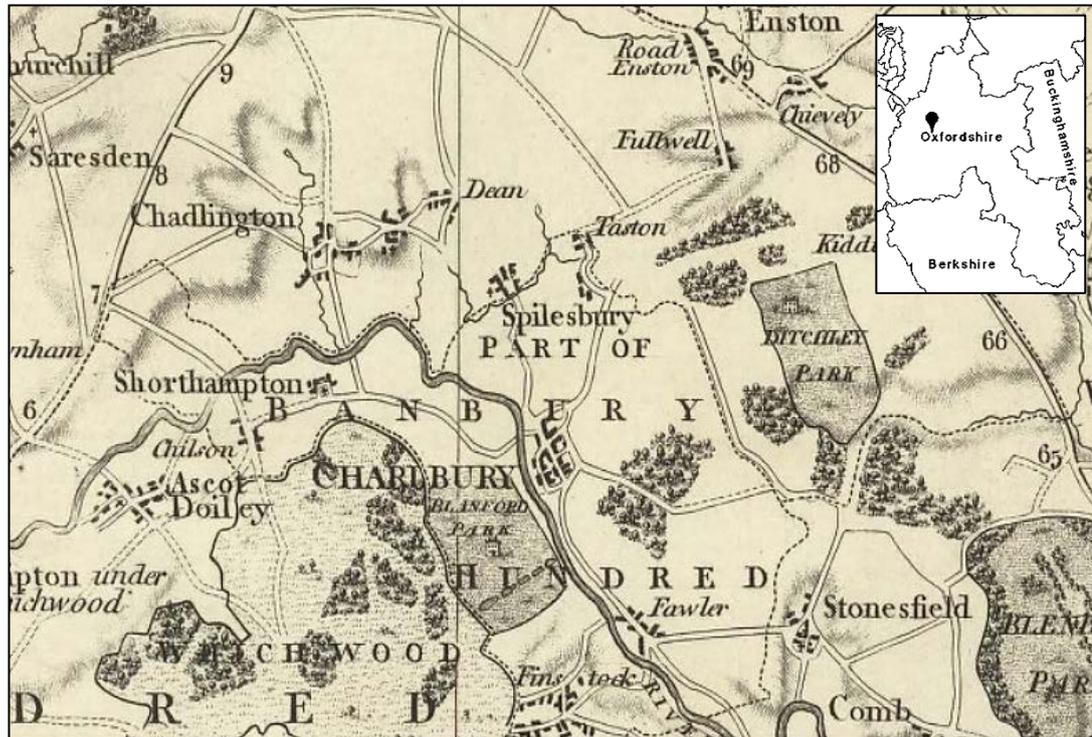


Figure 2.1: Map showing Charlbury, Spelsbury and surrounding settlements, 1793-94.⁶

The main part of Figure 2.1, taken from a map drawn almost contemporarily to the period, shows the area and its immediate surroundings. Oxford lies off the map, about seventeen miles south-west of Charlbury, and Banbury, the only other significantly sized town, about sixteen miles north-east. The smaller towns of

⁴ Giles Darkes, 'Topography', in Tiller and Darkes, *An Historical Atlas of Oxfordshire*, ed. by Kate Tiller and Giles Darkes, (Finstock: Oxfordshire Record Society, 2011), p.6.

⁵ Kate Tiller, 'Agriculture 1750-1950', in Tiller and Darkes, *Historical Atlas*, p.110; Arthur Young, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Oxford* (London: Board of Agriculture, 1813), p.6.

⁶ Richard Davis, *Map of the County of Oxford, made 1793-94*, Sheets 1-2, <<http://digitalarchive.mcmaster.ca>> [25 August 2019]. As an indication of scale, Charlbury-Spelsbury is two miles. Inset: <<https://www.familysearch.org/mapp>> [25 August 2019]; marker locates Charlbury.

Chipping Norton, Woodstock, Witney and Burford are roughly seven miles north, east, south and west. The parish of Charlbury then comprised Charlbury township, the village of Finstock, and hamlets of Fowler, Chilson, Shorthampton, and Pudlicote (the latter, not shown on the map, is immediately north of Chilson). Spelsbury parish included Spelsbury village, the hamlets Dean, Taston and Fulwell, and Ditchley Park estate. For poor law purposes, the entire parish of Spelsbury counted as one unit, whereas in Charlbury the township was administered separately from the rest of the parish.⁷ Since poor law records for Charlbury's outlying settlements appear not to have survived this study thus covers Charlbury township and all of Spelsbury parish. For simplicity, these units will henceforth be referred to just as Charlbury and Spelsbury.

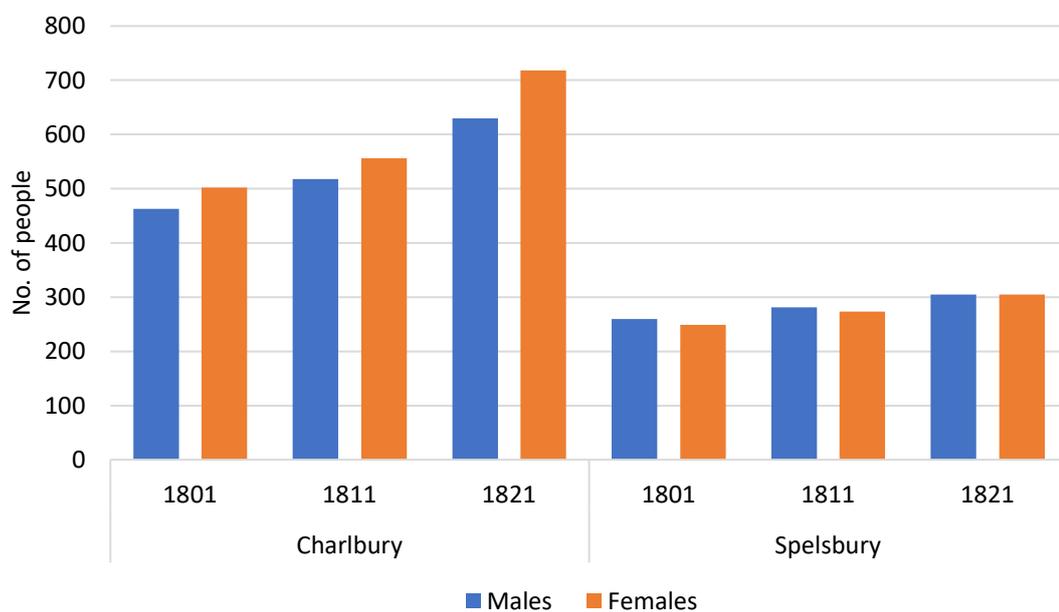


Figure 2.2: Population of Charlbury and Spelsbury, by gender, 1801-21.⁸

⁷ Crossley, p.127.

⁸ *Enumeration Abstracts 1801*, pp.280-3 and 1821, pp.254-257; P.P. 1812 (316) *Abstract of Answers and Returns under Act for taking Account of Population of Great Britain (Enumeration Abstract)*, 1811, pp.257-60.

Each place had very different population levels and densities. In 1801, Charlbury had 965 inhabitants (463 males, 502 females) and covered 2,113 acres, whilst Spelsbury had 509 inhabitants (260 males, 249 females) over 3,900 acres.⁹ This equated to roughly one person per two acres in Charlbury and almost one per eight acres in Spelsbury. Over the next two decades, Spelsbury's population increased by 20 per cent, reaching 610 by 1821.¹⁰ As Figure 2.2 indicates, its male-female ratio retained an insignificant male dominance in 1811 but by 1821 gender numbers were equal. In Charlbury, the population increased more steadily, by about 40 per cent, to reach 1,348 by 1821, and females continued to be slightly more prevalent than males.¹¹

The economic structure of each settlement also differed. Almost three-quarters of households in Charlbury in 1801 were chiefly employed in trade, manufacture or handicrafts, and just one-quarter in agriculture.¹² These proportions remained fairly similar over the next twenty years.¹³ Like many towns at this time though, the increasing success of some other local centres, for instance Banbury, resulted in Charlbury being pushed lower down the urban hierarchy.¹⁴ In 1791, Charlbury still had five large livestock fairs each year, but its once 'considerable' weekly market was declining, as was its lock manufacturing trade.¹⁵ Likewise, cottage industry in the form of glove-making. Glovers had in 1709 held the largest number of stalls at Charlbury market, but by the start of the Napoleonic wars this work had almost died

⁹ P.P. 1801-02 (9) *Abstract of Answers and Returns under Act for taking Account of Population of Great Britain (Enumeration Abstract), 1801*, pp.280-283.

¹⁰ P.P. 1822 (502) *Abstract of Answers and Returns under Act for taking Account of Population of Great Britain (Enumeration Abstract), 1821*, p.257.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p.254.

¹² *Enumeration Abstract, 1801*, p.280.

¹³ *Enumeration Abstracts 1811*, p.257 and *1821*, p.254.

¹⁴ Kate Tiller, *English Local History, An Introduction*, 2nd edn (Stroud: Sutton Publishing Ltd, 2000), p.175.

¹⁵ Peter Barfoot and John Wilkes, *Universal British Directory, 1791* (n.p., London), p.601.

out.¹⁶ It was then revived in 1808 by William Albright, a leading Charlbury inhabitant and Quaker, to ‘relieve the distress in the town and its neighbourhood by providing employment for women’.¹⁷ Gloving went on to provide local work until the 1960s, mainly for women, but also for men and even children.¹⁸ The market also continued, but did not regain its former standing; by 1830 Charlbury was labelled ‘a decayed market-town’.¹⁹

Although the gloving industry spread to several nearby villages these were mainly restricted to settlements adjoining Wychwood Forest (shown in Figure 2.1) and it did not become as prevalent in Spelsbury.²⁰ In contrast to Charlbury, 77 per cent of households in Spelsbury worked mainly in agriculture in 1801, and by 1811 the figure was 88 per cent.²¹ Spelsbury was thus far less densely populated than Charlbury and had a chiefly agrarian economic profile in contrast to Charlbury’s more urban one. This opposing employment profile suggests average wages in Spelsbury were probably lower than in Charlbury. In 1803 a male day labourer in Oxfordshire earned on average roughly 13s. a week in summer but only about 8s. 6d. in winter.²² Improved farming methods meant fewer labourers were needed than previously; consequently, more labourers were being hired by the day or week than as live-in farm servants, and many had insufficient work for much of the year.²³

¹⁶ Crossley, p.145.

¹⁷ Crossley, p.144.

¹⁸ N.L. Leyland and J.E. Troughton, *Glovmaking in West Oxfordshire* (Oxford: Oxford City and County Museum, 1974), pp.8-9; Crossley, p.144.

¹⁹ Pigot, J., *National and Commercial Directory, 1830: Oxfordshire* (n.p.: Pigot & Co., 1830), p.642.

²⁰ Leyland and Troughton, p.9.

²¹ *Enumeration Abstracts, 1801*, p.283 and *1811*, p.260.

²² Young, p.72.

²³ John Langton, ‘The Geography of Poor Relief in Rural Oxfordshire 1775-1832’ in *Obligation, Entitlement and Dispute under the English Poor Laws*, ed. by Peter Jones and Steven King (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), pp.193-234 (p.194); K.D.M. Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor, Social Change and Agrarian England 1660-1900* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1985) p.149; Dunkley, p.374.

Meanwhile, tradesmen usually got more consistent employment, and higher wages, for instance a carpenter or mason averaged 2s. 5d. per day.²⁴

The impact of these differences is borne out in four deposition statements from witnesses to a probate dispute concerning a Charlbury farmer, Sarah Iszard, in 1785. John Cross of Spelsbury stated he was a day labourer aged ‘about’ forty-seven and ‘were all his Debts paid he should be fifteen pounds worse than nothing’. John’s wife Elizabeth said she ‘cards and spins for the Bread’ but was ‘worth not a single farthing’. Another Spelsbury day labourer, fifty-nine-year-old William Bowell, was ‘worth all his Debts being paid about twenty shillings’. Contrasting with these the fourth deponent, Thomas Shepherd, was a carpenter from Charlbury worth ‘about twenty pounds’.²⁵ Although a small sample, so not necessarily typical, these examples give some clues about the contrasting earning and saving potential of a Spelsbury labourer versus a Charlbury tradesman. Of the four witnesses, William Bowell and John Cross received long-term poor relief throughout this study and will be mentioned again in Chapter 4, whilst Elizabeth Cross will be encountered again shortly.

The propensity of many Spelsbury inhabitants to lower wages than in Charlbury ties in too with the landholding pattern. This reflects some similarities between the two places but also marked differences. In 1798, the Duke of Marlborough paid 41 per cent of Charlbury’s total land tax assessment of £138 7s. 4d. Another 18 per cent was paid by Lord Dillon of Ditchley, Benjamin Holloway of Lee Place, and the

²⁴ Young, p.72.

²⁵ OHC, MS.Wills Oxon. 303/1/23, Sarah Iszard Court Papers: Depositions of John Cross, Elizabeth Cross, William Bowell, Thomas Shepherd, 1785.

Vicar. The remaining 41 per cent was distributed amongst 79 landowners. Of these, 56 people contributed less than 10s. each.²⁶ This suggests that most individual holdings were small. Spelsbury and Dean were separately assessed but paid a total of £125 17s. 4d. Lord Dillon and Ditchley Estate paid 42 per cent of this, a Mr. Walker another 16 per cent, and the Vicar 4 per cent. The remaining 38 per cent was divided between 21 people, only two of whom paid less than 10s.²⁷ A substantial portion of land in each place was thus held by the elite, but whereas the remainder in Charlbury was divided between many people each holding a small share, Spelsbury had fewer landowners each with a larger share. This pattern meets that found in Williams' Bedfordshire study, where the market town of Shefford had far more, but smaller, landholders than neighbouring rural Campton.²⁸

Charlbury saw little change in landownership structure during the period, having already undergone partial enclosure by private agreement in 1715 and subsequent consolidation of smaller holdings.²⁹ Dean was enclosed by parliamentary act in 1779, but Spelsbury village not until 1803.³⁰ Enclosure frequently increased the seasonality of labourers' work patterns and thus the likelihood of unemployment.³¹ It also reduced opportunities for making ends meet by limiting access to common lands. Prior to Spelsbury's enclosure Elizabeth Cross, cited earlier, described spending a morning churning butter and the rest of the day 'picking of wood in Mr Dillons' Grounds'.³² A less law-abiding view was painted by Arthur Young, who in

²⁶ The National Archives (TNA), IR23/69, Land Tax Redemption 1798, Charlbury, p.248-250.

²⁷ TNA, IR23/69, Land Tax Redemption 1798, Dean, folio 267, Spelsbury, p.295.

²⁸ Samantha Williams, *Poverty, Gender and Life-Cycle under the English Poor Law 1760-1834* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2011), p.26.

²⁹ Crossley, p.143.

³⁰ Elsie Corbett, ed., *A History of Spelsbury including Dean, Taston, Fulwell and Ditchley* (Long Compton: King's Stone Press, 1931), p.237.

³¹ Snell, p.149.

³² OHC, MS.Wills Oxon. 303/1/23.

1809 commented that the extensive tract of Wychwood Forest, south-west of Charlbury and still unenclosed, was ‘filled with poachers, deer-stealers, thieves, and pilferers of every kind’ and that poor rates in surrounding parishes tended to be high.³³ Whether by honest means or not, being able to roam freely gave people a chance to potentially add to their makeshift economies, but after enclosure such opportunities were usually curtailed.

Keith Parry, however, argues that although poor relief in Oxfordshire parishes often increased post-enclosure, such rises more frequently resulted from the general economic situation than from the act of enclosure.³⁴ The economic distress prevalent nationally early in the nineteenth century was touched on earlier, but its severity locally is evidenced in a diary kept between 1784 and 1818 by William Jones, a Quaker weaver from Charlbury. The diary is dominated by Jones’ religious views, and indeed is thought to have been written for the purpose of reflecting on his inner spiritual experience, but it also includes frequent references to his efforts to help the ‘Exceeding Poor Djected Despised Poor Creatures’ he perceived were ‘often looked upon by the Rich unworthy to be taken notice of’.³⁵ More than once, for instance, Jones and other Quaker friends were in cold weather ‘closely Imploy’d at sarving out wood to 100 Poor people’.³⁶ The diary is especially useful though in showing how this locality was influenced by the high food prices that were nationally widespread in 1799-1800, then again in 1811-1812.³⁷ In December 1799, Jones wrote how it had

³³ Young, p.245.

³⁴ Keith Parry, ‘Parliamentary Enclosure 1758-1882’ in *An Historical Atlas of Oxfordshire*, ed. by Kate Tiller and Giles Darkes, (Finstock: Oxfordshire Record Society, 2011), p.114.

³⁵ Hannah Jones, ed., *The Life and Times of a Charlbury Quaker: The Journals of William Jones, 1784-1818* (Finstock: Oxfordshire Record Society, 2014), pp. xii-xiii, 23.

³⁶ Jones, 27 December 1796, p.123.

³⁷ Michael E. Rose, *The English Poor Law 1780-1930* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles Ltd, 1970), p.20.

been 'very cold weather of late and things very dear, Bread but a little more than 4lb for one shilling'.³⁸ Six weeks later, it was still a 'trying time with the poor, things being very dear, and the weather Cold'. With bread now 'three pound and a half for the shilling' Jones felt 'a concern' for the 'distressed situations of the poor' so visited the overseers of the poor in Charlbury 'and two more towns' and asked them to 'do what they could to help them to food and Raiment'. The overseers 'ware sensible it must be very trying with the poor' and promised to 'indeavour to be kinde to them'.³⁹ By April 1800 prices had increased again. Bread now cost '3lb for one shilling' and bacon 'Eleven pence pr Pound', leading Jones to reiterate his concern that the poor were 'much distress'd by the dearness of Provision'.⁴⁰

Jones does not expand on whether the wider non-Quaker population shared his concern for the poor, but other evidence helps identify the scale of local anxiety over rising prices at this time. In September 1800, Reverend Cobb, Vicar of Charlbury and local magistrate, advised the Home Office that three or four hundred men were gathering each evening and walking between villages demanding that farmers reduce their prices at market.⁴¹ Jonathan Paine of Fawler Mill, a mile south of Charlbury, similarly informed that twenty men 'of the class of Tradesmen', each armed with a bludgeon, had visited him, objecting to his importing foreign wheat. They demanded he reduce his prices, as 'their Baker's had no corn or meal to bake for the food of the Inhabitants' and warned they were part of a group of five hundred men who were currently a mile away and would descend on his mill if he did not comply.⁴² Even

³⁸ Jones, 29 December 1799, p.167.

³⁹ Jones, 16 February 1800, p.169.

⁴⁰ Jones, 20 April 1800, p.172.

⁴¹ TNA, HO42/51/192, Home Office Letters and Papers, 26 September 1800, p.468.

⁴² TNA, HO42/51/192, p.469.

allowing for potential exaggeration of the numbers involved, these sources expose the local desperation caused by rising food prices, and how it affected not just the poorer classes but tradesmen too. They likewise demonstrate the impact of national events on local poverty, in this instance war combined with a series of failed harvests and bad weather.

However, such examples tend to give what Steven King calls a ‘fuzzy’ approach to defining and measuring need because, despite being ‘inherently appealing’, it gives no precise measure.⁴³ An arguably less subjective view is gained from the statistical returns periodically submitted by parishes in response to parliamentary questionnaires on poor relief. Shirley Wittering, amongst others, criticises these for frequently being inconsistent with information in overseers’ accounts, attributing it to overseers having differing interpretations of what was being asked and attempting to maintain a balance between taxpayers and claimants.⁴⁴ As King observes, the returns also give only a snapshot of a particular time.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, unlike the more anecdotal evidence just seen, they do enable some direct comparison of poverty at local, county and national level. Table 2.1 draws on the two returns made during the time of this study, in 1803 and 1813.

⁴³ Steven King, *Poverty and welfare in England, 1700-1830* (Manchester: M.U.P., 2000), p.78.

⁴⁴ Shirley Wittering, ‘How reliable are the Government Poor Law Returns?’, *The Local Historian*, 30 (2000), 160-164 (pp.161-162).

⁴⁵ King, *Poverty*, p. 81.

Table 2.1: Poor relief in Charlbury and Spelsbury compared with the county and nationally, 1803 and 1813.⁴⁶

Year	Population*	Total poor relief expenditure (£)	<i>Per capita</i> poor relief expenditure (£)	Number of people receiving poor relief	% of Population on poor relief
Charlbury:					
1803	965	495	0.51	124	12.8
1813	1,074	389	0.36	54	5.0
Spelsbury:					
1803	509	444	0.87	128	25.1
1813	554	803	1.45	59	10.6
Oxfordshire:					
1803	109,620	88,689	0.81	21,985	20.1
1813	119,204	143,108	1.20	15,858	13.3
England:					
1803	8,331,434	3,929,525	0.47	1,142,772	13.7
1813	9,538,827	6,441,225	0.68	927,726	9.7

* Population figures based on 1801 and 1811 censuses.

Indications from Table 2.1 are that the proportion of people in Oxfordshire receiving some form of poor relief in 1803 was considerably larger than the national level, and the *per capita* expenditure on these paupers was almost twice the national average. In Spelsbury pauper numbers and expenditure were higher still. Poverty levels in Charlbury though were almost half those of Spelsbury, and markedly lower than nationally. By 1813, numbers relieved had dropped substantially everywhere, and in both Charlbury and Spelsbury were less than half the level of ten years earlier. This

⁴⁶ P.P. 1803-04 (175) *Abstract of Answers and Returns under Act for procuring Returns relative to Expense and Maintenance of Poor in England*, pp.398-408, 714-15; P.P. 1818 (82) *Abridgement of Abstract of Answers and Returns relative to Expense and Maintenance of Poor in England and Wales*, pp.352-362, 627-628; *Enumeration Abstracts, 1801*, p.451 and *1811*, p.427.

decrease was more marked locally than countywide or nationally. But although Charlbury's *per capita* expenditure had similarly decreased, in Spelsbury, like Oxfordshire as a whole, it was considerably higher. The inference is that the early-nineteenth century crisis years hit Spelsbury much harder than Charlbury, and that although pauper numbers had diminished by 1813, those who did need relief here were needing larger amounts. These findings tie in with the comments concerning wages made earlier, and with statement by Dunkley, that poverty was most severe in arable farming areas.⁴⁷ They also support an observation made in 1792, by John Howlett, that towns usually spent less per head on poor relief than rural parishes.⁴⁸

The government returns also indicate that over one-third of those permanently relieved in Charlbury received indoor relief in its workhouse, which was roughly three times the national and county levels.⁴⁹ Spelsbury recorded no such relief, indicating it had no workhouse. Although the overseers' accounts frequently mention payments for food, straw or beds 'for the workhouse' it seems probable that this was the building that on other occasions is called the 'Poorhouse', and that it was less of a place where the poor were put to work, than one in which to house the poor.⁵⁰ It should be added that this institution was distinct from Spelsbury's four almshouses, built in 1688 by John Cary, land agent at Ditchley.⁵¹ These selected residents from the 'Poorest Antientest and Honestest' men or women in the parish but were annually supported by ten guineas bequeathed by Cary in 1702 and maintained by a charity not the parish overseers.⁵²

⁴⁷ Dunkley, p.374.

⁴⁸ Williams, *Poverty*, p.25.

⁴⁹ P.P. 1803-04 (175) *Poor Abstract*, pp.398-408, 714-15; P.P. 1818 (82) *Poor Abstract*, pp.352-362.

⁵⁰ OHC, PAR246/5/F1/2, 1799-1809; PAR246/5/F1/3, 1809-15.

⁵¹ Corbett, p.188.

⁵² OHC, PAR246/13/F/1, John Cary Almshouses Charity Account Book, 1702-1957.

To summarise, this chapter has shown that despite being contiguously sited in the same part of Oxfordshire, and sharing similar physical and geological characteristics, early-nineteenth century Charlbury and Spelsbury had very dissimilar social and economic profiles. Charlbury was roughly four times more densely populated than Spelsbury, most employment was in trade or manufacture, and proportionally more landowners each owned a small plot. In contrast, Spelsbury was larger but had about half the population, was predominantly agricultural, and fewer landholders each had larger holdings. Anecdotal evidence indicates soaring food prices early in the nineteenth century caused considerable local poverty, but also suggests that wages in Charlbury were higher. Also, that other help, including secondary employment, Quaker benevolence and gleaning or poaching in nearby Wychwood Forest, meant poor relief was not the only help available to the poor here. Government Poor Law returns confirm that poverty was more problematic in Spelsbury than Charlbury, by showing that the proportion of its inhabitants receiving some form of poor relief was roughly twice the level found in Charlbury in both 1803 and 1813, and that it had a far higher *per capita* expenditure on poor relief. The extent to which these factors impacted on how outdoor poor relief was allocated, and specifically on the gender and life-cycle stages of the people to whom it was given, will become apparent in the discussion in the next two chapters.

3. THE GENDERED NATURE OF POOR RELIEF

This chapter will focus on the help given as outdoor relief to paupers in Charlbury and Spelsbury by the overseers of the poor. Particular emphasis will be given to the gender of paupers, in order to test the assertion made by Samantha Williams, based on her study of two Bedfordshire parishes between 1760 and 1834, that ‘Poverty was gendered’.¹ Williams is one of many historians who have concluded that ‘many more women were relieved than men’ in the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries.² Lynn Hollen Lees similarly asserts that large amounts of parish money ‘flowed’ to women under the Old Poor Law, Alannah Tomkins that more women than men were relieved between 1700 and 1850, and Steven King that in Calverley, Yorkshire, female pensioners far outnumbered males in most years between 1650 and 1820.³

Not all historians agree though. Peter Dunkley argues that from 1795 until 1834 most relief recipients were men, and Henry French that after 1804 the number of women relieved in Terling, Essex, were outnumbered by men.⁴ King’s study of fourteen parishes in southern and eastern England shows that although poor relief in 1760 was heavily skewed towards women, by the late-eighteenth century more men

¹ Samantha Williams, *Poverty, Gender and Life-cycle under the English Poor Law 1760-1834* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2013), p.101.

² *ibid.*

³ Lynn Hollen Lees, *The Solidarities of Strangers, The English Poor Laws and the People, 1700-1948* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1998), p.58; Alannah Tomkins, ‘Women and Poverty’ in *Women’s History: Britain, 1700-1850*, ed. by Hannah Barker and Elaine Chalus (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), p.159; Steve King, ‘Reconstructing lives: the poor, the Poor Law and welfare in Calverley, 1650-1820’, *Social History*, 22 (1997), 318-338 (p.325).

⁴ Peter Dunkley, ‘Paternalism, the Magistracy and Poor Relief in England, 1795-1834’, *International Review of Social History*, 24 (1979), 371-397 (p.374); Henry 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 (p.205).

than women were getting relief.⁵ As King points out though, there were many exceptions to this trend and in some studies, including his own, the level of change was fairly minimal. Only, he adds, by looking in detail at expenditure in localised areas can a more accurate picture be gained.⁶

To identify where Charlbury and Spelsbury sit in this debate, this chapter will first look at the gender distribution of people relieved in Charlbury and Spelsbury, and the total spent by each place, before then looking in turn, again by gender, at the types of outdoor relief given by these two communities: regular pension payments, irregular relief given as cash and in kind and, for Spelsbury, yardland allowances given in aid of wages.

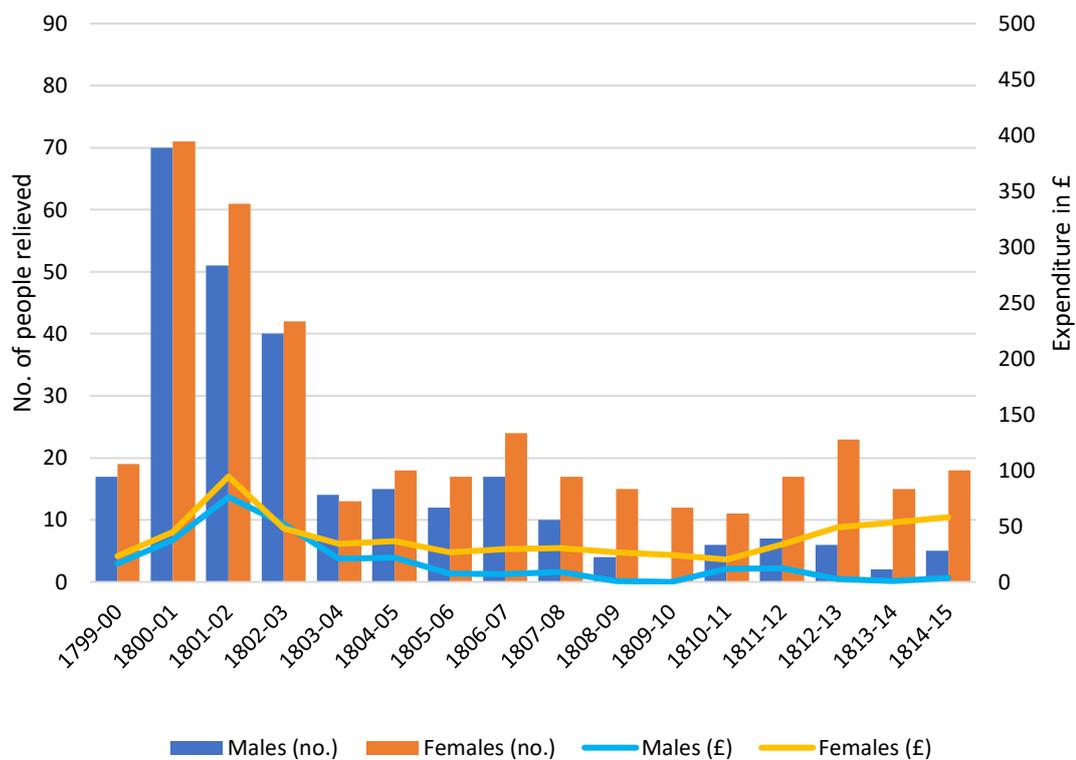


Figure 3.1: Number of recipients and expenditure on poor relief in Charlbury, by gender, 1799-1815.⁷

⁵ Steven King, *Poverty and welfare in England, 1700-1830* (Manchester: M.U.P., 2000), p.166.

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ CTC, Charlbury Overseers' Accounts, 1799-1815.

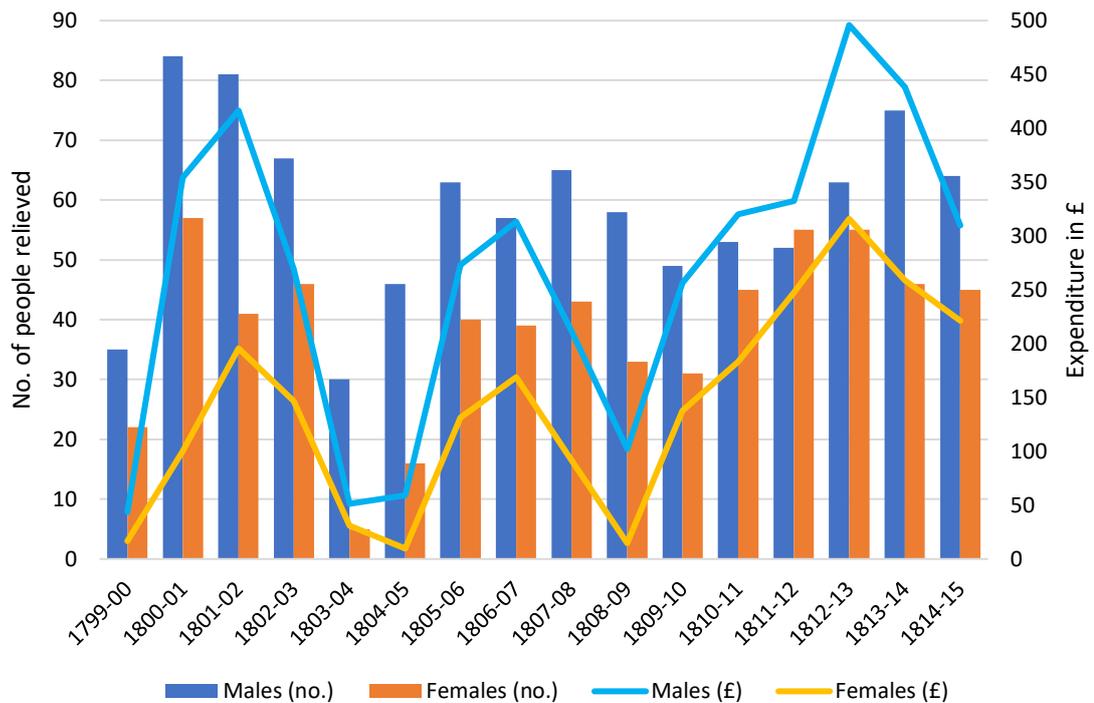


Figure 3.2: Number of recipients and expenditure on poor relief in Spelsbury, by gender, 1799-1815.⁸

Figures 3.1 and 3.2 draw on the data assembled from the details in the overseers' accounts to provide an overview of the number of outdoor relief recipients in each settlement, and total spent relieving them. The differences between the two are considerable, although both experienced a surge in paupers in 1800-01 and 1801-02 which dropped rapidly to a low in 1803-4 then gradually rose again. The timing of this peak links precisely with the references to poverty in William Jones' diary and the local rioting accounts, outlined in Chapter 2. It is also consistent with the pattern found in much of Britain at this time, that stemmed, as mentioned, from economic disturbance and severely increased food prices.⁹ Amongst others, Williams found it

⁸ OHC, PAR246/5/F1/2 Spelsbury Overseers' Accounts, 1799-1809; OHC, PAR246/5/F1/3 Spelsbury, Overseers' Accounts, 1809-1815.

⁹ Michael Rose, *The English Poor Law 1780-1930* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles Ltd, 1970), p.19.

in her Bedfordshire study, and Daniel Baugh throughout Essex, Kent and Sussex.¹⁰

A further peak occurred in 1812-13, again caused by economic distress and high food prices.¹¹ The effects of this were clearly evident in Spelsbury, which in 1812-13 spent £811 on out-relief, its maximum for the period. Charlbury reflected this too, although to a much smaller extent. Here, as the graph shows, the highest expenditure was £170 10s., in the 1801-02 crisis year but only £51 16s. in 1812-13.

In terms of gender, females in Charlbury took a higher proportion of poor law expenditure throughout the period, whereas in Spelsbury annual totals on male relief consistently exceeded that on females. Except 1811-12, when female paupers narrowly outnumbered their male counterpart by 55:52, Spelsbury relieved far more men than women each year. Conversely, the number of females receiving relief in Charlbury exceeded males in all years except 1802-3. This was especially apparent from about 1806 onwards. Despite fairly similar numbers of people on poor relief in each place in the early years of the study, Charlbury progressively had fewer paupers, especially males, whereas Spelsbury, although not quite repeating its 1800-01 high, continued to relieve a substantial number of each gender. This difference is greatly enlarged when it is remembered that, as Figure 2.2 highlighted, Charlbury's population was roughly double that of Spelsbury.

However, as King states, raw numbers give only limited insight into poor relief, and risk overgeneralisations and therefore false interpretations.¹² Despite the indications in Figures 3.1 and 3.2, not all male paupers in Spelsbury received large amounts,

¹⁰ Williams, pp.36-37; D.A. Baugh, 'The Cost of Poor Relief in South-East England, 1790-1834', *Economic History Review*, 28 (1975), 50-68, pp.54-55.

¹¹ Rose, p.20; Baugh, pp.54-55.

¹² King, *Poverty*, p.166.

equally not everyone in Charlbury got small sums. For example, between 1799 and 1815 'Dixon' from Spelsbury received just a sheet in 1804-05, but Lydia Lardner of Charlbury had a weekly allowance of between eight and fifteen pounds a year from 1802 to at least 1815.¹³ Dixon, who was probably the Samuel Dixon buried in 1821 aged 72, received no other help during the years of this study, suggesting he was largely self-supporting but needed a small amount of parish help at one particularly difficult time.¹⁴ In contrast, for Lydia Lardner poor relief probably formed a major part of her income, and long-term. A more enlightening assessment thus needs to probe further by analysing the range of poor relief given by each place.

To this end, the types of poor relief, and how each was influenced by gender, will now be discussed, starting with regular monetary relief. Commonly referred to by historians as 'pensions', Henry French defines this as relief claimed by any one person for at least 'one-in-three' weeks per year.¹⁵ As he points out, this frequency meant that even if not the primary source of subsistence, it was still a 'regular, unavoidable component of household budgets.'¹⁶ In line with this, this study will class relief received for eighteen or more weeks each year as regular relief, and that given for less than eighteen weeks a year as irregular relief. The latter, at this stage, includes cash payments, items given in kind, and yardland relief, since these were all given on an occasional basis. Figure 3.3 shows the distribution. It reveals that in both places a larger proportion of monies spent on females went on regular rather than irregular relief. However, whereas Spelsbury generally spent more on regular relief

¹³ CTC, Overseers Accounts; OHC, PAR246/5/F1/2.

¹⁴ OHC, PAR246/1/R5/1 Spelsbury Burial Register 1813-92.

¹⁵ French, 'How dependent', p.207.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

given to males than on irregular relief, Charlbury gave regular relief to very few men. Indeed, after 1804 Charlbury listed no males as receiving regular relief.

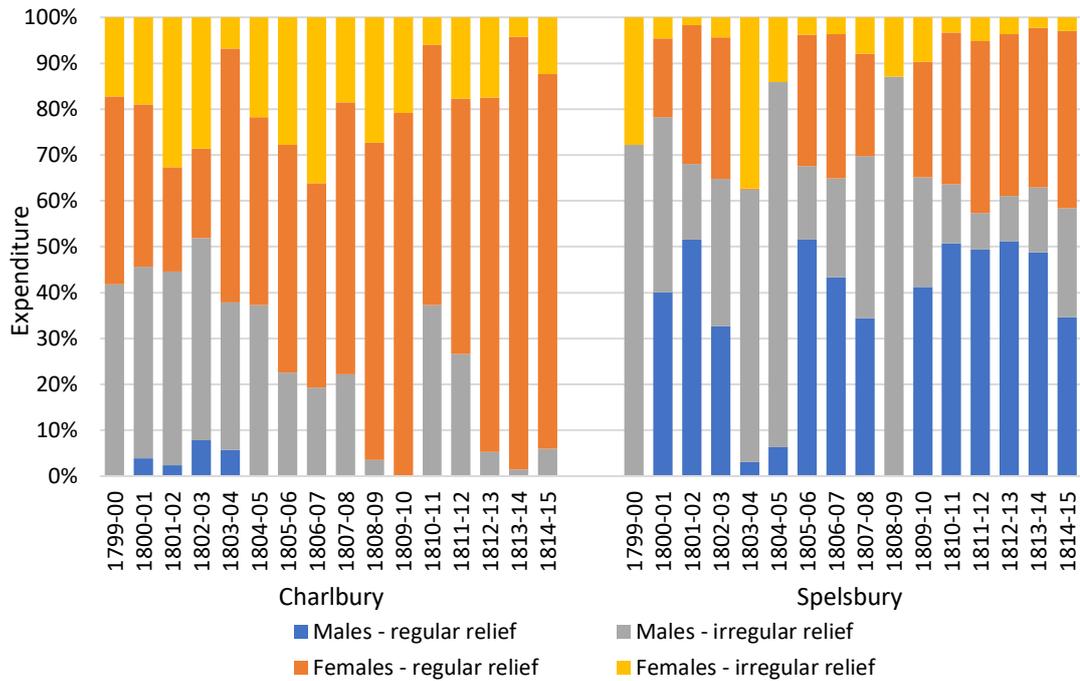


Figure 3.3: Distribution of regular and irregular poor relief in Charlbury and Spelsbury, by gender, 1799-1815.¹⁷

The differing male results are initially surprising, but close reading of both sets of overseers' accounts reveals that in each place regular poor relief was, to a varying degree, farmed out to a contractor. Many Oxfordshire communities had since 1794 tried this system in an effort to limit the level of poor rates.¹⁸ Overseers paid a contractor, often called a 'farmer of the poor', to maintain the poor, in return for which the contractor could use pauper labour.¹⁹ Contractors usually had to meet any shortfall from their own pocket, however in March 1809 vestry members at Spelsbury agreed to reimburse William Harper, who until November 1808 was

¹⁷ CTC, Overseers Accounts; OHC, PAR246/5/F1/2 and PAR246/5/F1/3.

¹⁸ Frederic Morton Eden, *The State of the Poor or An History of the Labouring Classes in England, Volume II*, (London: n.p., 1797), pp.275, 614; David Eastwood, *Governing Rural England Tradition and Transformation in Local Government 1780-1840* (Oxford: Oxford Historical Monographs, 1994), pp.11, 34.

¹⁹ Eastwood, p.34.

contracted to farm their poor, with thirty pounds for a 'loss sustained by him in disbursement of sums to the Poor'.²⁰ In Spelsbury the system was used only intermittently, in the years indicated by Figure 3.3 when overseers distributed little or no regular relief, namely 1799-1800, 1803-05 and 1808-09. In Charlbury it seems to have been used throughout the study and to have included most regular relief. This explains the small numbers recorded being paid as regular relief here, but severely compromises the ability to now disentangle the relationship between gender and regular poor relief. If any accounts were kept by those contracted to maintain the poor in either place, they have not survived, meaning an unknown number of paupers are now hidden from the records. As an indication of the scale of this deficiency, one Charlbury overseer in 1801-02 separated the monthly in- and out-relief paid to the contractor: the contractor received £274 6s. that year for outdoor relief, whilst relief paid to paupers by the overseers totalled £170 10s.²¹

Despite these limitations, it is still feasible to evaluate the regular relief administered to those pensioners recorded in the overseers' accounts, and to assess how this varied by gender and place. Weekly sums paid to each pensioner in any one year were totalled and divided by the number of payments that person received to obtain an average payment per person that year. For greater ease of charting and to lessen the impact of any idiosyncrasies specific to a particular year, results were grouped into two-year periods. Shown in Figures 3.4 and 3.5 they again reveal wide differences.

²⁰ Eastwood, p.34; OHC, PAR246/5/F1/2, 1808-09.

²¹ CTC, Overseers' Accounts, 1801-02.

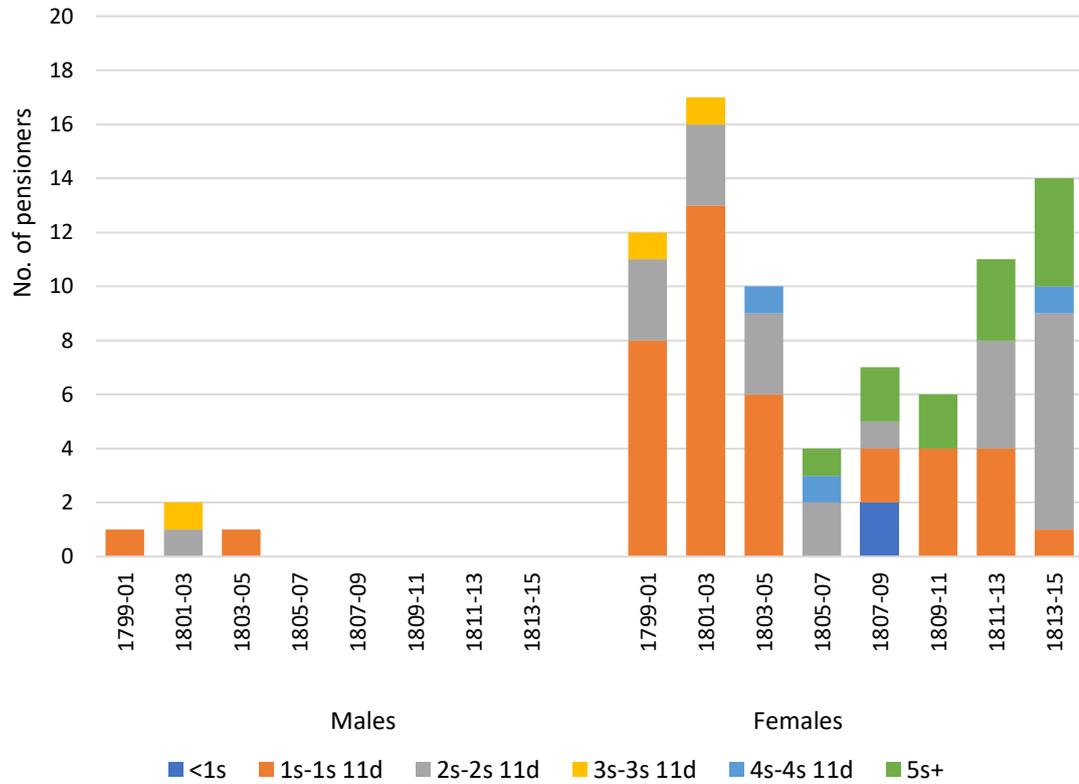


Figure 3.4: Value of weekly pensions in Charlbury, by gender, 1799-1815.²²

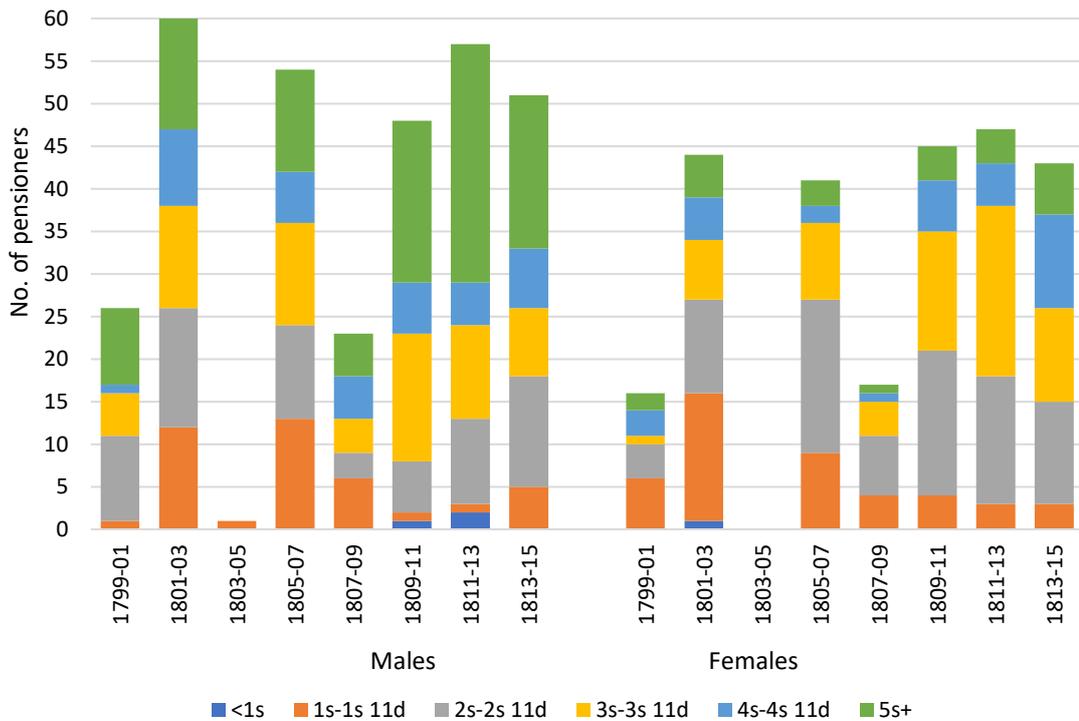


Figure 3.5: Value of weekly pensions in Spelsbury, by gender, 1799-1815.²³

²² CTC, Overseers' Accounts, 1799-1815.

²³ OHC, PAR246/5/F1/2 and PAR246/5/F1/3. Note differing vertical axis values to Figure 3.4.

Although in Charlbury the reduced number of people known to have received regular relief may be distorting the results, indications are that most pensions here were around 1s. or 2s. per week. It has already been identified that Charlbury had roughly equal proportions of males and females in 1801 and 1811, yet no regular relief was recorded as being paid to men from 1805. It is now clear that from this same time the range in sums given to women increased. Whilst Sarah Collett, for example, received only 8d. each week between 1807 and 1809 towards caring for her illegitimate daughter Hannah, Lydia Lardner, already mentioned, got 5s. 4d.²⁴

In Spelsbury, the larger number of pensioners doubtless allows Figure 3.5 to more accurately reflect regular relief expenditure, excepting the years when relief was contracted out. Amounts given were mostly larger than in Charlbury. Throughout the period between 20 and 50 per cent of male pensioners in Spelsbury received over 5s. per week, with an increase in recipients over time. Women tended to receive less than men, but a steadily increasing number were paid 3s.-5s. per week. A much smaller percentage than in Charlbury received just 1s.-2s. per week.

Despite the relatively larger size of regular relief payments in Spelsbury, compared to Charlbury, few of the pensions here amounted to anywhere near the average wage of the time. As discussed in Chapter 2, labourers usually earned less than tradesmen, meaning the large number of agricultural workers in Spelsbury perhaps contributed to the higher proportion of males needing regular relief here. However, the amounts given were such that most pensions probably provided a supplementary, not total,

²⁴ CTC, Overseers' Accounts, 1797-1815.

income. For females too sums paid were mostly vastly short of estimated subsistence rates. There were just a few, like Elizabeth Painting of Spelsbury who received between 11s. and 17s. each week from 1811 until at least 1815, for whom poor relief may have been their sole source of income.²⁵

Overall, the indications are that sums paid to men and women increased over time in both places, but men in Spelsbury received a far larger share of regular poor relief, whereas in Charlbury women were more prominent recipients of such monies. The trend to larger nominal pensions over time conforms to the pattern Williams found in Bedfordshire, where fewer high payments were given in the town of Shefford than in more rural Campton.²⁶ It ties in too with Keith Snell's observation that relief was commonly more generous in less densely populated places.²⁷ However, the prominence of male regular poor relief in Spelsbury sharply contrasts with Williams' findings that many more women received regular poor relief than men.²⁸

This propensity to male relief in Spelsbury is enlarged when another form of poor relief, not adopted in Charlbury but consistently used in Spelsbury, is considered. This was the allowance system. The scheme was heavily criticised in the late 1790s by social investigators like Thomas Malthus and Frederic Eden for increasing poverty levels and poor rates, and again in the 1834 Poor Law Report.²⁹ However, the many variations of these schemes are now seen, as Snell comments, to have been

²⁵ OHC, PAR246/5/F1/3, 1811-15.

²⁶ Williams, p.40.

²⁷ K.D.M. Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor, Social Change and Agrarian England 1660-1900* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1985), pp.108-09.

²⁸ Williams, p.101.

²⁹ George Boyer, *An Economic History of the Poor Law* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1990), pp.56-59.

a reaction to unemployment and pauperism not the cause of such problems.³⁰ The variant Spelsbury used was the 'yardland' system. Enstone, an adjacent parish that used the same scheme, described in 1834 how labourers who were not 'constant' were 'sent round by the yard land' and paid 'half from the master and the rest from the Poor's Rates.'³¹ Finmere, then in north-east Oxfordshire, noted how such relief ensured parishes found 'employment of some sort for the people rather than relieve them without'.³² This helped enforce the original Elizabethan principles of the Old Poor Law, that able-bodied poor should be set to work.³³ However, some ratepayers disliked the system, feeling it discriminated against smaller farms which employed little labour.³⁴ This explains the ruling at a Spelsbury vestry meeting in February 1810, that in future 'every Labrer going by the yardland to be paid by the imployer and for no person to refuse them in thear turn'.³⁵

As Figure 3.6 shows, yardland numbers in Spelsbury had in 1810 reached a low but thenceforth started to rise again. Most labourers employed by the yardland were, not surprisingly, male. Some men worked this way for six days a week over a large proportion of the year. On average, overseers paid them between 6d. and 9d. per yardland day worked. Samuel Evins, for example, worked 290 yardland days in 1807-08, for which the overseers contributed £8 12s. 2d. Evins received no other poor relief that year, though was named in relief lists all other years in the study, often for a combination of relief types. For many men, yardland allowances were

³⁰ Snell, p.109.

³¹ P.P. 1834 (44) *Report from His Majesty's Commissioners for Inquiring into the Administration and Practical Operation of the Poor Laws, Appendix B*, p.372c.

³² C.R. Oldham, 'Oxfordshire Poor Law papers', *Economic History Review*, 5 (1934), 87-97 (pp.90-91). Finmere is now in Buckinghamshire.

³³ Oldham, p.96.

³⁴ Mark Blaug, 'The Myth of the Old Poor Law and the Making of the New', *Journal of Economic History*, 23 (1963), 151-184 (p.156).

³⁵ OHC, PAR246/5/F1/3, February 1810.

more minimal: five of the sixteen years had men who just worked one day on the yardland, but mostly these received other forms of relief, if not that year in other years. For instance, Henry Hall worked only one yardland day in 1799-1800 but received 6s. 6d. over 5 weeks in 1800-01 and £6 4s. 8d. over 33 weeks in 1801-02.³⁶ Similarly, William Horn received only 6d. for his yardland day in 1800-01, but in 1801-02 received clothes worth 2s. 6d. and cash payments totalling 6s. 6d. over seven weeks. For the next five years William again appeared on yardland lists, working between ten and sixty-five days.³⁷ These examples illustrate how precariously many of these men lived, seemingly always on the brink of needing extra help from the parish in one form or another.

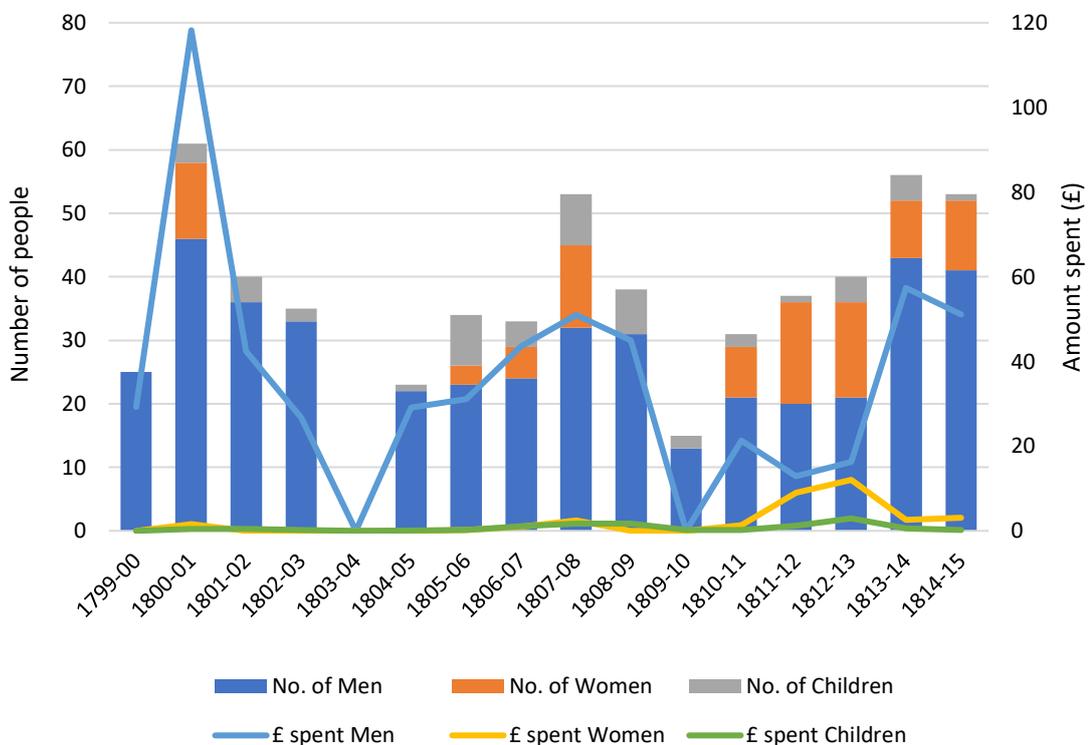


Figure 3.6: Yardland allowances in Spelsbury, by gender, 1799-1815.³⁸

³⁶ OHC, PAR246/5/F1/2, 1800-02.

³⁷ OHC, PAR246/5/F1/2, 1800-06.

³⁸ OHC, PAR246/5/F1/2 and PAR246/5/F1/3.

It was not only men who received yardland payments. Women and children were also relieved this way, especially in the latter half of the period. For two successive years they even outnumbered men in the number of days worked: in 1811-12, twenty men between them worked 482 yardland days, sixteen women 748 days, and one girl 83 days; the following year twenty-one men totalled 558 days, fifteen women 813 days, and four children 159 days.³⁹ On average the overseers paid these women only 3d. per day. Thus they gave Elizabeth Mayo 14s. 3d. for working 56 yardland days in 1811-12, but her husband George got £2 1s. 3d. for one day less.⁴⁰ Children, possibly underestimated as some have been counted as such only when indicated by a label such as 'Thomas Griffin's daughter', were paid even less, in this case 10d., for five days worked in July 1800.⁴¹

Spelsbury had two other years with peaks in numbers of women employed in yardland work, namely 1800-01 and 1807-08. Like 1812-13, these have been identified as having high poor relief expenditure. The increased employment of women and children thus seems linked to years of particular hardship in the parish. It shows how whole families were willing to work towards trying to earn an adequate income, and also suggests that overseers tried to keep costs down where possible in these years by employing women and children more cheaply than men. This conflicts with Lees' claim that overseers identified 'work and family support as a male activity' but ties in with Blaug's assertion that 'as the burden on the rates increased, the parish officers simply drew the purse strings tighter.'⁴²

³⁹ OHC, PAR246/5/F1/3, 1811-13.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

⁴¹ OHC, PAR246/5/F1/2, 1800.

⁴² Lees, p.106; Blaug, pp.162-3.

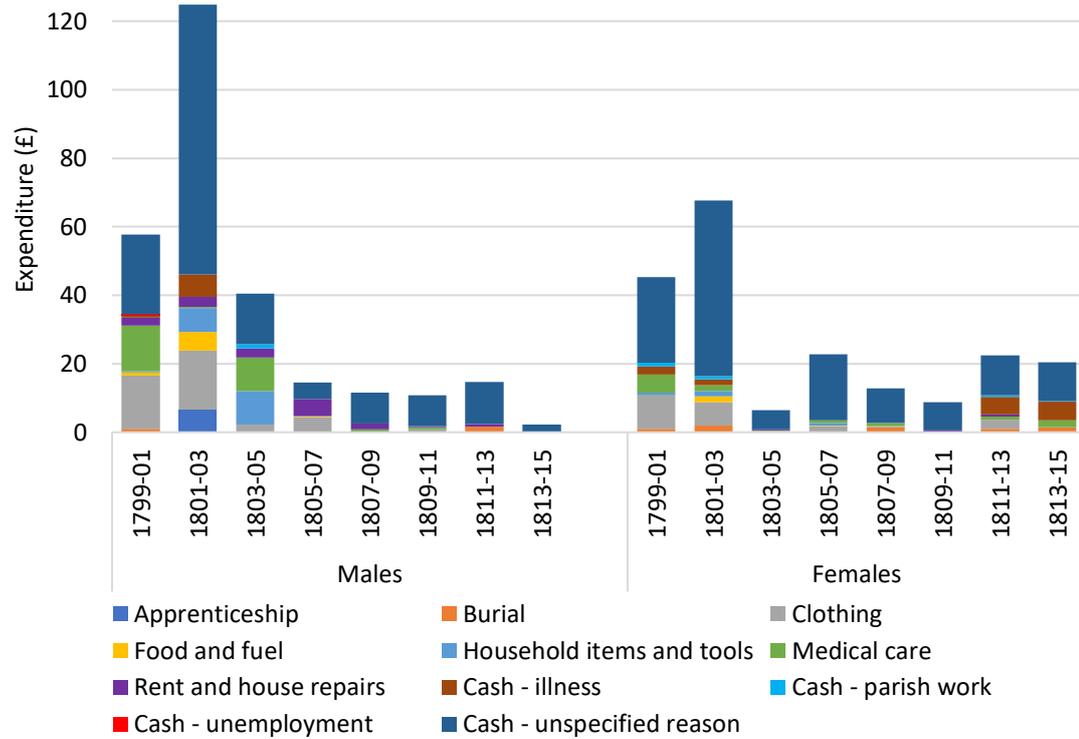


Figure 3.7: Distribution of irregular relief in Charlbury by gender, 1799-1815.⁴³

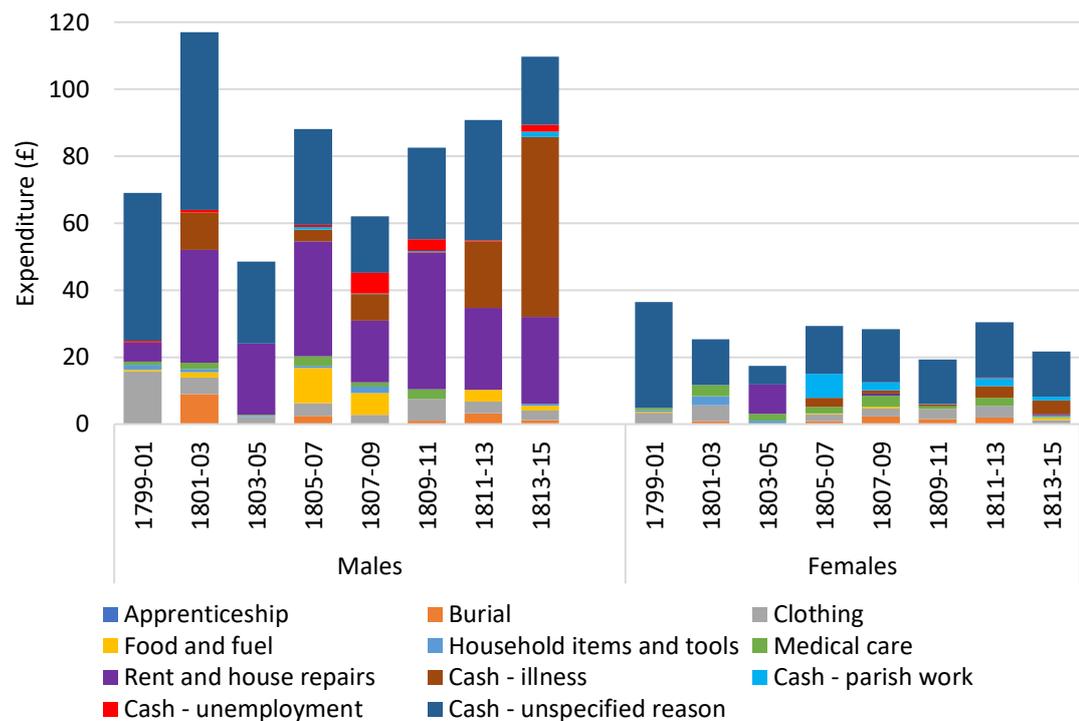


Figure 3.8: Distribution of irregular relief in Spelsbury by gender, 1799-1815.⁴⁴

⁴³ CTC, Overseers' Accounts.

⁴⁴ OHC, PAR246/5/F1/2 and PAR246/5/F1/3.

As the examples of Henry Hall and William Horn indicated, many paupers receiving pensions or yardland relief also got help at irregular intervals. For a number, this was their only form of poor relief. Irregular cash payments, as stated, were given for less than eighteen weeks per year. For this analysis all such relief, whether given as cash or in kind, has been grouped into eleven categories, as itemised in Figures 3.7 and 3.8. In Spelsbury, expenditure on male relief of this type was substantially greater than that given to females. Males and females in Charlbury followed a more similar trend for such relief, but most noticeable is that, unlike the pattern shown in Figure 4, men in Charlbury were much more conspicuous recipients of irregular relief than they were of regular relief. Until 1805 male irregular relief expenditure here even outranked that on women, especially in 1801-03.

Occasional cash payments were mostly given for unspecified reasons but frequently a note explained why money was given. Commonest of these was cash given in times of illness to help compensate for loss of earnings, but money was also given when no work was available. Both reasons highlight how, as Snell has commented, the Old Poor Law was 'a system of employment as well as relief'.⁴⁵ Likewise parish work. For men from both settlements this usually involved transporting people or goods. For example, Spelsbury overseers paid William Tennant 10s. 6d. in 1800-01 to take John Souch's goods to the nearby village of Ramsden, following his removal there, then in 1801-02 paid Thomas Taylor to transport Jane Green to the infirmary at Oxford on his cart and John Sturdy to deliver wood to the homes of various

⁴⁵ Snell, p.106.

paupers.⁴⁶ Women more often carried out work like nursing or midwifery. For instance, again in Spelsbury, Elizabeth Evins was paid £4 7s. to nurse Ann Souch for twenty-nine weeks in 1806-07, Hannah Nixen to attend Harriet Ivings in childbirth, and in 1807-08 Ann Dillo to prepare Martha Bowell's body for her funeral.⁴⁷

Table 3.1: Expenditure on items in kind to nearest £ in Charlbury and Spelsbury, by gender, 1799-1815.⁴⁸

	Charlbury		Spelsbury	
	M	F	M	F
Apprenticeship	7			
Burial	2	7	17	8
Clothing	40	21	42	20
Food and Fuel	6	2	24	2
Household items and tools	20	4	6	4
Medical care	25	3	6	12
Rent and house repairs	13	1	205	10
Total	113	38	300	56

As can be calculated from Table 3.1, 60 per cent of relief in kind in Spelsbury was allocated to house rents, and predominantly paid to men. Individual contributions were usually between £1 10s. and £2 2s. per year. In Charlbury, rent formed only 8 per cent of this type of relief, being only paid a handful of times, and then sometimes for room lodgings, rather than house rental. Sums spent therefore tended to be smaller, although again given mainly to men. The largest individual expenditure in

⁴⁶ OHC, PAR246/5/F1/2, 1800-02.

⁴⁷ OHC, PAR246/5/F1/2, 1806-08.

⁴⁸ CTC, Overseers' Accounts; OHC, PAR246/5/F1/2 and PAR246/5/F1/3.

this category was £2 13s. 6d. on repairing Joseph Curtis' house in Charlbury, in 1804-05.⁴⁹

Table 3.2: Number of footwear and clothing items given as relief in kind in Charlbury and Spelsbury, by gender, 1799-1815.⁵⁰

Item	Charlbury		Spelsbury	
	M	F	M	F
Shoes, new	42	26	69	25
Shoes, mended	5	13	3	1
Shoes, second-hand	1			
Boots				1
Shirt	37		41	
Coat (* includes 1 mended)	12*	1*	9	1
Breeches	10		7	
Stockings	9	4	7	
'Clothes'	6	5	7	21
Waistcoat	3		1	
Hat	2		1	
Frock	2			
Shift		18		5
Petticoat		4		3
Gown		4		1
Apron		4		
Stays		2		
Cap, Bonnet		1		1
Jacket			1	
Cloth		2		1
Total	129	84	146	60

⁴⁹ CTC, Overseers' Accounts, 1804-05.

⁵⁰ CTC, Overseers' Accounts; OHC, PAR246/5/F1/2 and PAR246/5/F1/3.

Clothing constituted the biggest spend on items in kind in Charlbury, and second largest in Spelsbury. King suggests that overseers willingly spent money on clothes for paupers because clothing was a visible sign of poverty and of how well a parish cared for its poor.⁵¹ It is questionable though whether this would have been of great concern in rural Oxfordshire, and indications are that items given were usually practical, for instance more women were given a shift than a gown. Table 3.2 shows that, of the clothing items given over time, shoes were by far the most numerous in both settlements, especially for men. The cost of these averaged about 6s., which being a substantial proportion of a male weekly wage helps explain why so many people needed parish help with them. As Peter Jones points out, overseers doubtless recognised that shoes were a major tool of trade for labourers; without them such men might be unable to work, so end up costing the parish significantly more.⁵²

Many of the other amounts expended on items in kind were small, but nevertheless illustrative of the wide assortment of help provided. Household items and tools bought by Charlbury overseers included items as diverse as a fork and rake for Catherine Gomm in 1801-02, pot and kettle for John Chandler in 1803-04, and mending Mary Biles's bed in 1810-11.⁵³ Spelsbury noted fewer items in this category but, for example, Joseph Naish's wife received 2s. towards a spinning wheel in 1806-07, Ann Rook a pair of sheets in 1814-15, and Henry Bailes and Samuel Evins each had a bedstead made for them in 1808-09.⁵⁴ The fork, rake and

⁵¹ King, *Poverty*, p.158.

⁵² Peter Jones, 'Clothing the Poor in Early-Nineteenth-Century England', *Textile History*, 37 (2006), 17-37, p.23.

⁵³ CTC, Overseers' Accounts, 1801-11.

⁵⁴ OHC, PAR246/5/F1/2, 1806-09; PAR246/5/F1/3, 1814-15.

spinning wheel demonstrate that overseers recognised the benefit of not just providing household requisites, but also opportunities for earning additional income.

Medical care for men and women in both communities mainly related to visits by the doctor and to the Infirmary at Oxford, plus nursing in times of illness or old age. A range of sundry non-gender specific items also contributed to this category, such as salve for Edmund Gadfield of Charlbury in 1801-02, leeches for Elizabeth Hencher of Spelsbury in 1802-03, and a truss for William Moulder's son in Spelsbury in 1805-06.⁵⁵ Women also needed regular help from a midwife, and in 1801-02 overseers in Charlbury paid 2s. to Edward Turtle's 'clubb'.⁵⁶ This was presumably his subscription to one of the three Friendly Societies in Charlbury at that time.⁵⁷ It indicates the value overseers placed on such groups, recognising that if membership lapsed due to failing to meet the weekly payments the parish might end up providing help which might otherwise have been gained from the club.

In summary, this chapter has demonstrated how Charlbury and Spelsbury both relieved their poor by doling out monetary relief on a regular weekly basis, and more irregularly when a particular need, such as illness, arose. Items in kind like clothing, rent, and medical care were also distributed. However, despite their geographical proximity, the nature of outdoor poor relief granted in each place was otherwise very different. Charlbury overseers seemingly contracted out much of its regular poor relief throughout the period, whereas those in Spelsbury tried the contractual system

⁵⁵ CTC, Overseers' Accounts, 1801-02; OHC, PAR246/5/F1/2.

⁵⁶ CTC, Overseers' Accounts, 1801-02.

⁵⁷ Shaun Morley (ed.), *Oxfordshire Friendly Societies 1750-1918* (Finstock: Oxfordshire Record Society, 2011), pp.92-98.

for three periods, but otherwise organised all poor relief themselves. Spelsbury also used the yardland allowance scheme, but Charlbury did not.

Maybe because of these differences, but perhaps more likely the cause of them, there was also a difference in the gender of people who received poor relief. In Charlbury, women consistently dominated the total relief expenditure. Although in earlier years more men in Charlbury were given occasional cash relief and items given in kind, this became less marked after about 1803, and by 1815 men had virtually disappeared from Charlbury's relief lists. In contrast, men in Spelsbury were far more prominent throughout the study, both in number and in their share of all types of relief expenditure albeit with, in reverse to much of the commonly accepted scholarship, an increase towards the end of the period in numbers of females.

To some extent these differences are not entirely surprising given the different economic profiles of Charlbury and Spelsbury outlined in Chapter 2. In addition, the caveat that Nigel Goose gave in his study of poor relief in Hertfordshire under the New Poor Law applies here: the varying gender of paupers in the two places may well result from a genuine need for more relief by that particular gender but may also have been influenced by differing attitudes of poor law overseers.⁵⁸ Were this so, a more random pattern might be expected as each overseer served for only one year at a time, however, a lack of any surviving vestry minutes or churchwardens accounts, both of which may have provided insight into attitudes of parish officials, means any impact of such a possibility becomes unidentifiable.

⁵⁸ Goose, Nigel, 'Poverty, old age and gender in nineteenth-century England: the case of Hertfordshire', *Continuity and Change*, 20 (2005), 351-384 (p.357).

Whilst the full reasons behind the differences in each settlement may continue to elude, it can nevertheless be concluded that poor relief in Charlbury and Spelsbury both support the first part of Williams' statement, that 'Poverty was gendered'.⁵⁹ But whereas Charlbury meets with her assertion that 'many more women were relieved than men', this was certainly not the case in Spelsbury.⁶⁰ Discovering more about the life-cycle circumstances of individual paupers may help understand more on this. This will be the focus of the next chapter.

⁵⁹ Williams, p.101.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

4. THE LIFE-CYCLE EXPERIENCE OF POOR RELIEF

The previous chapter established that there were considerable gender differences in the poor relief given in Charlbury and Spelsbury. This chapter will assess whether there was similar disparity in the stages of life at which people in each community needed relief by testing the second part of Samantha Williams' statement, which claims poverty was 'overwhelmingly life-cycle related'.¹ In her Bedfordshire study, Williams found paupers aged 60 and over were particularly favoured.² Many others, including Lynn Hollen Lees, share the view that the elderly 'had the best chance of seeing the benign side of parish relief'.³ Others agree that poor relief was linked to life-cycle circumstances, but argue it was not limited to the elderly. For instance, Richard Dyson asserts that in Broughton, Lincolnshire, children and the widowed were as likely to be given relief.⁴ In a more diverging view, Barry Stapleton contends that poverty in Odiham, Hampshire, was inherited over at least two generations and that once paupers began receiving relief over two-thirds remained on it for the rest of their life-course.⁵

The concept of life-cycle poverty was highlighted in 1901 by B. Seebohm Rowntree's study of late-nineteenth century York. Rowntree theorised that labouring men experienced 'five alternating periods of want and comparative plenty', as

¹ Samantha Williams, *Poverty, Gender and Life-cycle under the English Poor Law 1760-1834* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2013) p.101.

² Williams, *Poverty*, p.113.

³ Lynn Hollen Lees, *The Solidarities of Strangers, The English Poor Laws and the People, 1700-1948* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1998), p.52.

⁴ Richard Dyson, 'The Experience of Poverty in a Rural Community: Broughton, North Lincolnshire, 1760-1835', *Local Population Studies*, 70 (2003), 11-28 (p.14).

⁵ Barry Stapleton, 'Inherited Poverty and Life-Cycle Poverty: Odiham, Hampshire, 1650-1850', *Social History*, 18 (1993), 339-355 (p.355).

illustrated in his diagram in Figure 4.1. These comprised three periods of poverty: childhood when the 'constitution is being built up', early middle age when raising children, and old age. Between these were two periods of comparative prosperity, firstly in the late teens and twenties when working but not yet supporting large families, and again in later middle age when children had ceased being dependant and perhaps even contributed to the family income.⁶

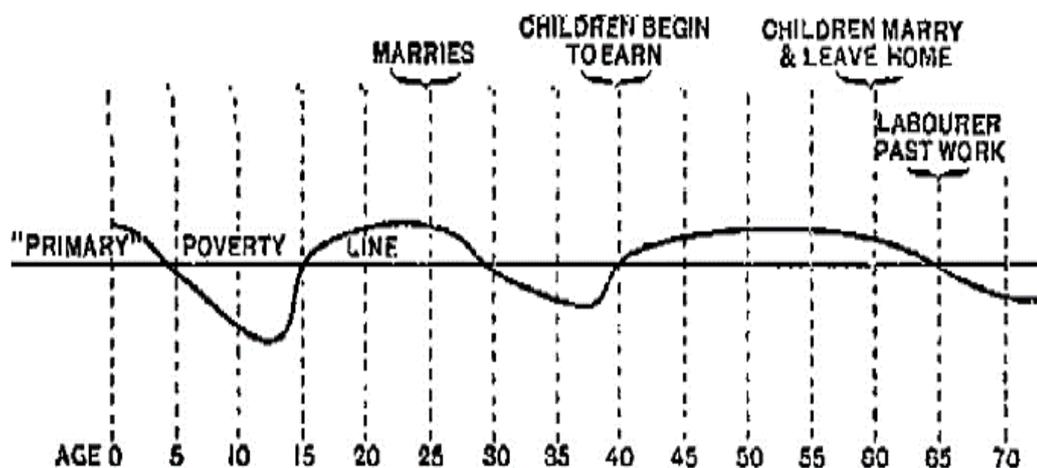


Figure 4.1: Rowntree's diagram of labourers' poverty over the life cycle.⁷

To gauge how the life-cycle poverty theory applied to Charlbury and Spelsbury, the age and marital status of paupers needed to be identified. To enable comparison with similar studies, it was decided to focus mainly on non-dependent paupers, and to distinguish between those who received regular pensions (as stated on page 23, relief paid for eighteen or more weeks a year) and those relieved only irregularly. Anyone dependent on a pauper, like wives or children, are where relevant included as part of that household unit. Baptism, marriage and burial registers were searched to

⁶ B. Seebohm Rowntree, *Poverty, a Study of Town Life* (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd, 1908), p.136.

⁷ Rowntree, p.137.

determine the age and family structure of paupers, using the nominal record linkage criteria recommended by Ottaway and Williams.⁸ As expected, some paupers could not be positively identified. For instance, the Spelsbury registers indicate three generations of men named John Margetts, plus cousins with the same name, meaning it was not possible to identify which of five potential candidates was being relieved. Others seem not to have been baptised, married or buried in either parish. Overall though, 187 paupers (93 males, 94 females) in Charlbury and 183 (109 males, 74 females) in Spelsbury were successfully identified.⁹ At 83 per cent of Charlbury paupers, and 81 per cent of those in Spelsbury, both settlements fall within the hoped for achievable range of 80-90 per cent indicated by Ottaway and Williams.¹⁰

The resultant information was then used to allocate an age group and life-cycle stage to each pauper. These are loosely based on Rowntree's categories of childhood, early middle age and old age, but modified to differentiate between single and married adults, and the widowed. Numbers in each of the resulting groups – childhood, single adults, married couples, the widowed and the elderly – are shown in Figures 4.2 and 4.3, and the expenditure on each in Figure 4.4. Each category will now be discussed more fully.

⁸ Susannah Ottaway and Samantha Williams, 'Reconstructing the Life-Cycle Experience of Poverty in the Time of the Old Poor Law', *Archives*, 98 (1998), 19-29, pp.26-27.

⁹ Note: these figures, and others in this chapter, may not match those quoted previously due to inevitable omission of certain paupers and differing evaluation criteria.

¹⁰ Ottaway and Williams, p.27.

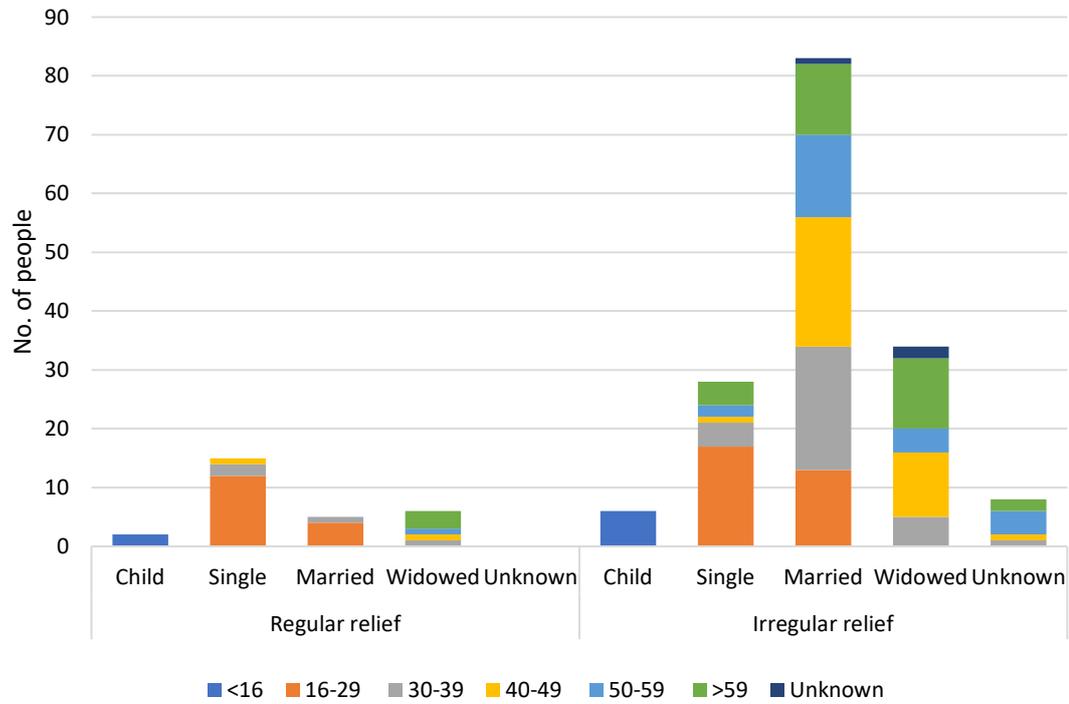


Figure 4.2: Overview of regular and irregular poor relief recipients by age and marital status, Charlbury 1799-1815.¹¹

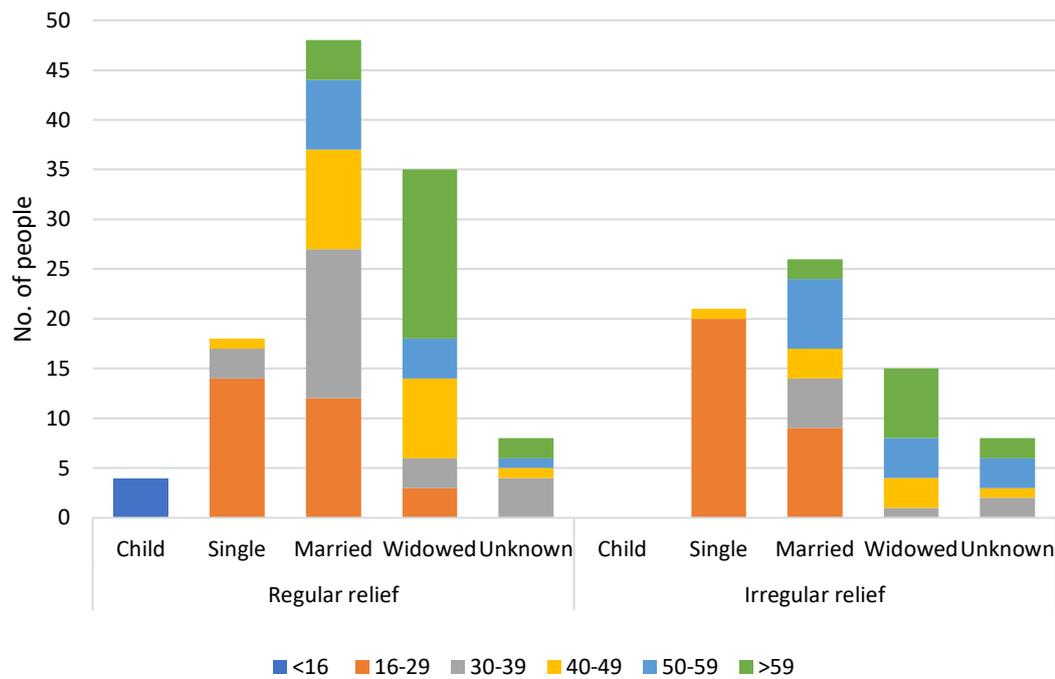


Figure 4.3: Overview of regular and irregular poor relief recipients by age and marital status, Spelsbury 1799-1815.¹²

¹¹ See Appendix.

¹² See Appendix.

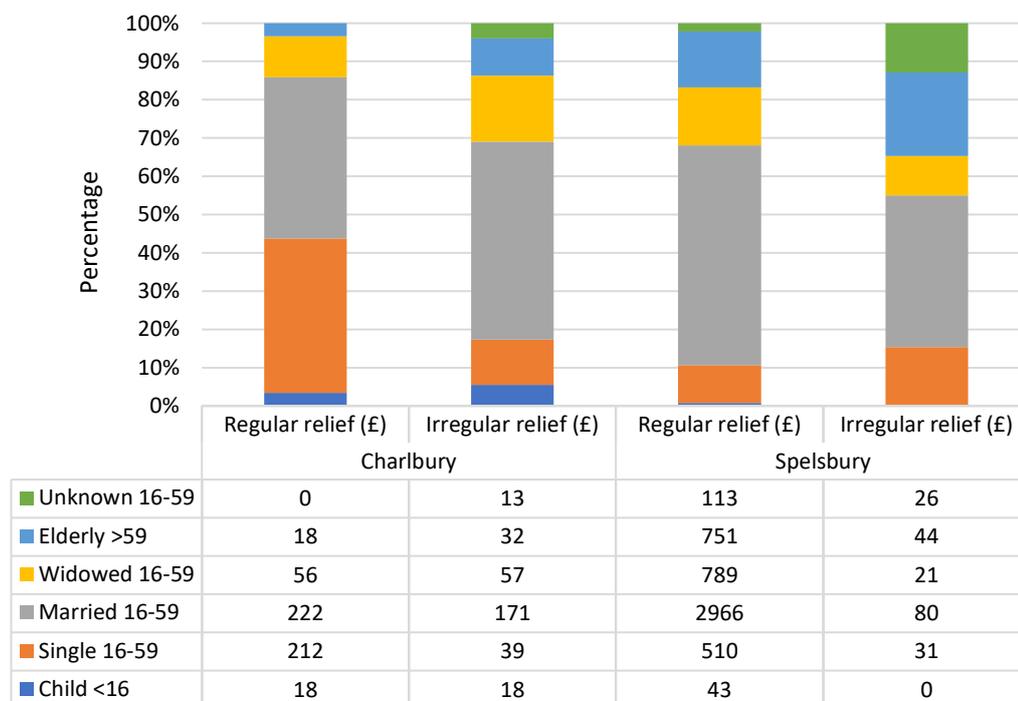


Figure 4.4: Expenditure on poor relief, by life-cycle stage and relief type, Charlbury and Spelsbury, 1799-1815.¹³

As the three graphs indicate, very few children got poor relief in their own right. Those who did mostly had no parent who could support them. Thomas Bowell of Spelsbury, for example, baptised in 1804, was the illegitimate son of Martha Bowell. When Martha died in 1807 the parish paid for her funeral then gave 2s. a week to Thomas for the next six months.¹⁴ He then vanishes from the Spelsbury records, so perhaps was sent elsewhere, either to be cared for by family or boarded out. The latter, as Williams points out, equated to modern-day fostering and often occurred in large families.¹⁵ One Charlbury example is Edward and Mary Turtle, who between 1789 and 1801 had seven children. Edward got relief for his ‘children at home’, but from 1801 to 1803 his ‘child at Benfield’s’ was relieved separately.¹⁶ Whether the

¹³ See Appendix.

¹⁴ OHC, PAR246/1/R1/3 Spelsbury Baptism and Burial Register 1753-1812; PAR246/5/F1/2 Spelsbury Overseers’ Accounts 1799-1809.

¹⁵ Williams, *Poverty*, p.104.

¹⁶ OHC, MSS.D.D.Par.Charlbury c.2; CTC, Charlbury Overseers’ Accounts, 1797-1815.

Turtle and Benfield families were connected is unknown, but some carers were related to the child they boarded. Thus, from 1802 to 1813 Spelsbury overseers sent money to John Low in Great Tew, on behalf of his grandchildren John and Mary Weaving, born Spelsbury.¹⁷ For others, there was no obvious reason: William Winter of Spelsbury was supported by relief paid to John Sorrell from age six until eleven, even though his parents lived until the 1850s and went on to have more children.¹⁸

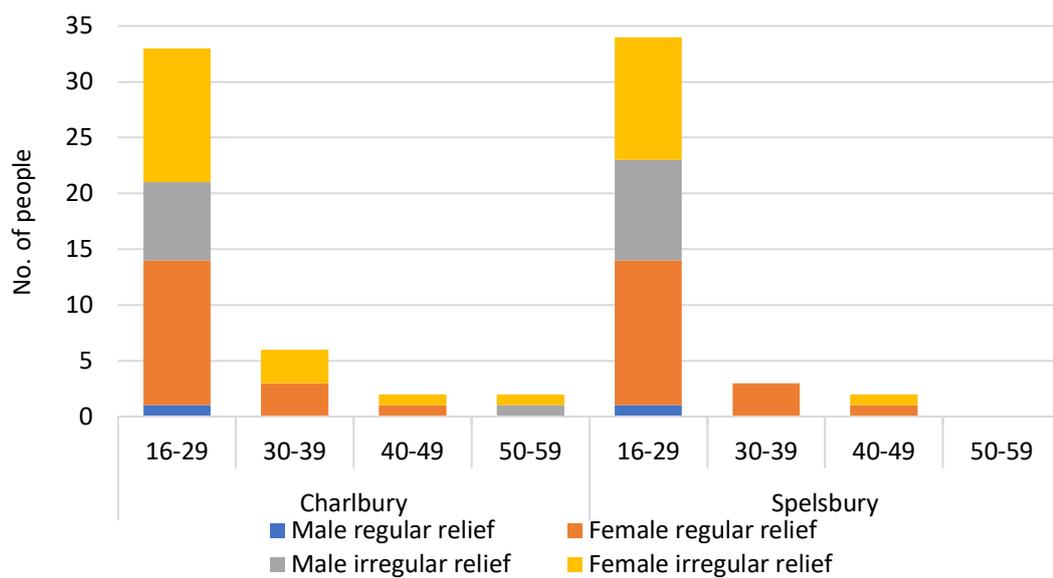


Figure 4.5: Number of single adults aged 16-59 on poor relief, by age, gender and relief type, Charlbury and Spelsbury, 1799-1815.¹⁹

Considerably more children were relieved indirectly through help given to a single, married or widowed parent. Turning to these adult categories, the data contributing to Figures 4.2-4.4 reveals that single adults aged 16-59 formed the largest category (54 per cent) of those regularly relieved in Charlbury and incurred almost the greatest outlay. Spelsbury gave regular relief to three more single adults than

¹⁷ OHC, PAR246/5/F1/2, PAR246/5/F1/3 Spelsbury Overseers' Accounts 1809-20; PAR246/1/R1/3.

¹⁸ OHC, PAR246/1/R1/3; PAR246/1/R2/1 Spelsbury Baptism Register 1813-55; PAR246/1/R5/1 Spelsbury Burial Register 1813-92.

¹⁹ See Appendix.

Charlbury but spent more than twice as much on them than Charlbury. The vast majority of single paupers in both places, as Figure 4.5 shows, were women aged under thirty.

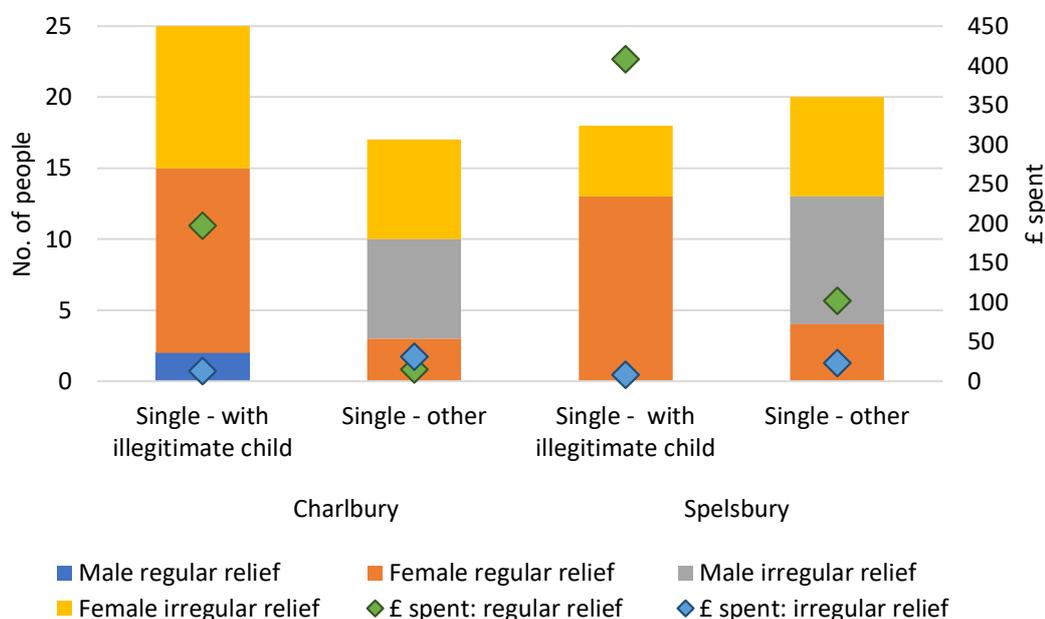


Figure 4.6: Number of single adults aged 16-59 on poor relief, and expenditure thereon, Charlbury and Spelsbury, 1799-1815.²⁰

Furthermore, as Figure 4.6 illustrates, most regularly relieved single adults, plus many less frequently relieved, were unmarried parents with an illegitimate child. In both places illegitimacy also accounted for the greatest expenditure on single adults. Lees comments how a sharp late-eighteenth-century rise in illegitimacy caused a substantial increase in relief to unmarried mothers.²¹ Williams similarly found that numbers of such women needing relief soared at this time, as did Patricia Bromfield in a study of seven Staffordshire parishes.²² In Charlbury, thirty-one illegitimate

²⁰ See Appendix.

²¹ Lees, p.58.

²² Williams, *Poverty*, p.107; Patricia Bromfield, 'Incidences and Attitudes: A View of Bastardy from Eighteenth-century Rural North Staffordshire, c.1750-1820', *Midland History*, 27 (2002), 80-98 (p.83).

children were baptised to mothers living in the town between 1799 and 1815. This constituted 6 per cent of baptisms for Charlbury residents, but in Spelsbury the proportion was higher: the twenty-four baptisms of illegitimate children during the period constituted 10 per cent of children baptised in the parish.²³

Only five of the mothers of illegitimate children in Charlbury managed without poor relief. A few more only needed minimal help, for instance Hannah Mitchell got £2 2s. in 1809 when her child was born but nothing thereafter, but most got weekly sums of 1s.–2s., frequently for several years. Ann Cross, whose son Richard was born in 1799, received £2 for her lying-in, then 1s. 8d. weekly for the next six years.²⁴ In Spelsbury, although the total outlay on this group was over twice that in Charlbury, roughly one-quarter of this (£107) went to one mother, Elizabeth Cross.²⁵ Elizabeth was what Peter Laslett terms a ‘repeater’ in that she had at least four illegitimate children, by at least two different fathers.²⁶ Her relief was therefore higher than usual, as much as 11s. a week in 1812-13, and extended over a longer than average time, from 1801 to at least 1815.²⁷

No link has been found to indicate that Elizabeth Cross of Spelsbury was related to Ann Cross of Charlbury, however the latter certainly comprised part of Laslett’s ‘bastardy-prone sub-society’, in that multiple members of her family had illegitimate children.²⁸ Each of these relied on poor relief for at least part of their life-cycle. An aunt, Mary Cross, was recorded as a pauper when her two bastard children were

²³ OHC: PAR246/5/F1/2, PAR246/5/F1/3, PAR246/1/R1/3, PAR246/1/R2/1.

²⁴ OHC, MSS.D.D.Par.Charlbury c.2; CTC, Overseers’ Accounts.

²⁵ OHC, PAR246/5/F1/2, PAR246/5/F1/3.

²⁶ Barry Reay, *Microhistories: Demography, society and culture in rural England, 1800-1930* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1996) p.188; OHC, PAR246/1/R1/3.

²⁷ OHC, PAR246/5/F1/2, PAR246/5/F1/3.

²⁸ Reay, p.190.

baptised in 1788 and 1793; Ann's brother, Thomas Cross, received relief in 1800-01 for his illegitimate son after the mother, Elizabeth Willett, died; and Thomas's widow, Mary, whom he married in 1805, got relief for the illegitimate son she had two years after Thomas' death in 1812.²⁹ These examples highlight how not just single women, but widows and single men too, could need help in maintaining illegitimate children.

Only one other single father in Charlbury, and none in Spelsbury, regularly got poor relief for their child and, like Thomas Cross, this occurred after the mother had died. Even so, overseers often devoted time, and money, to single fathers. In attempting to offset their outlay on Thomas Cross's widow Mary, just mentioned, overseers in Charlbury spent £2 8s. taking the putative father, Samuel Acres, into custody and obtaining two warrants. On Thomas Herbert, father of Mary Wright's child, they spent £6 10s. on hiring a horse for three days, fetching Herbert from Warwickshire, bringing him to Charlbury, imprisoning him for two days, then obtaining a warrant and affiliation order.³⁰ Frequently these efforts paid off. In the case of Ann Cross, a successful affiliation order led to regular contributions from the father, Richard Randall, which helped alleviate the contribution made by the parish.³¹

Rather than chase putative fathers through the courts many parishes tried to coerce unmarried parents into marriage. Williams found that overseers in Campton and Shefford financed twelve marriages; Dyson also found this done in Lincolnshire, and

²⁹ OHC, PAR246/1/R1/3, PAR246/1/R3/1 Spelsbury Marriages and Banns Register 1754-1816.

³⁰ CTC, Overseers' Accounts, 1811.

³¹ OHC, Oldfield Quarter Sessions Calendar MSS. Vol. 2, Examinations, Recognizances and Indictments, 1783-1830, p.87: Epiphany 1799.

Lees and Bromfield concur it was common practice.³² No such marriages can be identified in Charlbury or Spelsbury though. One might speculate that overseers here supported Thomas Malthus's thinking that marriage amongst the poor should be discouraged.³³ In his 1797 *Essay on Population* Malthus criticised the Poor Laws for encouraging early marriage, and thus rapid population growth, amongst those unable to support themselves and their families unaided.³⁴ Persuading unmarried parents down this path would be likely to result in more children being born, and potentially even more claims on poor relief.

Married couples in Spelsbury were, as Figures 4.3 and 4.4 revealed, already the largest group claiming relief, and by far the costliest. Forty-five recipients (40 per cent) of regular poor relief in Spelsbury represented couple-headed families aged under 60, and across the period received 56 per cent of its expenditure. Charlbury paid regular relief to only four (15 per cent) such couples. Though not many this was aligned to Campton and Shefford, where this group formed 15-23 per cent of those regularly relieved.³⁵ Williams concluded that either families managed to earn sufficient to support themselves unaided or found it harder to qualify for relief than those at other life-cycle stages.³⁶ This perhaps also applied to some extent in Charlbury where, as seen in Chapter 2, employment was largely more consistent, and wages generally higher than in Spelsbury. However, eighty-two married couples in Charlbury were relieved irregularly, and 46 per cent of all relief here went to married

³² Williams, *Poverty*, p.108; Dyson, 'The Experience', p.8; Lees, p.57; Bromfield, p.81.

³³ Williams, *Poverty*, p.108.

³⁴ Rose, p.44.

³⁵ Samantha Williams, 'Poor relief, labourers' households and living standards in rural England c.1770-1834: a Bedfordshire case study', *Economic History Review*, 3 (2005) 485-519 (p.500).

³⁶ Williams, *Poverty*, p.107.

couples, confirming, as Chapter 2 suggested, that poverty was still a problem for many families in the town although to a lesser extent than in Spelsbury.³⁷

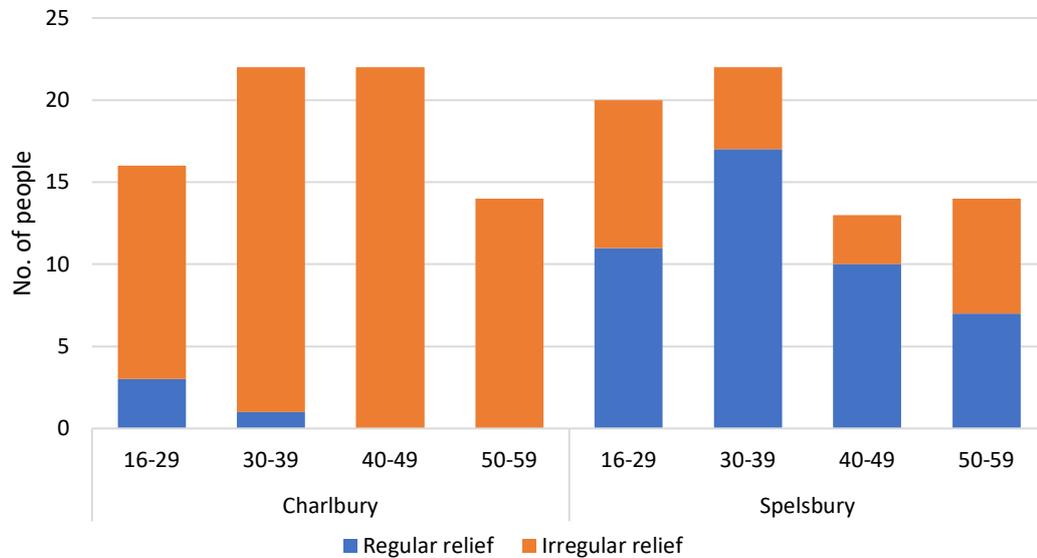


Figure 4.7: Married couples aged 16-59 on poor relief and with children, by age and relief type, Charlbury and Spelsbury, 1799-1815.³⁸

Figure 4.7 breaks the number of married couples down by the age they first claimed relief during the study period. It shows that most regularly relieved couples with children in Spelsbury, and all in Charlbury, first needed relief when aged under forty, and that fewer couples in their fifties got any relief in either place. This ties in with Rowntree's observation that early middle age was a key poverty phase.³⁹ Although Charlbury only gave regular relief to a few couple-headed families, it is evident from Figure 4.4 that these took 42 per cent of its regular relief bill. One couple, Jacob and Lydia Lardner, accounted for three-quarters (£162) of this expenditure. Jacob was in the militia and, like other such families, received a weekly allowance via the

³⁷ See Appendix.

³⁸ See Appendix.

³⁹ Rowntree, p.137.

overseers. This started in 1802, when the first child was born, and lasted until at least 1815, by which time they had a second child.⁴⁰ Spelsbury also had families with men in the militia, but none who were relieved over such a prolonged period. James and Ann Jewel, for instance, received only irregular relief between 1811 and 1814, as did Charles and Mary Hicks.⁴¹

Table 4.1: Duration of regular relief to couple-headed families, Charlbury and Spelsbury, 1799-1815.⁴²

Years	Charlbury		Spelsbury	
	No.	%	No.	%
<1-2	1	25	8	18
2-4	2	50	9	20
4-6			8	18
6-8			1	2
8-10			4	8
10-15	1	25	7	16
> 15			8	18
Total	4	100	45	100

As the census figures in Chapter 2 suggested, and details of those on yardland relief in Chapter 3 confirmed, most couple-headed pauper families in Spelsbury worked as labourers. Table 4.1 shows that many of these families needed poor relief for several years, in over one-third of cases for ten or more consecutive years. This helps explain the exceptionally high total expenditure on this category compared with other life-cycle groups in Spelsbury, and all those in Charlbury, but is at odds with the results from Campton and Shefford, where Williams concluded ‘only a handful’

⁴⁰ CTC, Overseers’ Accounts, 1802-15.

⁴¹ OHC, PAR246/5/F1/3.

⁴² See Appendix.

of couple-headed families got poor relief.⁴³ However, it supports George Boyer's claim that payments to labourers formed a major function of poor relief in rural parishes from 1795 to 1834.⁴⁴ It also ties in with Henry French and Richard Dyson's findings that Terling (Essex) and Broughton (Lincolnshire) each experienced a post-1795 increase in relief to able-bodied married men.⁴⁵

Poor relief paid to families in Spelsbury seems, as elsewhere, to have been linked to how many children they had. Snell, for instance, claimed poverty increased when families had three or more economically unproductive children.⁴⁶ Edward Newbold calculated that in Spelsbury weekly allowances paid in 1801 started with the second child, and at 1s. 9d. per child was less than that paid in many Oxfordshire parishes; Cropredy and Pyrton, for instance, paid 2s.–3s.⁴⁷ It is hard to verify these figures, as payments often varied from week to week plus other factors, like the amount of work a man could get, also influenced how much he earned. Even so, it is clear that larger families usually got more relief than smaller ones. Hence, thirty-seven-year-old John Betteridge in 1801-02 received £7 2s. relief for him, his wife and two children aged under three, plus another £2 7s. yardland relief. The same year, Samuel Bowell, also thirty-seven and married but supporting six children ranging from 12 to a baby, got almost £26. He and two sons got a few extra shillings in yardland relief, bringing his average relief to just over 10s. a week. Both men remained on weekly relief

⁴³ Williams, *Poverty*, p.107.

⁴⁴ George Boyer, *An Economic History of the English Poor Law, 1750-1850* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1990), p.15.

⁴⁵ Henry 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 (p.793); Dyson, 'The Experience' p.15.

⁴⁶ K.D.M. Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor, Social Change and Agrarian England 1660-1900* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1985), p.28.

⁴⁷ Edward Newbold, 'The geography of poor relief expenditure in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century rural Oxfordshire' (unpublished D.Phil thesis, University of Oxford, 1995), p.286.

throughout this study, but after John had two more children his poor relief increased, whereas Samuel had no more children and his payments decreased, presumably as children ceased being economically dependent. By 1812-13 Samuel averaged 3s.–4s. each week and John about 6s.⁴⁸

These two examples link with Rowntree's theory that couples raising children were frequently below the poverty line but entered a phase of relative prosperity, or perhaps more accurately lesser hardship, as children grew older.⁴⁹ Poor relief for both families can be identified as extending back at least another generation, and again this pattern is evident. John's father, also called John, and Samuel's father, who was William, are both named in Poor Lists from the 1770s as having weekly relief when raising their children. In 1778, John Betteridge senior received 7s. weekly for his family of seven, and William Howell 3s. for three people. In 1777, William was paid 4s. for four people, and in 1773 an unstated amount for him, his wife and five children.⁵⁰

William Howell was the day labourer cited in Chapter 2 as worth 20s. in 1785.⁵¹ At that date the youngest of his nine children was fifteen. His having managed to save a small sum suggests he too experienced an easing of financial circumstances as his children grew older. Figure 4.8 illustrates the many members of William's family who went on to need poor relief at certain life-cycle stages. After William died in 1799 his widow Elizabeth began getting weekly relief and remained on this until her

⁴⁸ OHC, PAR246/1/R1/3; PAR246/1/R2/1; PAR246/5/F1/2; PAR246/5/F1/3.

⁴⁹ Rowntree, p.136.

⁵⁰ OHC, E36/2/4/A/1, List of Poor, Spelsbury 1777; E36/2/4/A/2, List of Poor, Spelsbury 1778; E36/2/4/A/3, List of Poor, Spelsbury 1773.

⁵¹ See page 11.

death in 1816.⁵² Son William, like his brother Samuel, was relieved throughout this study as part of a couple-headed family with children. Both brothers had a daughter who married a labourer who needed regular relief, and Samuel had a son and daughter who each got relief for an illegitimate child.⁵³ As well as conforming to Rowntree’s model that poverty experienced by families diminished as children grew, the poverty of this family thus covered all of the life-cycle phases discussed in this chapter.⁵⁴ It also spanned at least four generations.⁵⁴

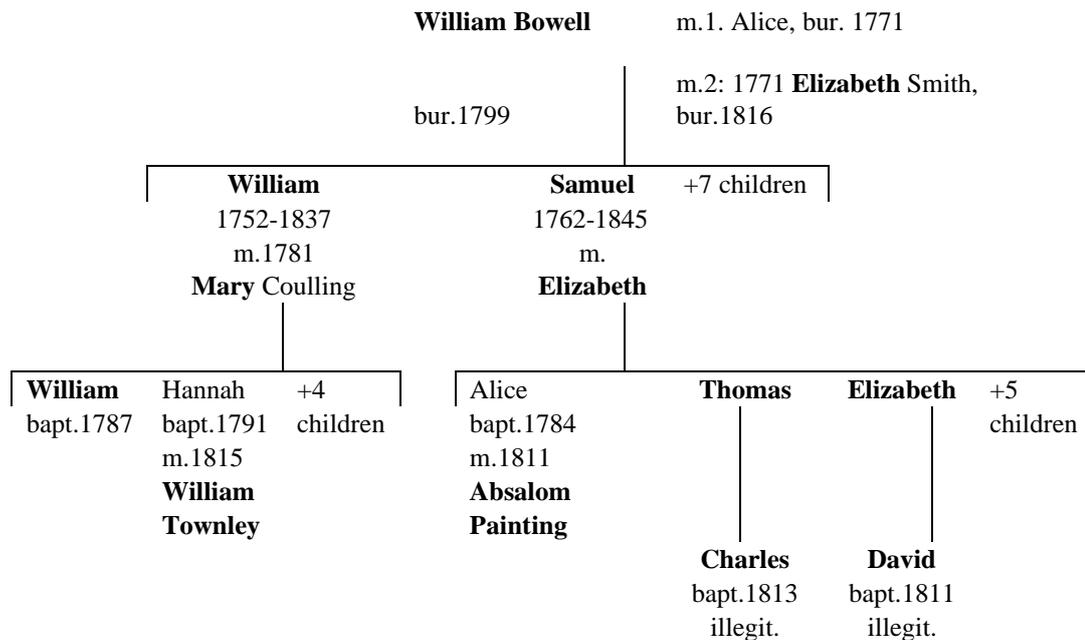


Figure 4.8: The Bowell Family of Spelsbury (recipients of poor relief shown in bold).⁵⁵

The extension of poverty over several generations of a family identifies with Barry Stapleton’s notion of inherited poverty.⁵⁶ Looking at all regularly relieved married

⁵² OHC, PAR246/5/F1/2; PAR246/5/F1/3.

⁵³ OHC, PAR246/1/R1/3; PAR246/5/F1/3.

⁵⁴ Rowntree, p.136.

⁵⁵ See Appendix.

⁵⁶ Barry Stapleton, ‘Inherited Poverty and Life-Cycle Poverty: Odiham, Hampshire, 1650-1850’, *Social History*, 18 (1993), 339-335 (p.344).

men in Spelsbury reveals another nine people whose father was likewise relieved in the 1770s. This equates to one-fifth of all couple-headed families regularly relieved during the study. Even if slightly underestimated, it seems unlikely that Spelsbury would therefore have achieved the one-third of families identified by Stapleton as in poverty for between two and seven generations.⁵⁷ As Williams concluded for Campton and Shefford, the identification of comparatively few families whose poverty occurred over consecutive generations suggests that poverty more likely resulted from life-cycle reasons than from an inherited pauperised 'under-class'.⁵⁸

Although there remains controversy between historians over the poor relief given to couples with families, it is generally agreed that relief for the widowed was more certain. As Susannah Ottaway argues, those at this life-cycle stage were considered part of the 'deserving poor'.⁵⁹ Williams concurs, adding that because women were not 'architects of their own destination' they tended to be looked on particularly favourably.⁶⁰ Figure 4.9 confirms that women in Charlbury and Spelsbury dominated this life-cycle category. It shows too that each settlement relieved a similar number of widowed paupers, and at similar age groups. However, like the relief for married couples, most widowed paupers in Charlbury were only irregularly relieved, whereas in Spelsbury they were paid regularly.

Two of the three widows identified as being regularly relieved in Charlbury started their relief on having illegitimate children, suggesting this, not their widowhood, led to their needing it. The other, Elizabeth Keel, got non-resident relief. She was

⁵⁷ Stapleton, p.345.

⁵⁸ Williams, *Poverty*, p.119.

⁵⁹ Williams, *Poverty*, p.111.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

baptised and married in Charlbury, and her husband buried there, but he originated from Hothfield, in Kent. As wives automatically gained their husband's settlement on marriage, regardless of whether they ever lived in that place, Elizabeth's poor relief, paid from 1800 until her death in 1807, was financed by the overseers at Hothfield, and sent to Charlbury at regular intervals.⁶¹

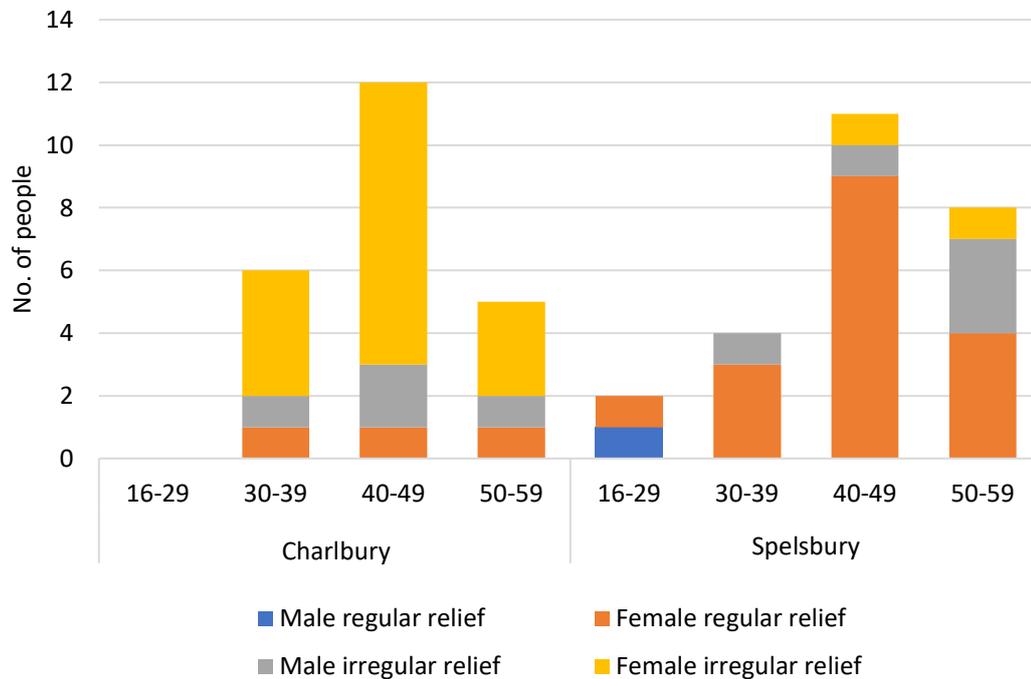


Figure 4.9: Number of widowed adults aged 16-59 on poor relief, by age, gender, and relief type, Charlbury and Spelsbury, 1799-1815.⁶²

John Harvey, the sole widower who got regular relief in Spelsbury, lost his first wife in 1806 when their daughter, Mary, was four. He had previously had relief only in 1802, when Mary was born, but after his wife's death got 5s. towards her burial, then 2s. weekly for the next three years. He re-married in 1809 to Elizabeth Thornett, a widow with five children whose first husband was killed by a falling tree in 1804.⁶³

⁶¹ CTC, Overseers' Accounts; OHC, MSS.D.D.Par.Charlbury c.1, c.2.

⁶² See Appendix.

⁶³ OHC, PAR246/5/F1/2; PAR246/5/F1/3; PAR246/1/R1/3, PAR246/1/R3/1.

Elizabeth was one of thirteen Spelsbury women who started getting relief immediately after being widowed; two others did so within three years. For two of the total of fifteen women it is not clear if their husbands got relief prior to death but six of the remaining husbands, including Elizabeth's, had received regular relief, another four had irregular relief, and just three appear to have had no relief.⁶⁴ Poor relief was therefore part of the family subsistence, to a greater or lesser extent, of most widowed paupers in Spelsbury even before their widowhood. This conflicts with the Bedfordshire results, where despite a preponderance of widows similarly beginning relief at the point of widowhood, less than one-quarter previously had relief as part of a married couple.⁶⁵ Widowhood there was thus frequently the first experience of poor relief, whereas in Spelsbury it mostly continued a reliance which was previously faced as part of a couple-headed family.

Like the widowed aged 16-59, women aged 60 or over were more numerous recipients of poor relief than men. In Spelsbury, women got 50 per cent of regular relief given to the elderly, men 30 per cent and married couples 20 per cent, whilst in Charlbury all regular relief to this age group went to women.⁶⁶ These figures are broadly similar to those in Campton and Shefford.⁶⁷ However, measuring numbers of elderly paupers in Charlbury and Spelsbury as a proportion of all relief gives substantially different results from those found elsewhere. The various studies by Williams, French and Ottaway found that 34-38 per cent of relief went to the elderly.⁶⁸ In contrast, less than one-quarter of regular relief in Spelsbury went to this

⁶⁴ OHC, PAR246/5/F1/2; PAR246/5/F1/3.

⁶⁵ Williams, *Poverty*, p.112.

⁶⁶ See Appendix.

⁶⁷ Williams, *Poverty*, p.113.

⁶⁸ Williams, 'Poor relief', p.500; French, 'How dependent', p.201.

age group, and in Charlbury only 11 per cent, or three paupers. Assessing both regular and irregular relief still gives comparatively low results: in Charlbury, the elderly numbered 18 per cent of all those getting outdoor poor relief and incurred just 6 per cent of its expenditure; proportions in Spelsbury were 20 per cent of paupers, and 15 per cent of expenditure.⁶⁹

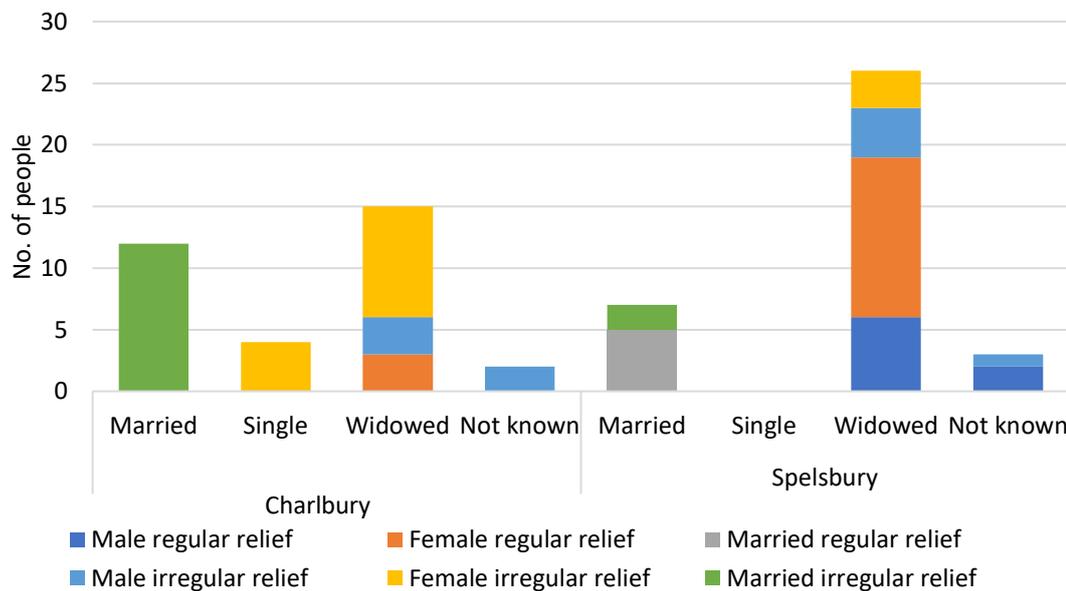


Figure 4.10: Number of adults aged 60 and over by gender, marital status and relief type, Charlbury and Spelsbury, 1799-1815.⁷⁰

At least seven of the elderly pensioners in Spelsbury can be traced as also getting weekly poor relief some decades earlier. One of these, John Cross, was the day labourer mentioned in Chapter 2 as owing £15 of debts in 1785.⁷¹ In the 1770s, John got 1s. per family member per week for himself, his wife and between two and four children. By 1799, the start of this study, he was a widower and seemingly lived alone, receiving 1s. each week over at least nine years along with occasional items of

⁶⁹ Figures 4.4 and 4.10.

⁷⁰ See Appendix.

⁷¹ See page 11.

clothing, money towards his rent, and regular yardland relief.⁷² In contrast, relief given regularly to the three elderly paupers in Charlbury lasted three years at most.

The presence of Charlbury's workhouse probably means the number of elderly people identified as needing poor relief here has been underestimated. The workhouse could accommodate up to forty paupers, though in 1803 housed only twenty-nine.⁷³ The overseers' accounts record only a few transfers of paupers to the workhouse, but that these were all elderly people suggests this was the main life-cycle category it accommodated. Sixty-year-old widower John Dring, for instance, worked for 'Esquire Holloway' at Lee Place until 1813 when overseers spent 4s. 'convaing' him to the workhouse; he died soon afterwards 'by the visitation of God'.⁷⁴ Susanna Henshaw was widowed in 1796, but excepting a pension from 1800 to 1803 remained self-reliant until 1812. By then aged seventy-two and 'in distress' she was relieved for a few weeks by order of the magistrates, then sent to the workhouse; she died two months later.⁷⁵ In Spelsbury, as Chapter 2 explained, elderly paupers might be admitted to one of four charity-run almshouses or the parish poorhouse. Of ten elderly pensioners who died between 1799 and 1815, at least three spent their last days in the almshouses and three in the poorhouse.⁷⁶ However, whereas inmates of the almshouses and poorhouse invariably continued receiving poor relief, meaning their effect on the analyses for Spelsbury was

⁷² OHC, PAR246/1/R5/1; PAR246/5/F1/2.

⁷³ P.P. 1777 (9) *Report from the Committee appointed to inspect and consider the Returns made by the Overseers of the Poor, 1777*, p.476; P.P. 1803-04 (175) *Abstract of Answers and Returns under Act for procuring Returns relative to Expense and Maintenance of Poor in England*, p.399.

⁷⁴ CTC, Overseers' Accounts, 1812-13; OHC, MSS.D.D.Par.Charlbury b.7; *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, 3 April 1813.

⁷⁵ CTC, Overseers' Accounts, 1812-13; OHC, PAR246/1/R1/3, PAR246/1/R5/1.

⁷⁶ OHC, PAR246/5/F1/2; PAR246/5/F1/3.

negligible, the 'hidden' impact of the workhouse in Charlbury may explain the small number of elderly paupers found here, and the reduced expenditure on them.

This chapter has again uncovered sizeable differences between Charlbury and Spelsbury, this time in the life-cycle stages at which paupers most often experienced poor relief. As discussed, the results for Charlbury are doubtless compromised by the workhouse, and by having contracted out some outdoor relief. But the surviving evidence indicates that single mothers in Charlbury constituted the most prominent life-cycle category in terms of the number of paupers regularly given outdoor relief. Illegitimate children in Spelsbury formed a proportionally higher share of all baptisms than in Charlbury but got a smaller share of poor relief. The most frequently relieved life-cycle phase in Spelsbury, and far and away the most expensive, was couple-headed families. Few such families in Charlbury got regular relief, but a significant number were relieved occasionally, meaning that in total almost half of Charlbury's total expenditure on relief went to couple-headed families. These findings contrast with Williams' claim that an increase in welfare provision favouring families was 'simply not evident at the micro-level', but tie in with assertions made by Snell, Boyer and others.⁷⁷

If all relief given to families with children in Charlbury and Spelsbury, whether headed by single parents or married couples, is considered, the results certainly conform with Rowntree's theory that childhood and parenthood were two of the three main life-cycle stages at which relief was needed.⁷⁸ However, neither

⁷⁷ Williams, *Poverty*, p.130.

⁷⁸ Rowntree, p.136.

settlement gave large amounts of relief to Rowntree's third category, old age. In this respect both sets of results also conflict with Williams' assertion that most relief went to the widowed and elderly. Overall then, the evidence presented in this chapter does support Williams' statement that poverty was 'overwhelmingly life-cycle related', albeit not in the way she originally applied it. However, the differences in how relief was experienced at each life-cycle stage, in particular the frequency and amounts given, means that such a conclusion needs to be made with the caveat that the life-cycle experience of poor relief for paupers in Charlbury and Spelsbury not only differed from that which Williams found in Bedfordshire, but also from each other.

5. CONCLUSION

This dissertation set out to test the hypothesis forwarded by Samantha Williams that poverty was ‘gendered and overwhelmingly life-cycle related’ through a critical analysis of poor relief in the two settlements of Charlbury and Spelsbury at the start of the nineteenth century.¹ In doing this it has aimed to contribute to a greater understanding of poverty and poor relief in the local area of Charlbury and Spelsbury at the time, as well as to the history of poor relief generally.

Chapter 2 set the area of study in context and showed how, despite their proximity, Charlbury and Spelsbury had contrasting social and economic profiles. The township of Charlbury had roughly double the population, concentrated in a smaller area, than the whole of Spelsbury parish. In Charlbury, most people worked in trade and families could supplement their income by glove-making, whilst in Spelsbury almost all work was agricultural. Anecdotal evidence from a diary, official accounts, and other contemporary writings indicate widespread local poverty at the time of the study. Government returns further emphasized this, but revealed that poor relief in Spelsbury was paid to a greater proportion of people than in Charlbury and incurred a higher *per capita* expenditure.

Chapter 3 examined how many people of each gender were relieved in each place, how much they received, and how frequently. It confirmed the indications from Chapter 2 that, despite its smaller population, Spelsbury had a larger number of

¹ Samantha Williams, *Poverty, Gender and Life-cycle under the English Poor Law 1760-1834* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2013) p.101.

paupers, and spent substantially more on outdoor relief than Charlbury. The chapter also revealed a dissimilar gender profile of paupers in each place. Females on poor relief in Charlbury were, as Williams and several other studies have found, more numerous than males, but in Spelsbury males were the dominant gender.

Chapter 4 analysed the life-cycle stages at which paupers needed help by assessing relief given to children, single adults, married couples, the widowed and the elderly. Unmarried mothers were numerically the most prolific recipients of regular relief in Charlbury, whereas in Spelsbury married couples with children were far more numerous and, due to the longevity of their relief, considerably more costly. A large number of such families occasionally relieved in Charlbury partly offset this difference, meaning that households with children, whether headed by one or two parents, were in both settlements the most extensive and expensive life-cycle phase. Both places thus contrast with Williams' findings, that most paupers were elderly and relatively few married couples were relieved, though less markedly in Charlbury than Spelsbury.

Given more time and space the study might have looked further into the seasonality of work, which in particular could have influenced poor relief amongst pauper labourers in Spelsbury. Dependent on sufficient sources, the influence of the makeshift economy, just fleetingly touched on in Chapter 2 regarding help proffered to paupers by the Quaker community in Charlbury, cottage industry for women in the form of gloving, and impact of nearby Wychwood Forest, might also have benefitted the investigation by establishing the extent to which these factors may have impacted on the lower *per capita* level of poor relief in Charlbury compared to

Spelsbury. Extending the timeframe of the study would also be beneficial. Spelsbury has earlier (1773-87) and later (1815-35) overseers' accounts, analysis of which could reveal whether the gendered nature of poor relief changed over time, as many historians claim. This could also expand on how frequently poor relief was life-course rather than life-cycle, and how frequently poverty was inherited, both hinted at in Chapter 4 but unproven due to the small number of years examined.

As it stands, certain factors encountered during the study have reduced the efficacy of the results. Like all largely statistical projects the overall findings are slightly distorted by a few atypical paupers, for instance the Lardner family of Charlbury or Elizabeth Cross of Spelsbury. More problematic is that neither series of poor law sources proved on analysis to be the 'good set' that is desirable for this type of study.² This was especially so in Charlbury where a lack of names for either the workhouse or contracted poor means an unknown number of the pauper community were unavoidably excluded from the study. In Spelsbury, where inhabitants of the almshouses and parish poorhouse still got parochial relief, and outdoor relief was only intermittently contracted out, the results are less severely compromised, however caution is still needed in reaching anything more than tentative conclusions.

These drawbacks do have one positive construal though, namely that they highlight the flexibility of the Old Poor Law. Variation between parishes in how poor relief was allocated, as Shave comments, was common in the early-nineteenth century and resulted not in one model of parish poor law administration but an 'almost infinite

² Paul Lawrence, 'Sources and avenues for further research', in 'Block 6: Poverty and Welfare', *A825 MA History Part 1*, (Milton Keynes: The Open University, 2009), p.33.

variety of constantly changing and overlapping schemes'.³ Langton, writing on Oxfordshire, has similarly observed how a great strength of the Old Poor Law was its ability to adapt quickly to changing local conditions.⁴ This has been shown as particularly apparent in Spelsbury, through its occasional use of the contract system and more frequent use of yardland allowances, discussed in Chapter 3. But, as Chapter 4 showed, it was also evident in Charlbury, where a greater use of irregular relief enabled households not permanently poor, but clearly close to subsistence, to dip in and out of relief according to changing circumstances.

In terms of assessing Williams' hypothesis, it becomes apparent by drawing together all the evidence found that Charlbury and Spelsbury both fit her statement that poverty was 'gendered and overwhelmingly life-cycle related', but that each does so in a very different way from how she originally applied it, and in a different way from each other.⁵ Charlbury meets Williams' assertion that more women than men were relieved, but whereas Williams found most of the females were elderly women, in Charlbury this category was outstripped by young single mothers. Spelsbury is at odds with Charlbury and the Bedfordshire findings in that most relief went to men, and primarily to married men in early middle age with children. As explained, this ties in with observations made by various historians, including Snell and Boyer, that shortages of work for labourers in rural areas caused an increasing number of families to need poor relief. Although a large number of families in Charlbury were also relieved, their allocation was less consistent and more minimal.

³ Samantha Shave, 'The Dependent Poor? (Re)constructing the Lives of Individuals 'On the Parish' in Rural Dorset, 1800-32', *Rural History*, 20 (2009), 67-97 (pp.68-69).

⁴ Peter Jones and Steven King, eds, *Obligation, Entitlement and Dispute under the English Poor Laws* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), p.15.

⁵ Williams, p.101.

Given the disparate nature of, and varying opportunities in, each community outlined in Chapter 2, and the differing ways in which each place allocated relief and varying categories of people to whom it was given seen in Chapters 3 and 4, these results are not entirely surprising. Gender and life-cycle undoubtedly influenced poverty and poor relief in Charlbury and Spelsbury, but taking all the factors discussed into account it appears that the assertion by John Broad, that poverty reflected ‘the particular circumstances of the parish community’ in which people lived, is as applicable, if not more so, to these two settlements than the gender and life-cycle model advanced by Williams.⁶

⁶ John Broad, ‘Parish economies of welfare, 1650-1834’, *Historical Journal*, 42 (1999) 985-1006 (p.986).

APPENDIX – PRIMARY SOURCES USED FOR ANALYSES IN CHAPTER 4

Charlbury Town Council:

Charlbury Overseers' Accounts 1797-1815

Oxfordshire Family History Society:

OXF-CN01, Oxfordshire Parish Register transcripts, Chipping Norton Registration District Vol. 1: Spelsbury baptisms, marriages and burials 1541-1938 (Oxford: OFHS, 2003)

OXF-CN02, Oxfordshire Parish Register transcripts, Chipping Norton Registration District Vol. 2: Charlbury baptisms, marriages and burials 1559-2001 (Oxford: OFHS, 2006)

Oxfordshire History Centre:

MSS.D.D.Par.Charlbury b.2, Baptism Register 1813-38

MSS.D.D.Par.Charlbury b.4, Register of Banns 1754-78 and Marriages 1754-79

MSS.D.D.Par.Charlbury b.5, Marriage Register 1797-1812

MSS.D.D.Par.Charlbury b.6, Marriage Register 1813-48

MSS.D.D.Par.Charlbury b.7, Burial Register 1813-63

MSS.D.D.Par.Charlbury c.1, Register of Baptisms 1661-1774, Marriages 1661-1753 and Burials 1661-1774

MSS.D.D.Par.Charlbury c.2, Baptism and Burial Register 1774-1812

MSS.D.D.Par.Charlbury c.4, Register of Marriages 1779-96 and Banns 1779-94

PAR246/1/R1/3, Spelsbury Baptism and Burial Register 1753-1812

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PAR246/1/R2/1, Spelsbury Baptism Register 1813-55

PAR246/1/R3/1, Spelsbury Marriages and Banns Register 1754-1816

PAR246/1/R5/1, Spelsbury Burial Register 1813-92

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