

ART. XVI – *Poor Relief in Eskdale in the Early 1800's*

By MARY HALL

IN 1951 Rev. C.M. Bouch published a paper in the *Transactions* of the Society entitled “Book of the Overseers of the Poor in the township of Great Strickland 1778–1835”. In this paper he illustrated the sorts of people who were given poor relief, the amounts given, the cost to the township and, briefly, the way in which the document could give a wider picture of life in the period. He ended by saying “I hope that other members of the Society who have access to records of a similar kind will let us have articles on them in due course.” Forty years on I have been looking at a very similar document which relates to the Township of Eskdale in South Cumbria and covers the period 1826–1837. So perhaps I can not only describe the way in which poor relief was administered in Eskdale, but also compare it with Great Strickland and hope that other people in the county who have access to such information will be able to add to the picture from documents in their own areas.

The township and chapelry of Eskdale and Wasdale was, in 1826, part of the very large parish of St. Bees. It consisted of part of the valley of Eskdale, the valley of Miterdale and the small community of Wasdale Head. The population in 1821 was 296 and in 1831, 354 and was made up mainly of farmers and agricultural labourers, with no large land-owners; the chapelry had a perpetual curate to oversee its spiritual needs.

Great Strickland, lying about 6 miles south-south-east of Penrith, was a village and township in the parish of Morland, which was part of Westmorland. It had a population in 1829 of 246¹ so it was of a very similar size to Eskdale, but was a less scattered community.

In Eskdale, as in other places, poor relief was administered at the beginning of the 19th century by the Overseers of the Poor, selected yearly. They distributed money and goods to the poor of their parish or township and collected such money by levying a rate on those “substantial householders and occupiers” who were of sufficient means to contribute. There grew to be a concern that the giving of relief was becoming more and more burdensome – particularly in those communities which had few inhabitants and few reasonably wealthy householders. Gilbert’s Act of 1782 allowed northern counties to administer relief on the basis of townships and chapelries and the Sturges–Bourne Act of 1819 enabled them to set up a “select vestry” or poor law committee to administer relief. In populous areas this meant that the large landowners, who were on the whole those who contributed the money for poor relief, were able to have more say in its distribution because a select vestry consisted only of elected members. In rural areas setting up a select vestry was thought to be a way of improving the poor relief arrangements and reducing the amount of money spent. A recent study has shown that only about half of the Cumberland and Westmorland authorities reporting to the Poor Law Commission² possessed either a select vestry or assistant overseer. Eskdale and Wasdale set up such a “Select Vestry” in 1826. This lasted until 1837, when the Poor Law Act of 1834 came into effect in the area. The doings of the vestry were set down in a book which is now in

the Cumbria Record Office, Carlisle³ and it is a particularly detailed account of the people who were given poor relief, what amounts of money and what other forms of help they were given and shows to some extent what life in the valley was like during the period.

The inhabitants of the Township of Eskdale and Wasdale, considering that the establishment of a Select Vestry would be advantageous for the management of the concerns of the poor it having of late become a matter of serious importance viz. the payment of the Rate for the maintenance of the poor. Therefore to carry the said establishment into effect a meeting of inhabitants of the said township was held on the 13th day of June in the year of our Lord 1826 and, after due notice being given for the said purpose, at this meeting a number of substantial householders and occupiers were nominated as the Statute in this case requires . . . Statute made and passed in the 59th year of the reign of his late majesty King George III entitled "An Act to amend the laws of the relief of the poor".

So runs the introduction to the Select Vestry book. The eleven men chosen for this first vestry were typical of those throughout its history. There were eight from Eskdale and three from Wasdale Head. Of these the majority were farmers, described as yeomen in the Parson and White *Directory*, 1829. One was a woollen cloth manufacturer and one a victualler. There were no "gentry" in Eskdale at that time; also included were Rev. Powley, perpetual curate of the chapelry of Eskdale, and the churchwardens.

Their first duty was to set up the rules by which they were to administer the poor relief for the township. So, in rather harsh terms they "resolved that the present overseers of the poor do give timely notice to all Paupers residing in houses or tenements for which the said township of Eskdale and Wasdale pay the Rents to quit the Houses or Tenements they now reside in, and also to give Notice to the several proprietors of the said houses or tenements that this Township will discontinue paying and are no longer responsible for the payment of any Rents except in such cases as may come under a special order from the said Vestry."

The general impression one gets however, when reading through the book, is that the members of the Vestry on the whole showed care and compassion when dealing with the unfortunates of the parish. The Vestry met once a month except for a time later in its life when the Vicar recorded that there had not been a meeting for three months and he had to fill in the record himself. Those who were listed as paupers averaged about seven during the period in question (in a population of about 350 this is 2%) and most of them were given relief for several years – indeed there were some who featured in the accounts for the duration of the vestry. The following list describes the paupers who appeared in the first entry in July 1826.

<i>Pauper's Name</i>	<i>Residence</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Settlement</i>	<i>Rent</i>			<i>Sum</i>		
				£	s	d	£	s	d
I. Nicholson	Gosforth		By birth	1	18				
Russell	Whitehaven	15	Parent by birth				1	0	
Russell	Whitehaven	10	Parent by birth				1	0	
Ed Braithwaite	Corney		Parent by birth				2	0	
Sarah Braithwaite	Corney	1	Parent by birth				2	0	

<i>Pauper's Name</i>	<i>Residence</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Settlement</i>	<i>Rent</i>			<i>Sum</i>		
				£	s	d	£	s	d
Frances Braithwaite	Eskdale		Parent by birth						
Hannah Sherwin	Ulverstone	10	Parent by birth				1	0	
Margaret Stable	Broughton		Husband's servitude				4	6	
Braithwaite	Leeds	10	Parent by birth				1	6	
Benj. Braithwaite	Corney		Parent by birth				2	10	
Daniel Tyson	Eskdale		Apprentice weaver				2	0	

The column headed settlement shows how the person has become entitled to relief in Eskdale. The qualifications included birth or parents' birth, performance of some office, the owning of a tenement in the township, apprenticeship and servitude – a certain length of time working for an inhabitant of the township.

The list shows various things which are characteristic of the entries as a whole and which were also noticed in the Great Strickland accounts. It can be seen, for example, that money was being paid by Eskdale to paupers as far away as Leeds because their parent was entitled to settlement in Eskdale. In Great Strickland there was an entry in 1832 "John Dixon for Relief at Nottingham". This is perhaps indicative of the migration of the population from rural to urban areas during the period. The variety of entitlements is also displayed in this first set of entries. Similar categories were seen in Great Strickland – "the indigent, the aged, unmarried mothers and illegitimate children". Also, in spite of their resolution at the beginning that paupers should quit their houses, the Vestry went on paying rent for several of the paupers. This form of relief – the paying of house rents – was also used in Great Strickland. Canon Bouch instances house rents between £2 and £4 a year. The Vestry did not merely support the paupers of the district with weekly or monthly sums of money or with rents. The provision of clothes and food, nursing of the sick, funeral expenses and also sundry duties with regard to children born or about to be born out of wedlock – these were some of their many concerns. Again, the first page showing the monthly accounts for July 1826 gives some flavour of the breadth of interest.

Pd for this book to keep the accts of this township	10 0
For the appointment of the select vestry	6 0
Isaac Nicholson's house rent in Gosforth	4 18 0
Eliz. Russell's children four shifts	4 4
County rate to Mr Hudleston	5 17 6
Margaret Stable's childrens clothes	5 11 0
Margaret Stable's Bed sack 10yds @ 1/-per yd	10 0
Paupers' meat, eight meals at sundry times	2 8
Nursing Mary Braithwaite's child	1 8
Frances Braithwaite for knitting stockings	1 0
John Russell 3 journies to Holmrook	7 6
Journey to Whitehaven with Mary Braithwaite	6 0
Pd. to Mr Heywood and the magistrates at W'haven	8 0
Journey to Holmrook with Ed Stable's daughter	2 6
2 journies to Corney on Mary Braithwaite's acct	1 6
Journey to Holmrook for a warrant to take Hy. Tyson	2 6

Do to Ulverstone to apprehend the said Hy. Tyson	I 10
Constable and warrant to apprehend Hy. Tyson	80
Journey to Gosforth to pay the County rate	26
Journey to Whitehaven with Mary Braithwaite	60
Pd. Mr Heywood and the magistrates at WtHaven	130
Journey to W'haven with Lancelot Porter	40
Journey to W'haven with Hannah Sherwin	40
Journey with do to filiate her child	40
Pd. Mr. Heywood and the magistrates	130
Journey to Ulverstone to apprehend R. Slater 3 days	I 10
Pd. Constable for the said apprehension	100
Pd. magistrates at Ulverstone	40

This particular extract is, in fact, rather atypical in that there is a larger than usual expenditure on dealing with illegitimate children. Lancelot Porter and Henry Tyson are both subsequently recorded as paying the Vestry regular sums of money for "bastardy". A resolution of 1826 reads "At this meeting John Porter of Bridge House in Ulpha and father of Lancelot Porter who is the reputed father of an illegitimate child on the body of Mary Braithwaite, the sd. John Porter has become responsible for payment of expenses of filliating and all other costs attending the same during the month and also for the payment of 1s 6d per week from the time of the child becoming chargeable until Martinmas next." Lancelot Porter and Henry Tyson are recorded as having paid regular sums to the vestry until 1835. Robert Slater seems to have disappeared from the valley. During the eleven year period of the Vestry there are indications of 6 or 7 cases of illegitimacy. But the payments for the bastard children continued for a long time after the births, so, even though the fathers of most of them contributed, this was a constant drain on resources. In his account of Great Strickland Canon Bouch talks of many entries relating to relief for illegitimate children, so Eskdale was no better or worse than other parts of Cumberland and Westmorland.⁴

The County Rate, mentioned here, was a proportion of the Poor Rate paid to the county for the maintenance of bridges and other things. Frances Braithwaite, shown as a pauper on the previous list is here shown as having been paid for knitting stockings and for looking after Mary Braithwaite's child. Perhaps this was a way of increasing her money while getting some benefit from her skills.

In all communities there are always one or two families who are at the bottom of the pile. Canon Bouch gives a description of the Penrith family, who gave the Overseers of Great Strickland a lot of work over a number of years. If we now take the entries relating to one particular family in Eskdale occurring throughout the period in question, the amount of effort required of the members of the Vestry and the amount of money invested can be seen clearly. The Stable family featured in the records of the Overseers of the Poor before the select vestry was set up. One of the last entries in the overseers' book lists the names of paupers and the amount spent on them between 1805 and 1826. Edward Stable's family tops the list as having cost £134. 11s. ½d. during that period. There is no indication of why the family suffered poverty, though it is recorded later that Mary, the eldest child, was "weak of intellect". The family in 1826 consisted of Edward, 52, his wife Margaret, 38, Mary, 15, Agnes, 12, Edward, 7, and Sarah, 3. Margaret and the children were living in Broughton and receiving benefit from Eskdale by reason of

"Husband's servitude". It is possible that Margaret Stable was originally a Broughton girl, though I have so far not been able to find any mention of her birth or her husband's birth. It seems likely that Edward was working as a labourer, possibly in Wasdale Head where there was a family of Stables living at Down i' Dale. In November the Vestry "Resolved that ratepayers do find employment for Ed. Stable each to find one day's work for every £3 according to the rates, the said wages to be 6d. a day, except in peat time, hay time and harvest, when he shall receive 1s. a day. [This would appear to be the "Roundsmen" system, described by J.D. Marshall in his book on the old poor law.⁵ It is the only example of such relief in the Vestry book.] . . . the said wages with 3s or one stone of oatmeal a week to be allowed to his wife." ". . . The said Ed. Stable to have a new coat, waistcoat, two shirts and two pr. hose, his little boy a pr. of clogs, his eldest girl a bedgown, petticoat and shift and his wife halfe a ton of coales." Later in December, Mr. Atkinson the surgeon was consulted about a sick child of the family. Average weekly wages of agricultural labourers in Cumberland in 1824 were 12s. 3d. per week.⁶

In March 1827, Margaret Stable died. The Vestry paid the funeral expenses and house rent and resolved that "Ed. Stable do return to his children with the weekly sum of 8s. and a donation of 5s. at present."

	£	s	d
Journey to Broughton to bury Margaret Stable		2	6
To Henry Taylor for ale at the sd. burial		8	2
Sundries to M. Stable during her last sickness		11	2½
To a Nurse at the same time 3s Coffin £1 3s	1	6	0
To Betty Fell for lodging E. Stable's children 6 days		12	0
To Wm Poole for cloathes for the children	1	6	1
To Wm Rigg for M. Stable's new clogs		4	2

It was then decided that a house should be taken for Ed. Stable and his children at Randle How in Eskdale. Isaac Porter of Santon Bridge received £4. 12s. 4d., as due to him for the maintenance of Agnes Stable for one year. In 1829 the youngest daughter, Sarah, aged 6, died and the son was apprenticed, the Vestry paying 5 guineas for his bond. It was resolved "to procure situations for Ed. Stable's daughters Mary and Agnes and that E. Stable do no longer keep house, his youngest daughter being dead and the boy being bound apprentice to Mr. Harrison." Mary Stable was to be looked after by John Pharoah and £1. 3s. 8½d. was paid for "Agnes Stable's outfit on going to service." In December is recorded; "Edward Stabel's goods were auctioned and the amount was 13s-." During the next few years Mary and Agnes were moved about amongst the community several times. Agnes was with Nicholas Viccars of Dawson Ground (now the Woolpack Inn) in November and December. Robert Briggs (of Greenland Hall Wasdale) received money for her keep at the beginning of 1830, as did William Porter (a farmer of Low Holme) in May, and in June it was "resolved to compell Ed. Stabel to maintain his daughter Agnes." She was then sent to Wasdale Head to Ann Stable, who also appears to have given her father lodging. In June Agnes died.

Agnes Stable funeral expenses	£2. 2s. 8d.
To Jno Ritson for fetching coroner	6s

The Coroner's report, which is still extant, reads – "Drowned in Mosedale Beck . . . She had no marks of violence appearing on her body, but was subject to fits and had taken a fit when filling two cans or buckets with water at the said rivulet and was then and there accidentally, casually and by misfortune, drowned". This shows another member of the family who had some long term disease.

Mary, who was clearly unable to be of much use as a worker of any sort, was also moved around to anyone who agreed to care for her. John Pharoah received £7. 10s. for lodging her for a year in 1831 and in 1832 Robert Tyson received "the sum of £8 for a year's lodging of Mary Stable. R. Tyson to mend her cloaths and keep her clean, but if sick the township to pay the surgeon." In 1833 she was on the move again – this time to Matt. Tyson. Then, in 1834 she went to Thomas Milligan of Wha House. A rather sinister entry in March 1836 says "Mary Stable to remain at Thos Milligans till next year's meeting for the sum of £7. 10s.; the township to take her away if not well treated". However, all must have been well because one of the last entries in the book in 1837 says "Mary Stable is to remain at Thos Milligans at 5s. per wk." and on 10 June 1837; "This being the last meeting of the Select Vestry previous to the commencement of the new Poor Law the following items are allowed . . . Mary Stable, 27, 5s per week to Thos Milligan."

Apart from the major decisions which it has been shown the Vestry was constantly making about the family there were numerous payments for clothes, clogs, and such things as "the carting of peats to Ed. Stable's house". (Peat and not coal seems to have been the common fuel; and oatmeal was the most common food distributed.) In his description of the overseers book of Great Strickland, Rev. Bouch gives some of the prices of household goods distributed to the poor. A comparison can be made for the 1830's with similar goods in Eskdale.

	Great Strickland	Eskdale
Clogs	6s. 6.	4s. 11.
Funeral	£2. 6. 0.	£2. 2. 6.
House rent	£2 to £4	£1. 11. to £5. 8s.
Pension	1s. 6d. to 4s.	1s. 6d. to 6s.

Another example of the Vestry's considerable commitment to particular families is shown in the case of Chrispin Pharoah. In July 1826 the meeting of the Vestry considered his case and recorded it thus: "Chrispin Pharoah, Stonemason, having a Wife and six children and he having for a length of time been indisposed, unable to follow any kind of employment, made application for parish relief. After a statement of his circumstances it was resolved that he and his family go to reside at Bakerstead in Eskdale until Lady Day next. The rent of the said tenement is £1. 11s. 6d., which sum the said Select Vestry agree to pay. It was also resolved that John Vickers of Gill Bank furnish him with Two pair of Blankets, and that the Overseers procure him other necessary furniture and also that he receive eight shillings present relief and Four shillings per week afterwards until otherwise ordered by the Select Vestry . . . He having Eight shillings extra from a Sick Club Weekly Allowance." The entries concerning these particular families illustrate therefore that, in Eskdale, this system of poor relief was at the very least one which showed a caring for the unfortunates of the parish.

The authoritarian side of the members of the Vestry is seen in one or two entries about people who were, perhaps, not so unfortunate as the Stables, but who received help from the Vestry. One such entry will perhaps illustrate this – on 31 December 1831, “At a meeting this day Jno. Pharoah having had 2/- per week since 26 November it is resolved to give such 2/- no longer as he sends his youngest daughter to dance against the will of the vestry.” What this means I have not been able to find out, but it shows the breadth of the Vestry’s concern. Earlier, in 1827, Jno. Pharoah had been at odds with the Vestry – an argument which was recorded thus:

“Jno. Pharoah’s house rent £3. 3s.

To journeys and expences for attending Jno. Pharoah

(in a fit of ill nature) £1. 7s. 6d.

Jno. Pharoah, refusing either to quit or farm the house on his own account which the parish have farmed for him, the Vestry resolved to compel him. The overseers ergo went steadily to work, when the above expence was incurred, but he was beat.”

The Vestry aimed always to find the children and young people on their books some sort of employment. There are several examples of such people being “let” to members of the community. Though no description of the work they were to do is given, presumably it would most likely be labouring and domestic service in the farms of the valley. In the first entries of 1826 Susan Braithwaite is “Let to the Rev Mr Powley, minister of Eskdale, for one year and Mr Powley to receive . . . per week and the said Township to find her clothing during the term let. Also John Braithwaite was let at the same time unto John Sharpe of Eskdale for the same term, and he, John Sharpe, to receive Ninepence and the township to find the Boy suitable clothing during the said term.” When Agnes Stable was sent into service in 1829 she was about fourteen or fifteen. Her brother was ten when he was apprenticed.

There seems to have been an agreement with the Gosforth overseers that their poorhouse could be used for Eskdale people in certain circumstances, as there was no poorhouse in Eskdale. In July 1826, “When Sarah Pharoah daughter of John Pharoah of Bank House in Gosforth, she having a legal settlement in this Township and being in a state of pregnancy, made application to the said Select Vestry for relief or provision for her accouchement it was resolved that she go to Gosforth Workhouse having a room farmed in the said Workhouse to place such paupers in, as need so require.” Also, in the March 1827 accounts there is a sum of £3. 5s. 5½d. recorded “To the overseers of Gosforth on Ed Stable’s account 5 weeks and 5 days.”

The provision of relief for vagrants, and others passing through, who had no settlement in the parish was not a great part of the Vestry’s concern. In February 1827, close to the beginning of their duties as givers of poor relief, the Vestry members resolved “that any Overseer or Constable granting relief to any Vagrant (unless regularly removed) shall pay the same out of his own purse.” However there were occasional references to “soldiers” and “tramps” being given food or small amounts of money. A reference in 1836 to money being given to “Braithwaite from Leeds on a tramp” might, I suppose, be the Braithwaite, aged ten, of Leeds, who was receiving relief as a pauper in 1826.

The amount of money raised by the levying of a Poor Rate gives some idea both of the

comparative wealth of householders and, when comparing the amounts raised in different years, the cost of poor relief to the community. The amount collected between 1805 and 1826 by the old Overseers seems to have averaged about £100 a year. By 1835 at the latter end of the Select Vestry the annual amount collected was about £154. (In Great Strickland with a population of 246 in 1821 it was £194. 1s. 9½d., and in 1837 with 30 more in the population it was £134. 17s. 11½d.) The rateable values for the households listed varied from £67 for Joseph Norman, who held land in Mitredale, to 15s. for Nicholas Tyson who had a cottage in Boot. The rate in the pound which was demanded varied throughout the years, but a rate of 2s. 6d. was fairly common. Thus Joseph Norman would have paid £8. 8s. a year and Nicholas Tyson 10d. The population in Eskdale in 1831 (I have excluded Wasdale Head from all these calculations) was 354, of which 82 were men "upwards of 20 years". In 1835 fifty-three households were subject to assessment for poor relief. This must mean that there were very few families who were not contributing to poor relief in the valley.

Gilbert's Act of 1782 had allowed northern counties to administer relief on the basis of townships or chapeltries. Richard Thompson⁷ says "It is arguable that the period 1821–1831 saw greater changes in the actual policies of granting poor relief than the changes which followed immediately upon the introduction of the New Poor Law". In Eskdale the pattern of relief seemed to change little from 1800 when it was administered by Overseers of the Poor and 1826–1837 when the Select Vestry was in operation. In Great Strickland, which did not set up a select vestry, there seems to have been a very similar attitude and concern about the poor. Both of them are small communities and those in authority seem to have used any of the methods of providing poor relief which seemed appropriate. In Eskdale, certainly there were no rules laid down to guide the Vestry. The documentation of the means and recipients of relief was indeed much more meticulous after 1826, but in essence the same methods of assisting the poor seemed to continue.

Acknowledgements

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Notes and References

¹ Census Returns for 1821, 1831 and Parson and White's *Directory of Cumberland and Westmorland* 1829.

² Richard Thompson, *The New Poor Law in Cumberland and Westmorland 1834–1871* (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis Lancaster University), Chapter 1.

³ Cumbria Record Office (Carlisle) PR21/18.

⁴ Dr Thompson indicates that illegitimacy in the area of his study was 1/118 of the total population.

⁵ J.D. Marshall, *The Old Poor Law, Studies in Economic and Social History* (MacMillan, 1968).

⁶ C.M.L. Bouch and G.P. Jones, *The Lake Counties 1500–1830: A Social and Economic History* (Manchester 1961), 339.

⁷ Richard Thompson, *op.cit.*