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5. The overseers' assistant: taking a parish salary, 1800–1834

Alannah Tomkins

The people of Dalston parish in Cumberland took an atypical decision on the death of their assistant overseer in 1847, when they chose to memorialize him: James Finlinson's headstone was put up by his Odd Fellows lodge in recognition of his 'valuable services' as an assistant overseer of 'many years', stretching back to the period of the Old Poor Law. Finlinson was thereby made prominent among a largely unsung group of men who applied for and secured work as permanent, perpetual or assistant overseers.¹

Parishes under the Old Poor Law recruited salaried overseers in an ad hoc fashion up to the permissive legislation of 1819, and more consistently thereafter. The thinking behind the employment of salaried overseers was relatively simple: the appointments were 'designed to allow parishes to restrict relief' and, in broad terms, the legislative reform that permitted these posts was successful.² A combination of select vestries and assistant overseers did tend to reduce the amounts spent on relief, despite the occasional doubt or demurrals.³ Elected overseers would have been forgiven for seeing additional advantages in employing a paid assistant, for the post-holders personally rather than for the ratepayers of the parish. The volume of Poor Law business generated by a populous parish could be vast, whereas parishes covering thousands of acres risked involving overseers in substantial travel.⁴ To these considerations might also be added the advantage for parish administrations of requesting certain skills from assistants, which could be

¹ J. Wilson, *Monumental Inscriptions of the Church Churchyard and Cemetery of S. Michael's Dalston* (Dalston, 1890), p. 79; Finlinson was not, however, unique: see the monumental inscription at Hillingdon, St John the Baptist, for William Reid, assistant overseer, who died in 1829, at Find my Past <<https://www.findmypast.co.uk>> [accessed 8 Sept. 2020]. See also Interlude 5 (W. Bundred, 'The parochial career of James Finlinson (1783–1847)' after this chapter.

² S. Shave, *Pauper Policies: Poor Law Practice in England, 1780–1850* (Manchester, 2017), p. III.

³ W. E. Taunton, *Hints towards an Attempt to Reduce the Poor Rate* (Oxford, 1819), p. 9.

⁴ Shave, *Pauper Policies*, p. 121. For the huge annual costs in 1830s Birmingham see C. Upton, *The Birmingham Parish Workhouse 1730–1840* (Hatfield, 2019), p. 99.

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variable or absent among the elected overseers.⁵ A paid, permanent man might be more alert to the circumstances of the resident poor, and attuned to the encroachments of mobile paupers (for whom, see Chapter 3). Finally, it is possible to surmise (if not to prove) that the benefit of a salaried overseer to the annually elected men was their capacity to deflect personal criticism following decisions about poor relief that offended or upset either the ratepayers or the poor claimants.⁶ It was the assistant's fault if the rates rose, or if a specific case of poverty went unrelieved – or it could be made to seem so. A Sussex observer sympathetic to the plight of the poor pointed in this direction when she noted: 'I know a Guardian of the Poor who is generally allowed to be the most hard-hearted person in his parish: and on *this* account the Farmers are desirous of making *his* office perpetual.'⁷ Assistant overseers are thus important for our understanding of the Poor Law as a system both of welfare and of social control, rather than simply as a feature of statutory performance in a given location.

Relatively little is known about this group's occupational background, social position or life experience beyond the office. The Poor Law Commission of 1834 made a number of assumptions about the occupational antecedents of assistant overseers (schoolteachers, tradesmen, farmers) and was generally favourable in its verdict. Much-repeated claims of their intelligence and zeal were leavened with cautions about their control by committee and lightly sprinkled with anecdotes of errant employees' fraud.⁸ The 'Small Bills' project has offered a new evidential pathway to view the salaried assistant overseer and unpacked partial biographies for the men (they were all men), their working lives and their relieving activity

⁵ Specifically, beyond functional literacy; applicants could allude to their familiarity with keeping accounts.

⁶ It was, of course, possible for elected annual overseers to be informally salaried, but none were found for the three counties studied here. For an example in Derbyshire see Derbyshire Record Office, D845A/PO1, Mappleton, Overseers' accounts, 1796–1834, giving a salary of £5 5s to annual overseers between at least 1805 and 1832. I am indebted to Dianne Shenton for this reference.

⁷ S. Markham, *A Testimony of her Times: Based on Penelope Hind's diaries and Correspondence, 1787–1838* (Wilton, 1990), p. 109 (emphasis original).

⁸ *Report from His Majesty's Commissioners for Inquiring into the Administration and Practical Operation of the Poor Laws* (Parl. Papers 1834 [C. 44]), throughout, given tentative confirmation by T. Sokoll, *Essex Pauper Letters, 1731–1837* (Oxford, 2006), p. 23, which sees parishes with assistant overseers as being more likely to retain letters, both phenomena being consonant with improvements in administration. M. Pratt, *Winchelsea Poor Law Records, 1790–1834* (Lewes, 2011), pp. xx–xxi, credits the scope of his own research to Charles Arnett, assistant overseer in Winchelsea, who retained incoming correspondence more systematically than either his predecessors or his successors.

within the three counties of Cumbria (incorporating the historic counties of Cumberland and Westmorland and parts of Lancashire and Yorkshire), East Sussex and Staffordshire.

This chapter will provide three perspectives on this group: first, it will survey the short but not generally merry existence of the office under the Old Poor Law in England before its reincarnation under the New Poor Law; second, it will analyse the multiple applications sent in response to one specific job advertisement in County Durham in 1831; and, third, it will offer a series of insights into men employed across the three counties of Cumbria, East Sussex and Staffordshire, in parishes where there are surviving Poor Law vouchers, and some conclusions about the causes and consequences of taking a parish wage. The central finding of this work is that assistant overseers, while not paupers, were men with financial difficulties of their own. As such it corresponds to the findings in Chapters 2 (by Elizabeth Spencer) and 4 (by Peter Collinge) in this book on the discretion of parish vestries to award work to those who might have been deemed 'at risk' of requiring poor relief.

This investigation is important because, despite a number of histories about the professions per se, and some specifically about administrators, our knowledge of parish staffing remains rudimentary.⁹ Mark Goldie has judged that the holding of parish office before the eighteenth century extended across a broad social spectrum without generating further enquiry.¹⁰ The drive of 'history from below' has been firmly in favour of the paupers over the ratepayers, and those in the middle who provisioned or ran the Poor Law were sidelined. The lone exception among the many early nineteenth-century assistant overseers is Stephen Garnett of Kirkby Lonsdale, chiefly of interest as the recipient of pauper letters.¹¹ David Eastwood suggested rather grandly in 1994 that the statutory permission to appoint assistant overseers facilitated the creation of a Poor Law civil service, but this contention has not subsequently been tested.¹² The recent work of Samantha Shave has redirected research to the importance of law, policy and implementation in conditioning the way parish relief played out in a specific context, and has looked at the uptake of Sturges Bourne's Acts specifically in Wessex

⁹ P. Corfield, *Power and the Professions in Britain, 1700–1850* (London, 1999); D. Eastwood, *Governing Rural England: Tradition and Transformation in Local Government, 1780–1840* (Oxford, 1994).

¹⁰ M. Goldie, 'The unacknowledged republic: office holding in early modern England', in *The Politics of the Excluded, c.1500–1850*, ed. T. Harris (London, 2001), pp. 153–94, at p. 163.

¹¹ J. S. Taylor, 'Voices in the crowd: The Kirkby Lonsdale township letters, 1809–36', in *Chronicle of Poverty: The Voices and Strategies of the English Poor*, ed. T. Hitchcock, P. King and P. Sharpe (Basingstoke, 1996), pp. 109–26, at pp. 110–11.

¹² Eastwood, *Governing Rural England*.

including the employment of assistant overseers.¹³ This latest research has provided an additional historiographical spur to the task of looking again at permanent overseers, albeit asking personal rather than policy-based questions. The evidence of the ‘Small Bills’ project suggests that a civil service did not emerge in any organized sense before 1834 and that its beginnings were faltering indeed.

By way of comparison, historiography is no more attentive to the Poor Law’s operational staff than it is to administrators. Salaried workhouse governors predated assistant overseers by decades, but there is very little discrete work on them either.¹⁴ They are mentioned dismissively as contractors or not at all.¹⁵ Physicians and surgeons who dealt with the poor for a set fee have attracted more attention from medical historians, for the role of a parish contract in securing a professional reputation.¹⁶ Such medical men have not been considered in the round of parish employees, perhaps because neither historians nor the modern medical profession can countenance viewing them as mere contractors on a par with others who took annual parish pay.¹⁷ The history of parish staff including but not privileging medicine has yet to be written.

It is generally held that assistant overseers were appointed in the years immediately following legislation but with patchy appearances across England. This is unsurprising given the variety of organizational forms adopted by parishes and townships for the delivery of poor relief, varying

¹³ Shave, *Pauper Policies*.

¹⁴ For a recent honourable exception see S. Ottaway, ‘“A very bad presidente in the house”: Workhouse masters, care, and discipline in the eighteenth-century workhouse’, *Journal of Social History* 54 (2021), 1091–1119. Workhouse employees were considered for the 18th-century Birmingham workhouse, suggesting among other things that an assistant overseer who became a workhouse master was moving up a parish career ladder: Upton, *Birmingham Parish Workhouse*, pp. 114–33.

¹⁵ S. Webb and B. Webb, *English Poor Law History*, i, *The Old Poor Law* (London, 1963), set the tone for the treatment of Poor Law employees, with occasional details subsequently illuminating the landscape. The workhouse master of Terling at the end of the 18th century was poor himself, and narrowly avoided being removed when he failed to produce a settlement certificate, an echo of what was to follow for assistant overseers: S. R. Ottaway, *The Decline of Life: Old Age in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 2004), p. 231.

¹⁶ A. Digby, *Making a Medical Living: Doctors and Patients in the English Market for Medicine, 1720–1911* (Cambridge, 1994); I. Loudon, *Medical Care and the General Practitioner, 1750–1850* (Oxford, 1986); S. King, *Sickness, Medical Welfare, and the English Poor, 1750–1834* (Manchester, 2018); A. Tomkins, ‘Who were his peers? The social and professional milieu of the provincial surgeon-apothecary in the late eighteenth century’, *Journal of Social History*, xlv (2011), 915–35.

¹⁷ Although see Interlude 6 (J. Kisz, ‘Abel Rooker (1787–1867), surgeon’) in this volume.

by region, settlement type or economic context. Samantha Shave has reminded researchers that the snapshot views offered by Parliamentary Papers probably concealed a good deal of adoption of the relevant Sturges Bourne Act, dropping of assistant overseers in the light of experience, and even, it must be supposed, the readoption of salaried officers.¹⁸ What can be said from an analysis of these parochial returns is that between 6 and 29 per cent of all parish or similar authorities with responsibility for poor relief reported making use of assistants between 1821 and 1824. At the county level, the vast majority fell into the range of between 11 and 22 per cent, and all three counties studied here were found in this subset: 16 per cent of places in Sussex (the eastern and western parts of the county were combined at this period) employed assistants, as did 22 per cent of places in both Cumberland and Staffordshire.¹⁹ This suggests that, despite the variation in approaches to relief management, there was a measure of alignment between geographically diverse English places over the perceived utility of employing paid overseers. There is one local caveat, however, in relation to Cumberland. This was a county where parishes made heavy use of contractors, and routinely farmed the poor (as flagged in the Introduction to this volume). Therefore, it is interesting to note that, even in a region characterized by parochial delegation, the use of assistant overseers was not out of line with the national picture.

Parish experiences: employers and employees

Assistant overseers experienced their first unsanctioned jobs in parishes around the country during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.²⁰ Their appointments were possibly well intentioned, and indeed had been proposed by Richard Burn on the grounds that elected overseers were rarely

¹⁸ Shave, *Pauper Policies*, pp. 118–20.

¹⁹ Westmorland, part of modern Cumbria, fell outside this pattern, with just 9 per cent of places using a salaried assistant. Data on the number of parishes, townships and other places responding to parliamentary inquiries from 1813 to 1818 have been taken from *Abridgement of the Abstract of the Answers and Returns made pursuant to an Act, passed in the Fifty-fifth Year of His Majesty King George the Third, Intituled 'AN ACT for procuring Returns relative to the Expense and Maintenance of the Poor in England; and also relative to the Highways' so far as relates to THE POOR* (Parl. Papers 1818), while counts of assistant overseers per county have been taken from *Report from the Select Committee on Poor Rate Returns* (Parl. Papers 1821, 1824).

²⁰ From Chew Magna in Somerset to Northwram in Yorkshire; Shave, *Pauper Policies*, p. 115; Painswick in Gloucestershire: see W. J. Sheils, *History of the County of Gloucester* (Oxford, 1976), pp. xi, 79–80; *Report ... into the Administration and Practical Operation of the Poor Laws*.

‘adequate to the performance ... [since] ... no man chuses to serve for nothing’.²¹ John Saint in Wednesbury (Staffordshire), and John Wannup in Greystoke (Cumbria) secured work as paid overseers in 1784 and 1809 respectively, and doubtless there were men whose paid work as parish clerks or in other roles effectually regarded some of the money as compensation for dealing with the Poor Law.²² Nonetheless, like many illegitimate beginnings, the employment specifically of paid overseers was technically forbidden, by a test case at King’s Bench in 1785, and could carry a significant social or financial cost.²³ Madeley in Staffordshire, for example, appointed James Halmarack in May 1816 on a dangerously low salary of £5 per year. The parish became displeased with his services and tried to disown him three years later. Halmarack was asked to return all parish money, at which point he informed the vestry that he was an undischarged bankrupt and no longer had control of any of his former resources.²⁴ This was quite true: James Halmarack the elder of Madeley, retailer of wine and spirits, was later reported bankrupt in the *London Gazette*.²⁵ Madeley sought legal advice, but was told there was no remedy, as the original appointment was not lawful.²⁶ Legal counsel rather piously observed that a salaried overseer ‘may now be appointed by 59 Geo 3.c.12 f. 7’, which must have been tremendously reassuring to the vestry of Madeley facing an accounting shortfall of £200.²⁷

²¹ R. Burn, *The History of the Poor Laws with Observations* (London, 1764), pp. 214–15; Gilbert’s Act also diminished the role played by elected overseers, from similar concerns; L. Ryland-Epton, ‘Social policy, welfare innovation, and governance in England: the creation and implementation of Gilbert’s Act 1782’ (unpublished Open University PhD thesis, 2020), p. 231.

²² J. F. Ede, *History of Wednesbury* (Wednesbury, 1962), p. 166; CAS, PR5/43, Greystoke, Poor account book, 1740–1812, minute of 26 Apr. 1809. The noted Sussex diarist Thomas Turner, for example, was paid as parish clerk in some of the same years he acted as overseer.

²³ F. Const, *Decisions of the Court of King’s Bench upon the Laws relating to the Poor* 1 (London, 1793), pp. 277–9; J. B. Bird, *The Laws respecting Parish Matters* (London, 1799), p. 50.

²⁴ Unpaid overseers could also fall bankrupt or be declared insolvent, but with less damaging consequences for their home parish: see ‘Isaac Lightfoot, overseer, attorney, and bankrupt, Wigton’ <<https://thepoorlaw.org/isaac-lightfoot-overseer-attorney-and-bankrupt-wigton>> [accessed 8 Sept. 2020].

²⁵ *London Gazette*, 13 Oct. 1821, p. 2042. This assistant overseer is not to be confused with James Halmarack the younger of Newcastle-under-Lyme, draper, whose own bankruptcy was reported in the *Gazette*, 1813–21.

²⁶ SRO, D3412/5/698, Madeley, Parish case paper relating to an assistant overseer, 1819.

²⁷ The requirement of magistrates to investigate men’s financial indemnity after 1819 did not rule out the men’s financial collapse (Shave, *Pauper Policies*, p. 114). For assistant overseers discharged as insolvent debtors or committing suicide in debtor’s prison see, respectively, *Liverpool Mercury*, 4 July 1834, p. 2, and *Jackson’s Oxford Journal*, 1 Feb. 1834, p. 2.

Traces of assistant overseers before 1819 are piecemeal, but evidences of these employees after the Act of 1819 are geographically widespread and easy to find within and beyond the parishes of the 'Small Bill's project.²⁸ For instance, parishes up and down the country tried to manage their new employees by inventing an 1820s equivalent of the job description and person specification, and by comparing notes. In Kent, the parish of Wrotham St George went about the task methodically, devising a list of expectations for appointments from 1829 onwards. This included a requirement for meticulous investigation of every pauper household, and

the character which he [the pauper head of household] bears with his master, or any respectable persons in the neighbourhood, for industry, honesty, sobriety and economy ... that he [the assistant overseer] may be able to discriminate between the deserving and undeserving poor.²⁹

Similarly, Ticehurst in Sussex wanted a married man without encumbrance to collect the rates, list the poor, manage the workhouse, attend petty sessions and present fortnightly accounts to the select vestry.³⁰ Ticehurst's security against fraud rested on the appointee offering £500 security against default, putting the post beyond the personal means of many.³¹ Applicants would have needed wealthy and trusting friends. Sussex parishes in general developed printed 'warrants' outlining the totality of tasks for assistant overseers (virtually everything formerly undertaken by their annually elected predecessors), with statutory permissions being cited for each activity.³² At the opposite end of the country, the churchwardens of Penrith wrote to their fellow vestrymen in other north-western parishes for details of 'the duties, usefulness and salaries' of 'permanent' overseers. Carlisle St Mary parish had a ready-trained man in the person of John Routledge, the

²⁸ A survey of the online catalogues of thirty-three English county archives offices in 2019 revealed indications of rich data.

²⁹ Kent Archives, P406/18/9, Wrotham St George, A sketch of the duties performed by the assistant overseer, 1829; E. Mellings (ed.), *Kentish Sources*, iv, *The Poor* (Maidstone, 1964), pp. 184–5, for the duties of the assistant overseer at Cranbrook; Shave, *Pauper Policies*, p. 124.

³⁰ ESRO, PAR492/37/46, Ticehurst, Duty of an assistant overseer, [presumed 1821].

³¹ Bonds and sureties were adopted elsewhere too, e.g., Gloucester Archives, P244/OV/7/3 (Painswick's miscellaneous overseers' records include a bond for the execution of duties of assistant overseer, 1832); Surrey Archives, 853/2/1 (Walton-on-Thames's overseers' bond for Matthew Steele as assistant overseer to the value of £200, 1828); Kent Archives, P4/18/5, Aldington St Martin (bond from Thomas Ayres as assistant overseer, 1825).

³² ESRO, PAR 361/37/49(1–3), Hastings All Saints, Mr John Lulham's warrants as assistant overseer, 1825–7. See also the exceptionally detailed document in Pratt, *Winchelsea Poor Law*, pp. 339–43.

manager of their workhouse, who in 1822 or 1823 was given an extra £10 a year to be permanent overseer as well (making £40 in all, with workhouse residence). Significantly, Routledge did not collect the rates: elected overseers paid the rate income into a bank account and Routledge could draw down money only to the exact value of bills approved by the vestry.³³ Aside from this, he had 'the whole of the business to transact which attaches to this Office', including visiting the poor at home, granting temporary relief to new applicants, handling all aspects of bastardy cases, inquiring about settlements, answering letters, paying the weekly poor and producing memorandums for the attention of vestry meetings. The tight financial rein restraining Routledge was deemed 'a compleat check', resulting in 'a great saving to the Parish'.³⁴

Applicants for posts, in their turn, were compelled to draw up letters of application, which they did very cursorily in places where they were already well known. John Longley's application for the job in Hastings in 1828 comprised a single line, to the effect that 'if it meets your approbation' he would fill the post for one year for £50, but then he was already the surveyor to the town's improvement commissioners.³⁵ Joseph Jobs, who went for the same post, effected a similar impression of distance, if with more prose, writing in the third person:

provided they [the vestry] would feel disposed to humour him with that department he will execute the Parochial Duties in the best manner in his power and refers them to his letter on that subject presented at the last election for his qualifications and ability to act.

Neither Longley nor Jobs was appointed, as the post went to the man already in the role. Where an applicant was previously unknown to the vestry, there was reason to be more fulsome in a written application. There was a vacancy for an assistant overseer three times in Wrotham St George in Kent in 1830–3, and one or two letters on each occasion made astute enquiries or offered evidence of candidates' own previous experience and reliability.³⁶

A feature of recruitment that was repeated across the country was the expectation that an attentive administrator could be retained for very modest

³³ Policy varied between different locations, as parishes came to opposite conclusions about the best deployment of assistant overseers. In Birmingham, early assistants (1782) *only* collected the rates and played no role in distributing money to the poor: Upton, *Birmingham Parish Workhouse*, p. 87.

³⁴ CAS, PR100StA/97, Penrith St Andrew, Workhouse papers, 1770–1826.

³⁵ ESRO, DH/B/140/70, Hastings, Application for permission to widen the road, 1825.

³⁶ Kent Archives, P406/18/16, Wrotham St George, Applications for the post of assistant overseer, 1830–3.

financial inducement. Assistant overseers were not well paid, particularly if they were expected to make parish work their only occupation. The Poor Law Commission reported that salaries usually fell in the range of £20 to £80 per annum, and research on Cumbria, East Sussex and Staffordshire suggests that £80 was at the upper end of payment by provincial parishes.³⁷ This placed assistant overseers in the same income bracket with watchmen, lower-level government employees and teachers.³⁸

The level of remuneration in different parishes was not obviously calibrated by features of the locality or historic expectations about the extent of relieving work. The salaries of paid overseers across all three project counties post-1800 were examined for any remote relationship they might bear to the acreage of the parish, the population as reported in censuses, and typical annual spending on poor relief. No commonalities or correlations were found other than the tendency of the salary to fall somewhere between 1 per cent and 5 per cent of total annual expenditure. There was no regional complexion discernible in the decision to pay assistants generously or otherwise, since higher-spending parishes could be found in all three counties.

Low and inconsistent calculations about salaries made it unsurprising if men like John Routledge (mentioned earlier) combined parish appointments, or that the lauded James Finlinson (in addition to his service as assistant overseer) was surveyor of the highways and governor of the Dalston workhouse. At Tamworth in Staffordshire the accumulation of titles enabled the same man to act as assistant overseer, governor of the workhouse, vestry clerk and police constable of the borough.³⁹ Such duplication entitled post-holders to claim they were devoting all of their work time to the parish, town or (pre-1834) union while assembling a viable annual income above that of their clients (the labouring poor). Unfortunately, it also opened them up to pressure to accept lower salaries overall: Thomas Baker of Lichfield was persuaded to take a pay cut from £50 per year to £40 when he became governor of the workhouse (which duty came with accommodation).⁴⁰

Possession of multiple roles raises the prospect that assistant overseers

³⁷ *Report ... into the Administration and Practical Operation of the Poor Laws*. London parishes offered salaries of £100 or above.

³⁸ J. G. Williamson, 'The structure of pay in Britain, 1710–1911', *Research in Economic History*, vii (1982), 1–54.

³⁹ *Report ... into the Administration and Practical Operation of the Poor Laws*.

⁴⁰ SRO, LD 20/6/9, Lichfield St Mary, Vestry minutes, 7 Apr. 1830. I am indebted to Janet Kisz for this information.

might themselves have employed deputies on still lower salaries that were again unprotected by legal recognition. If tempted to do so, they would have been mimicking their counterparts in government service, albeit lacking the opportunity to offer subordinates promotion or progress on an established career ladder.⁴¹ Were the less appealing aspects of parish, town, borough and county work repeatedly devolved? Such delegation would not be captured in overseers' vouchers, so the 'Small Bills' project provides no proof of this practice, yet the possibility must be acknowledged.

When in post and on task, the men were potentially guided by advice literature such as John Ashdowne's *Churchwardens' and Overseers' Guide and Director*, which was purchased by the parish of Lichfield St Mary.⁴² Such guides had been published from the seventeenth century. Burn's *Justice of the Peace, and Parish Officer*, published from 1755, became a standard in the field, but advice needed updating in light of the Sturges Bourne Acts.⁴³ Steven King has argued that these works offered 'a sort of do-it-yourself version of standardisation' in the absence of uniformity imposed by the state.⁴⁴ Assistants were bound to all of the same responsibilities as elected overseers, with the additional reassurance that if the duration of their appointment was unspecified it was presumed to be annual. This therefore conferred a legal settlement in the parish where they worked and, if the parish was wealthy, it might have been an added attraction for employees whose own finances were precarious.⁴⁵ Printed guides were generally written by lawyers, who framed them to allow parish officers 'to discharge their multifarious duties with credit and safety' to themselves and their communities.⁴⁶ Even so, lacunae abounded: James Bird's *Laws respecting Parish Matters* was updated to cover new provisions for select vestries under 59 Geo III, c 12, but the 1828 edition was still (falsely) emphatic that overseers were not entitled to pay assistants.⁴⁷

Parishes' reactions to their employees' emerging track record were generally

⁴¹ J. Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State, 1688–1783* (New York, 1989), pp. 69–70, 79.

⁴² J. Ashdowne, *Churchwardens' and Overseers' Guide and Director*, 5th edn (London, 1824).

⁴³ R. Burn, *The Justice of the Peace, and Parish Officer* (London, 1755). Greystoke parish, Cumbria, bought a copy of Burn's manual and kept it in the vestry room to be permanently available for consultation: CAS, PR5/43, Greystoke, Poor account book, 1740–1812, minute of 11 Mar. 1809.

⁴⁴ S. King, *Writing the Lives of the English Poor, 1750s–1830s* (Montreal, 2019), p. 130.

⁴⁵ J. Steer, *Parish Law: Being a Digest of the Law* (London, 1830), pp. 442–3.

⁴⁶ J. Shaw, *The Parochial Lawyer* (London, 1829), p. iii.

⁴⁷ J. B. Bird, *The Laws respecting Parish Matters*, 8th edn (London, 1828), pp. 57, 141–52.

at odds with those of the paupers because the latter responded with suspicion and active resentment to 'permanent' overseers 'as the "face" of the dreaded new system'.⁴⁸ Salaried overseers provided a tangible fracture point between the 'natural' authority of those in a markedly higher social position and the delegated authority of an employee without any of the visual markers of power. Assistant overseers did not sport badges of office or carry staffs/wands in the manner of beadles. Consequently, animosity between paupers and salaried relieving officers was foreseen, characterized speculatively as 'continual warfare' as early as 1815 and led to instances of physical assault in the early 1820s.⁴⁹ There must, of course, have been many assistant overseers who were *not* subjected to threats or injury; yet among the project counties East Sussex provides clear examples. The town of Winchelsea appointed Charles Arnett as assistant overseer and master of the workhouse in 1823, and by 1824 he was in need of legal protection from his fellow townspeople: Richard Edwards had threatened him so that 'he goes in danger of his life'; William Morris (a poor labourer) had abused him and had to be bound over; and in the following year Isaac Hearnden (not a pauper but a parish supplier of miscellaneous goods) had spat in his face. Matters reached a head in November 1825 when a group of five men allegedly threatened to 'kick my arse' and menaced Arnett with other verbal abuse and by throwing stones.⁵⁰ Arnett's successor in Winchelsea, David Laurence, seems to have had a less turbulent relationship with the townspeople.⁵¹

Triggers for such conflicts are easy to find. Assistant overseers became targets for their intrusive scrutiny of household incomes and for withholding relief, since one of the key justifications for employing them was an expectation that costs would be cut.⁵² Vestry permission to make enquiries about pauper livelihoods and demeanour seemed to sanction officious and intrusive behaviour. Cultural norms around church attendance or sobriety were enforced, while others, such as keeping animals, might be denied as a condition of relief.⁵³ Occasionally assistant overseers drastically

⁴⁸ Shave, *Pauper Policies*, p. 138.

⁴⁹ J. S. Duncan, *Collections relative to Systematic Relief of the Poor* (Bath, 1815), p. 163. See Cornwall Archives, QS/1/10/366 and QS/1/10/528, for examples of Cornish assistant overseers being threatened or assaulted in 1822 and 1824.

⁵⁰ Pratt, *Winchelsea Poor Law*, pp. 2–5.

⁵¹ Pratt, *Winchelsea Poor Law*, pp. 68, 234–5; see also the threats to murder John Colebrook, assistant overseer of Rogate: West Sussex Record Office, QR/W729, Chichester, Quarter sessions roll, Oct. 1823.

⁵² Shave, *Pauper Policies*, pp. 126–7.

⁵³ Shave, *Pauper Policies*, pp. 128–9.

exceeded their authority and were guilty of interpersonal brutality that patently did not fall within the remit of their job and that fell outside of the law, discriminating between the deserving and the undeserving poor. In Horsham an assistant overseer, in collaboration with other parish officers, forcibly cut a pauper woman's hair and was found guilty of a violent assault (damages of £60 were awarded to the pauper).⁵⁴ The vulnerability of poor women was further exploited in the same decade when an assistant overseer at Wilsden Chapel attempted rape.⁵⁵

Sussex and other south-eastern counties came to the fore when assistant overseers were explicitly targeted in the disturbances attributed to Captain Swing.⁵⁶ William Cobbett specifically identified assistant overseers in his rousing speeches in Sussex in October, and reprisals against resented assistants in the locality were probably inevitable. In November 1830, for example, the poor of Ringmer called loudly for the removal of permanent overseers, while in Brede the 'flinty-hearted' assistant overseer Thomas Abell was dragged in a cart by women to the edge of the parish as part of more general disorder.⁵⁷ A comparison of disturbances listed as 'workhouse riots' by Hobsbawm and Rudé with a search of digitized newspapers for parish staff as targets for 'Swing' yields a minimum of nine incidents menacing specifically *assistant* overseers in November and December 1830, chiefly across Sussex, Kent and Hampshire.⁵⁸ Beyond Swing's heartland, aggression directed at assistant overseers came from individuals or small groups with grievances, and fanned out from the Swing counties. Reuben Hill, who was employed by Dursley parish in Gloucestershire, for example, was attacked in May 1831 by John and Henry Smith, who were found guilty of beating him and fined £3. What is more, in line with research by Carl Griffin,

⁵⁴ *The Standard*, 27 Mar. 1830, p. 4. For hair-cutting as both a matter of institutional hygiene and a strategy for control see A. Withey, *Concerning Beards: Facial Hair, Health and Practice in England, c.1650–1900* (London, 2021), pp. 187–206.

⁵⁵ *Examiner*, 16 July 1826, p. 13.

⁵⁶ E. Hobsbawm and G. Rudé, *Captain Swing* (London, 1969), p. 104 and *passim*; M. Matthews, *Captain Swing in Sussex and Kent* (Hastings, 2006), pp. 58–61; Markham, *Testimony*, pp. 177–88.

⁵⁷ *Cobbett's Weekly Political Register*, 30 Oct. 1830, p. 591, and 13 Nov. 1830, p. 725; Hobsbawm and Rudé, *Captain Swing*, pp. 90, 105; *Bristol Mercury*, 30 Nov. 1830, p. 3; *Standard*, 30 Nov. 1830, p. 3; R. Wells, 'Poor-law reform in the rural south-east: the impact of the "Sturges Bourne Acts" during the agricultural depression, 1815–1835', *Southern History*, xxiii (2001), 52–115.

⁵⁸ Eight more incidents specified overseers without identifying them as permanent or assistant overseers; this is without counting workhouse masters as targets or other examples of parish disturbance where staff were not mentioned in the newspapers.

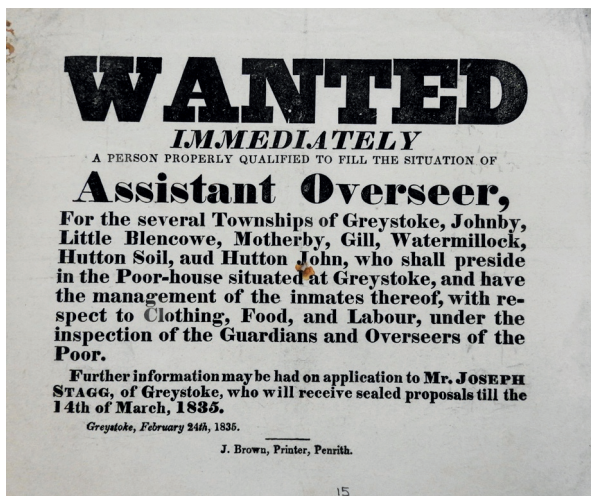


Figure 5.1 Advertisement for an Assistant Overseer, Greystoke, 1835. Cumbria Archive Centre, Carlisle

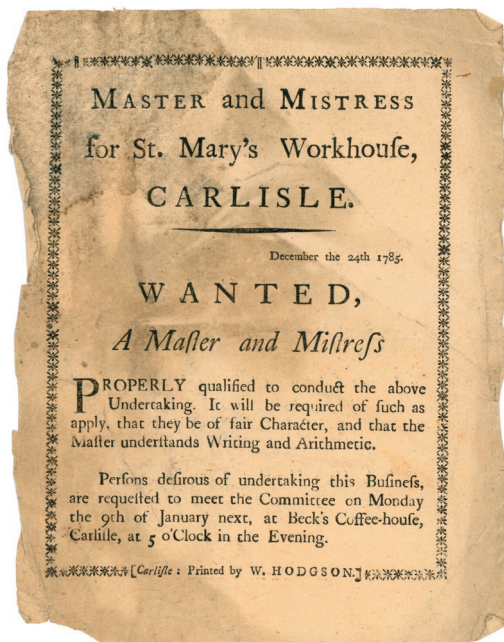


Figure 5.2 Advertisement for a Master and Mistress of St Mary's Workhouse, Carlisle, 1785. Carlisle Library

hostility could outlast the period of Swing: at Dymchurch in Kent the assistant overseer John Goodwin was not safe in 1833, when two labourers had to be bound on recognizance to keep the peace towards him.⁵⁹ Cowfold in western Sussex saw violence as late as 1834.⁶⁰ Evidently, salaried overseers and their assistants were a focus for parishioners' discontent in a way that elected overseers or a select vestry were not.

Swing made for a volatile denouement to the experiences of the first generation of assistant overseers, officials who were given a somewhat different set of responsibilities under the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834.⁶¹ The much-vaunted efficiency of assistant overseers emerging from the rural and urban queries in Parliamentary enquiries is problematized by these geographically widespread accounts, but not so much by isolated frauds. Rather, in line with Cobbett's contemporary analysis, the impersonality of a salaried overseer weakened any ties of obligation on both sides: devolved paternalism was short on moral responsibility, and arguably paupers and other parishioners jibbed at compliance with dispassionate relief from salaried hands or responded with greater resentment to a refusal of relief. There may have been further subtleties of response if the assistant had been appointed from within or outside the parish, depending on whether the resident poor were more wary of or antagonistic towards someone already known to them or a stranger.

Who were the aspiring bureaucrats who secured these jobs, jobs that surely proved a mixed blessing both in advance (given the typical scale of remuneration) and often in progress? Letters of application have the potential to provide potted histories of the men who sought employment as an assistant overseer, and the Small Bills counties contain examples of these just after the passage of the New Poor Law. Greystoke in Cumbria recruited an assistant in 1835 and received letters of application from five men, two of whom offered references or a very brief resumé.⁶² The advertisement for this post survives in the vouchers (Figure 5.1).

The modest evolution in advertisements for parish posts can be seen in a comparison of the handbill of 1835 to a handbill fifty years earlier (Figure 5.2).⁶³ The need for writing competency is specifically requested in 1785, if

⁵⁹ C. J. Griffin, 'Swing, swing redivivus, or something after swing? On the death throes of a protest movement, December 1830–December 1833', *International Review of Social History*, liv (2009), 459–97; Kent Archives, RM/JQr21/56, Romney Marsh, Quarter sessions roll, 1832–3.

⁶⁰ West Sussex Archives, QR/W771, Petworth, Quarter sessions roll, 1834, fo. 194.

⁶¹ 4 & 5 Will IV, c 76.

⁶² CAS, PR5/53, Greystoke St Andrew, File of vouchers, 1829–35.

⁶³ CAS, PR5/53, Greystoke St Andrew, File of vouchers, 1829–35; Carlisle Library, Jackson Collection, M174 [no item no.], Carlisle, 1785.

not necessarily demonstrable at the in-person meeting in a coffee house, whereas written 'sealed proposals' are the basis of application in 1835. Anyone in the habit of seeking parochial office, therefore, would have found the layout and format of such advertisements instantly recognizable: position, duties and contact information were joined by an emphasis on 'properly qualified' persons. A further collection of letters for the period of the Old Poor Law, albeit beyond the project counties but one neighbouring Cumbria, is rich in indicative evidence.

The appeal of a salaried post: the unwitting significance of Lamesley, County Durham

On 21 May 1831 the *Newcastle Courant* and other newspapers for the north-east of England carried a job advertisement for an assistant overseer to serve the chapelry of Lamesley, near Gateshead (population 1,910 in the same year).⁶⁴ The appointee was expected to conform to some stringent conditions of employment. In exchange for £60 per year, the man must live in the chapelry, follow no other occupation and offer security to the value of £200 against the risk of financial losses in office. Candidates were given notice that an election would be held on 10 June 1831 at 3 p.m.

In advertising widely, Lamesley was merely doing what a number of parishes thought wise: the chances of securing the best candidate were improved if knowledge was circulated beyond the existing residents.⁶⁵ What was unusual in this case was the number of responders to the opportunity, and the retention of the letters in the parish collection (when most of the other sources for the history of poor relief in Lamesley do not survive).⁶⁶ Thirty-one men replied to the advertisement by writing to the Reverend John Collinson, and the sixty-five pieces of correspondence in the collection include testimonials from multiple supporters and occasional withdrawals from the contest.

The applicants had a variety of occupational backgrounds, fulfilling some of the later assumptions of the Poor Law Commission. Five were either current or former farmers or schoolteachers. A range of additional trades were cited (grocer, draper, ironmonger), as were roles in industrial concerns (including a colliery and a pottery works). More surprising was the

⁶⁴ *Comparative Account of the Population of Great Britain, 1801, 1811, 1821 and 1831* (Parl. Papers 1831).

⁶⁵ Hayton advertised for an assistant overseer in the same year: CAS, PR 102/112/24, Voucher of July 1831. For parishes seeking contractors rather than officials see Shave, *Pauper Policies*, p. 156.

⁶⁶ Durham County Record Office (DCRO), EP/LAM 7/174–240, Letters of application for the post of assistant overseer, 1831.

geographical pull of the post. Men wrote from across the north of England (but not from Scotland), including from Westmorland and Liverpool.

The letter writers displayed a varying awareness of the skills they would require and of their preparation for the job. John Elliott, the son of a clergyman, confessed frankly to being 'somewhat unacquainted with the minutia required'.⁶⁷ Seven men alluded to familiarity with parish office work, most successfully in the case of William Wren who won the election.⁶⁸ Wren lived close by in Ravensworth and had previously served as the overseer of Winlton in exceptionally challenging circumstances. The removal of a big employer from Winlton, moreover one that had offered superannuation for former workers, flooded the vestry with requests for relief in 1816 at the same time as the onset of a post-war economic slump. The poor rate quickly rose from 4s 6d to 16s 6d: Wren had been the man to navigate these difficulties to the select vestry's 'Intire satisfaction' (quoted from the Winlton vestry's testimonial rather than a self-assessment from Wren).⁶⁹ Even the son of the contractor of the poor in Sunderland, otherwise a strong candidate, could not compete with Wren's track record.⁷⁰

The testimonials sent to accompany applications offered a range of positive adjectives to promote their preferred candidates. The men were described most frequently as either industrious or active, while other popular claims were assurances of honesty and sobriety. A clergyman recommended his own butler, where the latter came with the surprising addition of personal wealth based on rental income from houses in Leeds.⁷¹ A minority of referees were diffident. The perpetual curate of Hartlepool admitted he had 'not much personal intercourse' with the applicant Robert Proctor and offered rather cold comfort to the electors of Lamesley: 'I will not say that a sad series of reverses might not occasionally make him improvident, but not so as to detract from his general worth.'⁷² The Reverend Collinson, as the recipient of this mixed postbag, added his own caveat to one letter that Joseph Miller may indeed be sober, honest and industrious, but he could not confirm that he was therefore qualified for office.⁷³

⁶⁷ DCRO, EP/LAM 7/186.

⁶⁸ Specific experience in Poor Law roles was also persuasive elsewhere: Upton, *Birmingham Parish Workhouse*, p. 130.

⁶⁹ DCRO, EP/LAM 7/238, 240; see also E. MacKenzie, *An Historical, Topographical, and Descriptive View of the County Palatine of Durham* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 1834), i. 195–6.

⁷⁰ DCRO, EP/LAM 7/217–18, 220–1, 224, 226.

⁷¹ DCRO, EP/LAM 7/187.

⁷² DCRO, EP/LAM 7/185.

⁷³ DCRO, EP/LAM 7/214.

The letters from the candidates also reveal aspects of the appointing process, involving not only the election but also prior canvassing. Thomas Wilkinson wrote first of all to apply, and then to thank the vestry at Lamesley for their kind reception 'in my canvass through your chapelry'.⁷⁴ Another applicant thought it pointless to continue with his application when he would have to canvas as 'a stranger in your neighbourhood', while a third wished his canvas had begun sooner. Jonathan Cooke asked Collinson rather pointedly for assurances that the job had not been promised to a local man before the advertisement (as it had been in Hastings in 1828), behaviour that he considered ungentle.⁷⁵ A canvas for election as an assistant overseer after 1834 was expected, but by that time the guardians themselves were compelled to stand for election. It is clear that the hot contest in Lamesley had not been anticipated by all the applicants, since a sixth of them offered the names of no references and no letters of support, raising the question of how typical this episode was under the Old Poor Law. Was this an unusual one-off scramble for a salary or well-documented testimony to a widely held assumption that parish office was an attractive employment?⁷⁶

The most notable aspect of this collection of letters, however, is the unguarded way in which some of the men and their referees alluded to desperation for employment. That they needed the work was advanced as persuasive rather than avoided as an inhibitor of success. George Pearson gave a summary of his adult career, interrupted by ill health which had forced him to become a teacher 'as an occupation rather than to make a living by it, there being over many schools [in his Westmorland parish] before I began'. His salary had formerly been more than double that advertised by Lamesley, but 'such is the competition for situations and so numerous are applicants' that he had already applied, without success, for posts with the 'best recommendations'.⁷⁷ He reluctantly withdrew his candidacy when he realized that his small chance of election as a 'stranger' would not warrant the expense of attending the election.⁷⁸ Major Nicholas Bird of the North Shields and Tyneside volunteer force alluded to his 'reduced situation' (one of his referees was the duke of Richmond), whereas John Elliott referred to

⁷⁴ DCRO, EP/LAM 7/208.

⁷⁵ DCRO, EP/LAM 7/182. Joseph Robinson's application was conditional on the situation not having already been bestowed: see DCRO, EP/LAM 7/195.

⁷⁶ There was an election for a workhouse governor in Cheltenham (a Gilbert Act institution) in 1828, where candidates advertised election pledges: Ryland-Epton, 'Social policy', p. 181.

⁷⁷ DCRO, EP/LAM 7/188.

⁷⁸ DCRO, EP/LAM 7/229.

his 'disastrous' economic reverses and family responsibilities (hardly a wise admission when aiming for a position where finances and their application were crucial).⁷⁹ Joseph Robinson, a fifty-year-old schoolmaster, withdrew from the contest with the histrionic protest 'situated as I am at present I certainly would have grasped like a drowning [*sic*] person at every thread that even shadowed my success'.⁸⁰ Referees could adopt a similarly confessional mode in revealing the economic fragility of their candidates, as having known better days or suffering necessitous circumstances.⁸¹

Yet even employment at Lamesley came at a cost: a relatively modest salary and a prohibition against any simultaneous occupation proved less tempting on closer inspection, particularly among those living at a distance. George Pringle travelled to Lamesley to make enquiries about the post and then wavered when it came to surrendering his existing employment, admitting somewhat naively that 'Mrs Pringle thinks the exchange unprofitable'.⁸² John Brown of Sedgefield was more candid: he thought the salary was insufficient 'to allow a Man to appear decent and support a family' and regretted that the money on offer was not more liberal.⁸³ Perhaps he hoped that such a response would encourage the vestry to offer more, with an underlying warning that, unless they did so, they risked appointing an inappropriate candidate.

The tenor of this correspondence yields three key insights into the situation of would-be assistant overseers in the north-east of England in 1831. First, there was a demand – unmet by other employers – for relatively secure, salaried employment among men of both professional and trading backgrounds. Candidates were seeking the same kind of social safety net that was offered by government service in customs, excise and elsewhere in state bureaucracy.⁸⁴ Second, the occupations of the men who were initially attracted by the post were quite diverse and by no means confined to farming or education. Third, a subset of the applicants freely admitted to struggling with their personal finances as an argument in favour of their recruitment. Rebuilding fortunes was a motive for seeking and holding parish office, as it was in the search for even more marginal payment (for bell-ringing, bearing coffins or killing vermin).

⁷⁹ DCRO, EP/LAM 7/186 and 192.

⁸⁰ DCRO, EP/LAM 7/233.

⁸¹ DCRO, EP/LAM 7/191 and 228.

⁸² DCRO, EP/LAM 7/223.

⁸³ DCRO, EP/LAM 7/232.

⁸⁴ Brewer, *Sinews of Power*, pp. 66, 79.

The overseers' assistant: taking a parish salary, 1800–1834

Table 5.1 Assistant overseers appointed to selected parishes in Cumbria, Staffordshire and Sussex after 1800⁹⁰

Name	Location	Born	Appointed (annual salary)	Died	Other
Thomas Abell	Sussex, Brede (formerly Ninfield)	c.1777	By 1829–35 (Ninfield 1825–8) (salary not found)	1835	Farmer; victim of rioting 1830; estate worth under £300
Charles Arnett	Sussex, Winchelsea	1791	1823–7 (£15–£20)	1857	Schoolmaster; removed for improper conduct; reappointed by Bexhill
Thomas Baker	Staffordshire, Lichfield	1776	1826 to at least 1830 (£50–£40)	1834	Wheelwright
John Beard	Staffs., Whittington	c.1766	c.1826 (salary not found)	1839	Tailor
Solomon Bevill	Sussex, Hastings St Clements	c.1750	1828–1833 (£50)	1834	Controller of the port of Hastings and/or privateer
Richard Brown	Cumbria, Hayton	c.1776	By 1830 (£16)	[many possible]	Farmer
Thomas Burn	Greystoke, Cumbria	c.1776	By 1821 to at least 1834 (salary not found)	1850	Farmer
William Buttery	Cumbria, Wigton	c.1786	1822 (£12)	1853/4	Shopkeeper in 1841; assistant overseer in 1851
Patrick Cormick	Staffs., Aldridge	c.1762	1815–20 (salary not found)	1827	Farmer
Robert Argles Durrant	Sussex, Ringmer	c.1757	By 1804 to 1823 (£35–£40 from c.1811)	1823	Maltster; the subject of a notice to creditors 1811; assistant overseer to Patcham 1813

Providing for the Poor

John Finch	Sussex, Ringmer	[many possible]	1824–34 (salary not found)	Possibly Uckfield 1850	Also vestry clerk, governor of poor house and surveyor of the highways
James Finlinson	Cumbria, Dalston	c.1786	By 1828—at least 1838 (£25–£30 in 1828)	c. 1847	Also governor of the workhouse, included in salary
Stephen Garnett	Cumbria, Kirkby Lonsdale	c.1763	By 1809 (£10)	1840	Grocer, seedsman and auctioneer
Joseph Lancaster	Cumbria, Wigton	c.1771?	1819 (£8)	[many possible]	Shopkeeper
David Laurence	Sussex, Winchelsea	c.1784	1828–1830s (£10 at first)	1848	Carpenter
William Leek	Staffs., Lichfield	c.1769	By 1834 (salary not found)	1836	Joiner
Samuel Lyon	Staffs., Alrewas	c.1808	By 1833–5 (£30)	1869	Teacher, then clerk to Staffordshire county court
Thomas Martin	Cumbria, Dalston	c.1759	By 1816 to 1820s (£25)	1826	Innkeeper and other pursuits
Thomas Norris	Staffs., Uttoxeter	c.1787	By 1826 to 1830s (£42)	1848	Gentleman; later relieving officer to the Uttoxeter union
Joseph Reynolds	Staffs., Aldridge	1791	1820–2 (£25)	1860	Farmer, beer-house keeper, butcher
Edward Tester	Sussex, East Hoathly	c.1788	1833 (salary not found)	1869	Farmer
John Wannup	Cumbria, Greystoke	1773?	1809 (£3 10s)	1821?	Agent for the duke of Norfolk
John Wetton	Staffs., Colwich	1769	Before 1815 to at least 1834 (salary not found)	1855	Tailor
John Wilson	Cumbria, Brampton	c.1778	By 1816—at least 1830 (salary not found, but tenders invited 1833)	[many possible]	Agricultural labourer in 1851, possibly

Partial biographies for assistant overseers

A broad-brush survey of parish employees throughout England and the snapshot of applicants for a single post in the north-east provide new knowledge about the candidates for a parish salary. Even so, the men remain silhouetted against their parishes or captured in passing rather than being seen in detail as individuals. This is where the methodology of the 'Small Bills' project can shine. The repeated appearance of assistant overseers in vouchers across not just months but years makes them more visible than the neediest pauper and illuminates their administrative practices or financial competencies.

At least twenty-four men from the three project counties were appointed as assistant overseers under the Old Poor Law after 1800, in parishes with surviving vouchers. Concrete evidence of their actions in parish office, plus old-fashioned genealogy, naturally proffer a better-defined impression of their experience throughout life compared to just that at the time of appointment. The biographies that follow are of necessity patchy. They are, however, able to shed light on men's families, working lives and financial fortunes.

The lives of assistant overseers began in the 1750s, when the men destined for office were born. One of the earliest confirmed baptisms was for Robert Argles Durrant who lived at Wellingham in Ringmer all his life.⁸⁵ He was the son of William Durrant and his second wife, Rebecca, and had at least three brothers and four sisters who survived to adulthood.⁸⁶ A maltster by trade, potentially a very lucrative business but one that was taxed heavily by the government, he married for the second time relatively late in life, aged approximately forty-five, and had a son of the same name.⁸⁷ The precise terms of his parish appointment are unknown, yet he seems to have served continuously as one of the two overseers of Ringmer from at least 1804 until his death in 1823.⁸⁸ It is not yet clear when he became salaried but his permanence in office significantly predated the permissive statute.

Lifetime residence in one location enabled multiple points of connectivity with his neighbours: it is not surprising that Durrant and his wife witnessed the will of a yeoman farmer in Wellingham in 1806.⁸⁹ More

⁸⁵ I am indebted to John Kay for extensive details of Durrant's genealogy and parish employment.

⁸⁶ ESRO, AMS384, Copy admission, surrender and admission, manor of Ringmer, 1784.

⁸⁷ See marriage of 27 Mar. 1802 and baptism of 15 Apr. 1805, both Ringmer, at Find my Past <<http://www.findmypast.co.uk>> [accessed 8 Sept. 2020]. This is the source for all baptisms, marriages and burials cited.

⁸⁸ See burial of 29 Dec. 1823, Ringmer.

⁸⁹ ESRO, AMS433, Copy of will of Thomas Bannister, proved 15 Sept. 1815.

germane to his experience in post is the evidence of his financial troubles in 1811, and his continued appointment by Ringmer and at least one other parish as an assistant overseer thereafter. Durrant became insolvent and was presumably imprisoned for debt, as newspaper notices to his creditors urged their attendance at the relevant meeting 'in order that Mr Durrant may return to his family'.⁹¹ The accoutrements of his malting business were sold in May 1811 to satisfy his creditors, so Durrant needed salaried employment and seemingly received it in parish office. The parish may first have paid him a salary of £35 in March 1811, which would presumably have been defrayed immediately to support him on leaving prison. Sadly for Ringmer, Durrant was not a scrupulous custodian of parish finances: on his death he was indebted by £217 to the Poor Law funds (a debt his wife vigorously disputed).⁹² Ann Durrant was perhaps more reliable with money than her husband, given that she became a 'master' maltster in her own right and seemingly ran the business successfully for over twenty years.⁹³

As in the case of Durrant, information about belonging can be interleaved with clues to prosperity (or otherwise) to fill out a man's biography. Patrick Cormick may not have been born in the parish of Aldridge in Staffordshire but he was living there at the time of his marriage to Dorothy Fowell in 1796.⁹⁴ The couple had no children – Dorothy, forty-one when they

⁹⁰ TNA, HO107, Censuses of 1841 and 1851; General Register Office, Death certificates of 8 Oct. 1848 (Norris) and 20 Apr. 1850 (Burn); CAS, PR 60/118, Brampton, Printed advertisement for meeting to receive proposals for the maintenance of the poor, 1833–4; PR36/119, Wigton, Vestry minute book, 1735–1885, 9 Dec. 1819 and 24 May 1822; PR 102/114/4/1, Hayton, Overseers' vouchers, and SPC 44/2/25–6, Dalston, Overseers' accounts, 1816–36; SRO, D783/2/3/9i, Alrewas, Overseers' printed accounts, year ending 1834; Baptisms of 17 May 1807, 1 May 1808, 4 June 1809, and 22 Aug. 1811 in St Chad, Lichfield; Burials of 6 Feb. 1805 and 21 July 1836 in Lichfield St Chad; Baptisms of 26 June 1822 and 17 Mar. 1824 in Uttoxeter; ESRO, PAR 461/35/2/1, Letter from William Goddard to R. A. Durrant, 1804, and PAR 461/37/4/9, Ringmer, Printed justices' order, 1813; Burial of 1869, Whitton Cemetery, Birmingham; *Carlisle Journal*, 22 Oct. 1803 (for which reference I am grateful to Margaret Dean); *Sussex Weekly Advertiser*, 25 March. 1811, p. 2; Pratt, *Winchelsea Poor Law*, pp. 1–9, 306; W. White, *History, Gazetteer and Directory of Staffordshire* (Sheffield, 1834), p. 629; J. Pigot and Co., *Pigot and Co.'s National Commercial Directory ... Stafford* (1835), p. 391; Taylor, 'Voices in the crowd', p. 110. Wigton had appointed its first assistant overseer before 1800. John Rook was retained in 1792 on an annual salary of £9, which indicates that remuneration in the parish went down over time: T. W. Carrick, *The History of Wigton* (Carlisle, 1949), p. 44.

⁹¹ *Sussex Weekly Advertiser*, 1 Apr. 1811, p. 2.

⁹² ESRO, PAR461/31/3/1, Ringmer, Overseers of the poor vouchers to account, 1781–1849.

⁹³ TNA, HO107, 1841 and 1851 censuses, Ringmer. I am indebted to John Kay for information about Ann Worrall Durrant (née Flinders).

⁹⁴ See marriage of 8 July 1796 at Hints St Bartholomew, Staffordshire.

married, was older than Patrick – and they were quite poor.⁹⁵ Patrick was listed as a farmer in 1818, but left no will at his death in 1827.⁹⁶ Even so, like Durrant, he secured the job before it was sanctioned by statute. His successor in post eventually enjoyed very different marital and financial circumstances from Cormick. Joseph Reynolds (born in Warwickshire) was probably a farmer during his incumbency as assistant overseer in Aldridge from 1820 to 1822.⁹⁷ He was a younger man than most of his professional peers, aged just twenty-nine at his first appointment, and remarried as a widower in 1830. He certainly could have counted as having encumbrances after his second marriage, which saw the birth of seven children (including one set of twins). He prospered, became a farmer of fifty acres by 1851 and died in 1860.⁹⁸ Samuel Lyon was even younger than Reynolds, and possibly travelled further in terms of social mobility if he did not reach the same heights of prosperity. He was recorded as illegitimate at his baptism, yet became clerk to the Staffordshire county court.⁹⁹

Other assistant overseers defy much identification beyond the vouchers, but the vouchers themselves can be unpacked and (with luck) set alongside additional shreds. John Wilson was an active overseer, whether salaried or not, in the parish of Brampton in Cumberland. Vouchers survive for his work in 1816, when among other things he receipted payment for plants for the workhouse garden.¹⁰⁰ He was subsequently appointed assistant overseer, and in that capacity was prosecuted for embezzlement in 1830, aged fifty-two; he was acquitted on a technicality.¹⁰¹ It is unfortunate that he cannot be traced decisively in other parish records, given the ubiquity of his first and surnames, but if he is the man who appears in Brampton in the 1851 census (born in approximately the right year) he was a native of Cumberland but in occupational terms merely an agricultural labourer by that point (i.e., in his early seventies).¹⁰²

Thomas Abell, who had been so humiliated by the rioters at Brede in 1830, was not a Sussex man. He was probably born in Leicestershire in 1780 or 1781, and married Grace Phillips at Duffield in Derbyshire in 1801.¹⁰³

⁹⁵ For Dorothy's age, see burial of 19 Feb. 1851, Aldridge.

⁹⁶ See burial of 18 July 1827, Aldridge.

⁹⁷ See baptisms of 1 Mar. 1817 and 25 Dec. 1818, both Aldridge.

⁹⁸ TNA, HO107, 1841 and 1851 censuses; IR27/334, Index to death duty registers, 1860.

⁹⁹ Baptism of 1 May 1808, Lichfield St Chad; TNA, HO107, Census of 1851.

¹⁰⁰ CAS, PR60/21/13/5, Brampton, Vouchers and papers of overseers of the poor, 1759–1849.

¹⁰¹ *Newcastle Courant*, 28 Aug. 1830, p. 2.

¹⁰² TNA, HO107, 1851 census.

¹⁰³ Possible baptisms of 16 May 1780 at Sutton Cheney or 16 Apr. 1781 at Grimston, both

The couple moved to Thomas's home county of Leicestershire where four daughters were born at Shepshed between 1802 and 1810.¹⁰⁴ The family then recedes from view until Thomas is found working as the overseer of Ninfield in eastern Sussex from 1825, raising the question of whether the family moved specifically to take up parish work, or whether migration came first and the attraction of a parish salary subsequently.¹⁰⁵ Parish policy in Ninfield had long been attentive to setting the poor to work, so even if Abell did not already possess experience of work schemes he was effectually trained in implementing them. The poor of Ninfield workhouse were systematically allocated to different parish landowners and received 'pay' from their allotted employers which was used to offset parish expenditure on the house.¹⁰⁶ Abell obtained the salaried post in Brede in about 1829 and allegedly set the poor to work in punishing and degrading ways. His regime apparently included compelling paupers to drag a cart loaded with wood to a wharf some miles distant, explaining the manner of his rough handling and enforced journey in the same parish cart in late 1830.¹⁰⁷ Abell worked as assistant overseer in Brede until the year of his death, despite his ignominious cart ride and his report to the Poor Law Commission that 'his life would not be safe' if he tried to reduce the relief bill.¹⁰⁸ It may be inferred that he ran some sort of smallholding alongside his parish work, as he was described as a 'yeoman' at the time his estate was administered, but it was a fairly small smallholding as his estate was worth less than £300.¹⁰⁹

Occupational uncertainty about Abell can be set against occupational complexity for at least two other men. Thomas Martin of Dalston in Cumberland was a man of multiple pursuits, according to the occupational labels he gave himself or that were attributed to him. His will identifies him as an innkeeper, but at the time of his children's baptisms he was variously a cotton manufacturer or joiner, as well as a publican.¹¹⁰ In the 1810s he became

Leicestershire; marriage of 25 May 1801, Duffield, Derbyshire.

¹⁰⁴ See baptisms of 28 Mar. 1802, 19 May 1805 and 20 July 1810, all Shepshed.

¹⁰⁵ The confidence that the Leicestershire Thomas Abel was also the East Sussex Thomas Abel is based on both being certainly married to a woman called Grace.

¹⁰⁶ ESRO, PAR430/12/1/1, Ninfield, Vestry book, 1821–3; PAR430/31/1/3–4, Ninfield, Pauper ledgers, 1821–7; PAR430/31/3/1–3, Ninfield, Workhouse work books, 1825–7; PAR430/31/7/1, Ninfield, Overseers' notebook, 1828–9.

¹⁰⁷ *Morning Post*, 11 Nov. 1830, p. 4.

¹⁰⁸ *Report ... into the Administration and Practical Operation of the Poor Laws*, appendix A, p. 201.

¹⁰⁹ ESRO, PBT1/3/22/222B, Thomas Abell of Brede, yeoman, grant of administration, 1836.

¹¹⁰ See baptisms of 1 July 1787, 5 July 1789 and 7 Jan. 1802, all in Dalston and all giving different occupations; CAS, PROB/1826/W246, Will of Thomas Martin, innkeeper of Dalston.

assistant overseer, manager of the vagrant office and then workhouse master, but in the published Dalston parish registers he is alleged to have been an amateur architect, credited with building the King's Arms inn, and devising the architectural plans for the first church restoration in 1818. In 1822 he took on all the poor-relief work of the parish, including all disbursements to the poor, for an annual payment of £880.¹¹¹ This eclectic paternal activity saw Martin's children placed in professional or otherwise hopeful careers, without yielding the family long-term success. Martin's estate was worth less than £200 when he died in 1826, and his sons died relatively soon after him in the 1830s.¹¹² In contrast, Charles Arnett (who inspired such a negative response in Winchelsea) was mostly a frustrated educator with a patchy career. He was a schoolmaster near Rye before landing the job of assistant overseer, and after his departure from office (under a cloud) he tried a number of ventures that did not quite succeed. He was briefly an innkeeper at Tenterden in Kent, then ran a carrier service that failed. He removed to France where he tried to establish a school in Calais (which was stymied), became a bookkeeper and temporarily a lace manufacturer before he attempted to open a school for English children in France (which seemed to have operated).¹¹³

Arnett's experience points up the scope for sequential employments in different sectors, and in most cases it can only be assumed that (owing to the low level of salaries) men had access to other forms of personal or household income to make ends meet at the same time that they were in post as assistant overseers. Alternatively, this diversification (to use a twenty-first-century concept) could be construed as quite astute if it allowed men to avoid reliance on any one income stream. In contrast, for at least seven of the twenty-four men, there was a clear life-cycle aspect to their parish work because they sought or retained the posts after the age of sixty and worked to near their deaths or died in post.¹¹⁴ William Leek of Lichfield in Staffordshire took on the job aged approximately sixty-five, and died two years later in one of the city workhouses (presumably as the governor

¹¹¹ J. Wilson (ed.), *The Parish Registers of Dalston Cumberland*, ii, 1679–1812 (Dalston, 1895); *Carlisle Patriot*, 4 July 1818, p. 1.

¹¹² Wilson, *Monumental Inscriptions*, p. 101.

¹¹³ Pratt, *Winchelsea Poor Law*, pp. xx–xxi.

¹¹⁴ The only existing shred of evidence to compare with this relates to elected overseers in late 17th-century Aldenham in Hertfordshire, where the majority were under forty years old: W. Newman-Brown, 'The receipt of poor relief and family situation: Aldenham Hertfordshire 1630–90', in *Land, Kinship and Life-Cycle*, ed. R. M. Smith (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 405–422, at pp. 420–2. 'Some' of the Birmingham assistant overseers were said to be old men in 1834, without specific data being given: Upton, *Birmingham Parish Workhouse*, p. 87.

rather than as a pauper).¹¹⁵ These men were using a reliable parish income to support their declining years. Did the workload permit semi-retirement, or did financial necessity and the narrowing of other work options channel older men into overseer roles?

Among younger, fitter men office-holding and local responsibility could become a habit. William Buttery of Wigton in Cumbria was a home-grown assistant overseer. He was born in the parish in approximately 1786, was appointed to his post in 1822 and proved his worth through long service. He became an assistant overseer after 1834 too and was listed as an assistant overseer in 1851.¹¹⁶ Similarly, Thomas Norris, assistant overseer of Uttoxeter in Staffordshire under both the Old and the New Poor Law, further demonstrated that personnel could span different administrations. Uttoxeter probably still operated its poor-relief provision under Gilbert's Act (adopted in 1800) and, as Louise Ryland-Epton has argued, there was 'a good deal of continuity in personnel if not in ethos' across former Gilbert regimes into the post-1834 era.¹¹⁷ Norris is unique in one respect, however, in that he is the only man not also associated with another occupation as well as assistant overseer, despite being approximately thirty-nine years old at the time of his first parish appointment. At the births of his children before 1826 he was identified as a gentleman, and after 1826 as an overseer of the poor (on one occasion as a guardian of the poor, indicating Uttoxeter's continued adherence to Gilbert's Act) or relieving officer until the time of his death.¹¹⁸ This example takes us further towards a conclusion that could have been reached from the potted biographies of other men, and that is most palpable for Norris: the post of assistant overseer was filled by men whose fortunes were in decline. A salary of whatever level (Norris received £42 per year in 1830, for example) was an assured income for a household anticipating or experiencing fragility.

Conclusion

Bryan Keith-Lucas argued in 1980 that the Acts that permitted the appointment of assistant overseers and the formation of select vestries emerged in part from a desire to take the relief of the poor 'out of the

¹¹⁵ See burial of 21 July 1836 at Lichfield St Chad.

¹¹⁶ TNA, HO107, 1851 census.

¹¹⁷ SRO, Q/SB/1800 E/88, Agreement by the inhabitants of Uttoxeter to adopt the provisions of the Act for the Better Relief and Employment of the Poor, 22 Geo III (1800); Ryland-Epton, 'Social policy', p. 251.

¹¹⁸ See baptisms of 26 June 1822, 17 Mar. 1824, 7 Apr. 1826, 25 Oct. 1828 and 23 Oct. 1830, all Uttoxeter; Steer, *Parish Law*, p. 443.

hands of the poor themselves'.¹¹⁹ Policy implementation in this respect was undermined by an unforeseen trend among men who secured the work. Assistant overseers under the Old Poor Law were men of small estate whose success in other money-making endeavours was jeopardized by their economic contexts as well as by their own shortcomings. They were typically aged forty or over, married men who understated their encumbrances, with a more complicated employment history than the headline generalizations of the Poor Law Commission could represent. Most importantly, parishes might choose to support men in precarious financial positions rather than avoid placing trust in them. The Parliamentary Poor Law Commission of 1832–4 observed incredulously that one parish had bailed out a shoemaker who was unfortunate in business by making him assistant overseer, and then re-elected him despite the disappearance of the accounts, but gave only three further references in the 8,323 pages of the report alluding to assistant overseers as 'decayed tradesman'.¹²⁰ The 'Small Bills' project gives substance to these fleeting allegations: in Ringmer and other parishes covered by the project, appointment to salaried office was effectually welfare by other means.

¹¹⁹ B. Keith-Lucas, *The Unreformed Local Government System* (London, 1980), p. 98.

¹²⁰ *Report ... into the Administration and Practical Operation of the Poor Laws*, p. 184; appendix A, pp. 68 and 117.

Interlude 5

The parochial career of James Finlinson
(1783–1847)

William Bundred

The chapter on Assistant Overseers opened with the decision taken by the parish of Dalston, Cumberland, to memorialize James Finlinson. Over a lifetime dedicated to public service, Finlinson occupied a number of other parochial positions. Spanning the Old and New Poor Law these included workhouse governor, overseer, registrar of Dalston district, manager of roads, guardian of the poor and assistant registrar of the Carlisle union.¹

The eldest of four children of yeoman James Finlinson of Houghton and Ann (Nancy) Corry, Finlinson was baptised at Bolton, Cumberland, in 1783.² He married Elizabeth Pape (1784–1869) in Kingston-upon-Hull. He may also have been the James Finlinson, weaver, recorded in the 1818 militia list for Cumberland.³

Notices illustrating Finlinson's activity appeared regularly in Carlisle's newspapers and are recorded in vestry minutes. In 1825, he and his wife were appointed respectively as governor and matron of Dalston workhouse on a salary of £14 and were also provided with a room for a loom.⁴ In 1826, a new workhouse was built, and the following year Finlinson was appointed assistant overseer on a salary of £13 and keeper

¹ For further details see W. Bundred, 'James Finlinson', *The Poor Law* (2020) <<https://thepoorlaw.org/james-finlinson>> [accessed 13 Apr. 2021]. The blog post is made available under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0).

² CAS, PR158/2, Bolton, Cumberland, All Saints parish register, 1714–90, 2 Mar. 1783.

³ CAS, Q/MIL/6/2/7, Militia liable books, Cumberland ward, 1814–19.

⁴ East Riding Archives and Local Studies Service, PE185/16, Hull St Mary Lowgate, Parish register, 11 May 1809.

of the workhouse for which he was paid £12.⁵ In 1838, in his capacity as assistant overseer, Finlinson supported pauper Jane Hall's claim for relief. Unable to work owing to an inflammation of the chest, Hall and her nine-year-old daughter were dependent on parish relief.⁶ In the same year, applications to survey and map Dalston were sent to Finlinson, in his capacity as manager of the roads.⁷ In 1844, he became embroiled in a case involving a John or George Cairns of Carlisle. Cairns was charged with causing a false entry of a birth to be made by Finlinson in the Dalston parish register and of having obtained money under false pretences. Cairns claimed that his wife had given birth on 6 July at Buckabank. Finlinson registered the birth and gave Cairns two shillings. Joseph Nixon (the relieving officer for Carlisle), Margaret Bell (a midwife) and John Hodgson (a surgeon) all disputed Cairns's story attesting that Jane Cairns had given birth on 23 June and that the child had been registered at St Mary's, Carlisle; relief had also been given at the same time. Cairns, who was in an advanced stage of consumption, was committed for trial for perjury.⁸

Despite a proliferation of parish appointments, no occupation for James Finlinson is stated in the 1841 census. In 1842, he was elected as a poor law guardian, a position he also occupied in 1846.⁹ He resigned as overseer in November 1844, only to be reappointed in February 1845. He died in 1847 and is buried in Dalston churchyard.

⁵ CAS, SPC44/1/1, Dalton, Vestry minute book, 1825–7.

⁶ *Carlisle Patriot*, 19 May 1838, p. 3.

⁷ *Carlisle Journal*, 29 Dec. 1838, p. 2.

⁸ *Carlisle Journal*, 20 Jul. 1844, p. 3; 10 Aug. 1844, p. 3.

⁹ *Carlisle Journal*, 26 Feb 1842, p. 1; 27 Feb. 1846, p. 1.

