Testifying for the Poor: Epistolary Advocates and the Negotiation of Parochial Relief in England, 1800–1834

Abstract

At the heart of the English and Welsh Old Poor Law (1601–1834) lay a set of timeless questions: who should be eligible for welfare payments; how such payments should be balanced with contribution; and what to “do” about migrants. In recent historiography, answers to these questions have been constructed through the lens of pauper letters: narratives written by or for the poor who were out of their place of settlement. These documents show that the poor had agency in shaping relief practice. Our article puts pauper letters back into their wider context. They were in fact a minor part of the epistolary corpus that ultimately shaped how the poor obtained relief. Within this corpus, the largest group of writers were epistolary advocates—friends, family, officials, doctors, landlords, employers and neighbors—who wrote on behalf of the poor. Classifying and analyzing such letters, we argue: that the parish state was, and was expected, to be malleable in the face of advocates; that a deeply ingrained culture of individual and communal philanthropy ensured that poor law practice was not simply skewed in favor of the interests of ratepayers; and that in responding to the question of what to “do” about migrant rights to welfare, officials and epistolary advocates corresponded across a landscape in which contestability and balance were the key criteria. Even as the political lifeblood of the Old Poor Law flowed away in the 1820s and 1830s, communal attitudes towards migrant welfare needs and parochial duties remained remarkably flexible.

The English and Welsh poor law (1601) created the framework for a national welfare system in which care for the poor was to be delivered at the level of the Anglican parish, by named officers (variously elected, selected, or coerced), and using the proceeds of a local property tax to meet need. Despite recent assertions to the contrary, this was a discretionary welfare system. Those falling into poverty were enabled to apply for support and given an avenue of appeal if turned down, but no legal right to receive welfare and no legal obligation on parishes to provide it existed. At the heart of this discretionary system lay a set of tensions that we would recognise as essentially modern: Who should be eligible for welfare? How should the benefits associated with eligibility be set against accumulated contribution? Should officials simply try to minimize welfare costs? How should private
philanthropic activities relate to the state welfare system? What should officials and communities “do” about in-migrants? How could the poor learn the rules for navigating a discretionary system? What was the accepted ground of contestability for official decisions? And how malleable should the decision-making system of the local/parish state be in the face of these tensions?3 The settlement laws of the 1660s (variously amended thereafter) provided clarity on some of these issues. By birth, marriage, the paying of tax, renting property to the value of at least £10 per annum, or the serving of an apprenticeship, all English and Welsh people obtained and might change a “settlement.” Places of settlement were, in turn, the locus of applications for welfare, and those out of their “place” when they fell, or threatened to fall, into poverty could be subject to elaborate, protracted, and often expensive removal procedures involving repatriation to a settlement parish.4

For those living in or removed to a settlement parish—the “in-parish poor”—our understanding of how this discretionary welfare system was experienced and navigated by paupers has become increasingly nuanced, particularly during the later decades of the Old Poor Law (1790–1834) when source material becomes richer. Older notions that parishes employed strict moral yardsticks for eligibility are increasingly problematic. Officials and ratepayers were often unwilling or unable to prevent relief being paid to the morally reprobate. Those turned down usually returned with similar claims to test the consistency of decision-making. Recent research from Steven King has suggested that paupers knew the law of welfare very well, while Peter King has argued persuasively that they frequently had formal and informal resort to magistrates in order to reaffirm their eligibility.5 These magistrates, many of whom were local and appear to have been broadly sympathetic to the poor, were both knowable and known to the in-parish poor.6

This said, resort to the law was on the muscular end of the spectrum of pauper responses to the vagaries of discretionary welfare. The minutes of vestry meetings show that in-parish paupers generally approached those supplying welfare with deference and a sophisticated sense of the landscape and language of negotiation. Moreover, as Susannah Ottaway and others have pointed out, for the in-parish poor, customary and Christian practice had created in many places a sense that certain groups (the sick, aged, impaired, children, etc.) should get relief, even if parochial authorities retained the power to make that relief inconsistent, low, contingent, and highly variable across regions and types of community.7 By the 1790s there is evidence that the in-parish poor expected parochial officials to negotiate rather than simply to impose relief. John Daniell, the joint overseer of Doncaster parish (Yorkshire), was not unusual amongst overseers of the poor in northern and midland England when referring to payments being made “according to agreement” with a pauper. Considering the case of Ann Hill in October 1794, he wondered whether she “should not be taken into the [Work]House, she wanting further relief.” After visiting, however, he “Agreed to give her 2s a week instead of 1s.” This subtle language supports several readings, one of which is an act of face-to-face negotiation and changed policy in the light of pauper agency.8 The frequency with which early nineteenth-century vestries had to remind, order, demand, and request their overseers to actively enforce vestry decisions on individual cases provides some support for an interpretation that would see the relief decision at the sharp end as essentially negotiable. Certainly, an older
literature which tensioned questions of whether Old Poor Law policies at the local level were driven primarily by expediency (the size of the tax base or the desire for economy) or by a genuinely communitarian set of precepts has been nuanced by a sense of the pragmatism and fluidity of welfare practice.

For both parishes and paupers, the question of the eligibility of migrants who were out of their place of settlement was potentially much more complex. The nature and frequency of migration meant that all English and Welsh communities would have had some people living “away” from their settlement parish at the time they fell into poverty. Equally, all places would have hosted migrants whose settlements, and thus the liability for relieving poverty, were elsewhere. Steven King has argued that in some communities the majority of claimants were comprised of the nonsettled poor.9 Such observations probably apply to only a small minority of urban or de-industrialising areas, but the “out-parish poor” could still be a substantial issue for parish officers. The exact dimensions of this group are hard to trace. We know from English family reconstitution studies that in most communities the turnover of individuals and families within and between generations was very substantial. Where attempts have been made to link recipients of poor relief to family histories constructed in this way, the results for the early nineteenth-century have usually been disappointing, suggesting that at least a very large minority of people would have been out of their place when they later fell into poverty.10 Parish record-keeping frequently masks the presence of this group. When faced by a list of pauper recipients and their awards in overseers’ accounts, we have tended to assume that the payments relate to in-parish paupers, unless a balancing payment from another parish also appears in the accounts or a separate list of out-parish paupers has been kept. A brief rendering of the situation in Northamptonshire (one of our sample counties, see below) suggests the problematic nature of such assumptions. The overseers’ accounts of eleven parishes in the county reference “out-parish” books, which were either lost at the time or subsequently. Where an income and expenditure record was transferred from these books to the main accounts, we garner a sense of the scale of the problem (roughly a third of spending on the parish poor), but in other cases a more subtle consideration of the records is required. Thus, in the parishes of Oxendon and Oundle, we know from surviving correspondence and vestry minutes that allowances were being paid as far afield as Manchester and London, but the accounts of the overseers make no distinction between in and out-parish poor. At the same time, the Oxendon poor are not traceable in the accounts of the Hulme (Manchester) overseer because allowances were paid directly via a third party. Across the county in the parish of Thrapston, the survival of extensive incoming and outgoing copy letter books and associated bills testifies to a parish with extensive numbers of poor people (close to 50 per cent) out of their place, but the overseers’ accounts make no distinction between those living elsewhere, the settled in-parish poor, and the paupers of other communities relieved by Thrapston. Moreover, since many incoming and outgoing payments were made by intermediaries, the accounting entries relating to these paupers take the form of lump sum payments or receipts, which can easily be mistaken for payments to suppliers.11 Thus, while the scale of out-parish poverty may ultimately be unknowable, it is likely to have been very substantial.

The withering of the settlement certificate system across much of early nineteenth-century England and Wales,12 meant that the out-parish poor would: be subject to the examination and removal clauses of the settlement laws, have to
draw on neighbors and other forms of nonparochial support in their host communities, or would have to explicitly ask their settlement parishes for relief payments. That the settlement system remained a potent weapon in the arsenal of welfare options open to officials is clear. For some communities, vast swathes of the parochial archive are taken up with settlement examinations, removal orders, and disputed cases. Some places consistently and vigorously followed settlement law in relation to both their own paupers elsewhere and those with settlements elsewhere living in that community. In our county-level datasets, however, we find much to support recent contentions that the removal aspect of English and Welsh settlement laws was applied sparingly and sporadically. Even if they felt subject to surveillance or were keenly attuned to the threat of removal, in practice relatively few of those who could have been removed were sent back to their parish of settlement. Thus, turning to Northamptonshire once again (for consistency rather than because it stands out in our sample), a survey of surviving vestry minutes suggests that by the early nineteenth-century those applying for out-parish relief outnumbered those removed by around 2:1. More detailed work on the overseers’ accounts, correspondence, and other parochial records of Thrapston and Oundle further suggests that less than 25 per cent of those falling into poverty while living elsewhere were ever removed back to their parish of settlement. Rather, parishes in our sample forged numerous bilateral agreements, either active or passive, through which they agreed to support “their” paupers in a host parish. This “out-parish relief system” might involve the yearly reckoning of relative liabilities or the ongoing transmission of money and necessitated the sending of pauper letters. Such documents were written by or for the poor as part of the process of convincing settlement parishes to grant relief in a host (i.e., nonsettlement) parish, and they have been regarded as a means of recovering an elusive, even authentic, “voice of the poor.” They are part of a wider stock of correspondence between parishes that collectively affords us a rich window onto the operation of the English and Welsh relief system and to which we return later.

Meanwhile, the questions of how the out-parish poor navigated a discretionary welfare system so as to establish entitlement and how parochial officials understood their role as recipients of communications remain as problematic as they are important. Lynn Hollen Lees suggests that “entitlement is a modern word that points to the terrain within which . . . struggles over rights and obligations took place,” and nowhere was such terrain rougher or the struggle more intense than when considering whether, where, and how to distribute benefits to migrants. For the out-parish poor, distance from a settlement parish created an intervening layer of complexity that often did not apply to those who remained “at home.” Local magistrates (that is, local to the “home” parish) were often distant both physically and conceptually from the out-parish poor. While the contribution of the in-parish poor (financial, material, social, cultural) to their communities could be witnessed or evidenced by neighbors and family, those living away necessarily found it harder to tie eligibility to contribution or to provide evidence for it. Because they lived at a distance, almost all writers asked for relief in cash, whereas the in-parish poor could meld requests for relief in cash and kind so as to allay suspicions that they would fritter away their allowances; and the in-parish poor would have seen or heard of the impact of their claims first-hand. Their proximity arguably gave them a greater sensitivity to the contestability of welfare and simultaneously gave in-parish paupers the ability to readily offer more
information or to call casually on local people to correct misapprehensions. It has thus often been assumed that for the out-parish pauper establishing entitlement must always have been a matter of anxiety and, to an extent, one of strategy.\textsuperscript{19} Research into the claims of the sick poor suggests that this dichotomy between the knowledge and strategies of in- and out-parish paupers should not be so starkly drawn.\textsuperscript{20} Moreover, distance from a settlement parish did not necessarily mean that paupers were cut off from intelligence and news. Many letters emphasized how the writer had kept in touch with people “at home” via visits, letters, reading newspapers, or meeting the carters and others who traveled between parishes and carried gossip as well as goods. Nonetheless, there is a clear sense from much of the literature on the experiential dynamics of the Old Poor Law that establishing and maintaining entitlement in a discretionary system was likely to be a particularly fraught process for migrants, much as it remains today.

Against this backdrop, those writing on the dual themes of the out-parish poor and their eligibility have concentrated solely or largely on the role of the rhetorical and strategic agency of the poor themselves as revealed in their own letters.\textsuperscript{21} This is unsurprising. Letters that begin “Perhaps you may take me for a Lady of Fortune because some of my Friends got the Bishop of Durham to write to Mr Flamank about the payment of the Money. I must therefore undeceive you” or that contain an observation like “and besides we have been three parts famished for want of Vituals being Seven in family and my Children have took the peelings out of the pigs wash and Eate them for Hunger” are intuitively interesting, potentially reveal much about the experiences of the poor, and speak to much wider themes of dignity, agency, and the operation of labor markets.\textsuperscript{22} Yet, focusing on the full corpus of parochial correspondence—oversers’ letters, pauper narratives, and the communications of advocates and professionals—reveals that letters about the poor rather than by them were the dominant narrative form.\textsuperscript{23} Indeed, even where paupers wrote a series of letters to their settlement parish, a reassembling of the chronological run of that series usually reveals interspersing overseers’ correspondence and letters from third parties. Yet, the role and motives of official and unofficial advocates (parish officers, magistrates, landlords, doctors, employers, etc.) in helping the poor to navigate the English and Welsh welfare system has been completely neglected.\textsuperscript{24} This is unfortunate. Lynn Hollen Lees has argued that, under the Old Poor Law, “[w]hatever the motivations of the parties involved, the result of welfare transactions was unavoidably a reinforcement of social solidarity on the communal level.” For her the poor law was defined and bounded by “the morris dance of interlocking obligation” between the have-nots in the relief process and those who could help them.\textsuperscript{25} If this was true and true of face-to-face transactions over the vestry table or in the overseers’ parlor, then it was even more so in the case of the official and unofficial advocates who dealt on behalf of the poor from a distance.

An investigation into the correspondence of epistolary advocates thus provides a vital corrective to the cumulative historiography on English and Welsh pauper letters. Such an analysis also affords a window onto how a substantial group of the poor sought to navigate a discretionary welfare system and feeds into wider debates about the intent and sentiment of the Old Poor Law. Moreover, identifying key groups of epistolary advocates allows us to grapple with wider questions, about social obligations and reciprocity, the malleability of state power, the longevity of customary, Christian and philanthropic duty, and the way that
communities thought about the inclusion or exclusion of migrants. In this article, we thus focus on the writing of advocates for the poor during the closing decades of the Old Poor Law, a period often associated with dwindling sympathy for the claims of the poor in the political and (tax paying) public imagination. After a consideration of the scale and character of the corpus, we move on to review the role of advocates we describe as “friends” to the poor, respectable inhabitants who acted willingly and actively in a spirit of patronage and who, by so doing, helped to shape the nature of parochial negotiations. Following this, we offer a brief review of others who acted on the poor’s behalf, including employers and landlords. The final, most substantial, section investigates parish officials and the nature of their representations on behalf of out-parish paupers. We argue that the parish state was, and was supposed to be, malleable in the face of the claims of epistolary advocates; that the words and strategies of such advocates provided important yardsticks to the poor in navigating a discretionary welfare system; and that the often passionate advocacy of the group, even of local officials themselves, points to a strong underlying commitment to the migrant poor, which overrode simple questions of economy and was not generally diluted at parochial level in the later Old Poor Law whatever the wider political narrative might indicate.26

The Nature of Advocacy in Pauper Correspondence

Peter Jones has described the way that paupers used the letter-writing process as a means of “[filtering] their material and practical needs through a fine rhetorical mesh,” so that “such requests to a greater or lesser extent fulfilled, or corresponded to, the expectations and imperatives” of parish officers.27 Others, too, have noted that pauper letters were “strategic pieces of writing” designed to gain advantage within the relief relationship and demonstrating pauper agency in the process.28 Yet to acknowledge that pauper letters were rhetorical in their construction and strategic in their intent is not to imply that they were documents intended to deceive. Indeed, parishes satisfied themselves of the veracity of out-parish paupers’ claims through formal or informal methods which ranged from personal visits through to surveillance by proxy, using the agency of a trusted or nominated person from the host parish. Thomas Sokoll has even suggested for Essex that “if anything the surveillance of non-resident paupers must have been closer than that of those residing in their parishes.”29 Such surveillance notwithstanding, an out-parish pauper’s word was unlikely to have been enough, on its own, to establish entitlement. It is for this reason that those studying pauper letters have pointed to, inter alia: instances where a writer actively invites surveillance; efforts on the part of paupers to construct a shared linguistic register with officials; the appearance of well-understood yardsticks of deservingness—nakedness, starvation, etc.—in series of letters from the same person; and a tendency for paupers to appropriate the voices of others, in the formulation: “Doctor X says . . .” or “My neighbors think . . .”

A further persuasive indicator of truthfulness, need, and deservingness would have been the word of a “trusted other” to speak/write directly on the pauper’s behalf. The numerical importance of advocates’ correspondence is compelling. For the purposes of this study, a total of 1,100 letters to English parishes were analyzed, all of which constitute appeals for relief either by, or on behalf of, paupers. The vast majority come from county archive collections, and they constitute all
such letters which could be found in those collections. In common with other studies, most of the letters cluster in the period between the 1790s and 1830s. The largest collection of letters relating to a single pauper is fifty and the smallest just two, such that the corpus as a whole affords a perspective on 239 distinct paupers. Our counties were deliberately chosen because they represent significant typological contrasts and have been under-researched in the wider poor law literature. Early nineteenth-century Devon (186 letters) remained a relative rural backwater; Surrey (287 letters) was in socio-economic and cultural terms strongly orientated towards London and experienced significant in-, out-, and through-migration; early nineteenth-century Northamptonshire (299 letters) exhibited a complex mix of rapid industrialisation and simultaneous de-industrialisation, strong urbanisation and the development of a commercial agricultural sector; West Yorkshire (293 letters), combined both subsistence agriculture and highly commercial arable and pastoral production and was above all an urban-industrial county; and the City of Westminster (35 letters) provides a metropolitan perspective within a landscape of narratives where London is significantly under-represented because of sustained problems of source survival.

Within this broad corpus, appeals made by advocates on behalf of paupers, or would-be paupers, constitute over half (671, or 61 per cent) of all the narratives, with 208 distinct advocates writing. We have not, in calculating these figures, included instances where third parties were asked to simply add a postscript in support of a pauper narrative, something which is common throughout the sample. Almost all of the writers in the corpus were male, and the advocate letters were written from, and related to, paupers in a broadly balanced urban and rural subset. We have been able to detect only three justices of the peace acting as advocates, but there is a distinct middling-sort complexion to the occupations represented in the sample, which includes major employers, clergymen of different hues, officials, doctors, and gentlemen farmers. In conceptual terms we can think of them as falling into three distinct categories: parish officials (letters from whom constitute 36 per cent), “friends” (35 per cent), and “others” (just over 29 per cent, including medical men, employers, landlords and neighbors). In turn, it is perhaps unsurprising that these men fulfilled the broad Hanoverian requirement for “respectability.” The poor wanted as advocates and sponsors those in the host community who would have been able to speak with authority on their behalf, and who would have expected to have been listened-to by overseers and vestry officials, even at a distance. Most of their letters asked officials for “relief” or “assistance,” but specific requests for clothing, rent, nursing and medical aid, and food or fuel were also made. Reflecting the varying stages at which advocates might enter a trail of correspondence, requests for the continuance of payments or enhancement of existing relief levels were common.

Our initial analysis of this subgroup of letters found little spatial or chronological variation in the intent, content, rhetoric, or strategic approach of authors. The presence of epistolary advocates did, however, vary between counties. Advocate letters constitute 40 per cent of all appeals in Westminster and Devon, 46 per cent in Northamptonshire, 62 per cent in Surrey, and almost 70 per cent in West Yorkshire. This distribution suggests no obvious coherent regional patterning. Nor do such distributions map cleanly onto the spatial patterning of poor law payments per capita, literacy rates, transport infrastructure or intensity of urbanisation. The individual county samples are small enough for the differences
to be explained by random variation. Yet the different complexions of the county samples feel both real and important. One potential explanation is the duration of welfare payments. Paupers in counties with traditionally transient allowances may have contacted advocates sooner than their counterparts elsewhere, for whom it was worth investing more time and energy in building a personal relief relationship. Alternatively, this spatial patterning might reflect the strength and formality of the out-parish system. Communities in Lancashire and Yorkshire appear to have been much more likely to keep records of their payment relationships with other parishes than those in the South, and it would be unsurprising to see officials in particular playing a larger advocacy role in such places.

However we explain the distribution, within an overall trail of correspondence about/for an individual or family, advocates followed one or more strategies of instigation, interspersal, substitution, or intervention. *Instigating* letters were those which made an initial approach to a settlement parish and which laid the foundations for a chain of correspondence that, at its richest, might involve paupers themselves, officials, family members, and various advocates. A pattern of *interspersal* can be discerned where one or more advocates’ letters appears arbitrarily in a sequence of correspondence. Such letters seem to have been contingent upon a pauper meeting an advocate unexpectedly or the advocate simply responding to information about the circumstances of the family concerned. Interspersing letters rarely picked up threads from preceding items of correspondence or led to sustained follow-through in subsequent narratives. Indeed, several such letters might appear in a set of correspondence about a single pauper. A pattern of *substitution* involved an advocate taking up the narrative strands from the pauper concerned or from another advocate. This does not mean that paupers themselves stopped writing, but the narrative drive of the conversation with officials in a settlement parish switched in favor of the advocate. Finally, an *intervening* pattern involved advocates responding to a perceived, claimed, or rhetoricised “crisis” in the ongoing story of the pauper.

Of course, a single set of correspondence could include multiple advocates following all four patterns. At its most complex a single advocate letter encompassed multiple advocate voices. Thus, Reverend William Howarth wrote an *intervening* letter from March (Cambridgeshire) to Peterborough (Northamptonshire) on April 15, 1833, relating to Joseph Clark and his family to whom “My attention was this morning called.” Pointing to unemployment and chronic sickness in the family, Howarth appropriated the voice of “the medical gentleman who is kindly attending them” and who “thinks the womans life in great danger.” Expressing the view that the family were “altogether in a most distressed and folorn condition,” he further appropriated the voice of Clark’s employer who “gives him an excellent character for steadiness and industry, but not belonging to our parish he has been unable during the winter to obtain any work, except an occasional job.” Whether we should read Howarth’s letter as a semi-official intervention on behalf of the parish or an act of individual charity coterminous with his Christian duty is difficult to say. What is clearer is that advocates like Howarth thought the officials receiving their letters *ought* to consider and act upon them, suggestive of a deeply ingrained expectation that the power of the local state was malleable and contingent. Their expectations were shaped by the fact that, as we have suggested, advocates wrote as equals and sometimes superiors to officials and taxpayers: in
fulfilling their role they wrote, quite literally, to people just like themselves. Nowhere is this clearer than when they wrote as “friends.”

Advocates’ Letters

The notion of “friendship” in eighteenth-century social relations has been subject to significant scrutiny.37 Keith Snell, for example, recognizes that “[t]he term ‘friends’ had wide social usage and particular meanings in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries” and “could include family in our senses today (fairly close relatives) but [also] encompassed a wider array of connected people as well,” such as extended kinship networks and neighbors.38 King likewise notes the rhetorical value of friendship networks in the entitlement-building process and suggests that paupers explicitly sought to co-opt officials, employers, and landlords as de facto “friends.”39 Against this backdrop, it is possible in our corpus to discern a tripartite hierarchy of advocate “friends”: the friend as patron; close acquaintances; and “good” friends, including relatives by blood or marriage. Their advocacy was for the most part willingly, sometimes spontaneously, given and does not appear linked to the day-to-day administration of the poor law or settlement laws.

The letters of “friends” appear at all stages in the trail of correspondence; but they are disproportionately represented as instigating letters, establishing the nature of the claim for relief and adding initial momentum. These letters tend to correspond to the highest level of friendship identified above, that of the friend as patron. Thus, J. Bellett wrote on behalf of Richard Lane, a pauper living at Honiton (Devon) with a settlement in Totnes (also Devon). He stated that “the poor old Man has repeatedly called upon me” in order to solicit assistance, and requested that his relief of two shillings be substantially increased.40 Bellett’s instigating letter is fairly typical of the form: he emphasised Lane’s great age (eighty years) and the fact that he was in severe want and without any other form of support, and he went on to state, without undue embellishment, that even two shillings and sixpence “would, in my humble opinion, have the effect only of gradually starving a Man to death.”41 Bellett wrote twice more (with what might be described as substituting letters) in relation to this particular claim over the space of four weeks.42 The first was a reaction to the fact that no reply had been received from the Totnes overseers to his initial approach; the second makes it clear that Bellett had been successful in securing an extra sixpence per week for the old man.43 Two further letters dating from 1828 and 1829 survive, suggesting that Bellett acted as a “friend” and patron for Lane over an extended period and as instigator in a number of different claims for relief.44

Bellett’s correspondence is exemplary for a number of reasons. First, it is clear that he approached the Totnes overseers as at least their equal: in his instigating letter of 1827, he stated that “[I] trust that you will forthwith cause the additional sum of 6d. per week to be paid him.”45 Secondly, there is no indication that he had a prior personal connection with Lane, and it is therefore quite probable that he would not meet the definition of a “friend” to the old man in any modern, affectionate, or egalitarian sense. Nonetheless, when asked to write on Lane’s behalf he fulfilled a role well understood in the early-nineteenth century, undertaking an act of philanthropy convergent with his social standing and Christian duty. The model for this relationship has its roots in classical antiquity, as the philological debate over the precise meaning and usage of the Latin word amicus...
suggests. Yet, as that debate also demonstrates, there is genuine semantic disquiet over whether it is ever appropriate to describe the client-patron relationship in terms of “friendship.”

Everett Ferguson explains that for pre-Christian civilization, “[t]he interactions between patrons and clients and between members of a household represented the principal vertical relationships in society . . . [whereas] friendship was the ideal horizontal relationship.” Such conclusions translate well to the many modern societies where individuals can enjoy a dyadic relationship based on mutual respect and a level of equality (friendship) or can enter into a patron-client relationship, which of itself implies a level of inequality and asymmetry between the two partners. In this framework “friend as patron” would be understood as a contradiction in terms. The problem with this normative interpretation is that the evidence, from the early-nineteenth at least, is very clear: paupers consciously blurred the line between friendship and what we would more properly understand as a relationship of patronage.

The final point to note about Bellett’s correspondence is that he consciously and deliberately triangulated the relationship between pauper (Lane), “friend” or patron (himself), and the parish officials of both the home and host parishes. In each of his letters, Bellett signed off by requesting that the Totnes overseer replied, not to him, but to the overseer of Honiton. In one of the later letters, he states that Lane “has made repeated applications to Mr. Turner, our Assistant Overseer” but that Turner could not grant relief because he had “no answer to the several letters he [i.e., Turner] has written to you on the subject.” We do not, however, read this approach as an advocate merely seeking to contain the costs of parochial relief in his own parish; rather, in acting as a “friend” for Richard Lane, Bellett expected both parishes to bend in the face of social power and philanthropic respectability. Like the overseers with whom they often shared a social position, the advocate “friend/patrons” of the poor expected their testimony to influence parochial welfare policy. In the sense that their letters pointed to accumulated contribution to the community, the respectability of the pauper concerned or the extreme circumstances in which individuals found themselves, these advocates ranged across a linguistic and strategic register that had much in common with the paupers themselves. These were also letters that claimed, exemplified, and recorded yardsticks of deservingness as they were understood by host communities, a crucial service to the poor in a discretionary system of welfare.

Letters by a second group of “friends”—close acquaintances—are relatively uncommon in the sample. Of the 252 letters from “friends” in the underlying corpus, only sixty-four could be said to have come from what we would now understand as acquaintances. They are nonetheless important, encapsulating a different—more direct, impassioned, and sometimes confrontational—advocacy than that employed by patrons. When Charles Taylor wrote an instigatory letter on the subject of William Tebbot from Northampton to the nearby village of Earl’s Barton on October 24, 1830, he opened much as we might expect, noting that Tebbot “is in great distress and unable to support his family without your immediate assistance.” Rather than developing the detail of the case, however, Taylor asserted his deep personal knowledge of the family—“We have known him for some considerable length of time as an honest industrious man but unable from affliction in his family to provide for them”—and directed the overseer to act on the basis of his personal and informed testimony: “It is not necessary to give you any further information respecting him as I have no doubt you will
provide for him to the extent of your ability.” Jonathan Ford was even more direct when he wrote an intervening letter on behalf of Sarah Robins from Derby (Derbyshire) to Earl’s Barton on December 1, 1829. Robins was “in very great distress” because the Derby overseer had stopped paying an out-parish allowance, being unable to get recompense for this spending from Earl’s Barton. Drawing on a long acquaintance with the family, Ford “would beg if you have any mercy in you that you would send the money immediately and not suffer a poor old woman of 74 years of age to die of starvation.” Warming to his theme, Ford added “if the statement of Mr Moody’s [the Derby overseer, who had been asked why he stopped paying] is correct I think you are very much to blame in not remitting the money when due . . . if you do not think well to send the money the magistrates here shall be applied to.” He trusted that “the magistrates will give the poor woman that full support that her case requires.”

The letters of Taylor and Ford were freighted with authority, the assumption of action, and palpable emotion. An expectation that practice under a discretionary welfare system would be fluid in the direction of paupers as well as ratepayers, is very clear.

Letters from “good” friends (relationships founded on a longstanding familiarity and affection, in the modern sense) are similarly uncommon. In fact only a handful from relatives on behalf of mothers, fathers, in-laws, or children could be placed in this category. Such letters, almost invariably of the instigatory or substituting types, varied in tone, sentiment, and intent on a spectrum between impassioned, almost breathless, through to detached reportage. They have in common a core narrative of trilateral partnership between pauper, friend, and parish, one which simultaneously spoke to the basic conundrum of poor law practice—balancing the interests of paupers and ratepayers—and gave officials the moral cover needed to take a positive decision. Thus, the overseer of Oundle parish (Northamptonshire) noted in May 1836 that he “could not take upon myself the responsibility” of deciding on the future of “the Lunatic [William] Rippener.” Having referred the matter to his friends and family “They have decided upon the course to be pursued and have made temporary arrangements for his removal,” and in light of this positive action the overseer was emboldened to contract with Peckham Lunatic Asylum to pay for an extended stay. This sort of partnership narrative, largely absent from other advocate letters, made the question of what to “do” with migrants rather less contentious than it might otherwise have been.

Overall, the preponderance of letters from well-connected or influential “friends” as patrons further emphasizes the sense that the Old Poor Law was pliable, a work in progress, and that the advocacy of the well-to-do was more than simply a strategic tool employed by the poor to gain competitive advantage. Those in this category who wrote on behalf of paupers—ministers of the church, “respectable” rate payers, retired parish officials, and professional men—readily engaged with overseers and vestries precisely because they wished to influence the nature and direction of relief, despite their occasional protestations to the contrary. Though they inevitably shared many of the moral precepts of those to whom they wrote, they did not write as part of the normal business of interparochial relations nor in a framework that emphasised economy, and as a consequence they were able to fulfil their moral and Christian duty to the poor with a singularity of purpose. What is especially noteworthy is that so many chose to do so and with such alacrity.
The final category of epistolary advocate—medical men, employers, landlords, and creditors—though important in itself, is not as immediately relevant to this discussion and therefore invites only brief comment. Medical men could, on occasion, be found acting as “friends” to the poor in the sense that other respectable inhabitants did. However, the great majority of letters from doctors and surgeons were cursory, written in the form of certificates or brief comments attesting to a claimed illness or misfortune, often with a codicil that they had been asked to write by a pauper or official from a host parish. They generally take a form very similar to that of Charles Gilchrist of Sunbury, Surrey, who stated: “I certify that William Wonsford is unable to resume his occupation, but that he is in a convalescent state.” As such, most correspondence from medical men falls into the category of interspersal. Similarly, the majority of letters from employers, landlords, and creditors were of the interspersing kind. Most can be said to embody an element of economic self-interest, in the sense that they contained a request for the settlement of an unpaid bill, or for the temporary support of an incapacitated employee. They were one arm of a three-way negotiation for scarce resources: between a home parish, a pauper, and a landlord (for unpaid rent) or employer. William Griffin, writing from Cheam (Surrey) to inform the parish of Shere (also Surrey) that his tenant, William Moore, owed him rent of £3, is a classic example of a demand for money supplemented by a case for the pauper; Moore, “having a family of five Children, not one being able to work, [and] nor indeed is he scarcely able himself,” was a deserving case for parish assistance. Yet, many of those who wrote in this capacity also adopted a more expansive rhetorical concern for the object of their attention, sharing with the erstwhile “friends” of the poor a linguistic register and suite of yardsticks of deservingness. Thus, James Clark wrote from Exeter to notify Sidmouth (Devon) that John Seaman had met with “a very severe accident while under my employ” and to request “a trifle to enable him to support himself until he is sufficiently recovered to work again.” In a second letter, three weeks later, Clark wrote that Seaman was still incapable of work but was keen to emphasise that he was “an object of pity” and “a worthy and honest laborer.” Such sentiments can be read in many ways, but for us they indicate a shared sense amongst advocates that their role was more complicated than a dispassionate relating of fact or participation in an economic transaction. Rather, even those with direct economic self-interest in a pauper’s case seem to have had an understanding that the poor law was at heart a cultural and social system with deeply ingrained norms and expectations of appropriate behavior.

The Overseer as Advocate

The single largest group of epistolary advocates in the sample were officials (usually overseers) of the pauper’s host parish, something that remains chronologically consistent across the corpus. The letters they sent (usually of the instigating, interspersing, or intervening typologies) tell us more about the malleability of local welfare policy, the disputed position of migrants, the nature of interparish relations, and the establishment of entitlement than any of the others and, arguably, more than any other single source in the parochial archives. On the face of it, such overseer advocacy can be read as a simple extension of their day-to-day
management of finite parish resources and the complexities of the laws of settlement. They wrote to establish whether a home parish wished to continue/begin a welfare arrangement; to request instructions on relief levels; to demand payment; to clarify payment mechanisms; or to advise settlement parishes of changes in pauper circumstances. And there can be no doubt that overseer advocates were frequently expedient in their support of a pauper's claim, aiming to prevent disputed settlement and removal or to prevent paupers who needed short-term relief (for reasons of illness or temporary trade downturn), but who might be useful for the local labor market, from being removed to settlement parishes.59

Such expediency made sense. Disputed removals could be singularly expensive. Even where liability was accepted by a settlement parish, the multiple costs of sending a pauper “home” (ranging from magistrate fees through to the cost of food and drink on the way) was incurred by the removing parish. After 1795, a host parish was legally obliged to relieve a pauper who was too sick or infirm to be removed to their settlement, and was therefore forced to apply to a magistrate for a “suspended order of removal” which could only be enforced following the recovery of the pauper. While the costs of such processes were notionally reclaimable from a settlement parish, in practice these orders were notoriously difficult to bring to a conclusion and could result in years of costly dispute.60 And of course we should remember that a significant proportion of those removed from a host community simply returned in short order. In this context, officials assumed in their correspondence that they had an implicitly shared agenda to contain costs and that fellow officers would deal fairly with each other. Where paupers remained in their host parishes, officials often stressed the need for their fellow overseers to act with economy. Thus, the overseer of Hounslow wrote to John Young’s parish (Farnham, Surrey), to say “I think it may save you much trouble & expence if you will send him some casual relief.”61 Robert Brickwood, overseer of St. Germans (Cornwall), instigated correspondence and wrote three times to Totnes in support of Robert Hellman. In his first letter, Brickwood used considerable rhetorical force to impress upon the Totnes overseers that Hellman “is ill [and] not able to follow his employment, and reduced to necessity” and that he “implores your assistance, [as] his wife also labors under an ailment.” In his next letter, he used a more pragmatic approach, stating that Hellman “is still unable to follow his employment,” but that “I have no doubt . . . after receiving some temporary relief” he would be able to get a job. Having finally received notice that Totnes refused any relief for Hellman, Brickwood pointedly noted that removal would have to ensue but that “I [had] trusted you would not have put us to this Expence.”62 The corpus is replete with similar examples.

 Nonetheless, to suggest that it was solely expediency (a desire to contain costs, enforce economy, and recover sums already paid) that motivated overseer advocates would be to simplify an extremely complex relationship, as their frequent involvement in attempts to uprate existing allowances might suggest. Officials did not just report facts or seek action. Rather, their letters often included personal appeals or information in support of a pauper’s application for relief and employed a rhetoric that implied a genuine concern for paupers under their charge. It was common—more common than simple expediency would perhaps warrant—for officials to write multiple times for the same pauper and for them to move to letters of the intervening typology at times of crisis. More detailed consideration of their narratives reveals much about the malleability of local state
power, shared understandings of how paupers could and should navigate a discretionary welfare system, and how officials understood their competing obligations to the poor and the communities that they represented.

Thus, when Robert Brickwood (see above) noted that Robert Hellman and his family “implores your assistance,” he may have been simply repeating or rendering a conversation with the pauper, or he may have been hinting at his own feelings given the severe case of sickness involved. There seems less doubt, though, that the overseer of Wateringbury (Kent) was moved by compassion when he wrote an instigating letter to Farnham (Surrey) about the plight of William Collings and his wife, who had “applied to me to state their present situation to you.” “The man is become so very inform [sic] thro’an astma on his Lungs,” he wrote, and:

he is incapacitated for any work whatever and has been obliged wholly to give up his situation as Journeyman Blacksmith to Mr Ellis—His wife is also very ill & unable to do anything—They appear to have a very great wish not to be sent home to your Parish & earnestly request you would have the Kindness to allow them your regular Parish pay on such occasions, allowing them to receive it here.63

Of course, the proposed arrangement would have benefited Wateringbury. As the host parish it would most likely have been forced to apply to the magistrates for a suspended order of removal, with associated practical and financial consequences. Nonetheless, the overseer’s rendering and then embellishment of the case suggest genuine concern for Collings’s welfare, a view that is further strengthened by the fact that he autonomously authorized the payment of £1 1s. for the burial of Collings’s wife in July 1832. While he later made attempts to recover the sum from Farnham, the overseer must have known that there was a strong chance of this charge falling on his own ratepayers.64 Examples of this sort of rhetoric and the associated small practical or symbolic actions that give it power and meaning are even more common in the corpus than instances of direct expediency. While the narratives support a number of readings, our sense is of a deeply ingrained framework of individual philanthropy sitting alongside the conduct of local offices of state.

The fact that officials wrote across the typological spectrum from instigation to intervention both confirms that humanitarian sentiment and personal philanthropic sensibilities were at work and suggests that officials in settlement parishes did not have, and were not expected to have, unrestrained power. To return to our last example, the Collingses occupied a privileged space under the Old Poor Law because their infirmity was directly due to being both aged and sick (in the wife’s case, sick unto death).65 As the editors of a recent volume on the sick poor in Europe have noted, even amongst the aged poor “relief in whatever form was invariably tied into progressive disability and inability to labor because of physical or mental weakness.”66 Against this backdrop it is striking that the majority of letters written by overseer advocates relate to paupers who were aged, infirm, sick, or, more likely, a combination of the three. Many were about the continuation of relief rather than just its initial granting, such as Overseer Bostock’s letter to the home parish of Hannah Parkinson, wherein he writes: “I understand that she
formerly received 1/6 per week from you, and that that the allowance was discon-
tinued about seven weeks ago.” Bostock continued:

she is 50 years of age and consequently incapable of much bodily exertion—she
used to go out washing, but has been obliged to give it up from inability . . . Under
these circumstances I hope you will consider to allow her the 1/6 as before, which I really think is as little as you should do for her.

Of course, we can read this narrative as instrumental—a subtle attempt to avoid
large future bills—but the personal last line suggests a different perspective.
Through letters like these, officials worked collectively to balance the interests of
parochial taxpayers and welfare recipients within the framework of a system that
notionally gave parishes the power to eschew such considerations. They are simul-
taneously a record of the malleability of the local state and a mechanism by
which such malleability could be created. Because they were frequently solicited
by applicants and often constructed in collaboration (William Collings and his
wife “applied to me to state their present situation to you”), they formed an im-
portant navigation point for paupers whose rights were heavily circumscribed. In
this sense, they were essentially public documents by which paupers both in-
formed the process of their own relief and gained greater understanding of the
mechanisms by which that relief was (and could be) negotiated.

Although exceptional in its longevity, the correspondence relating to
Widow Elizabeth Atack (or Attick) is a vivid example of the way overseers came
to actively advocate on behalf of the poor. She first appeared in correspondence
between the overseers of Dawlish (Devon) and her home parish of Sandal Magna
(West Yorkshire) in 1791. At that stage she was already in receipt of an allow-
ance. In 1792, the Dawlish overseer wrote an instigating letter to Sandal Magna
stating that “Widdow Attatak[sic] has been poorly agood while and was it not
for ye Charity of good neighbours Must have more than you allow her.” He
added that “I can assure it for truth she has had many [entirely discretionary] Little
helpe from yc parish in Close and other Little necessaries” and closed his letter by
stating that “She is a very Clean indisteris woman.” Thereafter, Atack con-
tinued to be relieved by Sandal Magna at a distance for at least another four decades,
a relationship which generated almost 50 pieces of surviving correspondence.

A questionnaire sent out by Sandal Magna in 1835 allows us to establish
some basic facts about Atack: in that year she was aged seventy-seven (hence
thirty-three when the surviving correspondence began), had been relieved for
fifty years, had been blind since she was twenty-four years old, and had just the
one child (a son), who remained unmarried with no children and was earning 8s.
a week. We also know, from the content of the correspondence over the years
that both Atack and her son had regular bouts of sickness and infirmity, that she
lived for most of the period covered by the letters in Dawlish, and that she moved
in with her son at Kenton (Devon) in 1834 before moving to Teignmouth
(Devon) in 1837. In short, Widow Atack fulfilled the profile of a most deserv-

ing pauper throughout her long association with the parish. These, at least, are
the verifiable details on which her parish would have based its decision to relieve
her for so long, so far from home.

Yet despite the strength of her claim, Atack’s entitlement to relief required
constant reaffirmation over the years. The overseers of her home parish regularly
queried her circumstances and often attempted to make adjustments to her relief on the basis of real or assumed changes in her situation. For example, when Atack’s son was bound out as an apprentice, the vestry of Sandal Magna made it clear that “[t]hey expect W Attack will do with less pay than when she had the Boy to keep,” adding that “they think she might be employed in something to bring her a little money,” despite the fact that her host parish had consistently maintained she was incapable of any work at all.74 Whether these interventions by the settlement parish were motivated solely by a desire for economy is unclear, but the reaction of Dawlish, whose officials consistently took Atack’s part in negotiations with her settlement parish, demonstrates the very complex role that overseer advocates played. In 1807, for example, Francis Tripe wrote in an intervening letter that “she cannot support [herself] on the pay and she has had nothing more than her regular pay for four Years past,” adding “she never troubles the Parish for any Clothing never since the pay was first remitted.”75 This testimony of an ability to “make do” must be read alongside earlier letters, such as that of 1792 (dealt with above), in which we find such clothing needs were met by small discretionary gifts from the parish and from friends and neighbors. Widow Atack was, in other words, and despite her migratory status, a respected member of both her neighborhood and the parochial community represented by the overseer.

By 1813, Overseer Firth was writing to acknowledge the receipt of Atack’s allowance but also requested that it be increased, adding that “as an Overseer of the Poor of Dawlish [her pay] is not adequate for her Sustenance at this time.” He offered the settlement parish a benchmark of sufficiency based upon his long experience of office, encouraging them to moderate their practice in the knowledge of policy elsewhere. At the end of this letter, Firth sought further to emphasise Widow Atack’s respectability and embeddedness in her host community, stating that “she could not have remained on that sum” had not her friend, “who has a large Family,” assisted her.76 Towards the end of the correspondence, the vestry of Sandal Magna took the drastic step of reducing her weekly relief from 4s. to 2s 6d. “in consideration of Provisions being so low, and that her Son might do something for her.”77 This seems to have been a step too far for the Dawlish overseer, who brought all the rhetorical force at his disposal to bear on the settlement parish:

As you have reduced her pay to 2/6 pr week I decline paying any longer as her friends inform me she . . . cannot keep her in the state she is in which I am informed you know having sent a person to see her _ She now intend to apply to the parish officers of Kenton for a relief and an Order of Removal which no doubt will be suspended[,] It appears to me likely you will have moor to pay than you usually use to . . . as it is impossibly [sic] she can provide all necesserys for her at 2/6 Pr week.78

The robust response, in effect withdrawing from the informal network relationship that kept the Old Poor Law working efficiently, is significant. A brother overseer had unilaterally reduced an allowance below the subsistence level applied by the host parish and done so in the face of clear evidence of need—Sandal Magna had sent someone to inspect the Widow, after all. In so doing the settlement parish had transgressed an implied duty to balance the different parochial interests, and the language of advocacy used by overseer Ferris in this
situation—he considered it impossible for Atack to provide all of the necessities of life on her allowance, even with the assistance of her friends—was both powerful and direct. Unfortunately, even these apparently heartfelt appeals failed to weaken the resolve of the Sandal Magna vestry. They refused to increase the widow’s relief. As a result, the final piece of intervening correspondence from the overseer of Kenton, in 1837, shows her “Lying in a deplorable state” at the home of her son, who was “now scarcely able to maintain himself.” Faced with such suffering the overseer sought to enlist the services of others among Kenton’s most authoritative and respectable inhabitants on Atack’s behalf. Appended to his letter are a certificate from William Collyns, Member of the Royal College of Surgeons, who stated that “Blind Widow Attack, is in a very deplorable state” and a note from Jonathon Thompson, Curate of Kenton, who also confirmed that “Widow attack is in a deplorable state of wretchedness.”

Thus, while it is clear that officials sometimes acted solely in the interests of the parish and their office, a collective view of their correspondence also offers more subtle lessons. Passionate advocacy was common, and most overseer advocates at least offered embellishment or opinion, suggesting an important combination of humanitarian and philanthropic principles in the office of the overseer. The correspondence relating to Widow Attack suggests that the local state could be fractured and fractious on the subject of welfare entitlements, but the very fact that the overseer letters were written in the first place points to the potential malleability of local power. Indeed, the palpable outrage in the closing letter by the Kenton overseer suggests an absolute expectation of accommodation between brother officers. Moreover, both advocates letters and these occasional disputes were important in establishing yardsticks of behavior, rhetoric, and status in a discretionary welfare system. These were public documents involving contact with the family or individual and, no doubt, feedback, giving the poor themselves some fixed navigation points around what their host communities found acceptable in welfare terms. The action of the Dawlish overseer in involving other members of the community in support of his advocacy—in effect creating a powerful backdrop of respectability—was a public as well as a symbolic act and one repeated throughout the corpus.

Conclusion

Much of the literature on pauper narratives has seen direct pauper agency as a major influence on local practice under the Old Poor Law. Our material, however, demonstrates both that advocate letters were the most common form of communication in efforts to establish or maintain entitlement and that such letters were important in shaping expectations of the kinds of people who ought to be relieved in a discretionary welfare system. This is not to downplay the importance of pauper voices or to question the sense that the poor had agency. Pauper and advocate narratives can often support multiple readings, but ours is that paupers actively solicited advocates and worked with them to shape a case. In this relationship we would not tension the pauper voice against that of advocates to decide the relative strength of each. Rather, we suggest that the power, framing, and effectiveness of pauper agency can only be understood when pauper narratives are placed alongside other communicative avenues of the sort explored in this article. After all, many advocates went well beyond what paupers might
have requested in their own narratives, offering a persistent and insistent commentary on the proper duty of parishes to their periodically or chronically poor citizens and a learning opportunity for how paupers themselves might shape their future communicative strategy.

In turn, the very presence of the out-parish poor raised, as we have suggested, universal questions about what to “do” with migrants and how to tension their requirements against an accumulated contribution to host and settlement communities. Advocate letters suggest that the answers to these questions do not fall straightforwardly into a framework of economic expediency and self or parochial interest. For migrants of long-residence or family connection, we see a spectrum of attitudes and emotions, ranging from tolerance through to warm acceptance and active support for people whose contribution to either host or settlement communities could be mapped and weighed. Yet advocates also supported the transient or unconnected poor with vigor, and while we can recognize Keith Snell’s framework of local xenophobia, the striking thing about our dataset is the powerful intersection of custom, philanthropic duty, and Christian obligation coalescing in advocate letters that overrode the simple label “migrant.” This applies, perhaps most notably, to those serving in official roles as well as others who might be regarded as the traditional “respectable parish other,” such as clergymen. These men often strayed, in rhetoric and practice, well beyond what was needed in terms of the basic economics of welfare.

For the poor seeking to navigate a discretionary welfare system, we have argued that advocate letters provided important yardsticks. By and large, these were publicly constructed, executed, and reported documents, and they help to explain the emergence of a shared linguistic register of eligibility between paupers, officials, and advocates that others have also traced. The fact that officials and others in our corpus forcefully asserted the minimum standards of welfare that they would expect to see applied by others provided a very powerful sense indeed, for both paupers and those receiving the letters, of normative levels of relief. More than this, advocate letters in general suggest that the local state was, was supposed to be, and was supposed to be seen to be, malleable and contestable. Many writers simply assumed that their word would be enough to prompt officials to (re)consider the balance between their duties to ratepayers and those to poor citizens. In plenty of cases it was. Where letters went unanswered or inaction ensued, advocate voices could become insistent, multiple, and layered into wider processes such as calling upon magistrates. While nowhere stated explicitly, a close reading of the corpus suggests very clearly that inaction was seen as questioning the respectability, status, and philanthropic credentials of writers. For officials such inaction had the added dimension that a host parish’s failing to respond weakened the basic glue that kept the Old Poor Law functioning as a more or less coherent national system of welfare.

It is clear that, during the period covered by this article, the Old Poor Law was overtaken by a crisis of political confidence. This notion of crisis was clearly shared by some officials and elites in rural England, where poverty was seen to be increasingly endemic and threatening. Yet, we find little evidence, either in this corpus or the wider parochial archives on which it rests, of dwindling sympathy for the claims of the poor and migrant poor in the public imagination. Advocacy on a spectrum from restrained and respectful to passionate and sometimes angry usually brought or modified a response, something which speaks strongly to Lynn...
Hollen Lees sense of interlocking social obligations between paupers and payers even as the political lifeblood of the Old Poor Law seeped away from the 1790s.

Endnotes

We are grateful to the anonymous referees for this article, whose incisive comments have improved the text. Address correspondence to Steven King, University of Leicester, School of History, 7 Salisbury Road, Leicester, England, LE1 7RH. Email: sak28@le.ac.uk. Peter Jones, Department of History, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, Scotland. Email: peter.jones@strath.ac.uk.

1. On the English and Welsh system see Lynn Hollen Lees, The Solidarities of Strangers: The English Poor Laws and the People 1700–1948 (Cambridge, 1998), passim.

2. Lori Charlesworth, Welfare’s Forgotten Past: A Socio-Legal History of the Poor Law (Oxford, 2010): 93 and Lori Charlesworth, “Big Society, Legal Society, Poor Law and the Myth of a Voluntary Society,” in The Big Society Debate: A new Agenda for Social Welfare? eds. Armine Ishkanian and Simon Szreter (Cheltenham, 2012): 52–4. For a critique, see Steven King’s review of Welfare’s Forgotten Past in Rural History 22 (2011): 271–3.

3. This question of the malleability of local practice is a persistent one, as Jonathan Healey’s analysis of the seventeenth-century implementation of the 1601 poor law in Lancashire shows. For him, the Old Poor Law was instituted relatively rapidly precisely because statute law was malleable. Jonathan Healey, “The Development of Poor Relief in Lancashire, c.1598–1680,” Historical Journal 53 (2010): 567–72.

4. On settlement and removal, see Keith Snell, Parish and Belonging: Community, Identity and Welfare in England and Wales, 1700–1950 (Cambridge, 2006): Passim.

5. Steven King, “Negotiating the law of poor relief in England 1800–1840,” History 96 (2011): 410–35; Peter King, “The Summary Courts and Social Relations in Eighteenth-Century England,” Past and Present 183 (2004): 124–72.

6. Gwenda Morgan and Peter Rushton, “The Magistrate, the Community and the Maintenance of an Orderly Society in Eighteenth Century England,” Historical Research 76 (2003): 54–77, 74. On the crucial role of the magistrate in leavening practice in seventeenth-century Lancashire see Healey, “The Development.”

7. Susannah Ottaway, The Decline of Life: Old Age in Eighteenth Century England (Cambridge, 2004).

8. Brian Barber, Memorandum Book of Richard Tilburn and John Daniell: Overseers of the Poor for the Township of Doncaster (Doncaster, 2009): 24 and 26. Our italics.

9. Steven King, “‘It is Impossible for Our Vestry to Judge His Case Into Perfection from Here’: Managing the Distance Dimensions of Poor Relief, 1800–40,” Rural History 16 (2005): 165.

10. Most relevant for our period, see Steven King, “Reconstructing Lives: The Poor, the Poor Law and Welfare in Rural Industrial Communities,” Social History 22 (1997): 318–38; and Samantha Williams, Poverty, Gender and Life-Cycle under the English Poor Law, 1760–1834 (Woodbridge, 2011): Passim.

11. See Northamptonshire Record Office (hereafter NRO) 249p/164–66, Oundle Vestry Minute Books; 249p/169–70, Oundle Overseers’ Account Books 1831–43; 249p/216, Oundle Overseer Letter Book; 251p/23, Oxendon Vestry Minute Book, 1819–1894; 251p/25–30, Oxendon Overseers’ Account Book, 1777–1855; 251p/36–38, Loose Bills and Accounts; 251p/38, 98–199 Oxendon Poor Law Letters; QS/CC/180, Legal Bills for Northamptonshire Parishes; L(c)1718, Thrapston Overseers of the Poor Accounts; 194p/
194 and 195, Thrapston Copy Letter Books. See also Overseer’s accounts for Oundle (1790–1830) and Thrapston (1780–1819), both of which were originally consulted in the parochial churches. For Hulme, see Manchester Record Office, M10-M14, Letters and Accounts for the Parish of Hulme.

12. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, paupers seeking to move from their parish of settlement could apply for a certificate stating that the parish recognized their liability for the person concerned in the event of poverty and would afford them relief. While this system survived in parts of the southeast of England, we find almost no evidence in our sample of paupers asking for certificates, overseers collecting them, or settlement parishes incurring the expense of providing them.

13. The work of Ottaway and Snell, cited elsewhere in these notes, suggests that settlement and removal activity may have remained at a high level in the south east in particular. The same was true of London. See Jeremy Boulton, “Double Deterrence: Settlement and Practice in London’s West End, 1725–1824,” in Migration, Settlement and Belonging in Europe, 1500s–1930s, eds. Steven King and Anne Winter (Oxford, 2013): 54–80.

14. Joanna Innes, Steven King, and Anne Winter, “Settlement and Belonging in Europe, 1500–1930s: Structures, Negotiations and Experiences,” in Migration, Settlement and Belonging, eds. King and Winter: 1–28. This observation is also consistent with the sorts of family reconstitution studies mentioned above, which generally trace very substantial permanent out-migration rather than migration and return.

15. For sources see note 10. While those staying put in their host communities are more common than first appears, we would not of course claim that they are wholly representative of the experience of all paupers. Addressing this question is, however, a separate work.

16. See Thomas Sokoll, Essex Pauper Letters, 1731–1837 (Oxford, 2001).

17. Alannah Tomkins recently evoked this potential, writing that “[t]he English poor . . . do not require us to give them a voice; they possessed voices of their own. They merely require us to turn up the volume.” Alannah Tomkins, “‘I mak Bould to Wrigt’: First-Person Narratives in the History of Poverty in England, c.1750–1900,” History Compass 9 (2011): 370.

18. Hollen Lees, Solidarities of Strangers, 11.

19. This is well explored in Peter Jones, “‘I cannot keep my place without being deascent’: Pauper Letters, Parish Clothing and Pragmatism in the South of England, 1750–1830,” Rural History 20 (2009): 31–49.

20. Steven King, “‘Stop this overwhelming torment of destiny’: Negotiating Financial Aid at Times of Sickness under the English Old Poor Law, 1800–1840,” Bulletin of the History of Medicine 79 (2005): 228–60.

21. For example, see Thomas Sokoll, “Writing for Relief: Rhetoric in English Pauper Letters,” in Being Poor in Modern Europe: Historical Perspectives 1800–1940, eds. Andreas Gestrich, Steven King, and Lutz Raphael (Bern, 2006): 91–112.

22. Berkshire Record Office, D/P139/18/5/4, “Letter”; Steven King, Thomas Nutt, and Alannah Tomkins, Narratives of the Poor in Eighteenth Century Britain (London, 2006): 284–5.

23. On the classic pauper letter, see James Stephen Taylor, “A Different Kind of Speenhamland: Nonresident Relief in the Industrial Revolution,” Journal of British Studies 30 (1991): 183–208, and Sokoll, Essex.

24. There is evidence from vestry minutes that in-parish paupers also used advocates, particularly kin and neighbors, but the usage was different in scale, periodicity, and intent for the out-parish poor.
25. Hollen Lees, *Solidarities of Strangers*, 11. Advocate letters can also of course be understood as part of the way in which political influence and class distinction or solidarity was fostered within and between parishes. The theme is not central to this article but is well developed by Healey, “The Development”: 569–72.

26. On this issue and the wider “crisis of the Old Poor Law” from the 1790s, see Hollen Lees, *Solidarities of Strangers*, 82–111.

27. Jones, “‘I cannot keep my place,’ ” 31.

28. Thomas Sokoll, “Negotiating a Living: Essex Pauper Letters from London, 1800–1834,” *International Review of Social History* 45 (2000): 31, 42–46; Steven King, “‘I Fear You Will Think Me Too Presumptuous in My Demands but Necessity Has No Law’: Clothing in English Pauper Letters, 1800–1834,” *International Review of Social History* 54 (2009): 216, 220, 234; Tomkins, “I mak Bould to Wrigt,” 365.

29. Sokoll, “Negotiating a Living,” 29. Surveillance, correspondence, and money transmission were not of course cost free. While King (“‘It is Impossible,’ ” 168) suggests that out-parish paupers were paid lower per capita allowances than their in-parish counterparts, the wider “cost” of the two groups to parochial authorities were probably not very different.

30. This chronological concentration reflects increased literacy, the ramping up of regional postal systems, the development of noncash payment mechanisms, and the increased availability of small change from the 1780s.

31. Notwithstanding that it had a more vibrant economy than is often allowed. See Pamela Sharpe, *Population and Society in an East Devon Parish: Reproducing Colyton 1540–1840* (Exeter, 2002).

32. The total for Surrey includes eighteen letters, which came to light for historic Surrey parishes in the collections of the London Metropolitan Archive.

33. This is also true of pauper letters themselves, though see Steven King’s analysis of an unrelated sample: “‘The particular claims of a woman and a mother’ : Gender, belonging and rights to medical relief in England 1800–1840,” in *Citizens, Courtrooms, Crossings*, eds. Astri Andresen, Tore Grønle, William Hubbard, Teemu Rymin and Sven A. Skålevåg (Bergen, 2008): 21–38.

34. This is confirmed by a control sample for Norfolk and Lancashire, where advocate letters constitute 44 and 52 percent respectively of the overall corpus.

35. Judith Hill (“Poverty, Unrest and Response in Surrey, 1815–1834,” Unpublished PhD, University of Roehampton, 2006) and King (“Reconstructing Lives”) point to short durations of relief in Surrey and Lancashire, respectively.

36. NRO, Peterborough St John Letters (bundle 244), Letter 3.

37. See, for example, Naomi Tadmor, *Family and Friends in Eighteenth Century England: Household, Kinship and Patronage* (Cambridge, 2000) and Naomi Tadmor, “Friends and Neighbors in Early Modern England: Biblical Translations and Social Norms,” in *Love, Friendship and Faith in Europe*, 1300–1800, eds. Laura Gowing, Michael Hunter, and Miri Rubin (Basingstoke, 2005): 150–176. For a purely theoretical discussion of “friendship,” see Andrew Silver, “Friendship in Commercial Society: Eighteenth-Century Social Theory and Modern Sociology,” *American Journal of Sociology* 95 (1990): 1474–1504. Most recently, Barbara Caine, ed., *Friendship: A History* (London, 2014).

38. Keith Snell, “Belonging and Community: Understandings of ‘Home’ and ‘Friends’ among the English poor, 1750–1850,” *Economic History Review* 65 (2012): 4.
39. Steven King, “Friendship, Kinship and Belonging in the Letters of Urban Paupers 1800–1840,” Historical Social Research 33 (2008): 263 and 271.

40. Devon Record Office (hereafter, DRO), 1579A/24/117/3, J. Bellett to Totnes, March 3, 1827. This was not the first time Bellett had written on Lane’s behalf: a year before he intervened in relation to a separate claim for clothing.

41. Ibid.

42. In this instance, substituting for correspondence written by the pauper himself, or by anyone else on his behalf, none of which exists in the archive.

43. DRO, 1579A/24/117/26 & 27, J. Bellett to Totnes, April 13 and 17, 1827.

44. DRO, 1579A/24/118/2 & 1, J. Bellett to Totnes, January 31, 1828 and February 18, 1829.

45. DRO, 1579A/24/117/3.

46. See, for example, David Konstan, “Patrons and Friends,” Classical Philology 90 (1995): 328–42.

47. Ibid., 328–9.

48. Everett Ferguson, Origins of Early Christianity (3rd ed., Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2003): 67–8.

49. DRO, 1579A/24/118/2.

50. See, notably, Thomas Wilkinson of Knottingley, West Yorkshire, on behalf of his friend, Francis Sawyer, written between 1823 and 1832. See West Yorkshire Record Office (hereafter WYRO), WDP20/9/3/10/1,6,7,8,11,11,15,19 & 23; WYRO, WDP20/9/3/11/ 2,3,4,6,7,8,11,11,15 & 32; WYRO, WDP20/9/3/12/1,2,8,10,11,13,17,24,27,28,30 & 30; WYRO, WDP20/9/3/13/3, Thomas Wilkinson to Sandal Magna on behalf of Francis Sawyer, March 9, 1823 to December 20, 1832.

51. NRO, Earls Barton letters 110p/138/15.

52. NRO, Earls Barton letters 110p/138/9.

53. NRO, 249p/216 Oundle Letter book, Letter 119.

54. Surrey Record Office (hereafter SRO), 1956/1/11/8, Charles Gilchrist to unknown parish official, November 10, 1818.

55. SRO, SHER/28/8/2, William Griffin to Shere, February 11, 1828.

56. DRO, 1855A/PO40to44/4, J. Clark to Sidmouth, September 15, 1823.

57. DRO, 1855A/PO40to44/5, E. Clark to Sidmouth, October 8, 1823.

58. There was a discrepancy between regions, with West Yorkshire recording the highest proportion of parish officers acting as advocates (43 percent of advocate letters) and Westminster recording the lowest (7 percent). This issue has been explored above, but if we exclude Westminster, none of the other counties records a figure of less than 30 percent of advocates’ letters written by this group.

59. King, “‘It Is Impossible to Judge,’” 164.

60. See Snell, Parish and Belonging, 143.

61. SRO, 1505/Box37/F1/24, Peter Boughton to Farnham, September 19, 1831.

62. DRO, 1579A/24/118/13–15, Robert Brickwood to Totness, December 1829 to February 1830. On the cost of sending a pauper back to their parish of settlement, see
Norma Landau, “The Laws of Settlement and the Surveillance of Immigration in Eighteenth-century Kent,” Continuity and Change 3 (1988): 412 and Keith Snell, “Settlement, Poor Law and the Rural Historian: New Approaches and Opportunities,” Rural History 3 (1992): 152.

63. SRO, 1505/Box37/F1/30, Thomas Smith to Farnham, December 6, 1831.

64. SRO, 1505/Box37/F1/39, Thomas Smith to Farnham, October 9, 1832. The work of Hurren and King suggests that the overseer could just have left the body unburied and written to the overseer of the settlement parish for authority to bury “according to custom.” Elizabeth Hurren and Steven King, “Begging for a Burial: Death and the Poor Law in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century England,” Social History 30 (2005): 321–341. We found few examples of this practice.

65. We know they were aged because Collings himself alludes to it in his own letters to Farnham. SRO, 1505/Box37/F1/33, William Collings to Farnham, December 19, 1831; SRO, 1505/Box37/F2/25, William Collings to Farnham, June 15, 1833.

66. Andreas Gestrich, Elizabeth Hurren, and Steven King, “Narratives of Poverty and Sickness in Europe 1780–1938: Sources, Methods and Experiences,” in Poverty and Sickness in Modern Europe: Narratives of the Sick Poor, 1780–1938, eds., Andreas Gestrich, Elizabeth Hurren, and Steven King (London, 2012): 3.

67. WYRO, WDP20/9/3/12/15, J. Bostock to Asst. Overseer (name and parish unknown), August 9, 1827.

68. Ibid. Our italics.

69. WYRO, WDP20/9/3/5/7, Richard Whidborne to Sandal Magna, February 19, 1791.

70. This sense of neighbors helping to relieve the burden on the parish is common and again speaks to deeply ingrained individual philanthropy at the parochial level.

71. WYRO, WDP20/9/3/5/8, Richard Whidborne to Sandal Magna, May 5, 1792. Our italics. The postscript was entirely discretionary, though it also speaks to one of the ways in which eligibility could be claimed by paupers themselves.

72. WYRO, WDP20/9/3/19/5, John Firth to Sandal Magna, n.d. (1835).

73. Ibid.; WYRO, WDP20/9/3/8/15, W. Hoare to Sandal Magna, March 15, 1818; WYRO, WDP20/9/3/9/13, John Firth to Sandal Magna, June 19, 1821; WYRO, WDP20/9/3/13/10, R. Ferris to Sandal Magna, April 13, 1828.

74. WYRO, WDP20/9/3/5/7, Unnamed correspondent to Sandal Magna, n.d.

75. WYRO, WDP20/9/3/6/7, Francis Tripe to Sandal Magna, March 30, 1807.

76. WYRO, WDP20/9/3/7/22, John Firth to Sandal Magna, April 13, 1813.

77. WYRO, WDP20/9/19/4, Overseer to Dawlish, July 10, 1835.

78. WYRO, WDP20/9/19/4, R. Ferris to Sandal Magna, July 4, 1835. Our italics.

79. WYRO, WDP20/9/21/5, J. Southwood to Sandal Magna, March 11, 1837.

80. Keith Snell, “The Culture of Local Xenophobia,” Social History 28 (2003): 1–30.

81. On shared linguistic registers, see Steven King and Alison Stringer, “‘I have once more taken the Leberty to say as you well know’: The Development of Rhetoric in the Letters of the English, Welsh and Scottish Sick and Poor 1780s–1830s,” in Gestrich, Hurren, and King, Poverty and Sickness: 69–92.
82. By way of example, an unnamed correspondent from Stamford (Lincolnshire) wrote to Paul Large, overseer of Oundle in Northamptonshire on May 30, 1833, to note his actions in relation to “your [sick] Parishoner Prentice.” He had acted “as if he had belonged to us” and this involved paying for lodgings, commissioning doctors and nurses, paying for food, and giving cash relief: “Indeed [I] did exactly the same as we should have done for our Own Paupers in the same disease.” This was a powerful assertion of normative standards and is not unusual in the corpus. See NRO, 249p/216 Oundle Letter book, Letter 14. Magistrates might also perform in the role of setting normative standards. See Healey, “The Development,” 565–69.