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Conclusion

Alannah Tomkins

The 'Small Bills and Petty Finance' project was born out of frustration at the limitations of overseers' accounts for investigating the economic detail of poor relief and apprehension of the massed data folded within overseers' vouchers. Research over three counties and five years has pointed up the documentary interplay between accounts and their ephemera, where focus on one archival genre within the ephemera clearly brings some questions to the fore and leaves others in the background. This volume has therefore followed work by Keith Snell on settlement examinations, and Steven King on pauper letters, by bringing vouchers into prominence for framing questions about welfare processes under the Old Poor Law.¹

Part I of this volume interrogated the vouchers for their capacity to illuminate the lives of the poor, specifically in relation to agency and visibility. Parish paupers have been the beneficiaries, in historiographical terms, of the drive for history from below, which has characterized English social history for the last fifty years. Multiple local studies, particularly those that examine accounts of poor relief in parishes either possessing censuses or reconstructed by the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure, have addressed quantitative aspects of parish welfare for paupers in cohorts.² The elderly, widows and children have been made prominent as types among the poor. Letters between parishes have demonstrated the involvement of the settled-but-not-resident poor in negotiations for relief. Vestries may have held the upper hand and yet still found it necessary to acknowledge or pacify those paupers who knew or worked out how best to influence the process.

The vouchers studied in the project counties have revealed the poor obliquely, given relief claimants' coincidental participation in the economic

¹ K. Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor* (Cambridge, 1985); S. King, *Writing the Lives of the English Poor, 1750s–1830s* (Montreal, 2019).

² S. Williams, *Poverty, Gender and Life-Cycle under the English Poor Law, 1760–1834* (London, 2011).

transactions being recorded. From the point of view of a Sussex overseer and the shoemaker he commissioned, for example, it mattered little whether a pair of shoes was being purchased for Ann Vinal or Elizabeth Sinden. The significance of the paupers named in vouchers, therefore, is amplified by teaming subsets of voucher data with additional sources, as in the chapters by Louise Falcini (Chapter 1) and Tim Hitchcock (Chapter 3). Enforced or 'knobstick' marriages are assumed to have been foisted on pauper spouses, on the basis of anecdotes of husbands absconding; in contrast the material for East Hoathly, which uniquely permits the conflation of overseers' accounts with an overseer's diary, shows that the terms of such marriages could be shaped by the couple to their own (as well as the parish's) long-term advantage. The parochial relief system was designed to work in tandem with the vagrancy laws, so it might be expected that the vouchers have little to say about the mobile poor. Glimpsed in the vouchers are public meetings regarding vagrancy and the devolving of parish responsibility for it, payments to and for vagrants and contributions to mendicity societies.³ The 'vanishingly small' proportion of data on this topic in the three counties, however, indicates the "dark figure" of unrelieved poverty.⁴ The paucity of overlap between the vouchers, the 'Vagrant lives' dataset, and the national Parliamentary Returns on vagrants indicates a solidity to the administrative boundary between settled and migrant poor, though their material circumstances may have been identical.⁵

The appearance of paupers in vouchers is serendipitous: the presence of things, in contrast, is central to the existence of vouchers. Vouchers convey information on what appear at this remove to be mundane transactions and interactions, but the goods and services they record provide the material evidence of processes that impacted on often fragile lives and on local economies. Objects are described with often acute specificity, if only because they carry a price, but food, drink, cloth, fuel and other commodities were given additional indicators of weight, length, texture, colour, quality and intended usage. This level of detail arose from the needs of tradespeople to account for goods and services supplied when there could be significant time lags between delivery and the settling of accounts, and from overseers' need to track the precise reasons for debts

³ CAS, PR36/V/7/33, Wigton, 1777; SPC21/8/11/80, Threlkeld, June 1802–Oct. 1803; SPC44/2/38/37, Dalston, 4 July 1818; PR60/21/13/6/9, Brampton, 3 Apr. 1828; SRO, D925/5/2/12, Rocester, 9 Apr. 1800; ESRO, PAR378/31/3/12/13, East Hoathly, 1773.

⁴ See Chapter 3.

⁵ For example, see *Returns of Persons Committed under the Vagrant Laws to the respective prisons and houses of correction in England and Wales from 1 January 1820 to 1 January 1824* (Parl. Papers 1824).

incurred (given the annual nature of most parish officers' appointments). The historical yield of these minutiae is significant, since the chapter on textiles shows how the mundane items recorded in vouchers can be used to help to define the parish as a site for everyday life and consumption. Elizabeth Spencer's analysis of vouchers on the specifics of yardage, price per yard and durability in Chapter 2 mapped diversity in parish purchasing, local preferences (for example, for blue duffel cloth in Cumberland) and individual intimacies (where traditional linen for shifts and shirts worn next to the skin gave ground to cotton).

Part II considered the people who are merely surnames in most volumes of accounts but whose investment in the Poor Law, both personal and commercial, was more substantive than these fleeting name checks imply. The suppliers and administrative enablers of the Poor Law are present in vouchers as accountants, signatories, retailers and commissioners of bill-head art. They might even use vouchers sporadically as a vector for correspondence, communicating in the same business language conventions adopted by international traders.⁶ Their levels of literacy and orthography, the quality of their communications on paper, and the paper itself, varying from printed bills to torn scraps and reused handbills, all indicate their immersion in parish business. Furthermore, the array of trades and services represented on paper speak to fluctuations or cycles in parish policies of provision; the choice of goods, the preferences in favour of some businesses but not others, the patterning of interactions in daily, weekly, monthly or annual points of contact and the readiness to pay, are inscribed in vouchers but not typically transferred to accounts.

Flows of both goods and paper, in a triangulation of parish officers, service or commodity providers, and the poor, draw people forward who are easy to overlook when using other documents. In Chapter 4 Peter Collinge spoke to both Poor Law economics and the world of retailing more widely when tracing female suppliers of workhouse foodstuffs and other parish goods. Shifting the focus from women as recipients of relief to women who were often missing from trade directories and newspapers: the latter were nonetheless prominent in transmitting goods, working as business owners or assisting in the trades of others. As such, the vouchers provide a new pathway for research into the role of women (and men) in the commercial arena and the mechanics of business. Similarly, where assistant overseers have previously been regarded as generic, the vouchers enable the research by Tomkins in Chapter 5 to be specific.

⁶ P. Hudson, 'Correspondence and commitment: British traders' letters in the long-eighteenth century', *Cultural and Social History*, 11 (2014), 527–53.

Both of the chapters in Part II narrow the social distance between the paupers and their providers and thereby allow researchers to problematize their understanding of regional trends under the Old Poor Law. From his analysis of poor law accounts in the south and east, King suggested that parish authorities there may have intervened earlier than in the north in 'the descent of individuals and families into poverty', but it is evident in East Sussex, Staffordshire and Cumbria that, by appointing individuals to parish posts or by permitting businesses to charge slightly higher prices, parishes acted even earlier in the process in some instances.⁷ Parishes supported individuals, businesses and the local economy to respond to financial jeopardy, or the risk of fragility, in a proactive way. The ratepayers identified by Williams in Campton and Shefford, Bedfordshire, found that there could be a fine line between independence and dependence.⁸ Chapters 4 and 5 by Collinge and Tomkins, respectively, indicate a more dynamic possibility: people did not simply experience declining circumstances with no recourse beyond their own efforts, but could be shored up by Poor Law contracts and salaries. Grocery and material supplies in parishes of the Midlands and north, for example, demonstrate common provision practices – multiple suppliers, similar pricing and frequent purchases – that muddy the waters in analyses of regional and local diversity and any attempts to define businesses based on their customers who were middle class and above.

The final chapter of the second section, Chapter 6, goes to the heart of national welfare provision and asks who historians should include in the complexities of unpicking the Old Poor Law. The volume opened with Jane Sewell's appeal to the magistrates challenging parish decisions regarding welfare relief, drawing attention to the range of individuals and mechanisms involved in allocating poor relief. Shave's chapter builds on this to extend the 'gene pool' of those who should be considered when discussing Poor Law provision. Whenever problems arose, where parishes denied relief, tried to coerce the poor, were inadequately informed of their duties or responsibilities, or where they failed to perform their legal responsibility to a satisfactory standard, enquiries and proposals for reform came from those beyond the custom and practice boundaries of the Poor Law system.

Throughout all of these chapters, the focus on individuals and their preoccupations drawn from massed data enables purposeful genealogy within an academic remit. Too often the study of family history is characterized as merely popular or marginalized as inaccurate, typically by

⁷ S. King, *Poverty and Welfare in England, 1700–1850: A Regional Perspective* (Manchester, 2000), p. 257.

⁸ Williams, *Poverty, Gender and Life-Cycle*, pp. 162–3.

people who forget that historical research is frequently concerned with the descent of other people's families. The 'Small Bills' project has knitted the skills of volunteers together with questions beyond the remit of a single surname or lineage, ensuring that there is a direct connection between the life stories of professional and quasi-professional men such as Abel Rooker and James Finlinson, for example, and the unpacking of modest or tenuous careers in parish service.

Steven King noted that 'we are still a long way from having the databases to map intra- and inter-county variations on any definitive basis, let alone explaining them'.⁹ The 'Small Bills' project has provided a methodology for doing so. In particular, the chapters in this volume and the articles that continue to be written by project staff forecast the value of Poor Law vouchers in enabling research into provision and consumption practices. The close description of mundane objects and substances purchased for the poor contained in receipts offers something new to material history: an article about the voucher data for the patterns of acquisitions and uses across the three counties is in progress. Similarly, a study of the personnel involved in apportioning ratepayers' money to local trades is in draft, raising the question of whether the use of parish officers as suppliers was actively corrupt or an efficient use of social capital. Ultimately, this methodology can be expanded to include other voluminous collections of bills and receipts, such as those retained by estates, councils and corporations, to produce a new sort of economic history.

The research agenda emerging from the study of vouchers is important because it intersects with concomitant shifts in the macro-economic historiography of the Old Poor Law. Peter Solar argued a generation ago that the Old Poor Law 'functioned in ways that promoted economic development', supporting local economies by stimulating the churn of money.¹⁰ At the time of writing, the national economic significance of rising poor-relief expenditure is being re-examined as a phenomenon beyond the explanatory capacity of either population growth or wage/price inflation.¹¹ Waddell speculates that this expansion was driven by demand from the poor rather than by generosity among rate-payers; from this book onwards, the influence on expansion emanating from parish suppliers must be accommodated as well.

⁹ King, *Poverty and Welfare*, p. 260.

¹⁰ P. M. Solar, 'Poor relief and English economic development before the Industrial Revolution', *The Economic History Review*, 48 (1995), 1–22, at 6–8.

¹¹ B. Waddell, 'The rise of the parish welfare state in England, c.1600–1800', *Past & Present*, ccliii (2021), 151–94.

In addition to the historical questions that can be asked of vouchers, research should also stress the physical experience of encountering them in the archive as contradictory but instructive. Murphy and O'Driscoll noted in relation to *printed* ephemera that it 'mattered very much' at the time it was distributed, despite the apparent ease of its loss or destruction.¹² The same could be said of the thousands of handwritten bills that make up the majority of overseers' vouchers. The historical neglect and patchy survival of overseers' vouchers until now does not override this conclusion: for once in historical research, the near-ubiquitous production of these documents can be assumed, rendering the specifics of retention and survival less central than is usual. Indeed, fingertip engagement with surviving vouchers – months and years of handling dirty, scrunched or fragile objects – compounds the sense of their one-time significance. Simultaneously, their consistent inconsistencies speak to reliable patterns amid the diverse details. Indeed, the three counties studied by the 'Small Bills' project exhibit a complex and often personal mix of localized systems of supply and recording. The vouchers demonstrate that, across counties and above the level of regional difference, parishes were not spendthrift but checked and rechecked expenditure, a practice that in Lichfield generated inked confirmations. These scraps were vital for accounting and accountability everywhere and their importance did not leach away immediately when magistrates endorsed overseers' ledgers. By the time they were recognized as irrelevant to a parish's rigorous financial management, they had already become fragments of parochial history.

The composition and content of vouchers was aligned to the immediate requirements of their uses and users: 'the transient documents of everyday life ... [were] ... essentially produced to meet the needs of the day, such items reflect the moods and mores of past times in a way that more formal records cannot'.¹³ If the overseers' account book is the Poor Law historian's canonical text, then the voucher is its apparently disposable context and, like researchers in parallel fields, those involved in the 'Small Bills' project are in the business of ephemeralizing the canon.¹⁴

Placing vouchers at the centre of research, these chapters have provided content and context for the raw information they contain. Meeting at the

¹² K. D. Murphy and S. O'Driscoll, 'Introduction', in *Studies in Ephemera: Text and Image in Eighteenth-Century Print*, ed. K. D. Murphy and S. O'Driscoll (Lewisburg, Penn., 2013), pp. 1–28.

¹³ M. Rickards, 'History's other half: world search and rescue', *Private Library*, 3 (1980), 8–15.

¹⁴ Murphy and O'Driscoll, 'Introduction'.

points where the poor, the parish and the providers intersect or overlap, the vouchers have generated questions regarding the relationships and degree of agency between those who came into contact with the Old Poor Law. They have been used to reconstruct and reveal networks, negotiations, exchanges and interactions between groups of people who are often treated in isolation. Ephemeral as they are, vouchers nevertheless constitute the managing of information and data and the ‘enduring materiality of economic transactions’,¹⁵

Furthermore, the project team is inclined to reflect on a voucher’s ‘sociability – that is, its embedding in numerous networks and its reliance on multiple mediators’.¹⁶ As with books in the long eighteenth century, how overseers’ vouchers were used could be as significant as the information they contained.¹⁷ As an item of communication, a typical voucher was generated by a tradesperson or service supplier, handed to one or more parish officers, read, checked and authorized, returned to its author or an assistant for signature in recognition of payment, carried to meetings of vestrymen at local inns, potentially parsed by magistrates and finally bundled with other vouchers pending queries. Indeed, once accounts were settled, the vouchers were often ‘folded in thirds, labelled, stacked, bundled ... tied into bricks’, stored on spikes or pasted into ledgers to be stored.¹⁸ In the modern archive the same bundle is unwrapped, unfolded, flattened, interpreted and calendared. Under the auspices of the ‘Small Bills’ project, as many or more hands transmit the vouchers as in their initial circulation, particularly whenever legibility is queried, or a single scrap is passed from hand to hand to construe the meaning of arcane wording.

The sociability of vouchers has related directly to the activity of volunteers. In their article on ‘sedimented histories’, Sarah Lloyd and Julie Moore, have commented that co-production is about ‘dispelling the idea that research is only for the institutionally-trained historian and introducing the beauty of collaborative history as a process of taking everyone’s contribution to build a bigger picture’.¹⁹ When people are encouraged to explore ‘stories from

¹⁵ S. Rockman, ‘The paper technologies of capitalism’, *Technology and Culture*, 58 (2017), 487–505, at 489–90.

¹⁶ R. Felski, ‘Context stinks!’, *New Literary History*, 42 (2011), 573–91. For the implications of receipts for reciprocity and record-keeping practices, see also F. Maguire, ‘Bonds of print and chains of paper: rethinking print culture and social formation in early-modern England c.1550–c.1700’ (unpublished University of York PhD thesis, 2017), ch. 4.

¹⁷ A. Williams, *The Social Life of Books: Reading Together in the Eighteenth-Century Home* (New Haven, 2017), p. 6.

¹⁸ Rockman, ‘The paper technologies of capitalism’, 488.

¹⁹ S. Lloyd and J. Moore, ‘Sedimented histories: connections, collaborations and co-production in regional history’, *History Workshop Journal*, lxxx (2015), 234–48, at 239.

their own locality', knowledge and experiences are generated in ways that are 'unlikely to emerge through more orthodox academic processes'.²⁰ This volume unites these same stories with academic publishing by means of an extended sociability that, it must be hoped, will soon become orthodox across both academic and archival sectors.

The context of this sociability has been the archive. Chapter 7, on public histories, evaluates the pursuit of knowledge in collaboration with the project's partners, establishing parity of purpose between the academic goals of the project and its social process. In an era of public sector austerity, which looks set to become more acute, triangulation of effort has generated added value for hard-pressed archives.

Finally, the digital distribution and global availability of the vouchers' contents extends the metaphor of sociability beyond the limits of a paper artefact. At the time of writing, friends of the project are making use of voucher data, either in clumps or in snippets, to resource histories of men's body hair, women's clothes and the furnishings of poor households.²¹ The very granularity that has hitherto withheld serious attention from the vouchers is nonetheless finding an enthusiastic audience.

²⁰ Lloyd and Moore, 'Sedimented histories', 237, 241.

²¹ A. Withey, *Concerning Beards: Facial Hair, Health and Hygiene in England, 1650–1900* (London, 2021); J. Harley, *At Home with the Poor: Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture of the Poor in England, 1650–1850* (Manchester, forthcoming).