

Contents

List of Figures	viii
List of Tables	ix
List of Appendices	x
Acknowledgements and conventions	xi
General Editor's preface	xiii
Abbreviations	xv
Introduction	1
1 The context of poor relief in Hadleigh	9
Hadleigh's physical setting and neighbourhoods	9
The estimated population and demographic information	16
Economic life	19
Religion	30
Town government	36
2 Hadleigh's system of assistance	40
Officers and decision-making	40
The forms of aid, in-kind distributions and services	44
Financing poor relief	48
3 Recipients of relief and their households	63
Individual recipients of assistance	63
Recipient households and family relationships	75
A sample year: individuals and households in 1582	80
4 The care and training of poor children	83
Aid while living at home	84
Short-term boarding in another household	85
Assistance when entering service or apprenticeship	88
Training and discipline in the workhouse	90
Granted to a different family or expelled from Hadleigh	100
5 Aid to ill, disabled and elderly people	106
Care for people who were ill or disabled	106
Help for old people	110
6 Why?	119
The impact of Rowland Taylor and opposition to him, 1544–54	119
Relations between clothiers and workers	127
Worry about control and cost, 1576–85	130
Civic identity, civic competition	135
The ongoing influence of Christian social teachings	141
Appendices	151
References	177
Index	183

Introduction

England faced severe problems with poverty during the middle and later years of the sixteenth century. Population growth that outpaced economic expansion left more people in need.¹ During the 1520s, 1530s and 1540s, bad harvests, heavy taxation, changes in the value of money and the closure of monasteries and many hospitals contributed to a growing number of the poor. Indigent people who left home seeking better opportunities elsewhere heightened fears of vagrancy and begging among local and national leaders. In the reign of Edward VI the central government set up a system of parish-based assistance. A statute of 1552 (modified slightly in 1563) required parishes to collect aid from their more prosperous members to provide help for those who could not support themselves. Although the concerns of civic humanism and early Protestantism promoted this approach, all Christian churches of whatever doctrinal position advocated charity to the poor both before and after the Reformation. During the second half of the sixteenth century some of England's towns and cities experimented with their own forms of relief. But local assistance found it increasingly difficult to keep up with demand, especially because rapid inflation was not matched by an equivalent rise in wages, squeezing those who worked for pay. The 1590s experienced crisis conditions due to a series of crop failures and resulting high food prices. In 1598 and 1601 Parliament – fearing desperation among the poor and serious unrest – passed omnibus sets of laws that intensified and extended the provisions for collecting and distributing poor rates within parishes and addressed a number of other problems with earlier forms of aid. Those statutes initiated the period commonly known as the Old Poor Law, which continued until 1834.

This book describes how Hadleigh, Suffolk, a small town lying nine miles west of Ipswich, responded to the needs of its poor residents between 1547 and 1600 (see Figure Intro.1). In that period, the leaders of this cloth-manufacturing centre developed and operated an exceptionally comprehensive and expensive system of poor relief for some of its 2,400–3,300 inhabitants. By the 1590s they were running the most complex array of help offered by any English town, one that we may still admire today.² Hadleigh's economy was dominated by its wealthy clothiers, middling-scale entrepreneurs who organised and financed the various steps necessary to the production of heavy woollen broadcloths. They hired and paid the carders, spinners, weavers and finishers and then sent many of their cloths to London or Ipswich for export to the continent. Clothiers also held political power within the town, serving as the Chief Inhabitants who made decisions about a wide array of urban matters. They also chose officers for the town and its market, the administration of poor relief and

-
1. *For fuller discussion of these general developments, see Marjorie Keniston McIntosh, Poor relief in England, 1350–1600 (Cambridge, 2012), pp. 15–25.*
 2. *An assessment based upon my use of all surviving poor relief records from this period throughout England.*

Poor Relief and Community in Hadleigh

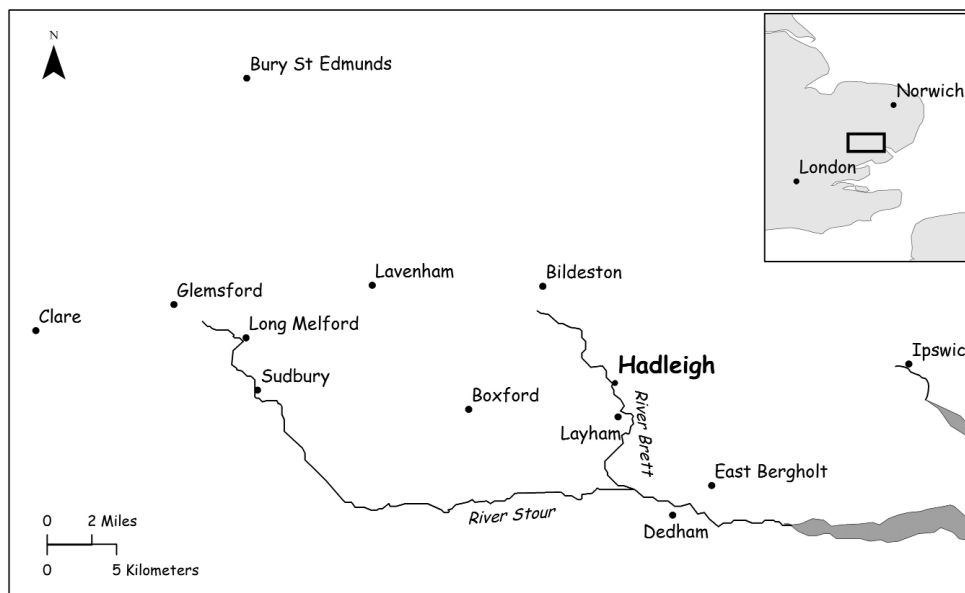


Figure Intro.1 Hadleigh and neighbouring communities.

even the parish. Attitudes towards charitable assistance in Hadleigh were influenced by the preaching of its early Protestant rector, who argued that a primary obligation of a Christian community was to attend to the needs of the poor. The prosperity of the clothiers coupled with the poverty of many of their workers, the authority and concerns of the Chief Inhabitants, and the Christian charitable message were among the factors that contributed to Hadleigh's willingness to offer aid to many needy people.³

Hadleigh's system of relief, providing individual assistance to at least 603 residents between 1579 and 1596, included multiple components. Most of the help was given to people living in their own homes. The largest group, people who were poor but could usually manage on their own earnings, received aid only occasionally, in the form of cloth, clothing, fuel or cash. Others were supported during periods of special need – such as an illness – or only after death, if their families could not pay for a decent burial. A smaller set of poor or disabled people received regular weekly payments at a level dependent upon their ability to earn part of what they needed to survive. Boarding formed a different type of aid, in which a person needing help would be cared for by another household, with expenses met by local officers. This approach was used especially for young orphans and children from troubled poor families, but also sometimes for adults temporarily unable to look after themselves owing to illness or injury. More than half of those who boarded others were themselves recipients of poor relief: the town's assistance thus filled two social needs at the same time. A third form of relief involved entering a residential institution. The town operated two sets of almshouses, endowed with land by charitable benefactors, in which 32 elderly poor

3. See Chapter 6 below.

lived rent-free while receiving a weekly cash allowance plus firewood and occasional gifts of household goods. Certainly by 1589, and possibly as early as 1574, Hadleigh was running an institution that was sometimes termed a hospital but was more accurately labelled a workhouse. It provided residential care, a disciplined setting for labour, training in basic skills (preparing woollen thread and knitting stockings) and in some cases punishment for the 30 poor children and idle young people sent to it. The town also paid to have orphans placed with another family and arranged positions for slightly older children as servants or apprentices, as well as opening public employment to needy men and women.

Hadleigh assisted an unusually large percentage of its residents for an Elizabethan urban community. During three years between 1582 and 1594 for which we have complete accounts, 111 to 149 people received individual relief annually (see Table Intro.1). Four to five per cent of the town's estimated residents were thus helped directly, and many of them presumably shared their benefits with other family members.⁴ Paul Slack has suggested that one should double the number of direct recipients to obtain an approximate figure for all the people being assisted. The resulting fraction of 8–10 per cent getting aid in Hadleigh was considerably higher than the adjusted values seen in five somewhat smaller Elizabethan towns and in the cities of Exeter and Norwich, though lower than the fraction relieved in a poverty-stricken parish in Warwick.⁵ If we think in terms of households, at least one member of 91 to 110 domestic units was helped annually in Hadleigh between 1582 and 1594; those households constituted 14–15 per cent of the town's estimated 660–780 units.⁶ Further, the average weekly payment of 3.6d per recipient in Hadleigh was well above the 2.2d awarded in the five comparable towns though below the 4.6d in seven cities. As well as administering residential institutions for the poor, Hadleigh's Chief Inhabitants were also helping a wider range of people than was true elsewhere. Most interesting was the town's willingness to assist illegitimate children, youngsters from dysfunctional families and some married adults of working age.

-
4. *The fraction would be even higher if one added some of the young inmates of the workhouse, which provided a form of poor relief for some of its residents. Just over half of its roughly 30 inhabitants at any one time were needy children and teens who had not been awarded other forms of public assistance but were given temporary housing, food and clothing while receiving occupational training (see Chapter 4, 'Training and discipline in the workhouse', below). For below, see Paul Slack, Poverty and policy in Tudor and Stuart England (London, 1988), p. 174.*
 5. *The combined average in the five smaller towns was 5.6 per cent (Marjorie K. McIntosh, 'Poor relief in Elizabethan communities', forthcoming, for Bishop's Stortford, Herts., Melton Mowbray, Leics., Framlingham, Suffolk, Wivenhoe, Essex, and Faversham, Kent, market centres or ports with estimated populations of 500 to 2,000 residents). Exeter's adjusted figure was 4.2 per cent in 1563 and Norwich's was 2.6 in 1578–9 (Slack, Poverty and policy, p. 177). St Mary's parish in Warwick assisted 7.4 per cent in 1582 (A.L. Beier, 'Poverty and progress in early modern England', in Beier, Cannadine, and Rosenheim (eds), The first modern society, pp. 201–39, esp. p. 207).*
 6. *In St Mary's, Warwick, 11 per cent of the 373 families received relief in 1582, and another 18 per cent were "ready to decay into poverty" (A.L. Beier, 'The social problems of an Elizabethan country town: Warwick, 1580–90', in Clark (ed.), Country towns in pre-industrial England, pp. 46–85). Warwick had about 2,000 residents in 1563 and 2,500 in 1586. For below, see McIntosh, 'Poor relief in Elizabethan communities'.*