

Warnham Historical Society

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The Operation of the Poor Law in Warnham 1748-1816

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The general principle involved in meeting the needs of the "indigent poor", i.e. those unable to support themselves in England in the 18th Century was that they should return to the parish of their birth-place and that they should be supported as a charge on the public funds of that parish.

This principle derived from the Elizabethan Poor Law which was made necessary by the Dissolution of the Monasteries and by the collapse of such elements of Feudalism as existed in England. The monasteries in their time had played a large part in relieving the poor and the end of Feudalism meant that the parish became the unit of local government. The relief of the poor, however, was still a function of the Church (at this time the Church of England) and its detailed administration was in the hands of the Churchwardens in each parish, who appointed an "Overseer" of the poor.

The Elizabethan system, as became manifest in many departments of government, presupposed that people would normally "stay put" in the parishes where they were born. In the case of the labouring classes this is to a great extent what happened. Most people in a parish would be personally known to the local J.P.s and the poor of the parish might well be helped by the neighbours and gentry among whom they had been brought up.

The Elizabethan system never envisaged that large numbers of "indigent poor" would be involved or that many people would need to be moved from one parish to another. But the end of the 18th Century saw great changes with the growth of population, agrarian and industrial development and the Napoleonic wars. It is no wonder that the Elizabethan system broke down and that the poor then suffered dreadful hardships and indignities.

These national tendencies are reflected in the Parish of Warnham. Local records indicate as follows:-

- (a) In the 20 years 1748-68 only two families were moved from Warnham to other parishes. This was a period of marked social stability.
- (b) In the next 26 years (1768-1794) eight families and one spinster were moved. Agrarian and population changes were beginning to have an effect though this was far less marked in Sussex than in the Midlands, East Anglia and London.
- (c) In the 16 years (1800-1816) the social fabric was greatly disturbed by the Napoleonic wars and even more by the Industrial Revolution. During these years there were twenty-three re-settlements. These included a large proportion of widows and some single women with children.

Throughout these three periods a noteworthy feature is that nearly all the people re-settled were born in Sussex or Surrey Parishes, many in parishes close to Warnham. Five were born in Rudqwick, four in Slinfold, four in Rusper, three in Capel, two in Ockley and two in Horsham. The most distant parishes were Portren (Portsmouth), Guildford and Lambeth each with one case. The Lambeth case occurs right at the end of period (c).

These figures do not, of course, include people who moved on their own

initiative. In rural West Sussex there is little doubt that most people of the labouring class spent their lives in, or very near to, their places of birth. This immobility was probably more marked in the Weald than elsewhere owing to the notoriously bad and difficult bridle road through our thickly wooded countryside with its deep mud. The lack of navigable rivers and canals, which by the end of the eighteenth century were opening up other parts of the country, also restricted mobility in the Weald of Sussex. The Wey and Arun Canal was not in operation until 1790 and must have had little effect on transport around Warnham, although there were ambitious plans for a canal to Horsham by way of Broadbridge Heath which never materialised.

A minor point of interest concerns the legal documents which had to be signed by a local J.P. before re-settlement of a poor person or family could be enjoined. Before 1748 these documents were hand written, but after this date printed forms were used and these were produced by a London firm of printers, Messrs. Coles and Evans of 21 Fleet Street. This surely suggests that there was some uniformity of documentation, at any rate in the south of England. However, in 1803 and 1804 the documents were printed locally in Horsham, possibly as a result of war conditions. But after 1804 they were once again printed by Messrs. Coles and Evans with occasional exception.

As regards Warnham born people who had become charges on public funds elsewhere through impoverishment, the pattern is much the same. Between 1730 and 1793 there were eight cases of people brought back to Warnham under the Poor Laws. After 1793 the records are a little confused but between 1800 and 1859 there were fourteen. The numbers over the years were therefore quite small. Most cases concerned widows or spinsters, often with children, and mostly returned to Warnham from closely neighbouring parishes in Sussex or Surrey. The most distant Cases were a widow from Waltham Cross in Essex, a single woman with a child from Uckfield and a family from Brighton. In some cases Warnham was paying out-relief to people born in Warnham but living in other parishes. This often continued for some years before re-settlement in Warnham was applied for. Records indicate that this delay was sometimes the result of the illness or disability of the person concerned.

Each case had to be tried by the Justices and witnesses called, usually including the person to be re-settled. One can well realise that, though the numbers were small, much human distress and hardship lie behind these cases at a time when the lives of the poor were in any case hard and even brutal.

In the absence of Birth certificates it is evident that some of these unfortunate people were quite uncertain about the birth-places of their parents and even of their own and these could not always be traced through Parish Records.

It is nevertheless evident that, at any rate in this area, the Justices made considerable efforts to deal fairly with these matters according to the standard of humanity of the time, which were of course very different from our own. At the same time they seem to have been greatly concerned that applicants were not managing to get out-relief from two parishes at once.