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Caring for the poor in East Hertfordshire c.1620–50

Alan Thomson

THE POOR RECEIVED care and support in a number of different ways in the mid-seventeenth century. Firstly there were the products of the medieval and post-medieval charities, whose benefactors specified the purposes to which the charities should be put, which might include hand-outs of cash or in kind at specified times, support for the building and maintenance of almshouses or income from grants of land aimed at specific groups, such as poor widows.¹ In theory these charities were perpetual, in contrast, secondly, to the one-off payments that arose from the bequests in individual wills whose authors specified the amount of their estate that should be distributed, usually to the poor of their own parish.² Thirdly, there were the charitable collections, often on a weekly basis, through the poor box in the parish church, which were seldom recorded in the churchwardens' accounts. These were sometimes supplemented by charitable giving on feast days such as Christmas or Easter, when either a special collection was made for the poor or hospitality was extended from the wealthy to others in the wider community.³ These were also seldom recorded except in the detailed accounts of the great estates, churchwardens, traders or businessmen. However, from the late sixteenth century there was, fourthly, provision for a parish poor rate to be levied on the better-off members of the community to support the poorer, which was often raised only in years of particular hardship.⁴ These were increasingly recorded in the accounts of the overseers of the poor. Lastly, in an emergency which had arisen through harvest failure or high bread prices specific funds were raised locally, as was the case in the early 1630s.



Figure 5.1 Hertfordiae Comitatus, 1607. Christopher Saxton's map of Hertfordshire, engraved by William Kip for Camden's *Britannia*.

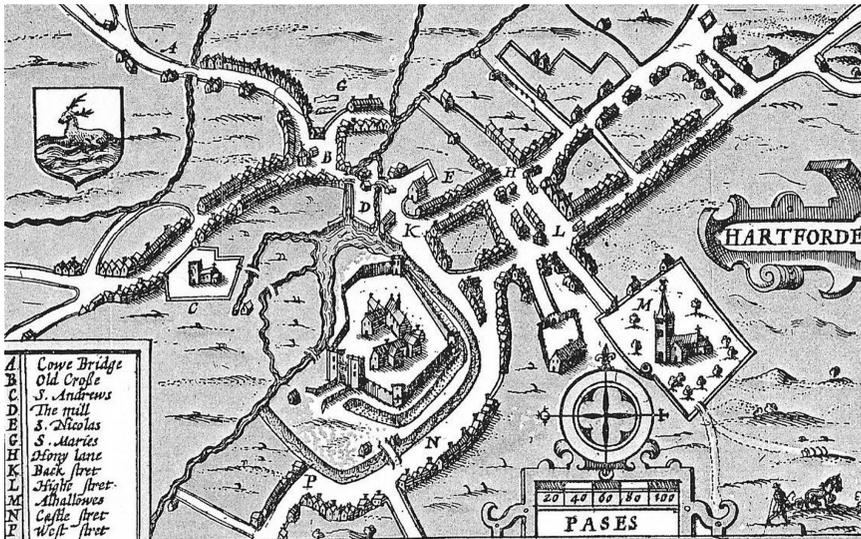


Figure 5.2 Map of Hertford, 1610. Detail from John Speed's Hertfordshire map for *Theatre of the Empire of Great Britaine*.

Against this broad backdrop, the current chapter focuses on significant developments in poor relief (widely defined) in the rural parishes and small towns of East Hertfordshire (Figures 5.1 and 5.2) in the middle decades of the seventeenth century, when political policies and social and economic circumstances changed dramatically. The first part deals with parochial charitable provision. Contemporary bequests made in wills to the poor can be partly found in the *Victoria County History of Hertfordshire* and other local histories and partly in the wills proved by both the Prerogative Court of Canterbury and the local archdeacons' and bishops' courts. Parts of East Hertfordshire were in the archdeaconry of Middlesex in the bishopric of London, many of whose records are held in the Essex County Record Office at Chelmsford. Other wills in the hundred of Hertford were part of the archdeaconry of Huntingdon, in the southernmost part of the vast Lincoln diocese.

The second part of the chapter deals with the crises of the 1630s. Following poor harvests at the beginning of the decade the 1630s witnessed rising bread prices, increasing vagrancy and poverty and endemic attacks of the plague and smallpox, which led to the implementation of the Book of Orders (instructions, issued to all local magistrates, on how to cope with bread shortages and mass poverty), attempts to more tightly control the local markets, the extension of pauper apprenticeship and a variety of local responses to care for different categories of poor.⁵ Evidence for this decade is particularly found in reports sent from divisional magistrates to the Privy Council⁶ and printed *Acts of the Privy Council*. Parochial records, particularly those from Hertford borough, and the County Quarter Sessions⁷ give a more detailed perspective on the experiences of individual localities.

The chapter's final part focuses on the impact of the civil war in the 1640s on the parishes and their ability to care for the poor, and on post-war provision. The war brought massive increases in taxation, the loss of manpower to parliamentary armies and the increasing burden of free quarter (the practice of soldiers taking free board and lodging in houses and inns, the owners of which were not paid until much later). These all resulted in there being fewer people to implement poor-law provisions as well as less money to support them. Additional resources had to be found for those injured or maimed during the conflict and for war widows.⁸ Demobilisation of armies, including the local volunteer regiments, the army of the Eastern Association and the National Armies created an

increase in vagabonds, particularly in the east of the county through which ran the Old North Road, the main road from London to the north. County and divisional magistrates had to respond to this situation in a variety of ways, including repairing houses of correction and, later, paying constables to remove vagrants.⁹ In turn, policies of the 1650s were influenced partly by the continuing problems created by war, the disastrous summer of 1648 and the harsher moral climate of the Cromwellian Protectorate. Apprenticeship, bastardy orders and legal settlements became prominent as means of getting young men off the streets, discouraging them from having illegitimate children and limiting those who could claim a legal settlement in a particular parish.¹⁰ Policies of maintaining law and order, moral imperatives and a drive to reduce those on the poor rates influenced how communities acted.

Charitable provision for the poor in East Hertfordshire to 1640

East Hertfordshire in the seventeenth century consisted of the communities in the old divisions of the hundreds of Hertford and Braughing and surrounding parishes then in other hundreds. Included were the borough of Hertford and the market towns of Ware, Bishops Stortford, Buntingford and Sawbridgeworth, along with other villages north and east of Braughing and settlements down the Lea Valley to Broxbourne and Cheshunt. Charities for the poor existed in many parishes, some of which involved payments from the rental of lands or buildings. In Ware there were a number of such properties, the town's charities going back to the early fifteenth century at least. In 1407 the Ware feoffees or trustees (then in the guise of the Guild of Corpus Christi) acquired a house and garden in Mill Lane (now Priory Street) which by the 1630s had become two almshouses. Other land and buildings produced rent, such as the Bell Close, containing about four acres, and that on which the former Corpus Christi Barn had stood, as well as two inns, the Saracen's Head (possibly acquired as early as 1365) together with a piece of land called the Netherhoe and the White Hart with appurtenances (Figures 5.3 and 5.4). This latter had been obtained by 1479, or possibly as early as 1426.¹¹

The Ware Guild had political and religious imperatives until the sixteenth century, when it was reformed. It changed its name to the Jesus Brotherhood and used its income to meet the common charges of the town, such as cleaning the streets and repairing the roads. After dissolution in 1539 the properties passed to the 'Feoffees of the Town Land



Figure 5.3 White Hart Inn, High Street, Ware.



Figure 5.4 Blue Plaque for the White Hart Inn, Ware.

Rents' whose purpose was to administer the trust and 'to distribute the income to the benefit of the inhabitants of Ware'. With the establishment of the overseers of the poor in Elizabeth's reign the vestry and the trustees shared responsibility for looking after the local poor, the vestry levying the poor rate and paying for the workhouse, the trustees both keeping up the almshouses and giving hand-outs to the 'necessitous poor'. In 1612 all the properties were brought together under one trust and a new trust deed stipulated that the profits were to be used for the public charges and to relieve the poor of the parish 'as shall fortune to be in such great poverty or necessitie' as charity would relieve. By then the trustees had obtained various acres of meadow on the Meads, an almshouse and other properties in Crib Street and the schoolhouse. A similar situation had arisen in Stevenage from the late fifteenth century, when almshouses and other charities were accumulated.¹²

Further donations to the stock of charitable resources were made before 1640. In 1619 George Mead MD gave a post-mortem bequest of £5 yearly issuing out of the George Inn, and in 1622 John Elmer made a post-mortem bequest of Baldock House for the benefit of the poor of Ware and Stevenage. The Charity of Ellen Bridge, founded in 1628, consisted of a garden formerly known as Pope's or Doulton's Pightle, situated in Watton Road, and the Charity of Humphrey Spencer, founded on 26 June 1630, consisted of a cottage in Kibes Lane. Following Spencer's death in 1633 £200 from his will enabled the trustees to buy the Holy Lamb inn at Colliers End with eight acres of land and a cottage, the rent from which came to the trust. The schoolhouse was also established with £100 from his will to pay for a master to 'teach and instruct so many of the children of the poorest sort of the inhabitants of the town of Ware to write and read, freely and for nothing'. Thus in this one town there were already, before the 1630s, a considerable number of charities which focused on caring for the urban poor and providing an education for their children.¹³

Hertford, being a borough, had more resources than most towns for helping the poor.¹⁴ In 1645 a review was carried out of the use to which the profits from the Chequer (a covered building containing shops and stalls which were rented out) and other sources of income had been put over the previous 16 years. The rents on properties, including shops, in the Chequer¹⁵ had raised a total of £288. Other rents and income came to £192 and fees for innkeepers' and victuallers' licences brought in £49. Rents from two purchased properties had brought in £60, where the initial

purchase price had been £55. Only £13, however, had gone to the poor on the direction of Sir Thomas Gardiner, along with £18 for those visited by the plague, a further £11 that was lent to poor men for trading purposes, £10 to set the poor on work and £64 to provide fuel for the poor at £4 a year. A vast amount had been spent on rebuilding the Chequer and the neighbouring Red Lyon Inn after a disastrous fire, as well as on legal fees for this and other purposes.¹⁶

As well as receiving borough income, groups of the 'deserving poor' were identified in bequests from benefactors with links to Hertford. The will of Roger Daniel in 1625 left an annuity of £10, of which £5 was payable for a monthly sermon, £4 for the 14 poorest householders of All Saints and 6 of the parish of St Andrew, 12s for bread and drink for poor prisoners in the 'Maine Gaol' and 8s for a breakfast for the administering trustees. In 1649 Mary Pettyt, widow, gave two tenements near Cowbridge for as many poor widows. Other towns were not as lucky or as well organised as Ware and Hertford but donations from various wills served similar purposes from the 1620s to the 1650s. The church and poor lands in Sawbridgeworth, in an indenture dated 20 July 1652, consisted of a moiety of the income derived from the following property: the bowling green, containing 3 roods 22 perches and used as a recreation ground for boys; three cottages occupied as almshouses by three poor women who received parochial relief; Pishocroft Gardens, containing about five acres near High Wych, and a rood of land in Church Street. Almshouses for widows were also the object of William Bonest, who left his tenement in Overbury in Braughing to the churchwardens in trust for four widows to dwell in rent-free and £1 yearly out of a field called Dassel Field to be distributed equally among them.¹⁷

Bishops Stortford also had five almshouses founded by Richard Pilston in 1572. This was in a long tradition: it has been estimated that about 1,300 almshouses, hospitals and so on were constructed in England and Wales during the medieval period.¹⁸ In addition, the tradition of leaving land or a rent-charge on land in a will was regularly followed in Stortford in the Tudor and early Stuart periods by people such as Robert Adison in 1554, Margaret Dane in 1579, William Ellis in 1616 and William Gilby in 1630. Cheshunt was exceptional in that it had accumulated a considerable sum of money for the poor which had derived from the compensation given by King James I for inclosing a large piece of common to increase the size of Theobalds Park. The compensation totalled £500: £180 was expended