

Care in the Community

It is tempting to think of the welfare state as a post-World-War-II invention, conceived by Lord Beveridge and implemented by Attlee's Labour government. Arguably, England looked after its poor and sick better in the Middle Ages, at a parish level.

The church 'vestry' was then the administrative hub; it was there that the leading yeomen met; they took it in turn to act both as churchwardens and sidesmen and as overseers of the poor and surveyors of roads and bridges. They worked unpaid and in turn employed the sexton, scribe, constables and dog-catchers who were paid out of the parish funds. Residents paid the Poor Rates which funded care of the sick, elderly and unemployed. In 1640 the Privy Council, under Charles I, decreed that parishes should be the official arms of local government; rigorous laws ensured that the poor were properly looked after; village workhouses were built to house paupers who until then had been supported in their own homes.

Because the better-off paid directly for the care of local sick and poor, the Overseer had to account for every penny and every effort was taken to make sure that migrant poor from other parishes did not benefit. (It was the job of 'beggar-bangers' to move them on ...) Conditions were far from perfect, but a look at overseers' accounts for the period illustrate the support given to paupers, as well as their earnings since those fit to work were expected to do so.

Parish care of its poor continued until 1834, when a severe Poor Law closed village workhouses and moved paupers to forbidding Union workhouses, like Petersfield's*, instructed to make life as unpleasant as possible for the 'undeserving poor'. Anyone who saw the film 'I, Daniel Blake' (2016) will have appreciated how impersonal today's welfare state can be.

Petersfield Area Churches Together (PACT) and other organisations are doing much to make 'care in the community' mean what it says, but central government still holds the financial reins.

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*Petersfield's Workhouse in Love Lane (West) was bombed in Nov 1940 killing eight people including its Master and Matron.