

Poverty, Old Age and Outdoor Relief in Late-Victorian England

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Abstract

While studies dedicated to the extent of poverty in old age under the New Poor Law in nineteenth-century England have grown, gaps still exist in terms of a detailed examination of outdoor relief compared with workhouse populations. Using rarely consulted outdoor relief application and report books for three Poor Law Unions in the early 1880s (Alton Union, Hampshire; Hertford Union, Hertfordshire, and Ripon Union, Yorkshire West Riding), we provide estimated proportions of older people on outdoor relief by linking the report books with census materials. We also examine variations in allowances prescribed to single and married individuals. First, older people in southern England were more likely to receive outdoor relief compared with their northern counterparts, consistent with the extant literature outlining a ‘north-south’ divide of welfare provision. Second, allowances were surprisingly generous in Ripon Union. For married couples, allowances were double the average documented elsewhere and reflect those granted under the Old Age Pension Act of 1908. Conclusively, continuity in the treatment of older-age applicants between the later years of the New Poor Law and the start of the Old Age Pension Act is emphasised, especially in the context of northern Poor Law Unions such as Ripon.

Keywords

Poverty, pauperism, outdoor relief, old age, Alton, Hertford, Ripon

The historical study of old age has been substantially documented in terms of older people living in poverty, or more specifically, pauperism, under the nineteenth-century welfare system of the New Poor Law in England and Wales. However, recently, there has been a tendency by historians to overemphasise older people in workhouses under the New Poor Law, notably through demographic studies of workhouse populations.¹ Very seldom are detailed materials consulted, such as outdoor relief application and report books, that present the identities of the outdoor poor and how much they received in cash or in kind.² This is despite the importance of the aged poor in mid-Victorian England receiving relief at home, in proportions greater than those that were institutionalised.³ According to Steven King, historians know ‘almost nothing’ about the lives of those on outdoor relief under the New Poor Law.⁴ Consequently, the twentieth century is viewed progressively because most older people (apart from those on poor relief) became entitled to pensions in their homes under the Old Age Pension Act of 1908. Although this Act lifted many older people out of extreme poverty, we still do not have a comprehensive picture of the extent of outdoor relief provision, or the amount given, to older people prior to the inception of the Act.⁵

This article reasserts the importance of detailed analysis on outdoor relief provision for older people in late-Victorian England by consulting rare outdoor relief application and report

¹ The tendency of scholars to overemphasise the experiences of older people in workhouses was critiqued by Nigel Goose in his book review of Karen Chase’s *The Victorians and Old Age* (Oxford, 2009) in *Local Population Studies*, 84 (2010), 97-9.

² Instead, letter books, minute books and sanitary records are consulted for Brixworth Poor Law Union, Northamptonshire in E.T. Hurren, *Protesting about Pauperism. Poverty, politics and poor relief in late-Victorian England, 1870-1900* (Woodbridge, 2007); however, M. Levine-Clark does use application and report books for Stourbridge Union in ‘The gendered economy of family liability: intergenerational relationships and Poor Law relief in England’s Black Country, 1871-1911’, *Journal of British Studies*, 45 (2006), 72-89 and in her monograph *Unemployment, Welfare and Masculine Citizenship. ‘So Much Honest Poverty’ in Britain, 1870-1930* (Basingstoke, 2015).

³ N. Goose, ‘Poverty, old age and gender in nineteenth-century England: the case of Hertfordshire’, *Continuity and Change*, 20 (2005), 351-84, at 355.

⁴ S. King, ‘Thinking and rethinking the New Poor Law’, *Local Population Studies*, 99 (2017), 5-19, at 5.

⁵ The disqualification clause for those on poor relief was removed in 1910, and another 160,000 people became eligible for old age pensions. See M. Pugh, *State and Society. A Social and Political History of Britain since 1870* (4th edition, London, 2012), 128.

books. Using case studies of three Poor Law Unions in England, we investigate why older people applied for outdoor relief, the length of relief given and variations in their allowances. The Integrated Census Microdata (I-CeM) datasets, which have digitised the original census enumerators' books (CEBs) for England and Wales, are consulted, and the names of outdoor relief applicants are linked with their census entries. Also, aggregated data from the University of Cambridge's Populations Past website, based on I-CeM data, are linked with outdoor relief patterns at the Poor Law Union level via socio-economic characteristics. Using these methods, it will be argued that treatment of the aged poor varied widely, although the generous treatment given to several applicants points to continuities between the later years of the New Poor Law and the start of the Old Age Pension Act.

Poverty, Old Age and Outdoor Relief in Nineteenth-Century England

In Keith Snell's 2006 publication, *Parish and Belonging: Community, Identity and Welfare in England and Wales, 1750-1950*, he rightly asserts that outdoor relief was an integral component of parish life in mid nineteenth-century England, with its emphasis on settlement and belonging as a right to welfare entitlement.⁶ Nigel Goose, in a review for the journal *Local Population Studies*, stresses: 'Snell is surely attacking a straw man, for no serious historian of the New Poor Law writing in the last 50 or so years has ever questioned that this was indeed the case, even among those whose main focus was upon the workhouse.'⁷ However, one can appreciate Snell's argument that 'so much literature and historiography has been dedicated to the workhouse', and his need to reinforce the importance of outdoor relief.⁸ From the 1990s, academic literature on workhouse populations under the New Poor Law had proliferated, with studies on the demographic composition of its inmates, on medical care in its infirmaries and

⁶ K.D.M. Snell, *Parish and Belonging. Community, identity and welfare in England and Wales, 1750-1950* (Cambridge, 2006), 210.

⁷ N. Goose, review of Snell, *Parish and Belonging*, *Local Population Studies*, 78 (2007), 127-130.

⁸ Snell, *Parish and Belonging*, 208.

the workhouse as a site of popular protest and rebellion.⁹ Thus, historians remain intrigued by the workhouse's real-life parallels with Dickens' representations, and its oppressive treatment towards (and agency by) the poor.¹⁰ An overemphasis on workhouses by historians may explain why recently there is a dearth in detailed local studies on outdoor relief with the exception of Elizabeth Hurren's study of Brixworth Union, Northamptonshire, Jean Robin's study of the parish of Colyton, Devonshire, Marjorie Levine-Clark's focus on Stourbridge Union, Worcestershire, and Sonya O. Rose's examination of Ruddington and Eastwood parishes, Nottinghamshire, the latter two using outdoor relief application and report books.¹¹ While outdoor relief has primarily been examined under the Old Poor Law by Samantha Williams and Steven King, historians are still waiting for similar treatises that examine outdoor populations in the same way that workhouse populations are prioritised under the New Poor Law.¹² When the New Poor Law is prioritised by Robin of Colyton and by Rose of Ruddington and Eastwood parishes, their approach is parish-based in nature, which may mask an appreciation of broader regional comparisons in the treatment of the outdoor poor. More information is also needed on the identities of the outdoor poor, variations by age and by

⁹ For example, A. Hinde and F. Turnbull, 'The populations of two Hampshire workhouses, 1851-1861', *Local Population Studies*, 61 (1998), 38-53; N. Goose, 'Workhouse populations in the mid-nineteenth Century: the case of Hertfordshire', *Local Population Studies*, 62 (1999), 52-69; C. Seal, 'Workhouse populations of the Cheltenham and Belper Unions: a study based on the census enumerators' books, 1851-1911', *Family and Community History*, 13 (2010), 83-100 and A. Ritch, 'English Poor Law institutional care for older people: identifying the "aged and infirm" and the "sick" in Birmingham Workhouse, 1852-1912', *Social History of Medicine*, 27 (2014), 64-85.

¹⁰ Snell, *Parish and Belonging*, 208-9. On the agency of workhouse inmates, see S.A King and P. Jones, 'Fragments of fury? Lunacy, agency and contestation in the Great Yarmouth workhouse, 1890s-1900s', *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 51 (2020), 235-265.

¹¹ Hurren, *Protesting about Pauperism*; Levine-Clark, 'The gendered economy of family liability'; J. Robin, 'The Relief of Poverty in Mid Nineteenth-Century Colyton', *Rural History*, 1 (1990), 193-218; S.O. Rose, 'Widowhood and Poverty in Nineteenth-Century Nottinghamshire', in J. Henderson and R. Wall (eds.), *Poor Women and Children in the European Past* (London, 1994), 269-291.

¹² For a study of Bedfordshire parishes, see S. Williams, *Poverty, Gender and Life-Cycle under the English Poor Law, 1760-1834* (Woodbridge, 2013); over several regions see S. King, *Poverty and Welfare in England 1700-1850. A regional perspective* (Manchester, 2000).

geography, and the ways in which they bargained for outdoor relief under the New Poor Law, all of which will be addressed later in this article.¹³

Nevertheless, studies on workhouse populations show that the decision to give outdoor relief was made by gender. In the 1891 census for Hertfordshire, 51.5 per cent of male workhouse residents were aged 60 years and over, compared with only 32.9 per cent of female workhouse residents.¹⁴ Therefore, according to Goose, ‘women had many more paths to relief than did men, particularly in the case of out-relief.’¹⁵ Perceptions of the domesticated nature of elderly women appealed to their offspring, and thus older women could receive out-relief complemented by familial support.¹⁶

The distribution of outdoor relief also varied regionally. Data recorded on 1 January between 1861 and 1908 on the percentages of older men and women receiving relief in workhouses for 10 regional registration divisions show that those in south-western, southern and eastern England had a greater share of outdoor relief. However, the majority of paupers in England and Wales were *not* relieved in workhouses, but on outdoor and medical relief. Indoor relief was mainly concentrated for the majority of males in London and the North West.¹⁷ In any case, Boyer’s data focus on fixed points in time, as he consults poor relief data from the House of Commons Parliamentary Papers archive recorded in census years. A considerable majority aged 60 years and over would have been on poor relief at some time in their old age.

¹³ Natalie Carter and Steven King’s recent publication provides a good introduction, “‘I think we ought not to acknowledge them [paupers] as that encourages them to write’: the administrative state, power and the Victorian pauper”, *Social History* 46 (2021), 117-144. On the London poor, see D.R. Green, *Pauper Capital. London and the Poor Law, 1790-1870* (Oxford, 2010), 157-188.

¹⁴ Goose, ‘Poverty, old age and gender’, Tables 3 and 4, 360-2. For Birmingham, see A. Ritch, ‘English Poor Law institutional care for older people’; for Cheltenham and Belper, see C. Seal, ‘Workhouse populations of the Cheltenham and Belper Unions’.

¹⁵ Goose, ‘Poverty, old age and gender’, 357.

¹⁶ Goose, ‘Poverty, old age and gender’, 368.

¹⁷ G. Boyer, “‘Work for their prime, the workhouse for their age’: old age pauperism in Victorian England”, *Social Science History*, 40 (2016), 3-32, Table 7, 12.

In terms of allowances, David Thomson has shown that two-thirds of older women and half of older men in Ampthill Union, Bedfordshire, received outdoor relief as a weekly cash allowance, or a pension, usually around three shillings.¹⁸ However, Edith Hunt has argued that poor relief was not granted as a universal right of reaching old age, but was subject to circumstances such as unemployment and disability.¹⁹ Pat Thane agrees, stressing that ‘a large minority of old people received poor relief, but they often received very little, very late in life and grudgingly.’²⁰ For example, allowances given to older people were relatively meagre, such as the two shillings per head issued in St Marylebone Union, London in 1847. Married couples received a larger allowance of four shillings weekly. Despite this, in the late 1870s and 1880s, relief of two shillings and sixpence or three shillings weekly was given to single older men, an allowance closer to Thomson’s assessment.²¹ According to Levine-Clark, as part of the ‘crusade against outdoor relief’ first implemented in the 1870s, outdoor relief application and report books increasingly record offspring that were considered liable to financially assist their elderly relatives. Outdoor relief was mainly contingent upon provision by sons, as ‘circumscribed by gendered conceptions of work’ and ideas about the male breadwinner.²² Consequently, in Stourbridge Union, Worcestershire, older people on average received between one shilling and one shilling and sixpence weekly.²³ Generally, historiographical coverage of the distribution of outdoor relief is viewed pessimistically.

¹⁸ D. Thomson, ‘The welfare of the elderly in the past: a family or community responsibility?’ in M. Pelling and R.M. Smith (eds), *Life, Death and the Elderly. Historical perspectives* (London, 1991), 194-221, esp. 202-4.

¹⁹ E.H. Hunt, ‘Paupers and pensioners: past and present’, *Ageing & Society*, 9 (1990), 407-30.

²⁰ P. Thane, *Old Age in English History. Past experiences, present issues* (Oxford, 2000), 171.

²¹ L.H. Lees, *The Solidarities of Strangers. The English poor laws and the people, 1700-1948* (Cambridge, 1998), 187.

²² Levine-Clark, ‘Gendered economy of family liability’, 78-9.

²³ Levine-Clark, ‘Gendered economy of family liability’, 81.

Outdoor Relief Application and Report Books

To further our research on old age and outdoor relief, one must ask: were there differences in the proportions on outdoor relief at the local registration district (RD)/Poor Law Union level? Are the patterns explained by the details contained in the corresponding CEBs on household and occupational structure? How meagre were the allowances? Was relief issued weekly as a ‘pension’? Also, no attempt has been made to construct the numbers recorded in pauperism at the registration sub-district (RSD) level, despite available data from the outdoor relief application and report books at parish level that will enable an RSD analysis.

It is surprising that the report books have received little attention in the local Poor Law Union context, given their accessible linkage with corresponding census materials, and the systematic and uniform nature of outdoor relief records for every Poor Law Union in England and Wales. It may be that they are less scrutinised than workhouse admissions and discharge registers, or workhouse populations in the census, perhaps due to their rarity and relative inaccessibility.²⁴ When outdoor relief report books do survive, as per Levine-Clark’s study, the data are patchy and lack comparisons between different Poor Law Unions and regions. However, they deserve a detailed investigation, because they are rich with information on relief claimants at RD, RSD and parish level (the boundaries of RDs were roughly coterminous with Poor Law Unions).

Owing to their rarity, it is best to provide details on what is contained within them. Figures 1a and 1b use the example of 75-year-old general labourer William Buck from the parish of Aldfield, Ripon Union, applying for relief on 7 October 1880.²⁵ Generally, recorded

²⁴ Snell argues that, after the creation of the modern welfare state in 1948, there may have been a greater interest among archivists and local government officials in preserving material related to workhouses; consequently, records on outdoor relief, which lacked the historical significance of the workhouse, were likely to have been destroyed. Snell, *Parish and Belonging*, 209-210.

²⁵ Details on his occupation available at Integrated Census Microdata datasets, Aldfield parish, Ripon, 1881.

in the report books was the name of the applicant, their families, addresses, their age, the length of time in the Poor Law Union, and the reasons for applying for poor relief which, in William's case, was 'old age', their occupation, their ability (whether 'able-bodied' or disabled) and the extent of their debility. The applications were entered into the records and were signed off with a note of decision by the Board of Guardians inserted at quarterly meetings. As discussed by Levine-Clark, the recording of relatives liable to the applicant, or those able to financially assist their relatives, was increasingly used after the 'crusade against out-relief' in the 1870s.²⁶ Also, relieving officers could visit the residence of the applicant to help make an informed decision on the granting of relief to the applicant. However, in William's case, no relatives are identified as liable to him, although he received three shillings for 26 weeks regardless.²⁷

[Figures 1a and 1b here]

Usually, the decision was to pay the applicant a cash allowance, sometimes one in kind, or both. Occasionally, an application for outdoor relief could be rejected and a workhouse offer given instead. If outdoor relief was successfully granted, then the length of the relief given was published. Allowances were often paid weekly and the applicant could ask for its renewal, subject to approval from the Board of Guardians. Particularly for older-age applicants, relief was granted for 26 weeks of the year and renewed every six months, akin to a weekly 'pension'.²⁸ From these materials, the names and allowances were recorded onto outdoor relief lists; the introductory page records the numbers receiving outdoor relief on 1 January 1888 (Figure 2), which were then recorded in the biannual pauperism returns for 1 January and 1

²⁶ Levine-Clark, 'Gendered economy of family liability', 78.

²⁷ North Yorkshire Record Office (hereafter NYRO), Outdoor Relief Application and Report Books, October 7 1880 to September 22 1881, BG/RI 4/1/4.

²⁸ A detailed summary of the contents of the books is located on the website dedicated to the Surrey History Centre, where records for the Godstone Poor Law Union are kept for the period 1869-1915. Names of its applicants have been transcribed by volunteers Mike and Gill Couper, and are available online, <https://www.surreycc.gov.uk/culture-and-leisure/history-centre/researchers/guides/poor-law-records/godstone> (accessed 30 March 2022).

July in the Parliamentary Papers archive.²⁹ However, the report books consider all older people on outdoor relief over the year, not just those recorded on 1 January or 1 July.

[Figure 2 here]

Data have been selected on all successful outdoor relief applicants aged 60 years and over from the Poor Law Unions of Ripon, Yorkshire West Riding, Alton, Hampshire and Hertford, Hertfordshire, as recorded in the late 1870s and early 1880s. While it may be more fruitful to focus on welfare in the 1870s, measuring the impact of the ‘crusade against outdoor relief’ on applications, or the 1900s, when demand for relief increased owing to rising unemployment, the decision to cover the 1880s was made for two reasons.³⁰ First, data survive for all Unions in this period. Second, data do exist for Alton Union in the 1900s but this would have undermined the comparative nature of this study.³¹ It was also decided to define ‘elderly’ people as those aged 60 years and over, although it may be more suitable to take an age threshold set by the Old Age Pension Act, being 70 years. However, across the New Poor Law regime, commissioners and guardians agreed that 60 years was a generally accepted transition from being ‘able-bodied’ to ‘not-able-bodied’ and thus ‘aged and infirm’. This is regardless of any differences by age in terms of work profiles or welfare dependency. Workhouse dietary lists outlined by the Poor Law Commissioners in the mid-1830s defined ‘old people’ as ‘being all 60 years of age and upwards.’³² In the 1895 Report on the Royal Commission of the Aged

²⁹ NYRO, Ripon Guardians: Weekly Outdoor Relief Lists 1888, BG/RI 4/3/2/3; the numbers recorded in the relief lists of ‘not-able-bodied’ men and women on outdoor relief in Ripon Union on 1 January 1888 tally with the Parliamentary Paper returns. BPP, *Pauperism (England and Wales). Return (B.), Paupers Relieved on 1st January 1888*, 1888, LXXXVI.345 (74B), 37.

³⁰ G. Boyer, *The Winding Road to the Welfare State. Economic insecurity and social welfare policy in Britain* (Woodstock, 2019), 25, 28; G. Boyer and T.P. Schmidle, ‘Poverty among the elderly in late Victorian England’, *Economic History Review*, 62 (2009), 249-78; E. Hurren, ‘Welfare-to-work schemes and a crusade against outdoor relief in the Brixworth Union, Northamptonshire, in the 1880s’, *Family and Community History*, 4 (2001), 19-30.

³¹ Records relating to Alton Union are located at <https://calm.hants.gov.uk/TreeBrowse.aspx?src=CalmView.Catalog&field=RefNo&key=PL> (accessed 23 February 2022).

³² BPP, *Second Year Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners for England and Wales; Together with Appendices A, B, C and D*, 1836, 595, 56-9.

Poor, when Permanent Secretary to the Local Government Board Sir Hugh Owen, KCB was asked if there was ‘any limit of age applicable to the able-bodied’, he answered ‘No; but the guardians ordinarily adopt 60 years as the dividing line.’³³ Overall, the decision to define those aged 60 years and over as ‘elderly’ is chosen to facilitate clearer comparisons using definitions of the ‘young-old’ (aged 60-69 years) with the ‘oldest-old’ (aged 70 years and over), as well as to account for a wider sample size of older people.³⁴

The geographical locations of the selected Poor Law Unions are presented in a base map of England and Wales registration districts from the 1891 census (Figure 3). Ripon, Hertford and Alton are generally agricultural in character. Ripon Union was in close proximity to the cluster of textile districts that comprised Lancashire and the Yorkshire West Riding, specialising in silk, woollen and cotton manufacturing. As described by Comptroller General for Commerce, Labour and Statistics at the Board of Trade, Arthur Wilson-Fox in a presentation given to the *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society* on agricultural wages in 1903, manufacturing in the north ‘kept labour comparatively scarce, wages high and work regular.’³⁵

[Figure 3 here]

Hertford, as well as being the administrative town of the county of Hertfordshire, surrounds the professional districts of Barnet and Ware. By the end of the nineteenth century, southern Hertfordshire was increasingly recognised for the large numbers of suburban elites migrating to the outskirts of London in pursuit of the country.³⁶ While Ripon was mainly

³³ BPP, *R.C. on the Aged Poor*, 1895, 123 (C.-7684-I), Vol. II, Minutes of Evidence, Days 1 to 26, Qs. 31. Although the Report expressed scepticism about fixing the threshold at 60 years, it was recommended that ‘persons alleging themselves to be over 60 should not against the will be classed as able-bodied, except with the approval of the medical officer.’ *ibid*, XIV.1 (C.7684), Vol. I, xii.

³⁴ Historians have also accepted setting the age threshold of historical elderly populations at 60 years. See Thane, *Old Age in English History*, 167. See also P. Johnson, ‘Historical readings of old age and ageing’, in P. Johnson and P. Thane (eds.), *Old Age from Antiquity to Post-modernity* (London, 1998), 1-18, esp. 3-4.

³⁵ A. Wilson-Fox, ‘Agricultural wages in England during the last fifty years’, *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, 66 (Jun., 1903), 273-359, quote at 317.

³⁶ J. Moore, ‘The Impact of Agricultural Depression and Land Ownership Change on the County of Hertfordshire, c. 1870-1914’, Ph.D., Hertfordshire, 2010, 50-62.

known for its pasture ‘family farm’ economy, Alton in southern England was associated with the large-scale arable economies relying on intense agricultural labour. Unlike those of the farm service workers that Wilson-Fox describes as characteristic of northern England, the wages of agricultural labourers would not have been ‘sufficient to enable many of them to save money and start on small farms.’³⁷

Due to the erratic nature of the surviving report books, outdoor relief in Ripon Union and the RSDs of Dishforth, Kirkby Malzeard, Ripon and Wath are examined between September 1880 and September 1881; Hertford Union takes data from its sub-districts (Hertford and Watton RSDs) recorded from 1879 to 1881 and Alton Union, Hampshire, is collated in Alton and Binsted RSDs from 1880 to 1882.³⁸ As reinforced by the gaps in the coverage, an estimate of those receiving outdoor relief as a proportion of the elderly population in the corresponding 1881 CEBs is given. Data are collated on 504 single individuals and 174 married couples recorded as aged 60 years and over (discounting those under that age in a couple) that received relief wholly or partly in cash, totalling 824 relief recipients in the sample. In the event that one individual received varying amounts over time, the highest amount was recorded. The 60 separate entries of single and married individuals that were offered the workhouse are also examined to see how far a ‘workhouse test’ was enforced.

Finally, other measures that cannot be effectively quantified may also account for the proportions receiving outdoor relief, such as access to almshouse accommodation and Friendly

³⁷ Wilson-Fox, ‘Agricultural wages in England’, 318. On the prominence of farm service in northern England, see A.J. Gritt, ‘The census and the servant: a reassessment of the decline and distribution of farm service in early nineteenth-century England’, *The Economic History Review*, 53 (2000), 84-106.

³⁸ For Ripon Union, NYRO, Outdoor Relief Application and Report Books, October 7 1880 to September 22 1881, BG/RI 4/1/4; for Alton Union: Hampshire Archives and Local Studies (hereafter Hampshire Archives) Outdoor Relief Application and Report Books, Alton No1 District, June-September 1881, PL3/2/89 and December 1881-March 1882, PL3/2/90, Binstead No2 District, June-September 1880, PL3/2/128 and December 1880-March 1881, PL3/2/129; for Hertford Union, Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies (hereafter Hertfordshire Archives), Outdoor Relief Application and Report Books, Hertford District, September 1880-March 1881, BG/HER/51, Hertford District, March 1881-September 1881, BG/HER/52 and Watton District, September 1879-March 1880, BG/HER/57.

Society membership.³⁹ However, as Friendly Societies and almshouse accommodation are harder to quantify at RD level, it is beyond the scope of this paper to investigate these, especially when confining our study to three Poor Law Unions. Nonetheless, comparative studies on the occupational composition and household structure of Alton, Hertford and Ripon RDs can be undertaken to measure the extent of outdoor relief. This is indicated by several social class categories on the University of Cambridge's Populations Past website, a publicly accessible interactive atlas based on census and Registrar General data, as well as raw enumeration census data from I-CeM.⁴⁰

Outdoor Relief and Older People, 1879-1882

Table 1 shows the percentages of elderly men and women that received outdoor relief between 1879 and 1882 out of the male and female population aged 60 years and over on census night, 1881, by eight registration sub-districts and by three registration districts/Poor Law Unions of Alton, Hertford and Ripon. First, older men and older women in Ripon were less likely to receive outdoor relief, compared with Hertford and Alton, where percentages in the latter two are roughly similar, reflecting wider trends of a 'north-south' divide in the distribution of outdoor relief.⁴¹ Second, women were more likely to receive outdoor relief than men, conforming to previous research.⁴² Overall, 11.6 per cent of men and 22.6 per cent of women

³⁹ For almshouse accommodation, see N. Goose and M. Yates, 'Charity and commemoration: a Berkshire family and their almshouse, 1675-1763', in C. Briggs, P.M. Kitson and S.J. Thompson (eds), *Population, Welfare and Economic Change in Britain, 1290-1834* (Suffolk, 2014), 227-48; on Friendly Societies, see P.H.J.H Gosden, *The Friendly Societies in England, 1815-1875* (Manchester, 1961), 22-3.

⁴⁰ Details on 1881 are available <https://www.populationspast.org/type/1881/#6/54.457/-5.131/bartholomew> (accessed 1 April 2022) and based on the research project 'Atlas of Victorian Fertility Decline', which has been funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and the Isaac Newton Trust (Cambridge). The data have been produced by the 'Atlas of Victorian Fertility Decline' project (PI: A.M. Reid, ES/L015463/1), using an enhanced version of data from K. Schürer, and E. Higgs (2014), *Integrated Census Microdata (I-CeM), 1851-1911* [data collection]. Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive [distributor].

⁴¹ King, *Poverty and Welfare in England*, 141-2.

⁴² Goose, 'Poverty, old age and gender', Tables 1 and 2, 355-6. In Stourbridge Union, greater numbers of applicants among those aged 60 years and over were women, particularly among the widowed, although men predominated among those married and were more likely to issue multiple applications (not examined in this study) than women owing to changing familial responsibilities. See Levine-Clark, *Unemployment*, 52-6.

from 1879 to 1882 received outdoor relief, or 17.4 per cent when men and women are combined, matching Barry Reay's findings for three Kentish parishes in the early 1860s.⁴³

The percentages of older men on outdoor relief ranged from 4.9 per cent in Dishforth RSD, Ripon RD, to 16.1 per cent in Watton RSD, Hertford RD; for women, a low of 15 per cent in Ripon RSD is met with 31.3 per cent in Binsted RSD, Alton RD. There are neat regional differences even at RSD level, regardless of the higher rates for females in Dishforth and Wath RSDs compared with Kirkby Malzeard and Ripon RSDs in Ripon RD/Poor Law Union. One must consider that, in one's lifetime rather than in fixed periods of three years, a majority may have received welfare in some form, especially in the more agrarian RSDs of Watton and Binsted, so the percentages presented in Table 1 may underestimate the extent of outdoor relief.

[Table 1 here]

Table 2 presents data on the percentages of working men aged 15-64 years in eight status designations defined by the Registrar General for the 1911 census.⁴⁴ Overall, Ripon RD/Poor Law Union had a greater proportion of working men in higher skilled designations than in Hertford and Alton in 1881. For example, there were more working men in the RG 2 category (non-manual skilled, examples including farmers and dealers) in Ripon than in Hertford and Alton, while the converse was found for those in RG 5 (manual unskilled) and RG 8 (agricultural labourers). This is consistent with the idea that smallholding farmers commanded a share of the workforce of Ripon in the north, compared with the larger farm-holding structures and proletarianized workforce of Alton and Hertford to the south.⁴⁵ Assuming that the proportions in the eight RG groups hardly changes in earlier periods, where

⁴³ B. Reay, *Microhistories. Demography, society and culture in rural England, 1800-1930* (Cambridge, 1996), 171.

⁴⁴ Contextualised information on this is found on the 'Overview' page of the Populations Past website, under the subheading 'Social class – RG' in the section titled 'Socio-economic Status & Social class'. <https://www.populationspast.org/about/> (accessed 24 February 2022).

⁴⁵ For more details on this dichotomy, see Heritage, 'The Elderly Populations of England and Wales, 1851-1911: A Comparative Study of Selected Counties', Ph.D., Southampton, 2019, 133-4.

the older people recorded here on relief were at working age, this suggests that old age pauperism was predicated on the occupation of one's earlier life.

Data from I-CeM (not presented here) also shows that there was a higher proportion of elderly women recorded as annuitants in Ripon, at 19.8 per cent, compared with 11.1 per cent in Hertford and 7 per cent in Alton.⁴⁶ 'Annuitants' were those that received income from a variety of sources other than poor relief: dowries, investments, or properties in houses or land.⁴⁷ Charles Booth identified that those in northern England were more likely to rely on savings than in any other geographical region, and the data presented here are no exception.⁴⁸ The proclivity of people in Ripon to save provided a safeguard from outdoor relief on a scale not realised in Hertford and Alton.

[Table 2 here]

Differences may also be explained by the distribution of familial and household structures.⁴⁹ Besides old age pauperism, a 'north-south' divide also existed in terms of household composition, with older people in districts in northern England more likely to co-reside with their adult offspring and reside in more complex household structures. Using the Hammel-Laslett household classification system which, although it has been consulted for over 50 years and increasingly subject to scrutiny, is still useful for analysis (Appendix 1).⁵⁰ A household structure analysis reveals that while 19.3 per cent of elderly men in Ripon were

⁴⁶ Integrated Census Microdata datasets, Alton, Hertford and Ripon Registration District, 1881.

⁴⁷ C. Jones, 'From Hartland to Hartley: marital status and occupation in the late nineteenth century', in N. Goose (ed.), *Women's Work in Industrial England. Regional and local perspectives* (Hatfield, 2007), 289-313, esp. 294-5

⁴⁸ C. Booth, *The Aged Poor in England and Wales* (London, 1894), 425.

⁴⁹ On the finding that extended forms of kinship were clustered mainly in northern and mid-Welsh regions, see K. Schürer and T. Penkova, 'Creating a typology of parishes in England and Wales: mining 1881 census data', *Historical Life Course Studies*, 2 (2015), 38-57, at Figure 14, 53.

⁵⁰ P. Laslett, 'Introduction: the history of the family' in P. Laslett and R. Wall (eds.), *Household and Family in Past Time* (Cambridge, 1972), 1-89, esp. 31-4.

living with their spouse only without offspring or extended kin (code 310), this jumps to 23.4 per cent in Alton and 25.3 per cent in Hertford, the latter two in southern England.⁵¹

It is possible to take the names of those recorded in the outdoor relief application and report books, and link these to their entries in the corresponding 1881 census. This is achievable by either consulting secure access data from I-CeM, where names are published or, in this case, by tracing the names on Ancestry Online. Since the registers continuously run for up to three years, and the census is a snapshot of the population on one night, it is possible that those recorded in the registers may have migrated from the parish or died prior to the census. In fact, tracing names from the registers to the census proved productive an exercise. 77.2 per cent of all successful outdoor relief applicants (or, 237 of 307) in Alton Union recorded in 1880-1882 were traceable, along with 82.3 per cent of successful applicants (or, 167 of 203) in Ripon Union between 1880-1881, and 76.4 per cent of successful applicants (or, 239 of 313) in Hertford Union between 1879-1881. Examining the households of those traced, outdoor relief was skewed towards one-person households (code 110) and households where married couples lived alone (code 310), who were perhaps experiencing the exit of their offspring from the parental home. The exit of said offspring was a key feature of households where the household head primarily worked in labouring occupations, suggesting that their offspring migrated in search of better economic opportunities.⁵² On the other hand, among elderly men in Ripon, the proportion of farmers was higher than that of agricultural labourers, at 24.4 per cent compared with 16 per cent. Elderly men were also more likely to co-reside with their offspring in Ripon than in Hertford and Alton.⁵³ Consequently, adult offspring would have stayed with their elderly male relatives to help run smallholding family farms in Ripon. The emphasis on farming

⁵¹ Integrated Census Microdata datasets, Alton, Hertford and Ripon Registration District, 1881.

⁵² Snell, *Parish and Belonging*, 299. See also J. Day, 'Leaving home in 19th Century England and Wales: a spatial analysis', *Demographic Research*, 39 (2018), 95-135.

⁵³ Integrated Census Microdata datasets, Alton, Hertford and Ripon Registration District, 1881.

rather than labouring, and the adult offspring that delayed their exit from the parental household by staying in smallholdings, may be one explanation as to why old age pauperism varied regionally.

[Table 3 here]

In terms of variations in cash allowances received by each successful outdoor relief applicant, the highest cash allowance is taken and plotted in Table 3 for both single and married applicants, broken down into three categories of those who received between one shilling and two shillings sixpence, three shillings and four shillings sixpence and five shillings to eight shillings, and by the three Poor Law Unions. In terms of the standard allowance under the Old Age Pension Act, which was five shillings for single applicants, the standard Poor Law allowance was slightly less.⁵⁴ The majority of single individuals, or 56.5 per cent, received relief between three shillings and four shillings sixpence. Individually, a third of elderly single applicants received three shillings, followed by over a quarter that received two shillings sixpence, which conforms to previous research.⁵⁵ Interestingly, despite the lower proportions on outdoor relief in Ripon Union, its payments were relatively generous compared with Alton and Hertford Unions. The majority of single relief claimants in Ripon received three shillings sixpence or four shillings. Only 12.2 per cent of Ripon's single claimants received between one shilling and two shillings sixpence compared with 54.2 per cent in Alton.

The two single claimants with the highest allowances were Ann Waite, aged 69 years, who received seven shillings on 27 January 1881 and 84-year-old William Nicholson, who received eight shillings on 7 April 1881. Both were based in the town of Ripon. Ann received seven shillings for four weeks after the death of her husband, William, who originally received seven shillings as a married couple. She then received four shillings for four weeks until 7

⁵⁴ C. Gilleard, *Old Age in Nineteenth-Century Ireland. Ageing under the Union* (London, 2017), 70-1.

⁵⁵ Thomson, 'The welfare of the elderly in the past', 202-4; Lees, *Solidarities of Strangers*, 186.

April, when she was given four shillings weekly for half a year.⁵⁶ As for William Nicholson, he initially received three shillings before it was upgraded to four shillings on 7 October 1880, on account of his old age. By 7 April 1881, he was deemed ‘wholly disabled’ owing to ‘bad legs and old age’. As a result of his ‘bad legs’, the Board of Guardians granted him eight shillings weekly for 26 weeks.⁵⁷ These two cases show the generous provision of outdoor relief provided to older people. For Ann Waite, a transition period was granted when she became a widow, permitting the weekly allowance given to her when she was married until she adjusted to the allowances given to single applicants. For William Nicholson, the fact that ‘bad legs’ was later added to the reasons for applying for out-relief, and the subsequent upgrade of relief, demonstrates how relief was not permanently fixed but could be adapted based on the applicant’s current circumstances. Although there is no recorded testimony from Ann Waite and William Nicholson, the adaptation of their allowances may reflect their agency in their successful bargaining for a more generous allowance.⁵⁸

Although the percentage that received five shillings (the standard maximum allowance provided by the old age pension) or above was 3.2 per cent, in Ripon it was 6.1 per cent. Although only a minority of applicants received five shillings or above, William and Ann’s stories show that the relationship between older people and welfare cannot be measured progressively over time. To call Liberal welfare reforms, which include the Old Age Pension Act, a ‘major watershed’ in the welfare of older people ignores the surprisingly generous allowances issued in the later years of the New Poor Law.⁵⁹ They are a far cry from the paltry sums reported in Stourbridge, Worcestershire, where they ranged from one shilling to one

⁵⁶ NYRO, Outdoor Relief Application and Report Books, October 7 1880 to September 22 1881, BG/RI 4/1/4, Ripon parish.

⁵⁷ NYRO, Outdoor Relief Application and Report Books, October 7 1880 to September 22 1881, BG/RI 4/1/4, Ripon parish.

⁵⁸ Evidence shows that the outdoor poor, when petitioning by letter, received more replies from the Poor Law Board than did the indoor poor, which would suggest the greater bargaining power of older people applying for outdoor relief, see Carter and King, ‘The administrative state’, Table 1, 129.

⁵⁹ Boyer, *The Winding Road to the Welfare State*, 25.

shilling sixpence.⁶⁰ Additionally, Levine-Clark argues that the cost of living fluctuated over the late-Victorian period, with the period 1870-1890 marked by price slumps, suggesting the greater purchasing power of successful relief applicants.⁶¹ Alternatively, Ripon was a late Union only formed in 1852, and experienced a significantly higher rate base than did Alton and Hertford. In the early 1890s, the rateable value per head in Ripon, as indicated in data recorded by Charles Booth, was eight pounds and seven shillings. By contrast, in Alton and Hertford, the rateable value per head was much lower, at five pounds and six shillings and four pounds and eighteen shillings respectively.⁶² Alton and Hertford Unions were formed early in April and June 1835 respectively, a year after the introduction of the New Poor Law, and were at the lower rate base zone.⁶³ The rigorous adherence to the New Poor Law in Alton and Hertford's early years, and the reinforcement of measures designed to limit expenditure to the poor following the 'crusade against outdoor relief,' might explain Alton and Hertford's attitudes to the poor in a manner that differs from Ripon's relative generosity.

The limited sums of money issued to single applicants in Alton and Hertford might also be explained by the 'liability' clause, whereby relief would be supplemented by the Board of Guardians alongside the provision of care by relatives. In All Saints parish, Hertford, 76-year-old harness maker William Stevens received a lowly one shilling and sixpence weekly as his son, also a harness maker and publican, was married and assisted his father with his harness making.⁶⁴ In Alton's case, the opening pages for each parish list all the applicants receiving

⁶⁰ Levine-Clark, 'Gendered economy of family liability', 81.

⁶¹ Levine-Clark, 'Gendered economy of family liability', 81-2; details of falling prices in the Black Country referenced in G.J. Barnsby, 'The standard of living in the Black Country during the nineteenth century', *The Economic History Review*, 24 (1971), 220-39; for a rural perspective, see F.M.L. Thompson, 'Free trade and the land' in G.E. Mingay (ed.), *The Victorian Countryside, Vol. I* (Cambridge, 1981), 103-117, esp. 108-9.

⁶² Booth, *Aged Poor in England and Wales*, 440, 443, 483.

⁶³ Information on the year of formation of Alton, Hertford and Ripon Poor Law Unions found on Peter Higginbotham's workhouses website: <https://www.workhouses.org.uk/Alton/>; <https://www.workhouses.org.uk/Hertford/> and <https://www.workhouses.org.uk/Ripon/> (all accessed 12 January 2023).

⁶⁴ Hertfordshire Archives, Outdoor Relief Application and Report Books, Hertford District, September 1880-March 1881, BG/HER/51, All Saints parish.

weekly allowances with nearly every entry containing references to their offspring and their immediate families. The columns where cash allowances are listed are marked with ‘no change’, suggesting that the supplemented allowances and familial support constituted a long-term arrangement.⁶⁵ With few exceptions, relatively little use of the ‘liability’ clause is made in Ripon. This may reflect longer-term trends in the provision of outdoor relief. Taking 1 January 1871 as an example, before the effects of the ‘crusade against outdoor relief’ took hold, of the ‘non-able-bodied’ population, adjusted to reflect those most likely over 60 years of age, only 8 per cent of men and 15.2 per cent of women aged 60 years and over in Ripon received outdoor relief. This compares with 18.8 per cent of men and 33.1 per cent of women in Alton respectively (Hertford’s proportions are similar). Lower allowances in Alton and Hertford, as well as the extensive use of the ‘liability’ clause, might have been issued as a response to a continually high rate of outdoor relief applications towards the 1870s.⁶⁶

As Table 3 also shows, married couples receiving relief allowances were treated more generously in Ripon Union, with nearly 90 per cent receiving allowances between five and eight shillings, compared with just over 60 per cent in Hertford and Alton. Of these, in Ripon, 64.1 per cent of married couples received seven or eight shillings weekly, contrasting with 2.7 per cent in Alton. Interestingly, over a third (33.4 per cent) of married couples had allowances

⁶⁵ Hampshire Archives, Outdoor Relief Application and Report Books, Alton No1 District, June-September 1881, PL3/2/89; Binstead No2 District, June-September 1880, PL3/2/128.

⁶⁶ Interestingly, Stourbridge Union, the site of Levine-Clark’s study, saw a significant increase in the proportion of ‘non-able-bodied’ people making outdoor relief applications in 1871 from 1861, while the proportions for Alton, Hertford and Ripon actually fell or remained constant. For Stourbridge Union, data are calculated through the Parliamentary Papers returns on outdoor relief data recorded on 1 January 1861 and 1871 respectively, BPP, *Poor Rates and Pauperism, Return (B.), Paupers Relieved on 1st January 1861*, 1860, LVIII.183 (383B.I), 43; BPP, *Poor Rates and Pauperism, Return (B.), Paupers Relieved on 1st January 1871*, 1871, LIX.163 (140B), 37. The numbers aged 60 years and over for Stourbridge RD, used as a denominator against the numerator being the numbers of ‘non-able-bodied’ on outdoor relief, are from the website *A Vision of Britain Through Time*, which has transcribed for the period 1851-1911 age profiles for each RD in five-year bands to age 100, https://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10111614/cube/AGESEX_100UP (accessed 23 March 2022). For Alton, Hertford and Ripon, their data are created from Heritage, ‘Elderly Populations of England and Wales’, Tables 4.1a and 4.1b, 162-166. C.S. Loch, Secretary of the Charity Organisation Society (1875-1913), estimated that, across time, 18.3 per cent of the ‘non-able-bodied’ were over 60 years, hence the numbers of ‘non-able-bodied’ are multiplied by 0.817, see ‘Statistics of Population and Pauperism in England and Wales, 1861-1901’, *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, 69 (Jun., 1906), 289-320.

above the ‘starvation wages’ of seven shillings established by George A. Barnsby in his study of living standards in the nineteenth-century Black Country.⁶⁷ Under the Old Age Pension Act, married couples received ten shillings weekly, only slightly above the maximum allowances given under the New Poor Law.⁶⁸ Presumably, if the old age pauperism rate in Ripon Union was lower than in Hertford and Alton Unions, there may have been more relief available to expend to the applicants receiving it. In Ripon’s case, this was either issued generously to successful older single or married applicants weekly, or issued in short bursts. During the emerging industrial depression of the 1880s, the growth rate in textile outputs fell, which would inevitably affect Ripon’s textile workers.⁶⁹ Although the application and report books record that flax dresser William Hullah and his wife Margaret of Bishop Monkton parish (aged 67 and 60 years respectively) first applied on 27 January 1881 based on William’s ‘sickness’, the census entry recorded 3 April 1881 for the Hullah family shows how William and two other family members were recorded as ‘out of employment’. William is recorded in both the registers and the census as a ‘flax dresser’, his son, Frederick, listed in the registers as ‘liable to relieve the applicant’, is described in the census as a ‘blacksmith’ and his stepdaughter, Mary A. Vassey, a ‘domestic servant’. Although Margaret is working as a ‘paper hand mill manu[facturer]’, referring to the nearby paper mill industry in Bishop Monkton, the Board of Guardians issued six shillings for four weeks starting 27 January 1881, renewed on 24 February.⁷⁰ It is not clear when William became unemployed, but it may have likely been in

⁶⁷ Levine-Clark, ‘Gendered economy of family liability’, 82; G. Barnsby, *Social Conditions in the Black Country, 1800–1900* (Wolverhampton, 1980), 213.

⁶⁸ J. Macnicol, *The Politics of Retirement in Britain, 1878-1948* (Cambridge, 1998), 156.

⁶⁹ K. Theodore Hoppen, *The Mid-Victorian Generation, 1846-1886* (Oxford, 1998), 285.

⁷⁰ NYRO, Outdoor Relief Application and Report Books, October 7 1880 to September 22 1881, BG/RI 4/1/4, Bishop Monkton parish; 1881 census entry for the Hullah family at The National Archives (hereafter TNA), Bishop Monkton, 1881: RG/11/4318/72/15. The enumerator is likely to have mistakenly termed William’s daughter-in-law Mary A. Vassey, married to George, as ‘stepdaughter’. For more information on flax dressing in Ripon, see an online transcription by Steve Garton of the Yorkshire section of the 1834 Pigot’s Directory, <https://www.genuki.org.uk/big/eng/YKS/WRY/Ripon/Ripon34> (accessed 16 January 2023). The influence of the paper mill industry in Bishop Monkton parish, Ripon, is documented online at <https://bishopmonktontoday.chessck.co.uk/DOWNMEMORYLANE/Weeks12> (accessed 16 January 2023).

January as this may have facilitated his reliance upon the New Poor Law. Attitudes to those applying directly based on unemployment varied, as seen through 61-year-old shoemaker William Hornby Dixon, of Bishop Monkton. The Board of Guardians granted William a workhouse order on 22 March 1881.⁷¹ Conversely, 61-year-old Matthew Johnson from Grewelthorpe received seven shillings weekly for four weeks on 27 January, and then five shillings for four weeks, before it was discontinued for unknown reasons on 10 March.⁷²

Also, in the mainly agrarian Alton Union, there are three males, two of whom are married, recorded in the census as unemployed agricultural labourers. This also reflects the Great Depression of British agriculture characterising the early 1880s, when cereal and livestock prices began to decline.⁷³ The oldest of the two married applicants, 80-year-old Eli Warren, from Newton Valance parish, received six shillings weekly on 25 March 1881, while 61-year-old George Alexander, from Wield parish, received four shillings weekly on 24 March 1881. Again, while the six shillings granted to Eli Warren appear generous, his age of 80 years, compared with George Alexander's 61 years, indicates how the level of relief given to older applicants was dictated by their age.⁷⁴ While allowances may have appeared generous to some married couples and single applicants, policy under the early 1880s New Poor Law was by no means lax.

[Table 4 here]

To further show how the age profile affected the level of relief given to applicants, Table 4 presents variations in cash allowances by three age profiles (those aged 60-69 years,

⁷¹ NYRO, Outdoor Relief Application and Report Books, October 7 1880 to September 22 1881, BG/RI 4/1/4, Bishop Monkton parish.

⁷² NYRO, Outdoor Relief Application and Report Books, October 7 1880 to September 22 1881, BG/RI 4/1/4, Grewelthorpe parish.

⁷³ R. Perren, *Agriculture in Depression, 1870-1840* (Cambridge, 1995), 8-11.

⁷⁴ Hampshire Archives, Outdoor Relief Application and Report Books, Alton No1 District, June-September 1881, PL3/2/89, Newton Valance and Wield parishes; 1881 census entries for Eli Warren at TNA, Newton Valance, 1881: RG/11/1246/89 and for George Alexander at TNA, Wield, 1881: RG/11/1245/2.

70-79 years and 80 years and over), acknowledging both single and married applicants (the latter determined by the age of household head). There is a tendency for single applicants aged 60-69 years to receive lower allowances than those aged 80 years and over, reflecting Susannah Ottaway's research for the Old Poor Law.⁷⁵ Over two-thirds of those aged 60-69 years received between one shilling and two shillings and sixpence, whereas a greater percentage of those aged 70-79 years and 80 years and over were given between three shillings and four shillings sixpence. Similarly, the Boards of Guardians were more likely to offer between one shilling and two shillings and sixpence to married couples where the age of the household head was between 60-69 years. Contrastingly, those aged 80 years and over were more likely to receive between five and eight shillings. If their infirmity resulted 'partially from age', compared with 'wholly from age', then the relief applicant would receive smaller allowances; this was applied more frequently to those aged 60-69 years. Those 'wholly from age' were also recorded with additional conditions such as bronchitis, paralysis and diarrhoea, and were also more likely to receive relief in kind. For example, 91-year-old resident of All Saints parish, Hertford, Thomas Craft received three shillings, along with meat, seven pints of milk and half a bottle of brandy. This arrangement was granted for two weeks, but was frequently renewed by the Board of Guardians until Thomas' death on 23 May 1881, afterwards paying 35 shillings threepence for his funeral.⁷⁶

The idea that successful outdoor relief applicants aged 60-69 years received lower allowances than those aged 70 years and over shows how Poor Law policy conflicted with practice. While the age of 60 years was generally recognised as an acceptable threshold of reaching old age, the data show how contentious it is to associate those in their sixties with old age. Most older people in this age bracket were required to work until incapacity. Therefore,

⁷⁵ S. Ottaway, *The Decline of Life. Old age in eighteenth-century England* (Cambridge, 2004), 239-42.

⁷⁶ Hertfordshire Archives, Outdoor Relief Application and Report Books, Hertford District, September 1880-March 1881, BG/HER/51 and Hertford District, March 1881-September 1881, BG/HER/52, St Andrews parish.

deservingness was not necessarily tied up with old age *per se*, but with its association with disability and retirement from work. The designation ‘partially from age’, used by the Board of Guardians to prescribe lower allowances to those in their sixties, emphasises how old age was defined and when old age was realised. In short, it was the Board of Guardians who designated the parameters of old age when issuing allowances. 60-year-old Eliza Mascall from St Andrew parish, Hertford, provides a case in point. If someone was able to pursue an occupation (in Eliza’s case, earning two shillings a week from charring), but was also recognised with conditions based on old age (which also included in Eliza’s case ‘deafness’), this marked only a transition to fully-established ‘old age.’ This may explain how the Board of Guardians described her as ‘ordinarily able-bodied,’ but also why on 31 March 1881 she received two shillings and sixpence weekly for three months.⁷⁷ Thus, a compromise was reached between her ‘able-bodiedness’ and characteristics based on disability. There were starker differences between married couples aged 60-69 years and those aged 70 years and over. While near 67 per cent of those aged 60-69 years received between one shilling and two shillings and sixpence, only 2.4 per cent received between five and eight shillings. Conversely, near 76 per cent of those aged 70 years and over received five and eight shillings, compared with only 3.4 per cent that received between one shilling and two shillings sixpence.

It is no surprise that older people in their sixties were more likely to be given a workhouse order. This may be because, despite the generally accepted definition of 60 years as the start of becoming ‘aged and infirm’, they were more likely to be perceived as more ‘able-bodied’ than those in their seventies and beyond.⁷⁸ Exactly half of the 60 people offered the workhouse were aged between 60-69 years, and 61.7 per cent of the 60 people were men. This again reflects previous findings that elderly men were more likely to be admitted to workhouses

⁷⁷ Hertfordshire Archives, Outdoor Relief Application and Report Books, Hertford District, March 1881-September 1881, BG/HER/52, St Andrews parish.

⁷⁸ Thane, *Old Age in English History*, 167.

than elderly women.⁷⁹ Of course, we do not know without further research into the workhouse registers if some applicants admitted themselves to the workhouse or refused to go. Alternatively, the finite size of workhouses in rural Unions and costs of provisions for workhouse inmates would indicate that the Board of Guardians were more selective in their criteria as to who would be admitted.⁸⁰ A total of 107, 156 and 105 inmates were accommodated across Alton, Hertford and Ripon workhouses respectively.

Demographically, the 1881 census for Alton, Hertford and Ripon workhouses shows that, of male inmates, 49.2 per cent in Alton, 35.6 per cent in Hertford and 45.3 per cent in Ripon respectively were over 60 years, although this is far below the 70 per cent of all male inmates that were aged 60 years and over in Brixworth Union workhouse in 1891.⁸¹ Of elderly male inmates, one-third in Alton, Hertford and Ripon were aged 60-69 years. The fact that, in the report books, men aged 60-69 years were more likely to receive workhouse offers is not easy to reconcile with the workhouse populations recorded in the 1881 census, where the majority of elderly male inmates were over 70 years. Perhaps some of those aged 60-69 years turned down the offer of the workhouse all together, or that over time they eventually received lower outdoor relief allowances by persistence. Their resolve to not go to the workhouse would be reinforced if they were married and potentially faced the breakup of their home, and there would have been more married couples living in their sixties than in their seventies and beyond. Also, those that were originally offered the workhouse may have been less likely to appear in the snapshot census data than those requiring longer-term institutional care. As a percentage of

⁷⁹ Goose, 'Poverty, old age and gender', Tables 3 and 4, 360, 362; Boyer, 'Old age pauperism in Victorian England', Table 10, 17.

⁸⁰ M.A. Crowther, *The Workhouse System 1834-1929. The history of an English social institution* (London, 1981), 6, 59; Levine-Clark, *Unemployment*, 28.

⁸¹ Data derived from 1881 census data on workhouse populations, accessible for each Poor Law Union nationwide; <https://www.workhouses.org.uk/Alton/Alton1881.shtml#Inmates>; <https://www.workhouses.org.uk/Hertford/Hertford1881.shtml#Inmates> and <https://www.workhouses.org.uk/Ripon/Ripon1881.shtml#Inmates> (all accessed 23 March 2022); Hurren, 'Welfare-to-work schemes', Table 1, 27.

single and married applicants receiving both workhouse orders and outdoor relief, 10.1 per cent of all grants in Ripon Union were workhouse offers, compared with 7.8 per cent in Alton Union and 3.4 per cent in Hertford Union. This supports the idea that workhouse offers were more rigorously enforced in northern districts.⁸²

Despite this, little is known *why* older people found themselves in the position of pauperism. Of course, there are many contributory factors, including migration, destitution, economic and family structure. Each of the 824 cases that were granted outdoor relief will have their own backstory. However, for brevity's sake, the 60 cases that were refused outdoor relief and offered the workhouse instead will be covered here. First, old age was not always listed as a reason for outdoor relief. They may have reached 60 years, the generally accepted threshold of old age, but destitution, sickness, and unemployment were additional causes of seeking relief. This was common for those aged 60-69 years, with only two applicants in this age category described as disabled 'wholly from old age'. Second, among those aged 70 years and over, although they were deemed disabled 'wholly from old age', some were recorded as living with their offspring. There are cases where the registers record that the applicant 'wants admission to the workhouse'. The reasons for this are not explicit from the data but it could be inferred that the financial and/or emotional burden of caring for dependent relatives is behind this decision.⁸³ However, the majority of those offered the workhouse were recorded without any relatives listed as liable to look after their older relatives, suggesting adherence by the Board of Guardians to the 'liability' clause. Finally, some of those offered the workhouse were late arrivals to the Poor Law Union where they applied for outdoor relief. For example, 74-year-old widow Ann Metcalfe from Aismunderby with Bondgate parish, Ripon Union, is

⁸² Boyer and Schmidle, 'Poverty among the elderly', Table 6, 268.

⁸³ As explored through 88-year-old Samuel Broad from Wield parish, Alton Union, recorded with his son, William. Hampshire Archives, Outdoor Relief Application and Report Books, Alton No1 District, June-September 1881, PL3/2/89, Wield parish.

recorded as having spent one year and three months as resident of Ripon Union. Despite being classed as disabled ‘wholly from age’, she was instead granted a workhouse order. The Settlement Laws, whereby relief was granted based on how long an applicant ‘belonged’ to the Poor Law Union, imposed strict criteria on who could receive poor relief. The Union Chargeability Act of 1865 stated that those living at least one year in the Union or through paternal settlement could qualify for relief. Despite having settled in Ripon for over a year, Ann was still ineligible for outdoor relief, with the Board of Guardians prioritising longer-settled residents instead.⁸⁴

[Table 5 here]

Table 5 shows the percentage of the overall population that received outdoor relief by age composition (60-69 years, 70-79 years and 80 years and over). While 43.5 per cent of those aged 80 years and over in Alton Union received outdoor relief, only 10.3 per cent of those aged 60-69 years received it. The percentages are lower for those aged 80 years and over in Ripon Union, reflecting Charles Booth’s contemporary research of the aged poor in the 1890s.⁸⁵

The application and report books of Hertford and Ripon Unions are very particular on the length of each order of relief, ranging from one week to six months. Variations in the lengths of order in Hertford and Ripon Unions are analysed in Table 6, to assess whether relief was offered as a ‘weekly pension’. It is possible that the length of the order was downgraded or upgraded over time depending on the applicant’s circumstances. Alternatively, some applicants may have died before completing the length of their order, which may affect those whose order was prescribed for 26 weeks, as in the case of 69-year-old James Carling from

⁸⁴ NYRO, Outdoor Relief Application and Report Books, October 7 1880 to September 22 1881, BG/RI 4/1/4, Aismunderby with Bondgate parish. However, one atypical example involves William Groves and his wife Ann in Ripon parish, who on 16 December 1880 received seven shillings for four weeks, despite having settled for only 15 days, also in BG/RI 4/1/4. For more information on the Settlement Laws and the New Poor Law, see Snell, *Parish and Belonging*, 81-161.

⁸⁵ Booth, *Aged Poor in England and Wales*, 420.

Bondgate, Ripon, who died on 10 December 1880.⁸⁶ Of the 517 known relief applicants in Hertford and Ripon, only 20 died during the course of their order, half of whom were relieved for six months. Despite these limitations, only the length of the order provided to each applicant when they received the highest relief allowance is recorded, assuming that the length of order was fixed over time and that the person was alive throughout the duration of the order.

[Table 6 here]

Table 6 shows the variations in the length of outdoor relief given to single and married applicants, broken down by three age groups, by gender and by the Poor Law Unions of Hertford and Ripon. For Hertford, the length of relief is split between those that were prescribed relief for one week to four weeks and those for two months to six months; for Ripon, those issued relief for one week to four weeks and those from twelve weeks to six months. For men and women in Hertford, a majority in each age profile received relief weekly between two months to six months, although the proportions in this category increase by age, from 65.7 per cent of men aged 60-69 years to 84.2 per cent of men aged 80 years and over and from 76.7 per cent of women aged 60-69 years to 96 per cent of women aged 80 years and over. However, a higher proportion of men aged 60-69 years in Ripon received relief for a period of one week to four weeks. Michael Sexton, recorded as aged 60 years, first applied for outdoor relief on 30 December 1880 ‘partially for the sickness’ of his 9-year-old daughter, Catherine. Later, on 24 February, the family received seven shillings for two weeks; it is possibly Michael that is being described as ‘not able to work’ and wanting relief ‘wholly from sickness’. Asking for its continuation on 7 April, Michael and his wife were given a workhouse order, which was scrapped two weeks later when Michael and his wife were given seven shillings and nine pence in kind and three shillings afterwards in May. Their relief was discontinued on 30 June and a

⁸⁶ NYRO, Outdoor Relief Application and Report Books, October 7 1880 to September 22 1881, BG/RI 4/1/4, Bondgate parish.

workhouse order granted on 11 July, where Michael was admitted on the same day.⁸⁷ We do not know what happened to his wife and daughter, or whether Sexton was using his daughter's sickness as a bargaining chip towards his entitlement to relief. In any case, those in their sixties were less likely to seek outdoor relief on account of their old age.

Despite Michael's story, individually, the majority that received relief across most age profiles were granted weekly relief for a period of six months, akin to Thomson's discussion of Poor Law 'pensions'. Across all age groups, the majority of women received relief for six months, although this did not apply to men aged 60-69 years and to men aged 70-79 years in Hertford only (at near 46 per cent, compared with 68 per cent for women). The decisions made by the Board of Guardians were specifically based on old age as a cause of seeking relief. Although it was not a universal right, the generosity of relief was subject to the person's circumstances. In some cases, not least because those at 70 years and over were more likely to be issued outdoor relief than those in their sixties, there was little difference in the receipt of outdoor relief in the later years of the New Poor Law and that of old age pensions provided to those aged 70 years and over after 1908.

Conclusion – The Generosity of Treatment to Older People on Outdoor Relief

It is found in the outdoor relief application and report books that outdoor relief was less likely distributed in the northern district of Ripon Union than in the southern districts of Alton and Hertford Unions. At RD level, this may have been based on elderly men who, when they were in their 'working-age', were in higher-skilled occupations such as farming, compared with lower skilled work and agricultural labouring. The greater numbers of adult offspring exiting

⁸⁷ NYRO, Outdoor Relief Application and Report Books, October 7 1880 to September 22 1881, BG/RI 4/1/4, Ripon parish. Unusually, his year of birth is marked as 1810 in the workhouse admissions and discharge registers, hence the computation of his age. NYRO, Workhouse Admissions and Discharge Registers of Ripon Union, April 1880-December 1884, BG/RI 5/3/1. However, based on Michael's story and his daughter's age, the workhouse data are most likely erroneous.

the parental home in Hertford and Alton, and the retention of offspring in the ‘family farm’ economy of Ripon, may also account for the proportions on outdoor relief. As successful outdoor relief applicants are collated over a limited period of time (owing to the survivability of the data), the data may underestimate the extent to which older people moved in and out of relief in their lifetime.

Continuities between the later years of the New Poor Law and the start of the Old Age Pension Act abound. Higher relief allowances were given to the oldest age groups (or, those in their seventies and eighties). In terms of cash received, allowances for married applicants in Ripon Union averaged seven or eight shillings, only slightly below the standard allowance of ten shillings under the Old Age Pension Act. Relief for single applicants was also higher in Ripon than in Hertford and Alton, averaging three shillings sixpence and four shillings, the latter one shilling below the maximum old age pension allowance. A minority of single applicants received relief between five and eight shillings, on par with or higher than the maximum allowance issued under the Old Age Pension Act. Outdoor relief was generally issued to applicants as a weekly pension, usually for half of a calendar year before the applicant was re-examined and relief often renewed. In the local context, unemployment in the textile industries, indicative of the emerging industrial depression of the 1880s, may have also facilitated one’s reliance on poor relief, although relief was not always prescribed successfully if the older-age applicant was merely unemployed, and it could prove disadvantageous. In the case of 66-year-old flax dresser William Hullah from Ripon, outdoor relief on account of his sickness was only prescribed temporarily, and while his unemployment status was recorded in the census, it may have not been looked at by the Board of Guardians. Even when relief was offered weekly to selected unemployed agricultural labourers, as was the case in Alton, the scale of generosity to the older-age poor varied by age and marital status, with long-term generosity beginning from their seventies onwards. This is particularly evident when men in

Ripon aged 60-69 years were less likely to receive allowances over a longer period of time, and more likely to be offered the workhouse instead, reflecting the greater generosity towards female outdoor relief applicants. Despite this, in the later years of the New Poor Law, the Board of Guardians shared the forward-looking attitudes of those that introduced the Old Age Pension Act. Outdoor relief was not fixed, nor universal, but could be negotiated between the applicant and the Board and an outcome produced satisfactorily. This may have resulted from the poor exercising their agency as deserving applicants having the right to generous allowances, although there is no direct testimony from the outdoor poor themselves to make this conclusion robust. Of course, Poor Law policy in general was not entirely lax in this period, with successful outdoor relief applicants more likely to be beyond their sixties and wholly infirm. It was not enough to simply be referred to as 'old'; the characteristics of old age, such as retirement from work (though not always unemployment) and disability, maximised the likelihood of outdoor relief.

The reasons why a northern rural and market town Poor Law Union such as Ripon issued allowances above that of London or Stourbridge remains unclear. Perhaps the industrial and urban composition of the latter two, with its priorities on the in-migration of adult 'able-bodied' workers, meant that treatment to 'non-able-bodied' or elderly people was less sympathetic than it would have been rurally. Older people in urban areas would have likely been proportionately low and thus the idea that they were collectively in need of outdoor relief would not have been seriously considered due to their demographic marginality.⁸⁸ This would be consistent with research on 1860s south-west England, which identifies a relationship between the incidence of outdoor relief and the proportion of older people out of the

⁸⁸ Thomson, 'The welfare of the elderly in the past', 203-4.

population.⁸⁹ Also, the ‘liability’ clause, used more frequently in Hertford and Alton than in Ripon, may have resulted in lower allowances to older people than was the case in Ripon. This may be the by-product of the Speenhamland legacy, where relief in strongly arable southern agricultural districts (Hertford and Alton) was issued heavily since the 1790s and into the early New Poor Law era, as argued recently by George Boyer (‘Speenhamland’ referring to the controversial policy of distributing outdoor relief in relation to the number of children and the price of bread).⁹⁰ However, this more intimate local-level study has shown how Speenhamland is utilised by historians as a shorthand that obscures the many factors as to why provision for outdoor relief varied regionally, either by the extent of distribution or the amounts given.

In spite of limited allowances in the southern Poor Law Unions and the skew of workhouse populations towards older men, this article points to continuities between the New Poor Law and the Old Age Pension Act, especially based on the generous allowances of married couples issued at home, the greater likelihood of receiving welfare in one’s seventies and eighties, and the scale of allowances distributed in northern Poor Law Unions. This marks an interesting diversion from recent New Poor Law historiography that has had a recent tendency to focus primarily on older workhouse inmates, consigning outdoor relief and its source materials to the background. Focusing on the identities of older people applying for outdoor relief with a contextualised backstory gives a face to the history of old age. For its more authentic representation, we need to seek their stories with details from the outdoor relief application and report books.

[Appendix 1 here]

⁸⁹ See T. Heritage, A. Hinde and D. Clifford, ‘Geographical variations in the proportion of old people and aged pauperism in mid-Victorian England and Wales’ (unpublished paper presented at the British Society for Population Studies Conference, University of Winchester, 2016).

⁹⁰ Boyer, ‘Old age pauperism in Victorian England’, 26-7; King, *Poverty and Welfare in England*, 34.

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The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in University of Southampton Institutional Repository at <https://eprints.soton.ac.uk/437212>, under Microsoft Excel spreadsheet 'Outdoor_Relief_Applicants_Alton_Hertford_Ripon_1879_1881'.