

The contribution of the Poor Law in England towards alleviating the economic inequality of the elderly at the end of the eighteenth century

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Resumen

Este artículo analiza la información sobre los salarios y cuantías de las pensiones de jubilación que proporcionaba la Ley de Pobres en la Inglaterra de finales del siglo XVIII. Lo que se nos muestra es que las pensiones más altas se pagaban en el sur de Inglaterra en comparación con el centro y el norte del país, y que había una correlación negativa entre el nivel salarial y la cuantía de la pensión. Los beneficios que prestaba la Ley de Pobres ayudaron a reducir la pobreza de los ancianos y de las viudas pero no acabaron, por completo, con las desigualdades económicas surgidas de la incapacidad de los hogares pequeños y con estructura sencilla de proporcionar las ayudas adecuadas a los desfavorecidos en todas las etapas del ciclo vital.

Palabras clave: pensiones, mayores, viudedad, género, Ley de Pobres.

Abstract

This article analyses the information on wages and size of pensions provided by the Poor Law in England at the end of the eighteenth century. It appears that higher pensions were paid out in southern England than in either the midlands and the north and that there was a negative correlation between wage rates and the size of the pension. Assistance from the Poor Law helped reduce the poverty of the elderly and of widows but did not entirely eliminate economic inequalities arising from the inability of small and simply structured households to provide adequate support to the disadvantaged in all stages of the life cycle.

Keywords: Pensions, elderly, widowhood, gender, Poor Law

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Resumé

Cet article analyse les données sur les salaires et les montants des pensions de retraite que fournissaient la Loi des Pauvres en Angleterre à la fin du XVIII^e siècle. On nous montre que les pensions les plus élevées se payaient au sud de l'Angleterre par rapport au centre ou nord du pays, et qu'il y avait une corrélation négative entre le niveau salarial et le montant de la pension. Les bénéfices que prêtaient la Loi des Pauvres aidèrent à réduire la pauvreté des personnes âgées y des veuves mais ne finirent pas, ou du moins pas complètement, avec les inégalités économiques surgies de l'incapacité des petits foyers avec une structure simple de proportionner les aides adéquates/nécessaires aux plus démunis tout au long de leur cycle vital.

Keywords: Pensions, personnes âgées, viduité, genre, Poor Law

1. INTRODUCTION

The flexibility, multi-stranded character and comprehensive coverage of the English Poor Law even prior to its reform in 1834 are legion. Payments to the poor could be made in cash or in kind, in the form of a regular weekly pension, payment of rent (either as an addition or without a weekly pension), as casual one-off payments to a particular individual in the event, for example, of sickness or injury or more generally to alleviate the impact of an economic crisis affecting large sections of the community (on rent see Eden 1797 ii: 7,110-1). Payments might be made to the poor in their own homes or they might be maintained at the expense of the parish in the parish workhouse with work found for the able-bodied within or outside the workhouse (see Eden on Ealing and Nottingham, Eden 1797, vol. ii: 424,571). Detailed work on the poor law accounts of various parishes has established that the pension would be increased in line with increased age (and presumably need) and that policy of the poor law authorities could vary over time, moving from favouring out relief to incarceration in the workhouse (or vice-versa), or from support of the elderly to support of couples with many children, in response to both demographic change and the relative costs of providing relief in or out of the workhouse (Wales 1984:362-3; Smith 1996 33,39-40; Eden 1797 iii 864). On the other hand, although at times the Poor Law system could be disor-

ganised with the poor allowed some freedom even when resident in the workhouse (Eden 1797 iii: 901), more often than not the Poor Law was draconian with some groups of poor deemed more worthy than others (Smith 1996:40). The beneficiaries could even be made to exhibit in public the humiliation of their status through the wearing of a badge (Eden 1797 ii: 571).

The aim of the present article is to discover whether the provision of out-relief² by the Poor Law in the form of a weekly pension made a significant contribution to the reduction in economic inequalities of the elderly resulting from reduced capacity for work through age, disability and ill-health. The evidence measures in other words the extent of what Peter Laslett termed 'nuclear hardship', that is descent into poverty was occasioned by the failure of simple family households (households limited to married couples or lone parents with children) to provide adequate support throughout the life cycle, in this particular case in old age and for widows (Laslett 1988: 166-7). It was Laslett's contention that the Poor Law took full account of the family cycle when deciding what assistance to provide (*ibid.*: 166) but the adequacy of that assistance was only asserted and not tested. In order to gauge the value of the relief provided by the Poor Law to the elderly, the size of Poor Law pensions will be assessed below in relation to the wage rates of both men and women in the same community using the data on pensions and wage rates assembled by Eden.

Before considering the data in detail, however, a number of points need consideration. In the first place, weekly pensions might be supplemented by a variety of casual payments or the payment of house rent, or by the parish meeting a family's fuel costs. Secondly, in a number of cases the amounts paid out were also not based solely on the needs of specific individuals but of these individuals and their dependants. Thirdly, payments might vary according to the perceived needs of the individual, their degree of incapacity and whether they were living on their own or with others although it is interesting that there is only one instance in the many Poor Law accounts summarised by Eden of the parish and a child sharing the costs of the maintenance of a parent (Eden 1797 ii: 72). Many more cases possibly went undocumented (Smith 1996 and for a later period see Wall 1992:81-2).

2 Regular assistance of the poor in their own homes as opposed to institutional care in a poorhouse or workhouse.

The comparison of wage rates and pensions presented below in Table 1 also has to be interpreted with care as the wage rates reported by Eden are for labourers in full employment. The wages they actually received would have been somewhat less as periods of under-employment and unemployment were ignored. On the other hand, the omission from the calculation of average wage rates of the supplements in cash and board received during the hay and corn harvests has the opposite effect of slightly under-estimating the annual wage. For women these problems are compounded by less information on wages and greater diversity in payments depending on season, skill and in the case of manufacture, demand for the product. Even when the wage rates can be established, however, there is the same problem as with the relief payments of determining how many persons were supported from the wage, and extent of other contributions to family economies. Such contributions could include income from subsidiary earners, exploitation of community owned resources such as wastes and commons, additional payments by employers of a charitable kind and occasional assistance from the parish. Eden and his contemporary Davies provided some evidence of these additional channels of support when they calculated the budgets of a variety of working people. However, as most of the budgets indicated a deficiency of income over expenditure it appears that families found it virtually impossible to keep track of and value their exploitation of such resources (Sokoll 1992:45-7).

On one point, however, Eden has little to offer and that is on the number of dependants of the poor and non-poor alike. For the purposes of the present study, therefore, the data provided by Eden on out-relief payments will be reanalysed to allow a nation-wide perspective on the level of weekly pensions to the poor in their own homes but his findings will then be supplemented by a detailed examination of the situation of the poor in one particular parish where there is information on the household circumstances of the poor. That parish is Corfe Castle in Dorset which was thoroughly surveyed in 1790, a survey whose details on income and residence patterns I have already used to examine the earnings and income of married women (Wall 1994). The estimates of income, based on the assumption that the income of the household is distributed inequitably to the extent that a husband consumed 50 per cent more of the resources as his wife and a son over the age of 15 a quarter more, have been maintained for the present purpose of ascertaining the economic disadvantages experienced by the elderly (see Wall 1994:332, note 16 for the full set of assumptions). The advantage of pro-

ceeding in this way is that it provides a more realistic indication of the level of income available for personal consumption. No firm evidence of course is available as to how household incomes are distributed (even it would appear today) but it should be stressed that the assumed level of inequality is significantly less than embodied in the wages generally paid at the time to men and women (Eden 1797 *passim* and see below Table 1; Census of Corfe Castle 1790). The significance for the account offered below on the incomes of the elderly is that it implies a smaller decline in women's incomes as a result of widowhood than would have occurred if the resources of the household had been shared out equally. On the other hand, those men who continued to work after they had been widowed experienced a rise in income as they had fewer dependants to support although this extra income they would lose in whole or in part if they decided to remarry, employ a domestic servant or move into lodgings.

2. THE VALUE OF WEEKLY PAYMENTS TO ELDERLY PENSIONERS IN THE 1790S

We begin by using Eden's data on pension payments to assess their value relative to wage rates paid within the same community. Table 1 indicates considerable diversity in the value of pensions on the basis admittedly of very small numbers of pensioners in many of the communities. Median relief payments to elderly men in the different parishes could be as little as a shilling or as much as three shillings and six pence per week while for women an even wider range of payments is indicated from seven pence to four shillings. On average women received a little less. Six out of ten received less than two shillings per week compared with half of the men. In only four of the 18 parishes recording payments both to male and female pensioners were women on average paid more. In eight of the 18 parishes men were paid more. Wage differentials, however, were very much greater. Women, for example, earned on average two shillings per week from hoeing or spinning, three shillings from carting fruit, three to five shillings from spinning worsted, three to six shillings from lacemaking and five shillings from husbandry. In a few parishes some occupations might pay considerably more but not even then to all the women who were employed. Men employed as labourers could earn six shillings but seven shillings was

more normal and in many parishes labourers were paid on average nine shillings or more per week. The impact of the Poor Law was therefore to reduce very considerably the degree of economic inequality between men and women. From a situation where men even as labourers earned double what women could derive from employment they were reduced under the weekly pension scheme to a situation of near equality at least from this one channel of assistance. Other sources of aid, however might be available, both to elderly men and to elderly women, and we will return to this issue later when assessing the much more detailed evidence on the situation of the poor in Corfe Castle in 1790.

First, consideration needs to be accorded three other issues concerning variations in the scale of weekly pensions documented by Eden. The first is to note the negative correlation between the size of the pension and the level of the male wage in a given community. When wages were high it was customary although not inevitable that the pension would be less generous. For example, in five of the eight communities where labourers earned nine shillings or more per week the pension awarded to men was under two shillings. Conversely, relief in the form of a weekly pension of over three shillings a week was only paid when labourers were earning less than nine shillings a week. There could be a number of reasons for this. One possibility is that in a high earning population the Poor Law authorities took the view that the children of the elderly poor were in a better position to support them or that the elderly should have saved something for their old age. Whether they had such savings is debatable nor can it be assumed that their children were willing and able to support elderly parents when most would have had young families of their own. Another possibility though is that the culture of a high wage earning society engendered less sympathetic attitudes on the part of the authorities to the plight of those who had to depend on the community for support.

The second issue is to note the strength of the regional variations both in the level of weekly pensions and in wage rates. Pensions to elderly men and women were notably less generous in the north and in the Midlands than in the south. Such differences were already apparent in the second half of the seventeenth century and indeed may have lessened over the course of time (Smith 1996:38). Set against the regional variations in wage levels, however, it becomes apparent that at the end of the eighteenth century the differences in the monetary value of the pension and wage rates were greatest in the midland counties and least in the southern ones.

TABLE 1

Median weekly pensions in shillings and pence received by the elderly relative to wages of male labourers and women's wages, 1794/5

County	Parish	Median weekly pensions in shillings and pence				Wages		No. of pensioners	
		Males	Females	Labourers	Women	M	F		
Berks.	Wallingford	3s	2s	7s-8s	-	1	1		
Bucks.	Huberstone	3s 6d	4s	7s	2s 6d - 12s ⁴	2	1		
	Winslow	3s 3d	2s	7s	4s - 4s 6d ⁵	2	11		
Cumberland	Carlisle	2s	1s 6d	7s - 7s 6d	3s - 12s ⁶	1	8		
	Castle Carrock	1s 6d	-	7s 6d	3s ⁷	2	0		
	Cumrew	-	1s	-	-	0	2		
	Cumwhitton	1s 10d	9d	4s ¹	2s ⁸	2	3		
	Harrington	-	7d	7s 6d - 15s	-	0	4		
	Kirkoswald	2s	2s	4s - 5s ²	2s ⁹	3	6		
	Sedbergham	1s	1s	6s	5s ¹⁰	3	5		
Derbyshire	Chesterfield	1s	1s	9s - 10s	-	2	12		
	Derby St Peter & St Alkmund	1s	1s 3d	12s - 15s ³	-	6	10		
	Wirksworth	1s 6d	1s	8s - 10s	3s - 5s ¹¹	13	18		
Essex	Colchester								
	All Saints	2s 6d	4s	9s	2s - 3s ¹²	1	4		
Lancashire	Lancaster	1s 6d	1s	12s - 15s	-	9	39		
Leics.	Kibworth								
	Beauchamp	1s	-	8s 6d	3s - 5s ¹³	1	0		
Lincs.	Cockerington	-	1s 9d	5s	-	0	2		
	Swineshead	-	2s	7s - 9s	-	0	2		
Middlesex	Ealing	2s 10d	1s 6d	9s - 10s	3s ¹⁴	7	13		
Monmouth	Monmouth ¹⁶	3s 6d	3s 6d	9s	-	10	10		
Notts.	Rode	2s 3d	2s	6s	3s - 6s ¹⁵	2	5		
	Overingham	-	1s 6d	6s	-	0	1		
Staffs.	Wolverhampton	1s	1s	15s - 25s	-	19	42		
Yorks.	Settle	2s	2s 6d	8s	-	3	8		
	Halifax	1s	1s	9s - 12s	-	14	19		

SOURCE: Eden (1797) II, III: *passim*. Payments are expressed in shillings (s) and pence (d) (12d=1s; 20s=£1).

¹ Hedging, digging

⁴ Strawplaiting

⁷ Weeders

¹⁰ Husbandry

¹³ Spinning worsted

¹⁶ Alms persons only

² Thresher

⁵ Lacemakers

⁸ Hoeing

¹¹ Spinning cotton

¹⁴ Carting fruit

³ Labouring on canals

⁶ Stamperies

⁹ Spinning

¹² Spinning

¹⁵ Lacemakers

TABLE 2
Weekly pensions¹ by age and sex in 1794/5

Age group	Winslow (Bucks.) Wirksworth (Derby)				Derby (Derby)							
	Males		Females		Males		Females		Males		Females	
	N	Pension	N	Pension	N	Pension	N	Pension	N	Pension	N	Pension
65-9	-	-	1	1s 6d	1	1s	1	1s	0	-	2	9d
70-4	-	-	6	1s 9d	4	1s	6	1s 3d	5	1s 6d	9	1s
75-9	-	-	1	2s 6d	0	-	2	1s 3d	4	1s 6d	2	1s
80-4	-	-	3	1s 6d	1	2s 9d	1	1s 6d	4	1s 9d	4	1s 3d

Age group	Wolverhampton (Staffs.)				Halifax (Yorks.)			
	Males		Females		Males		Females	
	N	Pension	N	Pension	N	Pension	N	Pension
65-9	0	-	4	9d	4	1s	2	7½d
70-4	9	1s	22	1s	5	1s	5	1s
75-9	7	1s	10	1s	3	1s	8	1s
80-4	3	1s	6	1s	1	1s	4	1s
85+	0	-	0	-	1	2s	0	-

NOTE: Payments are expressed in shillings (s) and pence (d) (12d=1s; 20s=£1).

Finally, we can examine the relationship between the age of the pensioner and the size of their pension. Data on this point is set out in Table 2 for the five populations (mostly urban) with the greatest number of elderly pensioners whose ages were reported by Eden (Eden 1797 ii,ii: *passim*). Even so the number of cases is disappointingly small. In some parishes there is evidence of lower pensions paid if the elderly person was under the age of 70 with no pensions for men in their late sixties. There is also the occasional sign of the award of a higher pension if the pensioner had passed the age of eighty. There is no evidence in these data, however, of a gradual increase in pension payments with age as might have been expected given Wales' findings that in the second half of the seventeenth century individual pensions were raised as the pensioner aged (Wales 1984:362-3). Other scholars have already observed that the value of the pensions received by the elderly had failed to increase in line with the rise in the cost of living in the eighteenth century (Smith 1996:39) and a failure to augment pensions in line with advancing age might be another indication of the

way in which at the end of the eighteenth century the elderly were increasingly disadvantaged in terms of the assistance they received from the Poor Law. On the other hand, differences in the type of data available (longitudinal (Wales) and cross-sectional (Eden) and the small size of the data set derived from Eden mean that the claim that at the end of the eighteenth century pensions were not augmented as the pensioner aged requires further research before it can be considered proven.

3. THE POOR OF CORFE CASTLE, DORSET IN 1790

The detailed census of Corfe Castle facilitates a much more rigorous examination of the circumstances of the poor in that it enables evidence on the payment of poor relief to be combined with information on residence patterns and estimated weekly earnings. In 1790 Corfe Castle was a small market town with a rural hinterland and 1239 inhabitants. The poorer male residents were generally employed as quarriers, claycutters, masons, carters, fishermen and labourers. Almost all the poorer women were employed as knitters and spinners. Three sections of society can be distinguished: persons on poor relief (who might also be wage-earners), the wage-earners not in receipt of poor relief, and the economically secure. The last group included all sections of society above the level of the journeymen craftsmen: i.e. master craftsmen, tradesmen, farmers, professionals and the gentry. The descent of some of these into the ranks of the very poor was not excluded (the list in fact mentions a case of such social descent) but at the time of the survey the listmaker saw no occasion to detail their income and it is on that basis that they have been identified as economically secure.

Table 3 indicates that in 1790 just over a quarter of the elderly (defined as persons aged 65+) were in receipt of poor relief. Close to four out of ten elderly men and women were wage earners or in the case of married women supported by a wage earner. Just over a third were economically secure. The proportions of men and women in each category were almost identical. Richard Smith and David Thomson reported much higher proportions of the elderly receiving weekly pensions from the Poor Law in the seventeenth century and 1840s: 40-45 percent in the seventeenth century and a majority in the 1840s (Smith

1996:38 and Thomson 1991 cited in Smith 1996:36). If the comparison is acceptable (and there are a variety of problems; random variation and the possible unrepresentative nature of both Thomson's study of the south-east midlands and of Corfe Castle, and for Smith the difficulty of estimating the size of the 65+ population) then the particularly disadvantaged position of the elderly poor at the end of the eighteenth century is confirmed.

TABLE 3

Percentage of elderly persons in Corfe Castle, Dorset, in 1790, in receipt of poor relief

<i>Economic situation</i>	<i>Males (%)</i>	<i>Females (%)</i>
Poor relief ¹	27	26
Wage earning	38	39
Secure	35	34
Total	100	100
N	37	38

1. In combination in some cases with earnings (see text).

SOURCE: Calculated from Census of Corfe Castle, 1790, included in Hutchins (1796-1815) I: 290.

The issue of the relationship between marital status and economic situation is considered in Table 4. For men, their marital status had very little impact on the proportions receiving poor relief, dependent on wages or economically secure but it was a very different situation for elderly women who were nearly three times as likely to be receiving poor relief if they were widowed rather than married. A separate calculation of the percentage of the actual and potential recipients of relief who were in receipt of relief at the time of the census as in Table 5 confirms the pattern. Just over forty per cent of the 'at risk' male population over the age of 65 were in receipt of poor relief. In the case of elderly women close to six out of ten were in receipt of relief when widowed compared with only eighteen per cent of the married elderly.

TABLE 4

Percentage of married and widowed elderly persons in Corfe Castle, Dorset, in 1790, in receipt of poor relief, wage-earning, or economically secure

<i>Economic situation</i>	<i>Males¹</i>		<i>Females¹</i>	
	<i>Married (%)</i>	<i>Widowed (%)</i>	<i>Married (%)</i>	<i>Widowed (%)</i>
Poor relief ²	29	27	13	35
Wage earning	38	40	60	25
Secure	33	33	27	40
Total	100	100	100	100
N	21	15	15	20

1. One male and three females were never married. The one man was economically secure as was one of the women. One single woman was on poor relief, and one wage-earning.

2. In combination in some cases with earnings (see text).

SOURCE: Calculated from Census of Corfe Castle, 1790, included in Hutchins (1796-1815) I: 290.

TABLE 5

Percentage of non-economically secure elderly persons in receipt of poor relief in Corfe Castle in 1796

<i>Marital status</i>	<i>Males</i>		<i>Females</i>	
	<i>Poor relief</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Poor relief</i>	<i>N</i>
Married	43	14	18	11
Widowed	40	10	58	12
Never married	-	0	50	2

SOURCE: Calculated from Table 4.

The loss of the male breadwinner was clearly the factor which forced many women to seek assistance from the Poor Law whereas for men the death of their partner and loss of the homemaker did not precipitate the payment of poor relief. For elderly men the critical factor was their inability to earn as a consequence of age, disability or illness. Analysis of the census of 1790 shows that only one of the elderly men in Corfe Castle supported by the Poor Law in 1790 was employed at the time and even he was earning a paltry three shillings a week as a mole catcher when the lowest regular male wage was seven shillings as a labourer or fisherman. Women on the other hand were not barred from combining poor relief and employment. More than half of the elderly

women resident in Corfe Castle in 1790 and receiving relief were also earning but only amounts (typically one shilling per week) which made even the wage of the mole catcher look generous. The circumstances in which poor relief was granted has important implications for the effectiveness of the Poor Law in reducing economic inequalities between men and women and between the elderly and their younger contemporaries. This is a point that will be considered later.

Table 6 sets out the living arrangements of the elderly in Corfe Castle in 1790 according to whether they were on poor relief, wage earning or economically secure. A range of different residence patterns were possible for those on poor relief. Of the elderly men six out of ten lived with a spouse. Four out of ten co-resided with a never-married child. For elderly women the situation was different. A third lived alone and forty percent only with unrelated persons. Just a fifth still lived with a spouse. From these patterns we may infer that the Poor Law payments were awarded to elderly men regardless of their family circumstances whereas in the case of women family circumstances were an important factor. If we compare the living arrangements of the recipients of poor relief with those of the wage-earning population from which they were drawn it can be seen that the residence patterns of elderly men varied very little whether or not they received poor relief, once allowance is made for the small number of cases. Elderly women, by contrast, in the wage-earning population were much less likely than the those on poor relief to be living alone or with unrelated persons and much more likely to be still married.

TABLE 6

Residence patterns of elderly persons in Corfe Castle in 1790 in receipt of poor relief, wage-earning, and economically secure

Residential situation	Males			Females		
	Poor relief ¹ (%)	Wage-earning (%)	Secure (%)	Poor relief ¹ (%)	Wage earning (%)	Secure (%)
Alone	0	0	6	30	7	14
Non-relative only	10	27	6	40	13	14
Spouse alone	30	20	0	20	13	0
Spouse + others	10	13	19	0	20	14
Child	50	40	56	10	40	50
Other relatives only	0	0	12	0	7	7
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100
N	10	15	16	10	15	14
Co-residents						
Spouse	60	40	44	20	53	28
Never-married child	40	27	38	0	13	21
Ever-married child	10	13	19	10	27	28
Non-relatives	20	33	31	40	33	21

1. In combination in some cases with earnings (see text).

SOURCE: Calculated from Census of Corfe Castle, 1790, included in Hutchins (1796-1815) I: 290.

4. THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE POOR LAW TO REDUCING THE ECONOMIC INEQUALITY OF THE ELDERLY IN CORFE CASTLE

Using the information on probable weekly earnings from the census of 1790 we will now attempt to measure how effective the Poor Law was in Corfe Castle in reducing the degree of economic inequality among the elderly (Table 7) and between the elderly and persons in their late fifties and sixties (Table 8). Before proceeding it is appropriate to mention again that the estimates of income incorporate our assumptions about the division of income within the household: namely that a husband consumes 50 percent more of the income of the household than his wife and a son and other male relatives over the age of fifteen a quarter as much (Wall 1994:332, note 16). One other admission is also in order. The Corfe Castle census, despite its quality, omits one important detail: namely the actual amount of poor relief. For the purposes of this paper it has been

assumed that the amount awarded was two shillings per week. This constitutes the average payment received from the Poor Law by all pensioners (not just the elderly) in two other Dorset parishes in the 1790s (Eden 1797 ii: 146-51 and see Wall 1994:332 note 19). If the Poor Law in Corfe Castle was less liberal in its handouts or the elderly in general received less (for example because they had fewer dependants) then we will have over-estimated the economic support provided to the elderly by the Poor Law. In fact Table 1 above establishes that contributions of at least two shillings to the elderly in the form of a weekly pension from the Poor Law were typical of the parishes in southern England for which Eden provided such information. Moreover, neither the estimated contributions of the Poor Law to the inhabitants of Corfe Castle nor those obtained from Eden have been augmented (except where specifically documented by Eden) to include the payment of rent. On the basis of present evidence our estimate of a contribution from the Poor Law of two shillings per week seems reasonable.

TABLE 7

Estimated contribution of the Poor Law to reducing economic inequalities among the elderly

	<i>Median income in pence¹</i>		
	<i>Without Poor Law</i>	<i>With Poor Law</i>	<i>Ratio</i>
Males			
Married	39.5	41	96
Widowed	47	47	100
Bachelors	—	—	—
Females			
Married	29	29	100
Widowed	13	26.5	49
Spinsters	13.5	25.5	53

1. Assuming husbands consume 50 percent more of the resources of household as wife.

SOURCE: Calculated from Census of Corfe Castle, 1790, included in Hutchins (1796-1815) I: 290. Payments are expressed in pence (12 pence = 1 shilling).

Analysis of the effect of the Poor Law in reducing economic inequalities among the elderly according to marital status and sex (Table 7) establishes that the Poor Law had a negligible effect on the median incomes of married men and women and widowers but roughly doubled the median incomes of spinsters and widows. Nevertheless, the income of elderly widows even with the assistance of the Poor Law was still little more than half the median income of the elderly widowers. Moreover it still fell a little short (just under ten percent) of the median income of the elderly married women. If our estimates are correct, therefore, the Poor Law alleviated but did not remove the inequalities resulting from the wide differential in the wages of men and women. The alleviation was, however, considerable. Without the assistance of the Poor Law, assuming all factors would be constant, the median income of a widow was little more than a quarter of the income of a widower. With the help of the Poor Law the income differential was halved.

In a similar way Table 8 sets out the median income of persons aged 55-64 and 65+ with and without the assistance of the Poor Law. As could be expected median incomes fell sharply in old age. Married men and widowers had an income that was on average 73 percent of the income of married men and widowers aged 55-64. Married women and widows fared even worse having incomes that were on average two thirds and under half of those enjoyed by women who were in many cases only a few years younger. The impact of what Rowntree was to describe a century later as the poverty life cycle is apparent (Rowntree 1899; Nelson edition no date: 171). The Poor Law again left most of these inequalities untouched. The median incomes of married women, widowers and married men barely changed. The relative position of spinsters actually appears to deteriorate due to more frequent support afforded younger unmarried women. Only in the case of elderly widows was there a marked improvement in their median income. From a situation where their income was just under half that of widows in their late fifties and early sixties they benefited with the assistance of the Poor Law to the extent that their median income fell just fifteen percent short of the median income of younger widows.

TABLE 8
Estimated contribution of the Poor Law to reducing economic inequalities between the elderly and late middle age

	Median income in pence ¹					
	Without Poor Law			With Poor Law		
	Aged 65+	55-64	Ratio	Aged 65+	55-64	Ratio
Males						
Married	39.5	54	73	41	54	76
Widowed	47	64	73	47	64	73
Bachelors	—	60	—	—	72	—
Females						
Married	29	43	67	29	43	67
Widowed	13	27	48	26.5	31	85
Spinsters	13.5	12	112	25.5	36	71

1. Assuming husbands consumes 50 percent more of the resources of household as wife.

SOURCE: Calculated from Census of Corfe Castle, 1790, included in Hutchins (1796-1815) I: 290. Payments are expressed in pence (12 pence = 1 shilling).

The economic situation of certain underprivileged groups such as that of the elderly widow was therefore significantly improved by the operation of the Poor Law. The impact on the lives of particular individuals was even more dramatic. As we noted above the meagre earnings of elderly women were significantly increased by poor relief. Elderly men, on the other hand, would usually only receive such assistance if they were no longer capable of working. Without such assistance the plight of both would have been dire. In Corfe Castle in 1790 it seems that it was those most likely to be at risk who were singled out for assistance. At other times and in other places poor relief may have been applied more widely (See for example the age pyramid of primary paupers (those receiving regular relief from the Poor Law) in Braintree in 1821, Sokoll 1993:262)

5. CONCLUSION

The small size of the data sets both on Corfe Castle and derived from Eden must inevitably limit the general applicability of the findings presented above. A study is also required based on the analysis of well documented parish accounts which would match weekly pensions with payments of rent, provision of fuel and occasional supplementary relief to provide a fuller assessment of benefits received from the Poor Law. A preliminary investigation on these lines of poor law expenditure in the Essex parish of Ardleigh at the end of the eighteenth century indicates that the Poor Law accomplished a considerable transfer of income from richer to poorer inhabitants and from men to women and children but did not eliminate inequalities. For example, even with the support of the Poor Law the income of the average widow in Ardleigh represented just under 60% of the income she could have anticipated from residence in the household of a labourer (Wall 2001: 123). The evidence presented in the present article identifies the minimum contribution of the Poor Law. Analysis of the data derived from Eden suggests that there were no great differences in the weekly Poor Law pensions of elderly men and women, that higher pensions were paid out in southern England than in the midlands or the north (this confirms other studies³), and that there was a negative correlation between wage rates and the size of the weekly pension. When wages were low the pension was high (and *vice-versa*).

From the detailed study of the census of Corfe Castle in 1790 it was found that just over a quarter of the elderly were in receipt of poor relief, well below the proportions calculated by Thomson and Smith for other time periods and other English populations. Regrettably it is unlikely that a census of the quality of that of Corfe Castle will be found for the seventeenth century but a calculation of the proportions of the elderly receiving Poor Relief in other communities in the nineteenth century could be attempted to establish a more broad-based picture of the extent of support from the Poor Law. Analysis of the 1790 census of Corfe Castle also established that marital status and family circumstances influenced whether elderly women were likely to be in receipt of poor relief

3 This was also the position in Ardleigh although the pensions were not as high on average as those awarded in the neighbouring parish of Colchester, compare Table 1 above and Wall 2001: 117).

(higher proportions helped by the Poor Law when widowed or when residing alone or only with non-relatives). However, these were also not general patterns. Ardleigh in 1796 and Braintree in 1821 (both in Essex) are known to differ (inferred from Sokoll 1993:243, 247-8).

The impact of the Poor Law in reducing economic inequalities was considerable for elderly widows relative to younger widows and for elderly widows and spinsters relative to elderly married women. Economic inequalities among the elderly were, thanks to the Poor Law, lessened considerably in some cases, lessened but not obliterated. Or to adopt Peter Laslett's terminology (1988: 166-7), the Poor Law alleviated but did not entirely remove the poverty associated with 'nuclear hardship', the inability of generally small and simply structured families and households to provide adequate support to widows and the elderly.

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