

The rich among the poor: neighbourly interaction in London's eastern suburb, 1540–

1700

A paper that sets out to examine social relations between the richer inhabitants of London's eastern suburb with their poorer neighbours perhaps requires some initial explanation. First off, given the reputations of our fellow panellists for their work on the poor and marginal within metropolitan society, we had anticipated that a discussion of the city's wealthier inhabitants might provide a novel twist to today's session – a notion, which alongside our rather unsubtle inversion of the title of Jeremy's influential essay on 'the poor among the rich', has seemingly provoked a response in the title of his and Leonard's paper. Secondly, an investigation of the activities of the affluent in London's eastern suburb may seem a rather curious undertaking, given that from at least the sixteenth century onwards the area has been overwhelmingly associated with the poorest inhabitants of the capital. Yet as demonstrated by Jeremy's work on the poor within a (supposedly) socially exclusive district of the West End, a study of social relations between the members of the very top and very bottom of a local society can be immensely rewarding. For while it would, of course, be futile to challenge the overall picture of the poverty of the eastern suburbs, the area once housed a number of extremely rich residents, and wealthy individuals continued to live there, albeit as a much smaller proportion of the population, into the eighteenth century.

[SLIDE OF STUDY AREA]

Covering an area of almost eighty acres outside the eastern part of the city wall, the parishes of St Botolph Aldgate and Holy Trinity Minories are the focus of the ESRC-funded project 'Life in the Suburbs'. Roughly half of St Botolph's constituted the city ward of Portsoken, while the remaining half, the district of East Smithfield was formally part of Middlesex. This region of the metropolis experienced a quite remarkable phase of population growth and industrial expansion over the early modern period. In 1540 it was characterised by its gardens and wasteland, and housed less than 2000 people, including a number of wealthy residents, who, attracted by the space and cheap land prices, had built themselves substantial properties there. By 1700, however, it was densely built up with a population approaching 20,000 people, its once open spaces having long disappeared under networks of proliferating alleys and closes. It was here that the vast majority of its characteristically poor residents

crammed themselves into inferior dwellings, surrounded by brewhouses, armament works, and manufacturers of tallow, saltpetre and other noxious substances.

We can be fairly certain that the overall proportion of substantial households in the area decreased markedly over this period, and the Table gives a general impression of this trend in Portsoken ward, based on assessments of wealth taken at different moments of time.

[SLIDE OF TABLE – with sources]

Thus in a region where the highest assessment to the 1541 subsidy was that of the beerbrewer John Franke at £1000, well over twice the amount at which the knight Sir Arthur Darcy was assessed, we are privileging financial evaluations of wealth above titles or occupations in identifying the rich. But how did such inhabitants react to the changing society around them? The greater proportion of them clearly moved away. But what of those who remained? Did they inhabit an entirely separate social world, or did they interact with the poor and take note of their plight? One way of exploring what at least some of the rich thought of their poorer neighbours is through examining their charitable activities towards them. The focus of our attention today lies in *pre-* and *post mortem* giving, and turning in particular to those acts which led to direct interaction between rich and poor. Our work on this subject is very much in the early stages, and we will at times refer to general patterns in the absence of specific figures. What becomes apparent is that there is a gradual shift away from testamentary bequests to the poor in the seventeenth century, a trend that has been identified in other work on London.¹ However, in its discussion of the less familiar topic of lifetime charity practices, the paper reveals the extent to which the rich, in a unique society in which the poor most have appeared an ever-increasing social threat, were willing to offer their less fortunate neighbours sustenance and succour.

To begin it is worth emphasising the scale of poverty within the parish. St Botolph's was a parish that was badly in need of charity above and beyond the local and City-wide provision of poor relief; in 1589 the collection of the poor rate brought in just £20.² It was one of the parishes that drew aid from the wealthier parishes in London, and in a not untypical comment in a 1655 petition to Christ's Hospital for the taking in of parish children, the vestry pleaded

¹ Archer, article on charities; Boulton, giving.

² Archer, 162

they ‘hath bine Continually very Much Surcharged and over burdened wth miserable pore People, and hundreds of pore distressed Children & orphanes, the number of whom is now much more than euer Increased.³

Virtually every vestry meeting was concerned with dealing with the parish poor in some respect. Indeed the record keeping of relief and charity was such that a separate set of poor accounts was generated from the churchwardens’ normal accounts in the 1620s, which was used to capture the precise nature of receipts and disbursements until the last quarter of the century.

[SLIDE OF TOTALS]

Part of this book-keeping involved the detailed recording of the specific bequests of wealthy individuals that were specifically aimed at relieving the poor. Many pre- and post-mortem gifts were one off cash payments to be administered by the churchwardens, and recorded in the parish clerk’s memoranda books or churchwardens’ poor accounts. Some charity in the period included properties that were settled on the parish, which were either employed to generate rents for the benefit of the poor, or were used directly for housing those who were unable to pay even the low rents that could be found in the district. These houses were often in the wealthier areas, such as the widow Mary Bristow’s house on the High Street which in the 1620s generated a rent of £3 6s 8d for the poor;⁴ or the lawyer and vestryman Toby Wood’s extensive tenement next to Aldgate;⁵ and there were others Located in The Minories and Rosemary Lane. Thus in these densely settled wealthier areas, substantial inhabitants could find themselves the immediate neighbours of pensioners, orphans or children with sick or absconded parents.

Substantial bequests in the wills of the rich for the benefit of the poor, and the commemoration of the giver in the parish life and service, were commonplace in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. These gifts are often recorded multiple times across several sources, usually quoting the will or other document drafted by the giver, and the *rules* for both the spending of the gift and the manner of the commemoration are routinely discussed, amended and laid out in vestry minutes, as well as a specially commissioned Commemoration Book,

³ GLMS9237 f.2v

⁴ PCMs Feb 1624

⁵ Will

for decades afterwards. The brewer John Franke already mentioned, for example, left in his will of 1557 a £5 dole to the parish poor on the day of his funeral, and 20s to be distributed to the poor on the anniversary of his burial – the Commemoration Book for 1692 records the continued collection and disbursement of this sum well over a century later.⁶ In the 1580s and 90s there was a spate of similar, often more substantial testamentary gifts which are likewise still active at the end of the 17th century.

A customary part of the commemoration was a ‘guest’ sermon on the anniversary of the giver’s burial, presumably to remind parishioners of the role of charity in their lives, and encourage subsequent giving. A typical example from the vestry minutes records the gift of £20 from the widow Anne Clarke made in 1611 – which money was to be given in stock to the clerk upon security and the proceeds used to help the poor according to the discretion of the churchwardens and vestrymen. It was agreed that there would be a sermon on the anniversary of her funeral, with payments made to the poor and the minister. Toby Wood, already mentioned, had the same, whilst other donors stipulated that two sermons were to be had each year. There are numerous similar examples of such commemoration in the memoranda books which run between 1583 and 1625, and they are redolent of the kinds of medieval death-bed charity which became derided as hypocritical by the end of the 17th century. Nevertheless, the parish took considerable administrative pains to keep the income stream these gifts provided going. Even in the early 18th century appointed committees of vestrymen were updating the Commemoration Book, and discussing who was responsible for paying long established and even relatively small gifts, such as John Frank’s. Similarly they were concerned with the chasing up of gift payments that had lapsed, and incurring costs in the recovery of ‘owed’ payments from long established gifts, such as the £6 of Mr Edmunds’ gift that was demanded in 1693.⁷

The reason for such meticulous detail in the recording of charitable giving to the poor probably lies in the divergence between the scale of giving and the scale of the ‘poor problem’. The period between the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, which saw the most striking population boom in the parish, alongside a constantly pitched lament at the extent of its poverty, coincides precisely with the demise of large and small scale testamentary giving to the poor and the virtual disappearance of substantial households. This

⁶ Will TNA [PROB 11/42B](#). CW a/cs PLEB 1691 and 1692.

⁷ PLEB CW a/cs

is not to suggest that the practice of post-mortem charity stopped completely, as there are notable examples of it happening later – in 1721 a letter from Calcutta brought notification of the gift of Isaac Berkley merchant of 3000 rupees (£375) to the parish, although it is not clear that the money was intended for poor relief. But it is evident that after the first quarter of the 17th century charitable bequests to Aldgate's poor were much less common than half a century before.

Of course, the degree of interaction between rich and poor in the context of this kind of charity may have been limited to specific occasions, many of which would have been encompassed with social and moral hierarchies to govern behaviour. Begging, church attendance, the implementation of local government – these were all occasions which would bring rich and poor into contact in situations where the social differences between them would be emphasised. The controls put in place to try to stem the tide of poverty that threatened the social fabric of London parishes, it has been argued, broadened both the extent and visibility of social demarcation between rich and poor. The mechanisms of Poor law, the issuing of badges to the poor (which in St Botolph cost 14s 8d in 1691⁸) and other means of regulating relief highlighted the social consequences of being poor. Vestry minutes make it clear, for example, that committees met to judge the worthiness of the poor, with specific candidates for relief receiving aid or not based on the opinion of the parish's wealthy. The act of parish worthies sitting in judgement of the poor must surely have had implications for social interaction between the two classes. This is especially true given the acute impact the judgement could have on individuals' lives: in 1609 a program of demolishing and rebuilding a number of parish houses in the High Street and Woolsack Alley was planned, resulting in the forced removal of the pensioners occupying them (who had resisted two years' worth of repeated notice to vacate). In the winter of 1609 two of the six pensioners removed died in the street, despite the vestrymen's agreement to find them alternate lodgings.⁹

The moral demarcation caused by charity to the poor also found its way into the *personal* giving of Aldgate's wealthy in the period, as epitomised in the charity of the parish's most celebrated donor, the merchant taylor Robert Dow, who died in 1612. Dow set up a fund which provided for 64 pensioners, as well as a room in the Merchant Taylors almshouses in the parish for one (subsequently two) poor widows of the parish. The gift was an expansive

⁸ CW a/cs PLEB

⁹ This happened again in 1650s; VM LIts

one, and was set up through lengthy negotiations beginning in the mid-1580s - negotiations which not always went smoothly. Dow faced determined opposition over the acquisition of a plot of land from a neighbour who was asked to sell his house to accommodate the planned charity – but the backing of an impressive list of the parish’s wealthy meant that the plan was successful.¹⁰

Dow’s famous charity, whilst impressively contributing to the parish’s attempts to deal with its poor, underlined the moral demarcation between rich and poor through an extensive list of provisions, rules and requirements. The judgement of worthy pensioners was one aspect of this, along with the requirements for election to the almshouse – the parish nominated two poor widows (from four chosen equally from Portsoken and East Smithfield), one of which was picked by Dow *personally*. A period of continued residence in the parish was stipulated as a qualifying requirement, along with stringent standards of good reputation, moral standing and neighbourly consideration. Dow’s gift notes that “the poor in these days are given untoo too much idleness and little labour … and much seeking after alms how little soever it be”, an observation that sits squarely with Aldgate’s vestry in the 1620s and 1630s, which provided hemp for spinning by the recipients of poor relief, “forasmuch as Christian Charitie requireth that the poore being restrayned from begging: [they] should haue worke provided for them, whereby they might be relived”.¹¹ Those in receipt of Dow’s pension were also treated to a self-penned homily which, laden with moral superiority, lends support to those historians who see large scale ‘pious’ charity as a means of social demarcation and control.¹² Beginning with a reminder that the recipient is fortunate to have been *chosen* when so many others had need of the charity, they are then amongst other things told to “live in all charitable and christian sort with your neighbours and be peace and love makers to your power considering with yourselves that you be aged and therefore most meet for you to give good example”. This homily was annually commemorated on St Thomas’ day right up until 1890.¹³

Charity such as this is borne of and reinforces a particular kind of social interaction between rich and poor, essentially an idealised one, that emphasises social control. However, personal

¹⁰ PCMs May 1587; witness vestry meeting sept 1584 (PCMs) for list of signatories to Dowe’s acquisition of land to build houses on near the poor lands – all the big names signed up

¹¹ Cw poor accounts f.33v

¹² *Londinopolis*, 54-60

¹³ Atkinson 163-4

giving by the wealthy on anything approaching this scale, and certainly with the kind of explicit instructions associated with it, disappears in our area during the 17th century.

However from the late 16th century, a less anonymous type of charity existed, which may have persisted through the 17th century, and which provided significantly more interaction between rich and poor. The provision of what might be called a ‘surrogate household’ to those in immediate need was a form of charity that may have endured the perceived demise of charitable giving. It was also a form of charity that was by no means the exclusive province of the wealthy – both rich and poor were brought together by it, with each acting in the role of donor and recipient on different occasions.

The provision of this kind of charity took a number of forms: the nursing of orphans and foundlings; caring for the sick; housing the homeless poor; the sheltering of young pregnant women about to give birth and so on. Some of these activities bordered on social and legal transgression, and were sometimes investigated by parish representatives, but nevertheless crop up repeatedly in the sources. Quite often the householder taking in the needy is mentioned only once in this context, suggesting an ad hoc response to a particular individual ‘crisis’, and can be relatively humble in terms of their status and wealth. Sometimes a pattern is evident – for example, sick and dying sailors that arrive at the wharves are often taken in by mariners or their wives; whilst many others are taken in by victuallers, tipplers, or others evidently keeping an inn and therefore presumably with room to spare. On occasion, the constables assign a household to accommodate someone in need, although it is likely that these again are decided on an ad hoc basis. Finally, the poor accounts indicate regular payments to a few individuals, often poor widows, for the longer term care of orphaned children, or elderly parishioners.

These latter aside (being representative of parish-organised relief), the taking in of individuals may well represent a relatively intimate form of social interaction. There are examples of the poor taking in the rich, although these latter were often not parishioners, as in 1587 when the birth of the son of Richard Baylye citizen and vintner of St Vedast Foster Lane, occurred in the house of George Graves, a labouring man of Aldgate.¹⁴ Other examples of this kind of provision occur throughout the 17th century, with wealthy goldsmiths being

¹⁴ PCMs December 1587

taken ill and cared for in the houses of poor widows in the 1620s, and similar cases occurred in the 1660s and 70s before the churchwardens intervened to take charge of the situation.

However, in terms of provision for needy parishioners, it is evident that the rich accommodated the poor within their households, sometimes for short times, sometimes for longer intervals; and there is evidence that this practice continued across our period, although the nature of the sources makes it difficult to determine whether it occurs so commonly by the end of the 17th century. But there does appear to be something of a shift in the context of such provision by the wealthy, and that is that in the late 16th/early 17th centuries, acting as a surrogate household was part of a ‘package’ of charitable provision, whereas in the late 17th century, it seems to have been the only informal charitable activity of the rich that can be seen in the sources (other than weekly collections at the door of the church).

An example of such a ‘package’ can be seen in the activities of Anthony Duffield a large-scale beer brewer, who died in 1591. Duffield was one of Aldgate’s wealthy patrons, actively involved in local government and the vestry, who regularly made donations to the poor during his lifetime, and then left a substantial gift in his will. His charitable activities appear repeatedly throughout parish records in the latter decades of the 16th century. In February every year “acordinge to his accostomed maner” he gave 6s 8d to be spent on bread for the poor, which in 1583 fed ‘120 poore persones’.¹⁵ At the funeral of his tunman in April, he provided for the poor two barrels of crown beer and eight dozen of bread; and there are references to a number of other incidental gifts. This regular lifetime giving to the poor is notable, and indeed noted in the records, and was in addition to his provision of household accommodation. In 1586, an 18 year old man whose “name Was not knowne He Was one that Went a goodinge as I was informed by serten other masterles men he had bene a cooper... This yonge fellow being sicke was taken into the oven pitt at the howse of Mt Anthony Douffeild”.¹⁶ A year later an unnamed vagrant was allowed to shelter in Duffield’s storehouse.

Examples of substantial households sheltering the needy can be found elsewhere among the records. In the Duffield example, whilst it may not have been the case of the brewer welcoming waifs and strays into the bosom of his private household, it still suggests some

¹⁵ PCMs Feb 1583

¹⁶ Perhaps coincidentally Cooper was buried out of Duffield’s house on the 16/2

degree of face-to-face contact between rich and poor in the conveyance of charity. At the least it indicates that Duffield gave charity to specific cases about which he knew, and could pass judgement upon, rather than simply anonymously donating to a fund to be administered by the parish authorities.

Finally, it is worth considering the perception of men like Dow and Duffield within the parish and particularly among the poor. On the one hand, it is clear that there was knowledge of where it was possible to go for help. It is perhaps no coincidence that the wealthiest parishioners found people on their doorsteps asking for help at moments of crisis. In addition, there were the foundlings ‘dropped’ at the door of men like Duffield, and his peers such as James Crew, several times in the 1580s and 90s. Having a reputation as a charitable and wealthy individual could sit comfortably alongside the role of parish governor it seems. On the other hand, there was a tension located within the interaction of rich and poor. Dow, for all his ambitious planning and the significant impact he had on relieving the parish’s poor, met with antipathy, although not from his peers in the vestry, who remarked upon his neighbourliness and love for the parish - but from other householders. And some of the poor seem to have objected more symbolically to his activities, or perhaps his moralising. In 1598 a widow Tomkins, and her maid, and a Mistress Linkes were examined by the alderman and several wealthy parishioners, charged with the offence of casting “Fowle bowles of beastlynes agaynst Mr Robert Dow his backe doore”.¹⁷ Mistress Linkes and widow Tomkins’s maid were found guilty, and the latter was sent to Bridewell. The collectors’ accounts for 1598 record that Katherine Tomkins widow, had nine months rates unpaid.¹⁸ Interaction between rich and poor of this nature may well have been precisely what Dow’s homily was intended to avoid...

¹⁷ PCM Aug 1598

¹⁸ PCM Sept 1598