

Village Echoes

The system of state benefit is a modern creation. Before the passing of various acts of parliament to support families in need, each parish was responsible for the welfare of its own inhabitants. We are all familiar with the harsh reputation of workhouses, but the establishment of these buildings under the terms of the Poor Law Act of 1834 was an attempt to combine the resources of several parishes for value and efficiency.

Prior to this there was a much more benign system of altruism: every year two overseers were elected from each village to oversee the collection and distribution of money or assistance as necessary. As residents of the village they were familiar with the circumstances of most of the claimants or could easily find out. The fees collected from ratepayers were based on the ability to pay, according to the value of their house and land. Money was then distributed for food or basic clothing, and was also paid to local employers to take on unemployed poor to work on their land or in their trade. The Local History Society has recently been shown a small notebook containing details of 61 families in the parish who were in receipt of poor relief between 1799 and 1801. The names of these families and some details can be found on our webpage.

However, the more wealthy members of the community had a long history of endowment often given in the hope of securing a place in heaven. Goudhurst has a relatively long list of past benefactors, beginning with John Roberts in 1605. He gave an annuity of 10 shillings a year from the income of his land and property. This is the equivalent of about £55 in today's money. Edward Roberts in 1627 stated in his will that his son Thomas should buy land to the value of 40 shillings (£2) which was 'to remain for ever to the poor of this parish'.

Richard Bishop of Goudhurst died in 1630 and was keen to make sure his gifts distributed by the vicar and churchwardens benefited the older members of the community. He specified that 'ten poor aged and impotent persons' were to be paid every six months out of 20 shillings of income from his house and lands at Risebridge.

In 1636 John Horsemonden, a clothier of Goudhurst, left money in his will to provide wood and faggots for the 'poor people about the town of Goudhurst' whilst Richard Thomas, gent, left three cottages for the use of the poor people of the parish. They were described as being "at the lower end of Flimwell-street near to his lands called Poundfields".

Sir William Campion and his wife Frances who lived at Combwell left silver vessels for the church in their wills, for the use of all church-goers.

In 1670 when the importance of education for everybody was becoming widespread another John Horsemonden left a sum of money to set up 'a Latin School' in the village, and Thomas Bathurst of Finchcocks left money for 'an English School' at Riseden. Two further men, Sir Henry Fermor and Thomas

Paris, who died in the 1700s, left money specifically for supplying 'best wheat bred-corn' in the first case and 'forty sixpenny loaves' in the latter. These were to be distributed on a regular basis.

The result, as noted in Hasted's History of Kent, is that about 110 poor 'are constantly relieved'. However, these are not long forgotten and abandoned bequests, they survive today. By careful management and judicious investment these monetary gifts have been amalgamated to produce The Goudhurst Education Foundation which offers help for mainly educational purposes, whilst the Dorothy Bathurst Charity is another village-based charity. These ancient benefactors would surely be very satisfied to see their good works still being perpetuated.

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