

Sociology and Social Policy Research Seminar 2007/2008

Thursdays 12:00 - 13:00

Building 54 (Mathematics, Room 10037/10B (Level 10))

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Being vulnerable and the workhouse experience in the South of England, 1782-c.1845

Historians have long been fascinated with the institution and institutionalisation of workhouses established after the passage of the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. Since the initial work of the Webbs, research has examined the conditions inside these institutions (e.g. Crowther, 1981) and has also been inspired by Foucault's approach in *Discipline and Punish* (e.g. Driver, 1993). Whilst recent research has attempted to examine the experiences of the vulnerable in the post-1834 workhouse, little is known about welfare under Gilbert's Act of 1782. This Act enabled parishes to group together to provide a residence for the most vulnerable members in the parish: children and the elderly. The Gilbert's workhouse has thus been labelled as 'a source of care, not deterrence' (King, 2000, p.25). Yet, regardless of the renewed attention into the experience of the poor during the 'old poor law' (e.g. King) and the experience of welfare in old age (e.g. Thane, 2002 and Ottaway, 2004), this particular setting has been overlooked. This paper presents a re-assessment of Gilbert's Act, using new research on parish-level documents in the South of England. The experience of children and the elderly, as well as the able-bodied poor, is explored using several detailed collections of documents, including the extremely rare West Sussex 'case papers' which contain over 100 pauper biographies, their welfare claims and the Board's decision. Evidence suggests that the Gilbert's workhouse was not necessarily a sanctuary for those who required care. The changing economic and social context of welfare provision of the early nineteenth-century meant that this legislation was applied on the ground in ways which were far removed from the initial ethos of the Act.

References:

- M. A. Crowther, *The Workhouse System 1834-1929* (Georgia, 1981).
F. Driver, *Power and Pauperism: The Workhouse System 1834-1884* (Cambridge, 1993).
S. King, *Poverty and welfare in England 1700-1850: A regional perspective* (Manchester, 2000).
D. Marshall, *The English Poor in the Eighteenth Century; a study in social and administrative history* (London, 1926).
S.R. Ottaway, *The Decline of Life: Old-Age in Eighteenth-century England* (Cambridge, 2004).
P. Thane, *Old Age in English History: Past Experienced, Present Issues* (Oxford, 2000).

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