

Poor Relief and Community in Hadleigh, Suffolk, 1547-1600

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Marjorie McIntosh, Distinguished Professor of History Emerita at the University of Colorado Boulder, is a respected social and cultural historian of late medieval and early modern England. This book, volume 12 in the well-established *Studies in Regional and Local History* series published by University of Hertfordshire Press, which has developed a reputation for producing high-quality works of local and regional history under the general editorship of Nigel Goose, in many respects complements her recent national study of poor relief in late medieval England.(1) It provides a micro-study of the operation of a system of poor relief prior to the Poor Laws of 1598 and 1601 in the small Suffolk market town of Hadleigh, a settlement of between 2,400 and 3,300 inhabitants. In his preface to the volume and his review of her other work *Poor Relief in England, 1350-1600* for *Reviews in History*, Goose remarks that McIntosh is 'without doubt one of the foremost social and cultural historians of her generation, and has done so much to advance the cause of later medieval and early modern English history' (p. xiii).(2) Furthermore, he points out that she is 'one of those rare historians who have the capacity to produce broad general studies as well as micro-histories' (p. xiii).(3) Her *Controlling Misbehaviour in England, 1390-1600* was a 'pathbreaking study'.(4) In keeping with her previous work on the manor and liberty of Havering, which produced two full-length studies: *Autonomy and Community: The Royal Manor of Havering, 1200-1500* and *A Community Transformed: The Manor and Liberty of Havering, 1500-1620*, her work on poor relief in England adopts a similar approach.(5)

The book, which draws on 30 years of research conducted by McIntosh and other scholars, outlines the

response to the needs of the poor inhabitants of Hadleigh in the second-half of the 16th century (1547–1600), a period which saw numerous crises, including four consecutive poor harvests, notably between 1594 and 1597. Conventionally, historians of early modern poverty and welfare have been concerned with national legislative provision for the poor.(6) It has been recognised that many of the large incorporated towns and urban centres (such as Bristol, Hereford, Southampton, Ipswich and Leicester) introduced some of the earliest and most complicated comprehensive poor relief schemes in England prior to national legislation concerning the relief of the poor, specifically the Acts for the Relief of the Poor 1598 and 1601.(7) Less work has considered market towns in rural areas, a view further hampered by the focus on the allocation of poor relief in rural parishes. In order to provide a longer view of the history of poverty from the medieval period, McIntosh's own previous work and that of other historians has begun to explore the sources of welfare such as the introduction of collections for the relief of the poor, prior to that offered by the parish (through the levying of a compulsory poor rate) during the period of the old poor law which has long been the focus of early modern social historians.(8)

Considerable emphasis has been placed on the changing economic conditions in England.(9) The late 15th and 16th centuries saw a trend towards larger scale agricultural and craft production, a greater reliance on wage labour, a rising birth rate, a relatively high rate of inflation corresponding to a decline in real wages and increased geographic mobility especially among the poor. At the same time, medieval hospitals were insufficient in meeting demand for care even before the religious changes of the 1530s and 1550s, and similarly almshouses which were frequently founded between 1460 and 1600, were inadequate given the number of poor people seeking assistance. In the case of Hadleigh, the impact of the decline of the town's staple textile industry had the effect of creating demand for poor relief as the structure of the local economy could not provide sufficient livelihoods for the majority of the poor. By 1600, the end of the period under study, the textile industry was in severe decline, exacerbating the extent of poverty and underemployment to the point that by 1618 Hadleigh was filled with 'an abundance of poverty', with perhaps 15 per cent of the town's population being in receipt of relief by the mid 17th century (p. 148). Analysis reveals how the town's society was divided in terms of the distribution of wealth and that the shared belief in the need for social welfare helped to validate the town's social and political structure, with such a local study complementing national surveys which have shown the social polarisation of early modern English society. The book is logically structured as follows: 'Introduction', 'The context of poor relief in Hadleigh', 'Hadleigh's system of assistance', 'Recipients of relief and their households', 'The care and training of poor children', 'Aid to ill, disabled and elderly people' and the concluding synthesis chapter titled simply: 'Why?' The appendices are detailed and reconstruct the substantial body of data on which the study is based.

By way of background, chapter one, 'The context of poor relief in Hadleigh' (pp. 9–39) introduces the location and physical setting of the town, the pattern of manorial lordship and the town's urban form, in particular the presence of public and religious buildings (such as the guildhall, market hall and parish church) and the market place and the neighbourhoods according to which poor rates were collected. There follows an estimate of the population and other demographic information, after which attention turns to economic activity with discussion focusing on the town's cloth-manufacturing function and the substantial proportion of clothiers in the community and the implications this had in terms of the community's wealth, occupational distribution and gender differences. Hadleigh's religious life, in particular the impact of the Reformation, is discussed in detail (pp. 30–6) as is the form of town government (pp. 36–9). After this necessary background context, the subsequent chapters are essentially analytical in approach.

The following chapter, 'Hadleigh's system of assistance' (pp. 40–62), describes the officers that were responsible for administering assistance, their duties and the sorts of decisions they made. Of particular interest to this reviewer is the discussion of the officers involved in decision-making, a theme returned to later in chapter six when it is assessed in relation to occupational status and religious denomination (Tables 6.1 and 6.2, pp. 122 and 124). Also outlined are the multiple and overlapping forms of aid which were provided, whether in-kind or services received at the town's expense (pp. 44–8). The financing of poor relief is explained. In addition to the income received by churchwardens from rents of charitable properties, money

is recorded from charitable endowment of landed property, gifts and bequests and money levied from compulsory poor rates, the latter being analysed in-depth (pp. 48–62). Shifting from how Hadleigh's poor relief system was organised, chapter three considers the individuals and households who were in receipt of poor relief, analysing surviving poor relief accounts as well as other source material and the provision for two groups, namely poor children and teens, and the sick, disabled and elderly are examined in detail in chapters four and five respectively. The key results are described, and illustrated by relevant figures including several maps and accompanying tables which relate closely to the text, whilst there are further methodological and quantitative appendices.

Chapter three (pp. 63–82) examines the individuals who received relief and how assistance functioned for households, with a minimum of 603 people being assisted between 1579 and 1596, the recipients of relief being 31.7 per cent adult men, 35.5 per cent adult women and 32.7 per cent children (p. 63). Clearly, as McIntosh's research has revealed, Hadleigh was providing various types of relief for a large number of individuals and households depending on their situation, including children and young people who were not typically relieved in many early modern communities. Regarding individual recipients of assistance, useful comparisons are made with the larger county towns of Norwich (Norfolk) and Ipswich (Suffolk), it being found that at Hadleigh 91 people received relief, whereas in Norwich 165 people received relief (amounting to only 7 per cent of the census of the poor for 1570), and that those in receipt of assistance in Hadleigh received 1.8 times more relief each week (p. 74). No children or teens were supported in Norwich, with the men and women receiving relief being largely described as 'unable to find work', widows or women having been abandoned by their husbands, and a quarter of the older people in receipt of relief being disabled or ill (p. 74). Again, by comparison Ipswich provided larger amounts of relief to a smaller group, giving relief to only 46 poor people (p. 75). Despite it being a much larger town, Ipswich provided no direct assistance to children or teens and like Norwich gave relief to older people, largely widows and married men unable to work and, compared to Hadleigh, there was a greater concentration of elderly who were disabled or ill (p. 75). As McIntosh points out, the survival of extensive records for Hadleigh means that it has been possible to place those that received relief into their household contexts. This greatly aids understanding, providing a 'rare opportunity' to consider the number of households of which recipients of relief were members and the significance of family relationships in terms of the amount of relief granted at the household level (p. 75). Given the availability of a full set of accounts, her in-depth analysis of the year 1582 provides a detailed picture of the individuals and households who received support, 149 people being assisted as well as several unnamed poor (p. 80). She points out that of the 109 households receiving relief, more than two-thirds contained a single recipient, with 31 and four households containing two and three people respectively (p. 80). Unsurprisingly, it is calculated that 61 per cent of households received only occasional assistance, with 28 per cent and 14 per cent receiving household goods and occasional money (p. 81). Furthermore, analysis of family relationships shows how relief was distributed amongst households made up of a variety of family relationships, including husband and wife (42 per cent), man and a child (23 per cent), woman and a child or teen (19 per cent) or two child siblings (16 per cent) (p. 81). Also there were four three-recipient households, which included two married couples with one child each and two women with two children each (p. 81).

Discussion in the next two chapters examines specific sections of the community who received relief. For example, chapter four (pp. 83–105) focuses on 'the care and training of poor children' within the community, highlighting the unusually high number of poor children and teens in Hadleigh and their assistance by the town in one of the following five ways: by disbursing money to poor children whilst living with their families, or alternatively receiving money, household goods, clothing or medical care; by giving aid to their parents or by placing children with another local family; by providing a set of clothes and shoes to a child who was due to become a servant in another household; through poor relief officials arranging for boys to be apprenticed and enter service; and, from 1589, by sending children and young people to the workhouse during which time they were given basic training in occupational skills such as textiles. Each of these approaches is examined in turn. As the title of chapter five (pp. 106–18), 'Aid to ill, disabled and elderly people', suggests, Hadleigh's poor relief officials gave assistance to the ill, disabled and elderly in the form of goods or money while they lived in their own homes. The recognition that people should be encouraged to remain in their own home as long as possible and be part of the familiar community setting,

shows striking parallels with today's principle of *encouraging* and supporting the elderly to remain independent. However, an effort was made to place the sick in a single home, in effect imposing according to McIntosh a policy of quarantine – this was also used in 1592 when contagious people who had contracted bubonic plague were housed in the Guildhall (p. 107). The elderly, defined as those aged over 50 (p. 110), were accommodated in almshouses, which have been the focus of much recent historians' attention, the first reference to those at Hadleigh being in the 1430s.(10) She points out that in addition to providing basic assistance, more specific forms of relief were directed at vulnerable residents as required, with poor relief officials responding to those that were in need and deemed deserving (p. 118).

The final synoptic chapter: 'Why?' (pp. 119–49), addresses the three main research questions of the case study. Firstly, 'Why did this relatively small town feel the need for such an elaborate network of relief?' secondly, 'Why did the Chief Inhabitants of Edward's VI's reign decide to invest the proceeds from the sale of church and guild goods in a landed endowment to support the poor, and why did subsequent donors augment those resources?' and lastly, 'Why were Hadleigh's more prosperous residents willing to be assessed for poor rates (and in most cases to pay those sums), and why were the town's leaders prepared to spend considerable time administering assistance to the needy, time that had to be taken out of their own business activities?' (p. 119) Indeed, the overall impression which emerges is that Hadleigh's system of poor relief was complex, and arose from five factors which McIntosh highlights: the teaching of early Protestant clergy, in particular Dr Rowland Taylor and the emphasis on charity as an essential component of a community's godliness; the changing nature of relations between clothiers and workers; the concern or worry about idleness and misbehaviour and the control and cost of poor relief; the town's civic identity and civic competition with surrounding communities, namely the neighbouring wool towns of Sudbury, Clare and Long Melford; and lastly the on-going influence of Christian social teachings (pp. 119-149). Clearly, religion played an important factor in the establishment of a system of poor relief, lending support to the argument that the Protestant Church placed emphasis on charitable provision for the poor as part of spirituality.(11) Whilst there is evidence that the chief inhabitants and officeholders tried to control idleness, vagrancy and the influx of poor people who were viewed as disruptive and of whom it was feared they would later require relief, corresponding with the notion of a 'culture of local xenophobia', an impression emerges that it was a combination of economic, social and religious reasons which encouraged the more prosperous members of the community to operate and pay for the costs of the poor.(12)

The evidential basis for the conclusions drawn in chapters three to six is impressive and includes guildhall or town hall accounts of the churchwardens, collectors and sub-collectors for the poor, bonds and wills, as well as printed manuscript and secondary sources. The accounts for the poor 1535–1620 are summarised in appendix introduction one (pp. 151–3). Appendix introduction two (pp. 154–5) provides an overview of the type and amount of assistance given between 1579 and 1596 to individuals ('poor folk') and to residential institutions namely almshouses and the workhouse, the names and numbers of which are not given. It reveals that the total amount received by the collector (in pounds) increased dramatically from 73.58 in 1563 to 167.19 by 1620 whilst the amount disbursed to the poor by sub-collectors increased from 64.20 in 1563 to 77.83 in 1620, but typically ranged between 60.00 and 80.00, peaking in the 1590s (105.26 in 1593 and 101.29 in 1595) with the lowest figure being 56.58 in 1599 (pp. 151–3). The total amount disbursed to the poor, including the almshouses and workhouse, increased from 100.86 in 1580 to 154.16 in 1596 (pp. 152–3). Her methodologies and decision-making are discussed in the introduction to appendix three [\[J1\]](#) [2], specifically the way that the databases were constructed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and she recognises the potential inaccuracies, resulting from subjective judgements made in the data collection process. The extensive body of data, upon which the study is based, is presented in the appendices, providing demographic information regarding the number and ratios of birth, marriage and deaths (baptism, marriages and burials) which is used to estimate Hadleigh's population (appendix 1.1, p. 160). Additionally, the distribution of wealth (appendix 1.2, p. 161) is given based on the 1524 lay subsidy, and the situation at Hadleigh is contextualised through comparison with 16 country towns in the counties of Buckinghamshire, Rutland and Sussex and the suburban market town of Romford and its surrounding agricultural hinterland. Consideration is also given to the occupations given in parish records (appendix 1.3, pp. 162–3), the relationship between grain prices, seasonality, high mortality and poor relief (appendix 2.1,

pp. 164–5).

Appendices 2.2 and 2.3 (pp. 166–7) outline the goods or services occasionally given to individual poor people, the bequests to the poor by religious testament based on an analysis of wills between 1500 and 1599 and lastly the total amount bequeathed to the poor in wills. Analysis reveals that 56 of the 96 wills included bequests to the poor (58 per cent), and also apparent is a clear distinction on the basis of religious denomination with a higher percentage of protestant testators than traditional/catholic testators leaving bequests to the poor. Appendix 2.4 (p. 168) develops this religious dimension further, breaking down the bequests made in the 56 wills by period (1500–33, 1534–47, 1547–53, 1553–8, 1558–79 and 1580–99) and differentiating between ‘local people’ (56 wills) and ‘outsiders’ (6 wills). Her data indicates that the greatest number of wills with bequests to the poor made by local people was in the early Elizabethan period (1558–79; 18) with a cash value (in pounds) of 388.25 and in total between 1500 and 1599, 1193.36 cash was given to the poor, 1100.03 by ‘local people’ and 93.33 by ‘outsiders.’ The costs of burying the town’s poor (Appendix 3.1, p. 169) are given, but perhaps most interesting is the data outlined in Appendices 3.2 and 3.3 (pp. 170–1) which shows the recipients of poor relief in Hadleigh in the 1570s and 1590s differentiated on the basis of age, sex and marital status, with useful comparisons being made with findings for Norwich and Ipswich. Appendix 3.4 (pp. 172–4) shows the types of relief received by individuals in the year 1582 by sex and age.

Appendix 5.1 (pp. 175–6) provides insight into the human experience of poor relief. Parish reconstitution and *poor relief* records have been used to reconstruct mini pauper *biographies* of 12 residents of Hadleigh’s almshouses between 1582 and 1602, a technique frequently employed by historians of poverty and welfare.⁽¹³⁾ One example is that of John Cromer, the oldest almshouse resident, who in 1594 was aged 90 and was married to Katherine aged 63. McIntosh has managed to sketch Cromer’s life, the couple receiving occasional support between 1580 and 1594 in the form of blankets, canvas and clothes whilst living in their home in Benton Street and later when resident in the almshouse. Initially they received 6d a week but this increased to 9d by 1594. Katherine died in April 1595 aged 64. Subsequently John aged 92 married Anne Berdwell his neighbour in the almshouse before he died in 1598. Another notable example is that of Father John Gedge, who was already resident in the almshouse in 1579 and was given 1s per week, as well as canvas, cloth and clothes for four years. In 1582 he was temporarily boarded out with another poor family, dying two years later. It is highlighted that the Gedge family were one of the poorest families in Hadleigh receiving the greatest amount of poor relief, with nine recipients receiving relief across three households and over three generations.

Overall, McIntosh’s book provides an important micro-study, being at the forefront of new social and demographic history, offering a model which future historians may wish to employ and replicate elsewhere and which goes alongside national surveys of poverty and social welfare in early modern England. It is unique in that it provides an analysis of poor relief in a specific community in the second-half of the 16th century, demonstrating the value of a local case study approach. Significantly it sheds light on a transitional period in how care was provided with the formal assistance of the poor by the town supported in part by rates, considered in relation to the strong and on-going tradition of informal aid and voluntary help given by individuals and households. Moreover, McIntosh’s book offers a new perspective – or, at least, further develops an existing methodological approach that is already becoming readily adopted by historians of poor relief and social welfare, termed ‘new demographic history’ – in the way that such an in-depth case study represents individual human experiences. It identifies the causes of the demographic patterns which records of poor relief administration document, successfully utilising both quantitative data and narrative sources which provide insight into the lives of specific individuals. As Professor Richard M. Smith (University of Cambridge) has observed in his review on the reverse cover, ‘McIntosh’s ability to reconstruct the family circumstances and other demographic attributes of those receiving relief is unparalleled in any study of Tudor poor relief’.

This study of Hadleigh, for which surviving documentary evidence is rich, shows how a comprehensive poor relief system developed, although as with any micro, local or regional study, the question remains as to how typical it is and, the extent to which it is representative of experiences more widely. Consequently, it will be

of interest to both local and national historians. It builds on her previously published findings not solely concerning poor relief, but also charity, neighbourliness, networks of care, poverty and conceptions of civic and local identity, providing an exemplar for many other Elizabethan rural market towns, for which there is not the comparable level of surviving source material.⁽¹⁴⁾ Hopefully this study will act as a stimulus for similar work. However, to what extent is evidence of Hadleigh replicated elsewhere in England and Wales? It is through the accumulation of further local case studies where surviving documentary evidence exists, such as that outlined in the case of Hadleigh, that we gain a fuller understanding of how, at a local level, communities in a variety of economic and social circumstances sought through various mechanisms to alleviate the problem of poverty prior to the introduction of the Poor Laws of 1598 and 1601. Finally, the publication of this volume is even more timely given current political debates regarding welfare reform and the balance between forms of public and private assistance, providing an historic account of how, even in the second-half of the 16th century, prosperous people sought with a degree of tenacity to alleviate the problems which confronted the most vulnerable within communities, whether that be children and young people, the ill, disabled or elderly, or those without sufficient work to live.

(1) M.K. McIntosh, *Poor Relief and Community in Hadleigh, Suffolk 1547–1600* (Hatfield, 2013); <http://www.herts.ac.uk/about-us/our-structure/subsidiary-companies/uh-press/history> [3] [accessed 17 September 2013]; M.K. McIntosh, *Poor Relief in England, 1350–1600* (Cambridge, 2012).

(2) N. Goose, 'Review of *Poor Relief in England, 1350–1600*', (review no. 1404), <<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1404> [4]> [accessed 17 September 2013].

(3) Goose, review of *Poor Relief in England*.

(4) M. K. McIntosh, *Controlling Misbehaviour in England, 1390–1600* (Cambridge, 1998).

(5) M. K. McIntosh, *Autonomy and Community: The Royal Manor of Havering, 1200–1500* (Cambridge, 1986); M. K. McIntosh, *A Community Transformed: The Manor and Liberty of Havering, 1500–1620* (Cambridge, 1991).

(6) P. Slack, *Poverty and Policy in Tudor and Stuart England* (London, 1988); T. Wales, 'Poverty, poor relief and the life-cycle: some evidence from seventeenth century Norfolk', in *Land, Kinship and Life-Cycle*, ed. R. M. Smith (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 351–88.

(7) McIntosh, *Poor Relief in England*, p. 146; *An Act for the Relief of the Poor*, 39 Elizabeth I, c. 3 (1598); *An Act for the Relief of the Poor*, 43 Elizabeth I, c.2 (1601).

(8) McIntosh, *Poor Relief in England*; C. Dyer, 'Poverty and its relief in late medieval England', *Past & Present*, 216, 1 (2012), 41–78; S. Hindle, *On the Parish? The Micro-Politics of Poor Relief in Rural England c.1550–1750* (Oxford, 2004).

(9) McIntosh, *Poor Relief*, pp.115–138,141–269.

(10) N. Goose, 'The English Almshouse and the Mixed Economy of Welfare: Medieval to Modern', *Local Historian*, 40, 1 (2010), 3–19; N. Goose and H. Looijesteijn, '[Almshouses in England and the Dutch Republic circa 1350–1800: a comparative perspective](#) [5]', *Journal of Social History* [6], 45, 4 (2012), 1049–73.

(11) I. Archer, 'The charity of early modern Londoners', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 12 (2002), 223–44.

(12) K. D. M. Snell, 'The culture of local xenophobia', *Social History*, 28, 1 (2003), 1–30 reprinted in K. D. M. Snell, *Parish and Belonging: Community, Identity and Welfare in England and Wales, 1700–1950* (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 28–80.

(13) For example, S. Williams, *Poverty, Gender and Life-Cycle under the English Poor Law, 1760–1834* (Woodbridge, 2011); S. A. Shave, ‘The dependent poor? (Re)constructing the lives of individuals ‘On the Parish’ in rural Dorset, 1800–1832’, *Rural History*, 20, 1 (2009), 67–97.

(14) For example: M. K. McIntosh, ‘Local responses to the poor in late medieval and Tudor England’, *Continuity and Change*, 3 (1988), 209–45; M. K. McIntosh, ‘Negligence, greed and the operation of English charities, 1350–1603’, *Continuity and Change*, 27, 1 (2012), 1–29; M. K. McIntosh, ‘Poverty, charity and coercion in Elizabethan England’, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 35 (2005), 143–63; M. K. McIntosh, ‘*Networks of care in Elizabethan English towns: the example of Hadleigh, Suffolk*’, in *The Locus of Care: Families, Institutions, and the Provision of Welfare since Antiquity*, ed. P. Horden and R. M. Smith (London, 1998), pp. 71–89; M. K. McIntosh, ‘Locals, outsiders, and identity in English market towns, 1290–1620’, in *Local Identities in Late Medieval and Early Modern England*, ed. N. L. Jones and D. Woolf (London, 2007), pp. 71–91.

The author is happy to accept this thorough summary and valuable commentary and feels no need to reply.

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[6] [http://researchprofiles.herts.ac.uk/portal/en/journals/journal-of-social-history\(d20167aa-457f-4cf1-960b-cb1383b614b9\).html](http://researchprofiles.herts.ac.uk/portal/en/journals/journal-of-social-history(d20167aa-457f-4cf1-960b-cb1383b614b9).html)