



VCH Oxfordshire Texts in Progress

Cornwell

Social History

Social Character and Communal Life

The Middle Ages

Late 11th-century Cornwell was a small community of six bordars and their families and one slave (*servus*), all of whom worked on the lord's demesne with no separate tenant land listed. A more complex social structure was evident in 1279, when eight customary tenants (all but one with a yardland) owed labour services and corn rents. Three freeholders occupied larger farms, and a cottager ran the mill, while manorial officials presumably helped oversee the demesne.¹ The 13th-century byname de Berkstone or Bercheston suggests immigration from Barcheston (Warws.),² and several peasant families represented in 1279 (such as the Carters, Forsts, Speds, and atte Wells) continued into the early 14th century, alongside newcomers such as the Westons. The value of goods taxed in 1306 ranged from 12s. 6d. to £6 7s. 6d., widening to between 16s. and £9 10s. 8d. in 1316. The lord Thomas Blaket (later imprisoned for involvement in the earl of Lancaster's rebellion) paid three times more tax (11s. 11d.) than anyone else.³

No lord or demesne farmer was taxed in 1327,⁴ presumably because the manor was then in dispute between Blaket and Simon de Welles, whom Blaket accused of storming the manor house gates with Robert Trillow (a kinsman of Chastleton's lord) and 300 armed men, assaulting him, and stealing grain, livestock, and other goods.⁵ Ownership of the manor changed several times over the following century, but the Blakets evidently remained in Cornwell until at least 1410, Sir John (d. 1430) being perhaps the first of the family to settle instead at nearby Icomb (Glos.).⁶ Little else is known of the parish's character or communal life after the Black Death, the local effects of which are unclear, although as elsewhere some holdings were apparently amalgamated during the later Middle Ages,⁷ and there was

¹ DB, f. 161; *Rot. Hund.* II, 740–1; above, econ. hist. (medieval; milling).

² *Oxon. Fines*, p. 159; *Rot. Hund.* II, 740.

³ TNA, E 179/161/10; E 179/161/8; above, landownership.

⁴ TNA, E 179/161/9.

⁵ *Ibid.* SC 8/34/1679; *Cal. Pat.* 1327–30, 149, 282; above, landownership; econ. hist. (medieval); Chastleton, landownership. Cf. H.P. Trillo, *The Trillows of Chastleton* (2011), 34, for uncertainty as to which Rob. Trillow was involved.

⁶ Above, landownership; *Hist. Parl.* s.v. John Blaket.

⁷ Above, econ. hist. (medieval; 1500–1800).

probably increased migration. A rector and his acknowledged son were both indicted for felony and gaoled in 1387,⁸ and a Cornwell tenant of Salford manor defaulted on his rent in 1446.⁹ The church and agricultural regulation (through the manor court) presumably provided local foci, although the church building itself saw relatively little investment before the 15th century, while a few tenants were required to attend manor courts elsewhere.¹⁰

1500–1800

The wealthiest taxpayer in 1524 (paying 20s.) was John Holloway, presumably the demesne farmer, whilst three other men each paid 3s., and one 12d.¹¹ The ‘gentleman’ Edmund Ansley occupied the manor house (presumably as the Hyetts’ tenant) from at least 1541, and despite acquiring Brookend manor in Chastleton in 1544 remained at Cornwell in 1574, probably only moving to Chastleton shortly before his death in 1583.¹² In 1562 he presented to Salford rectory,¹³ although several of the family (if not necessarily Edmund) were Roman Catholic recusants, his daughter Margaret marrying into the Catholic Gainsford family of Idbury,¹⁴ and his eldest son Edmund (who predeceased his father)¹⁵ being perhaps the Edmund Ansley, a fellow of the Royal College of Physicians, who in 1557 was expelled or resigned from a fellowship of Merton College, Oxford, ‘on account of religion’, and who in 1573 was imprisoned on suspicion of corresponding with Mary, Queen of Scots.¹⁶ The elder Edmund’s widow Katherine was fined for recusancy from the late 1580s, although by then she was living in Chastleton,¹⁷ Cornwell’s manor house having presumably reverted to the Hyetts, of whom Richard was resident as lord in 1599.¹⁸ Henry Elsing (lord 1617–35) resided occasionally,¹⁹ appointing his ‘loving neighbours and friends’ Henry Jones and George Greenwood (both of Chastleton) executors of his will.²⁰ His relative Edmund Knyvett, from a

⁸ Below, relig. hist. (Middle Ages).

⁹ TNA, SC 2/197/61.

¹⁰ Below, relig. hist.; local govt.

¹¹ TNA, E 179/161/170.

¹² *L&P Hen. VIII*, XVI, p. 350; XIX (1), p. 177; *Oxon. Visit.* 201; TNA, C 142/200/32; OHC, MS Wills Oxon. 113/1/6 (describing him as ‘of Brookend’ and requesting burial in Chastleton church); above, Chastleton, landownership. He witnessed a parishioner’s will in 1577: OHC, MS Wills Oxon 185.479.

¹³ *VCH Oxon.* XXI (forthcoming)

¹⁴ Leics., Leicester & Rutland RO, DG39/435; *Oxon. Visit.* 155.

¹⁵ *Oxon. Visit.* 201; TNA, C 142/200/32.

¹⁶ G.C. Brodrick, *Memorials of Merton College* (OHS 4, 1885), 263.

¹⁷ *Recusants in the Exchequer Pipe Rolls 1581–92* (Cath. Rec. Soc. 71, 1986), 10, 129; *Recusant Rolls 1592–3* (Cath. Rec. Soc. 18, 1916), 254, 260; *1593–4* (Cath. Rec. Soc. 57, 1965), 122, 125; above, Chastleton, relig. hist.

¹⁸ Glos. Archives, D1677/GG/566.

¹⁹ Above, landownership (Cornwell manor); *ODNB*, s.v. Hen. Elsynge. He witnessed a parishioner’s will in 1618: OHC, MS Wills Oxon. 196.226.

²⁰ TNA, PROB 11/170/283.

prominent Norfolk gentry family, may have occupied the manor house in 1631, when he was 'of Cornwell'.²¹

Prominent farmers in the 16th and 17th centuries (mostly holding of the manor) included members of the Halifax, Spier, Weston, and Young families, although few were especially wealthy. Out of 14 probate inventories dated before 1700, the highest-valued (£211) belonged to Richard Halifax (d. 1635/6), whose ten-roomed house (with a 'new chamber') was furnished with featherbeds, curtains, and cushions. Two other inventories were worth £100 or more, and one £75, while 11 were worth less than £50, and the two lowest only £8 and £9.²² A similar pattern is evident in the 1665 hearth tax return, with only one householder paying on three hearths, two on two hearths, and one (the rector) on one hearth, while one householder was excused payment on grounds of poverty. By contrast the lord Sir Thomas Penyston was assessed on 25 hearths at Cornwell Manor.²³ Inhabitants' common rights were extinguished in 1669 by a private enclosure agreed between the Penystons and the rector, and the parish continued to be dominated throughout the 18th century by its resident Penyston lords and by its five or six chief farmers.²⁴

The Penystons themselves were resident lords from 1636.²⁵ Sir Thomas (d. 1647), the first baronet, who had previously lived at Cogges and had estates in Wales, Suffolk, and Lincolnshire, served as high sheriff in 1637.²⁶ His son Sir Thomas (d. 1674), the second baronet, instigated the enclosure, and was friends with the Roman Catholic Royalist and antiquary Ralph Sheldon, while possessions listed in his will included his cabinets, manuscripts, 'whole study of books', 'great organ in the great parlour', and harpsichord. His eldest son Sir Thomas (d. 1679), the third baronet, was friends in turn with the Oxford-based naturalist Robert Plot, who described him as 'ingenious and observing' and a 'learned and curious Artist', publishing accounts of fossils discovered on the estate and of soil experiments conducted in Penyston's own laboratory.²⁷ The second baronet's third son Charles (d. 1705) was vice-president of Magdalen College, Oxford, and several of his sisters made advantageous marriages, two into local gentry families.²⁸ The fourth and last baronet,

²¹ Norfolk RO, KNY 486,487 372 x 1. Elsing's mother had married Hen. Knyvett in 1584: *ODNB*, s.v. Hen. Elsyng.

²² Cornwell wills and inventories 1544–1672 in OHC, MSS Wills Oxon. (transcribed by Salford probate group). For Ric. Halifax, OHC, MS Wills Oxon. 132/1/21.

²³ *Hearth Tax Oxon.* 175; cf. TNA, E 179/255/3.

²⁴ Above, econ. hist. (1500–1800).

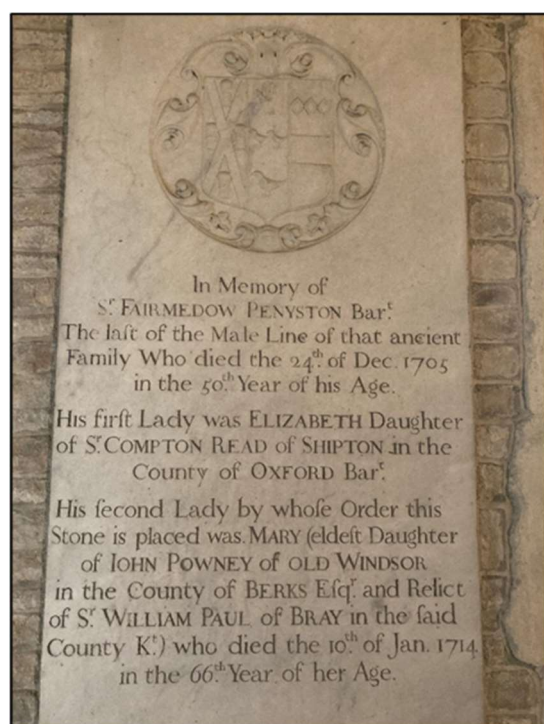
²⁵ Above, landownership (Cornwell manor).

²⁶ *VCH Oxon.* XII, 60; TNA, PROB 11/201/153; Brunner and Lunt, *Sheriffs*, 115.

²⁷ TNA, PROB 11/345/311; R. Plot, *Natural History of Oxon.* (1677), 53, 67, 98, 131–2, 143; *ODNB*, s.v. Rob. Plot, Ralph Sheldon. Sir Thos (d. 1679) lent books to his servant Edw. Wood (d. 1678): OHC, MS Wills Oxon. 72/3/10.

²⁸ Eliz. married John Hastings of Daylesford, and Cornelia Philarista Maria married Thos Greenwood of Chastleton: *Oxon. Visit.* 1669–75, 24–5; *VCH Worcs.* III, 335; OHC, E24/1/3D/14–15. For Anne

Charles's older brother Sir Fairmeadow (d. 1705), was high sheriff in 1689, and despite a falling-out with the rector (his brother-in-law) in 1682 was buried in the church under a fine marble grave ledger.²⁹ During the minority (c.1740) of a later Fairmeadow Penyston the manor house was let to George Smyth of North Nibley (Glos.),³⁰ but later 18th-century Penyston lords continued to reside, the house being radically remodelled in the 1740s and a family vault being created underneath the church by the 1780s.³¹



Grave ledger of Sir Fairmeadow Penyston (d. 1705), Bt, in the chancel of the parish church. The Penyston arms features three Cornish choughs.

Little is known of Cornwell's wider communal life before 1800, although a 'revel mead' mentioned in 1614 was presumably used for outdoor festivities,³² and the village inn recorded from 1671 probably hosted meetings and other events.³³ Reported crimes in the 18th century included horse theft and (in 1799) a girl's alleged murder by her own mother, although the charge was not proved and she was acquitted.³⁴

(married Sir Jas Astrey) and Rebecca (married John Kerry), above, landownership (Cornwell); below, relig. hist. (Reformn to 1819).

²⁹ Brunner and Lunt, *Sheriffs*, 131; below, relig. hist. (Reformn to 1819).

³⁰ Glos. Archives, D2957/41/186; D2957/216/150; OHC, par. reg. transcript, baptisms 1737, 1740; *Secker's Visit.* 47.

³¹ Above, landownership (Cornwell manor); below, relig. hist. (Reformn to 1819).

³² OHC, MS Oxf. Archd. Oxon. b 40, f. 102; P. Cavill (ed.), *A New Dictionary of English Field-Names* (2018), 355.

³³ Above, econ. hist. (trades).

³⁴ Oxf. Jnl Syn. 20 Nov. 1778, 14 Dec. 1782; *Oxf. Jnl*, 18 Feb., 9 Mar. 1799.

Since 1800

The Penystons continued as resident lords for much of the 19th century, Frances (d. 1873) erecting a wall tablet in the church to her 'faithful and attached servant' John Costiff (d. 1840), who owned property in Chipping Norton.³⁵ In all she employed eight to ten live-in servants at the manor house between 1851 and 1871, when her coachman, gardener, and groom were separately housed.³⁶ Rectors were non-resident until 1877,³⁷ and the rest of Cornwell's small population comprised mainly agricultural labourers employed by the chief tenant farmers,³⁸ two of whom committed suicide in the 1810s.³⁹ The manor house was broken into in 1806,⁴⁰ and the farmer John Checkley suffered an aggravated burglary at Glebe Farm in 1851,⁴¹ while in 1833 a Cornwell labourer was tried for forging a letter to the keeper of Oxford gaol, demanding his release after he was sentenced to six months there for assaulting the parish constable.⁴² Other parishioners were prosecuted in the 1840s for petty theft and poaching.⁴³

Cricket was played by 1862, the Cornwell club's president in 1877 being the newly resident rector Charles Walkey, who established a pitch on his glebe.⁴⁴ Frances Penyston gave a 'grand ball' in 1856, attended by more than 120 'nobility and gentry of the district', and on her death was remembered as 'a true friend ... ever ready to relieve the sick and the poor'.⁴⁵ J.F. Penyston (d. 1893) was similarly praised for his charity, hosting regular treats for the village schoolchildren and for elderly and infirm inmates of Chipping Norton workhouse.⁴⁶ Cornwell's next two lords were both non-resident, and in 1894 Cornwell Manor was let to Alexander Nelson Hall, the managing director of Hall's Oxford Brewery Ltd., who remained for 29 years. For much of that time he served as churchwarden, and received an OBE for distinguished service in the First World War,⁴⁷ which claimed the lives of three Cornwell

³⁵ Wall tablet in church; TNA, PROB 11/1926/185.

³⁶ TNA, HO 107/1732; *ibid.* RG 9/912; RG 10/1458.

³⁷ Below, *relig. hist.* (rectory ho.; since 1819).

³⁸ *Census*, 1801–31; TNA, HO 107/878; HO 107/1732; *ibid.* RG 9/912; RG 10/1458; RG 11/1521; RG 12/1179.

³⁹ *Oxf. Jnl*, 9 Apr. 1814 (Wm Wells), 8 June 1816 (John Dunn).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 8 June 1806.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 18 Oct., 22, 29 Nov. 1851; Bodl. MS Top. Oxon. d 244, p. 779.

⁴² OHC, QS1833/2/L3/7; *ibid.* CPZ/3.

⁴³ *Ibid.* QS1845/4/L3/37; QS1846/3/L1/18–20.

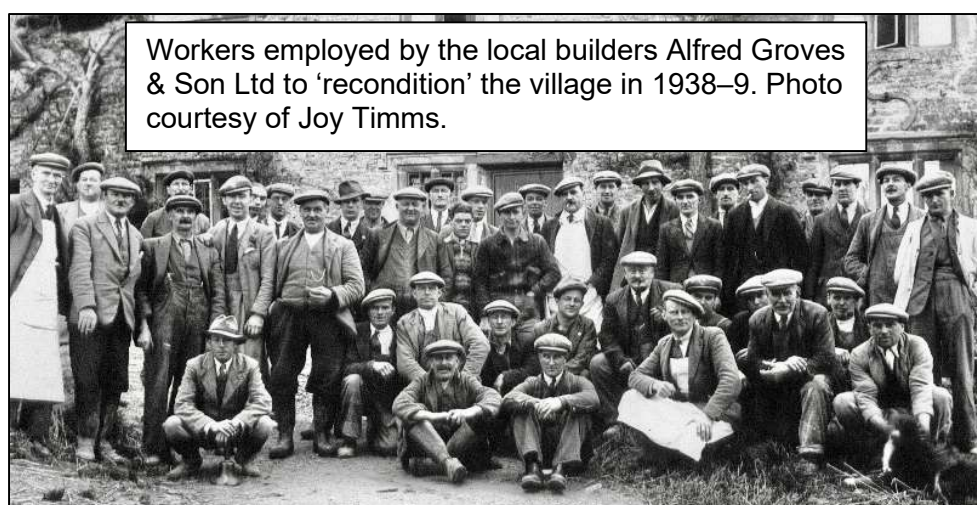
⁴⁴ *Oxf. Jnl*, 6 Sept. 1862, 29 Aug. 1877; *Oxon. Weekly News*, 4 and 11 Aug. 1880.

⁴⁵ *Oxf. Jnl*, 27 Dec. 1856; *Oxon. Weekly News*, 18 June 1873.

⁴⁶ *Oxon. Weekly News*, 14 Aug. 1878, 18 Aug. 1880; 23 Aug. 1882, 18 July 1888; *Oxf. Jnl*, 17 June 1893.

⁴⁷ *Oxon. Weekly News*, 14 Mar. 1894, 21 Mar. 1923; *Kelly's Dir. Oxon.* (1895–1920 edns); OHC, PAR73/2/A/1. His father (and the brewery's chairman) was Alex. Wm Hall (d. 1919) of Steeple Barton, sometime MP for Oxford and high sheriff 1867–8: Brunner and Lunt, *Sheriffs*, 177.

parishioners.⁴⁸ A three-day sale of furniture was held at Cornwell Manor following his death in 1923.⁴⁹



The new lord Joshua Bower occupied Cornwell Manor from 1924, similarly serving as churchwarden, and in 1930 participating in wider efforts to replace a negligent rector.⁵⁰ In 1937 he sold to the Gillsons, Priscilla Gillson's large inherited fortune allowing the village to be 'reconditioned' in 1938–9, when every one of its cottages (all occupied by estate workers) gained mains electricity, piped water, drainage, and indoor sanitation. Electric street lighting (to wrought-iron lanterns) was also provided, while other new amenities included a village shop, a village green with a children's playground, and a village hall adapted from the former school.⁵¹ In 1939 the Gillsons offered Cornwell Manor for war work,⁵² and from 1941–6 it served as an Auxiliary Territorial Service convalescent home for wounded soldiers, housing up to 45 patients at any time, who were entertained with concerts, plays, and dances, and who attended their own Sunday services at the parish church.⁵³ Mrs Gillson, whose husband was killed on active service in Burma in 1944, never returned to live in Cornwell, although her ashes were interred in the churchyard following her death in 1979.⁵⁴ Her successor Lord

⁴⁸ War memorial tablet in church; below, relig. hist. (since 1819).

⁴⁹ *Daily Telegraph*, 16 May 1923; *Oxon. Weekly News*, 4 July 1923.

⁵⁰ *Kelly's Dir. Oxon.* (1924); OHC, MS Oxf. Dioc. c 1784; below, relig. hist. (since 1819).

⁵¹ *Country Life*, 17 May 1941, 432–6; *Architects' Jnl*, 27 Nov. 1941, 355–60; above, landscape etc. (built character); landownership (Cornwell manor).

⁵² *The Tatler*, 25 Oct. 1939.

⁵³ K. Galbraith, 'Cornwell manor, 1941–6' (1973): TS in OHC; A. Macdonald, 'Glimpses of Cornwell Life' (2018): TS at Cornwell Manor.

⁵⁴ *Country Life*, 22 Sept. 2021, 88; OHC, par. reg. transcript, burial 1979 ('Contesse Priscilla Fregonniere'). In 1947 she had married the French count Guy de la Frégonnière: *The Times*, 17 July 1947.

Robert Crichton-Stuart, resident from 1947, occasionally took part in village cricket, and in 1949 there was a village outing to Southend-on-Sea (Essex).⁵⁵

The Wards (owners from 1959) made alterations to both the house and its gardens, employing successive head gardeners.⁵⁶ All of Cornwell's dwellings remained estate-owned until the early 1980s, when some outlying farmhouses were sold, and by 1991 five dwellings were owner-occupied.⁵⁷ Of those Glebe Farm was bought in 1982 by Margot Irene Rufus Isaacs, dowager marchioness of Reading, who lived there until her death in 2015.⁵⁸ In 2023 the village itself still belonged to the estate, and retained its children's playground on the green, although the shop had long closed, while the village hall had become the estate office. Cornwell Manor was home to Alexander Ward, and was also let commercially for weddings, filming, and events.⁵⁹

Education

In 1738 church offertory money was used to pay a widow to teach children reading and the catechism.⁶⁰ A dame school mentioned in 1805 was presumably that supported by the Penystons in 1808,⁶¹ which taught five children in 1818 (when five or six others learnt accounts 'in a neighbouring village'),⁶² and eight or nine 'very young' children in the 1830s. The only provision for boys aged 9–14 at that date was the rector's Sunday school (begun in 1829), which had 12 boys.⁶³ Older children of both sexes attended Churchill school by the 1860s–70s, when the dame school (still supported by Frances Penyston) had seven or eight pupils aged 3–9, taught by a single mistress in her own cottage.⁶⁴

A scheme to educate all of Cornwell's school-age children in neighbouring Daylesford (then Worcs.), proposed in 1872, was avoided by the building of a new schoolroom in Cornwell village in 1877, funded entirely by J.F. Penyston, who retained ownership.⁶⁵ Opened in 1878 as Cornwell National school, it came under government inspection later that year, and had a certificated mistress teaching 17–20 boys and girls. A

⁵⁵ Macdonald, 'Glimpses'; *Daily News*, 11 June 1949.

⁵⁶ *Country Life*, 22 Sept. 2021, 90–1; above, landownership (manor ho.).

⁵⁷ *Census*, 1981–91 (dwellings owner-occupied); above, econ. hist. (since 1800).

⁵⁸ Info. from Alexander Ward; *Daily Telegraph*, 14 May 2015; *Independent*, 18 May 2015.

⁵⁹ www.cornwellmanor.com (accessed Dec. 2022); info. from Charlotte Boston (estate manager). For shop, above, econ. hist. (trades).

⁶⁰ *Secker's Visit*. 47.

⁶¹ OHC, MSS Oxf. Dioc. d 568, f. 97; d 570, f. 87.

⁶² *Educ. of Poor Digest* (Parl. Papers 1819 (224), ix), II, p. 720.

⁶³ OHC, MSS Oxf. Dioc. b 38, f. 69; b 39, f. 103; *Educ. Enq. Abstract* (Parl. Papers 1835 (62), xlii), p. 744.

⁶⁴ OHC, MSS Oxf. Dioc. b 70, f. 213; c 332, f. 141; c 335, f. 103; c 338, f. 118; *Dutton, Allen & Co.'s Dir. Oxon.* (1863); *Returns relating to Elem. Educ.* (Parl. Papers 1871 (201), iv), p. 326.

⁶⁵ TNA, ED 2/362/12; *Oxon. Weekly News*, 29 Jan. 1873; above, landscape etc. (built character).

porch was added in 1894,⁶⁶ but average attendance fell to just ten in 1904,⁶⁷ when the school was closed and its pupils transferred to Churchill school at an annual cost of £28, rising to £36 in 1905.⁶⁸ The former schoolroom was remodelled as the village hall in 1938–9.⁶⁹



The former schoolroom remodelled as the village hall in 1938–9, from the south-east (left) and the north (right).

Welfare

Small bequests to the poor were common in 16th- and 17th-century wills,⁷⁰ Dorothy Halifax (d. 1655/6) leaving 12*d.* to each poor household.⁷¹ Charities endowed by John Wilton (rector 1628–62) and by an unknown donor, each raised from £5 stock, were active in 1685,⁷² but had been lost by 1738 when they were thought to have totalled £12.⁷³ Offertory money, formerly used for schooling, was given to the poor by 1759 and still in 1774.⁷⁴ Cornwell had no Friendly Societies, and though a resident Cornwell nurse advertised her services in 1888 inhabitants presumably looked mostly to Chipping Norton for medical care, collections for the town's hospital being made in the parish in 1919.⁷⁵

⁶⁶ TNA, ED 2/362/12; *Kelly's Dir. Oxon.* (1883); *Return of Schs* (Parl. Papers 1894 [C 7529], lxxv), p. 492.

⁶⁷ *Public Elem. Schs 1906* (Parl. Papers 1906 [Cd 3182], lxxxvi), p. 525.

⁶⁸ TNA, ED 2/362/12; OHC, CC4/275/12; *Oxf. Jnl*, 15 Apr. 1905.

⁶⁹ Above, landscape etc. (built character).

⁷⁰ e.g. OHC, MSS Wills Oxon. 190.289; 194.407; 72/3/10.

⁷¹ TNA, PROB 11/252/243.

⁷² OHC, MS Oxf. Archd. Oxon. b 40, f. 105; below, relig. hist. (Reform to 1819). Wilton's charity was not mentioned in his will: TNA, PROB 11/320/348.

⁷³ *Secker's Visit.* 47.

⁷⁴ OHC, MSS Oxf. Dioc. d 555, f. 149; d 558, f. 164; d 561, f. 161; d 564, f. 132; above (educ.).

⁷⁵ *Oxon. Weekly News*, 31 Oct. 1888, 26 Mar. 1919.

Total expenditure on parish poor relief in 1776 was £14 10s. (including 10s. spent on renting accommodation), which in line with wider trends rose to £18 in 1785 and to £103 in 1803. Five people (all adults) were then receiving permanent relief, but none occasional help, Cornwell's low poor rate being ascribed to the 'good wages' paid by farmers. A further factor was presumably the village's 'closed' character and the lord's control of the housing stock. Costs were similar in 1814 when eight people were relieved permanently and three occasionally,⁷⁶ and overseers' accounts (starting in 1819) show money spent on weekly pay, clothing, shoes, and doctors' visits.⁷⁷ Expenditure peaked at £130 in 1825, falling to £68 in 1831 then climbing to £111 in 1834,⁷⁸ after which responsibly passed to the new Chipping Norton Poor Law Union.⁷⁹ A private poor rate collected by parish officers 1854–64 was spent on rents, clothing, bread, and coal for five or six inhabitants.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ *Poor Abstract*, 1777, p. 437; 1787, p. 655; 1804, pp. 400–1; 1818, pp. 354–5.

⁷⁷ OHC, PAR73/5/F1/1.

⁷⁸ *Poor Rate Retns*, 1822, p. 136; 1825, p. 171; 1830–1, p. 159; 1835, p. 154.

⁷⁹ Youngs, *Admin. Units*, I, 395; *Oxon. Atlas*, pp. 144–5.

⁸⁰ OHC, PAR73/5/F1/1.