

POOR RELIEF IN THORNTON-IN-CRAVEN

Earby History Society reference:- 432 7/1536-/SO

POOR RELIEF IN THORNTON-IN-CRAVEN

Throughout history poverty has been an ever present spectre. The responsibility for the care of the poor was placed with the parish in an Act of Parliament of 1536 and alms were to be collected by the priest and churchwardens on Sundays. A further act of 1563 allowed the appointment of two or more persons to collect alms from all the inhabitants of the parish who were not in need of poor relief.

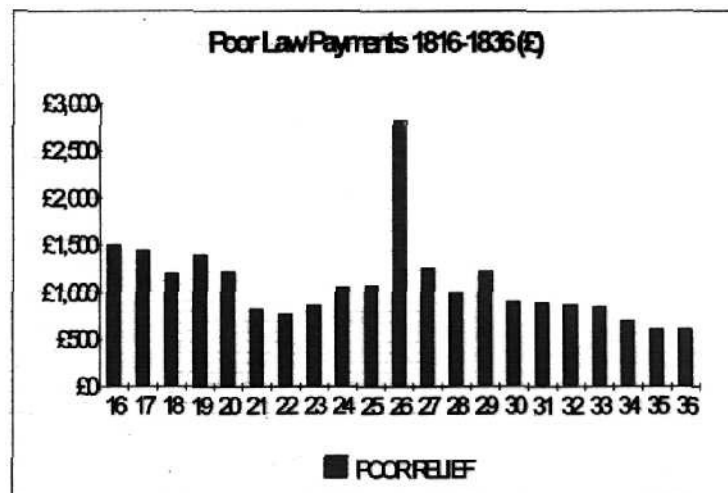
The Poor Law Act of 1601 was a mile stone in English Poor Law and the administration of poor relief was formalised by the appointment of the Overseers of the Poor who were commissioned to raise funds for poor relief by means of a poor relief rate which was a tax on the property owners of the parish. The Overseer had to keep accounts of monies received from the poor rates and the money distributed to the poor and needy of the parish. These records, if they have survived, provide an insight into the conditions in the parish at that particular time. From a family historian's point of view they can be enlightening as they usually record the amounts doled out to individuals in the community.

The local inhabitants of a parish were loath to fund paupers from other parishes who migrated into their area and Acts of Settlement of 1662 and 1697 were enacted to deal with this problem.

A stranger staying in a parish could be forcibly returned to the parish where he came from if he could not obtain work. The latter Act compelled strangers to bring a Settlement Certificate from his old parish stating that they would take him back if he became liable for poor relief in his new parish, thus his home parish would have to provide any relief needed.

The parish records of Thornton-in-Craven (housed at the North Yorkshire Record Office in Northallerton) contains a complete set of Overseers accounts for the years 1816-1836 and make interesting reading.

The chart (right) plots the amounts of money paid out in poor relief for these years.



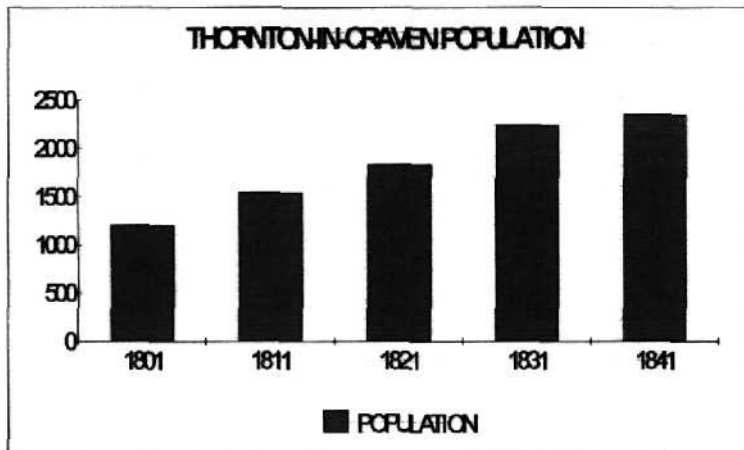
Two facts stand out, the relatively high annual totals and more particularly the large peak for 1826, and these need some explanation.

The Napoleonic War had ended in 1815 with the defeat of Napoleon Bonaparte and Europe was in turmoil.

Before the war, the price of wheat was averaging at 47 s an imperial quarter and during the war rose to sharply, to 126 s in 1812 and from 1820 -1850 the price stabilised at an average of 56s a quarter. By the end of the 1700s Thornton parish produced less if any of its own wheat, Booth Bridge corn mill had been converted for cotton spinning, and most wheat and corn would have to be bought in and was probably beyond the means of the poorer elements of the population whose meagre staple diet probably consisted of oats.

In 1815 the Corn Law was introduced which banned the importation of cheaper corn until the price of home produced grain reached 80 s a quarter, keeping the price of corn artificially high.

Trade was poor after the Napoleonic wars and wages were low which led to great distress. "The History of Colne" (edited by Dorothy Harrison) tells us that in 1826 trade came to a virtual standstill. Thornton parish baptism registers for this period show that the major occupation given by the father was weaver thus Thornton would have been badly affected by this downturn in trade.



The census returns for this period show a noticeable increase in population. Between 1801 and 1821 the population had risen by 50% and by 1841 had doubled. All this putting pressure on the family and also the parish which would need more money for relieving the poorer families.

At a vestry meeting of the parish on 25th March 1824, the minutes note the following "The meeting considers a workhouse very necessary and of the greatest importance and we the under signed consider and authorise the overseers to procure a part of Holden Clough, if it can be obtained, if not to procure one where it can be obtained at the most advantage."

There is no evidence been found that a work house was ever built, but in the overseers accounts for 1837/8 there is an entry " cash to the trustees of Skipton Union (work house) £85-15s (£85-75p)" and "paid for a receipt from the auditors of the union 1d". The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 allowed parishes to pool resources to fund a joint (union) workhouse.

Another factor which could have aggravated the exceptional poverty of 1826 was the enactment of the enclosure of Thornton Parish.

Enclosure by act of parliament was generally initiated by the larger land owners of the parish who put forward the advantages to agriculture of consolidating land ownership as opposed to small, usually scattered, parcels of land.

It is thought that some portions of the parish were enclosed some 100-200 years previously but the main Enclosure Act was passed in 1825.

The traditional village had common lands which were divided between the inhabitants, the system of cultivation being based on three large fields, one for wheat, one for corn and one left fallow and used for pasture. This land was probably subject to early enclosures and the 1825 act enclosed the remaining commons and wastes of the parish.

Enclosure squeezed the small land owners out to the advantage of the larger land owners and even if the land was fairly distributed, by the time the legal expenses and the cost of fencing the plot were totalled, the small farmer or labourer with a share had to sell it to pay the bill.

Enclosure also resulted in the loss of many rights of the use of common land for grazing and fuel collection.

Consequently enclosure acts caused many more people to seek assistance from the parish.

A combination of the three factors, a general down turn in trade (particularly in 1826) at the same time as the cost of food was relatively high, with an increasing parish population, aggravated by the effects of the 1825 enclosure act, led to the high levels of poor relief particularly in 1826/7 when the relief payments were nearly three times the previous years payments.

Saturday, December 30, 2006, Transcribed from Earby History Society document:

432	T/1536-/SO	Poor Relief in Thornton-in-Craven
-----	------------	-----------------------------------

jct
1069