

THORNTON-IN-CRAVEN

BYGONE DAYS IN AN ANCIENT PARISH

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We publish below the first of a series of articles on the ancient parish of Thornton-in Craven from the pen of Mr. A. H. Clegg. The ancient parish included the townships Of Thornton, Earby, Kelbrook and Harden, and Mr. Clegg's survey will deal with some of the bygone forms of civil and ecclesiastic administration as revealed in old documents which for the first time have been used as the basis of public writing. In compiling material for the first article, a section of which is now given, Mr. Clegg acknowledges the permission of the Bishop of the diocese and the courtesy of the Rector of Thornton-in-Craven for access to certain documents.

Having regard for changes which are imminent in the administration of the Poor Law, Mr. Clegg's sketch of the system of poor relief over a century ago is of special interest.

The ancient parish of Thornton-in Craven consisted of four townships, namely, Thornton, Earby, Kelbrook and Harden. The first three of these are mentioned in Domesday Book. In olden days the parish was the district in which one parish priest ministered - the area which paid tithes and other ecclesiastical dues to the same person.

The Parish Meeting, or Vestry, played a very important part in the life of the parish. The business at a Vestry was not confined to matters affecting the Church. In early days the distinction between things secular and things ecclesiastical did not exist. In this article it is proposed to deal with the care of the poor of the parish about a century ago.

Perhaps a brief explanation of the general system of poor relief prevailing at that time would be advantageous. In those days each parish was responsible for, and had to maintain, its own poor. The ultimate authority in all parish matters was the Vestry. The various officers of the parish were elected by the Vestry. The poor law system in force dated from the time of Queen Elizabeth. In 1601 an Act was passed which directed that officers should be elected for each parish called "overseers of the poor," whose duty it should be to raise a common fund " for the necessary relief of the poor" by "taxation of every occupier of lands, houses, tithes, coalmines, or saleable underwoods in the parish," and this system continued with modifications, down to about 1834.

Prior to 1722, parishes which desired to build a workhouse had to get a special Act of Parliament, but in this year an Act was passed which authorised Overseers, with the consent of the Vestry, to start workhouses, or to farm out the poor. If applicants for relief refused to go into the workhouse they forfeited their right to any relief at all.

In 1796 another Act was passed which abolished this restriction of right to relief to persons willing to enter the workhouse, and for the first time the granting of out-door relief to the able-bodied was made general. An Act of 1795 repealed the Act of Settlement of Charles II's reign which enacted that the Justices, at the complaint of the Overseers, might order any person coming to live in the parish to be removed back to his own place of settlement unless he could give security against becoming chargeable to the parish. This Act provided that nobody was to be removable until he became actually chargeable to the parish, and even then the order for removal was to be suspended in cases where the pauper was dangerously ill. Further, in 1795 conditions were so bad and there was so much poverty, that the Speenhamland system of supplementing wages from the poor rate according to a scale based on the price of a gallon loaf, was largely adopted. In 1819 an Act was passed which allowed parishes to set up a select Vestry and ordered that in these parishes the Overseers should give

relief as ordered by the select Vestry.

POVERTY AND DISTRESS

There can be no doubt that there was a great deal of poverty and distress in the parish of Thornton-in-Craven in the early part of last century. For the period of 22 years from 1816 to 1837 the amount disbursed in poor relief was about £24,060, or an average amount of over £1,093 per year, and the population of the parish in 1801 was 1,202 persons! Payments to the poor for different years are as follows :- 1816, £1,411 ; 1817, £1,490 ; 1818, £1,211 ; 1819, £1,410 ; 1820, £1,238 ; 1821, £829 ; 1822, £778 ; 1823, £871 ; 1824, £1,060 ; 1825, £1,081 ; 1826, £2,830 ; 1827, £1,261 ; 1828, £1,006 ; 1829, £1,231 ; 1830, £908 ; 1831, £895 ; 1832, £880 ; 1833, £855 ; 1834, £705 ; 1835, £620 ; 1836, £616 ; 1837, £863.

Each year the Overseer's accounts were passed by two magistrates in the following form : "West Riding of Yorkshire. Perused and allowed by us two of His Majesty's Justices of the Peace acting in and for the said Riding, the same being duly verified upon oath." Incidentally, the expenses of the journey to the magistrates to get the book signed were from 5s. to 7s.6d. per year.

It will be noted from the above figures that 1826 was the year of greatest distress within the period, and during this year over 400 persons belonging to the parish were relieved to the extent of £2,830. The winter of 1825/6 was a hard one, and 1826 appears to have been a disastrous year throughout the country, and especially in Lancashire and Yorkshire. Wood was scarce and wages, even when work was to be had, were low. From 1826 the payments to the poor gradually decrease until, in 1836 the amount was £616. The number of persons in receipt of poor relief in any one year seems to have varied between 150 and 400.

The years 1816 to 1820 was a bad period from the point of view of distress. Conditions seem to have been somewhat better from 1820 to 1823, but from then until 1829 distress was great, 1826, as stated above, being the worst year.

Payments from the parish to the treasurer of the Skipton Union commenced in October, 1837, as a result of the Poor Law Act of 1834, and for the half year October, 1837, to March, 1838, £323 13s.7d. was to be paid. The following figures for 1816 may be of interest. In this year the amounts paid to the poor in the different townships of the parish were as follows : Thornton, £358 ; Earby, £340 ; Kelbrook, £441 ; Harden, £272 ; making a total of £1,411 for the whole parish.

For the same year the rates were as follows : Thornton township, 65 cesses at £9 10s.5d. per cess, £618 7s.1d. ; Earby township, 65 cesses at £4 17s.0d. per cess, £315 5s.0d. ; Kelbrook township, 65 cesses at £4 2s.10d. per cess, £269 4s.2d. ; Harden township, 65 cesses at £3 1s.0d. per cess, £198 5s.0d. Earby Mill in this year paid 65 cesses at 3s.7d. per cess, amounting to £11 12s.11d.

In 1826, when expenditure was highest, the rates for the whole parish were 118 cesses at £20 14s.4d. per cess - a total of £2,444 11s.4d. In 1823 the rates are shown as 51/2 books of poor rates at £210 14s.01/4d. per book. As the poor rate mounted up, parish authorities kept a very strict watch on strangers entering the parish.

There was much poor law litigation. Lawsuits between parishes were continually occurring and in 1815 it is estimated that in the whole country the money spent in litigation and removal of paupers amounted to £287,000. Thornton-in-Craven contributed its share to this huge sum as the following items show : 1817 Law Bill, £76 2s.6d. ; 1820 Law Expenses, £80 16s.7d. ; 1826 Law Expenses, £48 3s.8d. ; 1828 Bill of Law, £11 2s.0d. ; 1831 Law Costs, £56 11s.0d.

In 1817 the Overseers of Thornton received of the Overseers of "Barlick their share" of a paupers expense, namely, £4 ; and, the Overseers add, "now Barlick takes him to them

selves" - no doubt to the joy of the Thornton Overseers, as it would relieve them of some expense and responsibility.

In 1832, the Overseers received from the Overseer of Salford for the maintenance of S.W. while under removal orders, £3 9s.0d. Apparently a native of Salford had settled in Thornton parish and unfortunately become chargeable to the parish, hence the Overseers had probably obtained an order for his removal back to Salford. The Thornton accounts show many payments to persons living outside the parish, but these would originally belong to the parish, which was therefore responsible for them.

THE OVERSEER

Previous to 1817 the Thornton Vestry seems to have appointed its Overseers by turn or "rotation of farms" and such Overseers seem to have been unpaid, but the Vestry held 27th March, 1817 decided "that the old of late practice of Overseers serving the office by turn, or rotation of farms, is not for the benefit in general, of either the payers of assessments or the poor, therefore it is agreed that two men shall be hired for the year ensuing to serve the office of Overseers." At the same meeting, two persons were elected to "serve the office of Overseers, jointly, with a wage from the parish of £30, who are to collect their assessments every month, and enforce all arrears as speedily as possible and make up their accounts of all disbursements monthly." Further it was agreed that the two Overseers should "have the usual allowance for necessary journeys out of the parish, which are to be made as few as possible." This last instruction is a naive and direct hint to the Overseers to economise.

One rather suspects that the chief reason for the appointment of paid Overseers was the defaulting ratepayers, with whom one cannot help but have some sympathy considering the amount which had to be raised each year. The Overseers were elected annually at a Vestry held in March, and probably their election was subject to the approval of the magistrates as the minute of their election usually takes the following form : " At a meeting held pursuant to Notice for the purpose of returning to the magistrates a list of substantial Householders to be appointed Overseers of the poor for the Parish of Thornton, for the year ensuing the following persons were approved etc."

The Overseers often held other parish offices as, for example, in 1818 the two Overseers were also appointed Constables and Collectors of Assessed Taxes, their joint salary as Constables being £2 2s. for the year. The Vestry often elected a committee, or select Vestry, to assist the Overseers. At a Vestry held 2nd June, 1817, "sixteen persons were appointed to form a committee, to assist the Overseers when required, in property inspecting and administering relief to the poor." The select Vestry was appointed under the Act of 1819 previously quoted, and had to be submitted for approval to two magistrates. Relief was usually given in cash, but it might also be given in kind or might take the form of payment of rent or free medical attendance. Apparently the poor were paid once a month, and at a Vestry held 21st March, 1833, it was resolved : " that the poor shall be paid on the first Thursday in every calendar month at 11o' clock in the forenoon, that T.B., J.S., J.W., and B.P. shall assist the Overseer and shall examine the accounts and settle them every three months and shall for their trouble receive the sum of £1 6s. each."

In 1818 the following relief to various persons was made in kind : Aprons 2s., shoes 2s.6d., healds etc., 4s.6d., petticoats, etc., 7s.7d.

The following items appertain to medical attendance :- At a Vestry held 1st June, 1818, it was agreed with Dr. Petty, of Gisburn, to attend all the paupers within the Parish of Thornton from this time to the 4th day of April, 1819, for the sum of £6." In 1826 doctors bills paid by the parish amounted to £7 13s.0d.. In 1837, 15s.6d. was paid to William Harrison, surgeon, Gargrave, for attending D.P.'s family in September, 1837. In 1818 the Overseers paid to a

property owner "for house rents" £16 18s.5d. Probably these houses were occupied by persons in receipt of poor relief, their rents being paid for by the parish.

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