

CHAILEY FRIENDLY SOCIETY

By N. CAPLAN

The idea of joining together in a fund to provide cash and other benefits in time of illness and old age developed rapidly in England towards the end of the eighteenth century, although the oldest friendly societies dated from the beginning of the century. It was estimated in 1803 that there were almost ten thousand societies with a membership of over 700,000.¹

The friendly society movement spread also in Sussex, particularly in the Western Division. In 1856, the Registrar of Friendly Societies published a consolidated list of all the Sussex societies and this recorded 238 societies in 156 different towns and villages, as registered up to the end of 1855.² Registration, however, was permissive, not mandatory, under the Act of 1793 for The Encouragement and Relief of Friendly Societies and it is possible that some of the earlier societies in Sussex were not registered. The important advantage of registration was that a society could then require its treasurer to deposit a bond and thus to insure against default or impropriety in the custody of its funds.³

It is evident that the Sussex societies were limited in operation to their stated objectives, unlike a good many of the societies formed in the new industrial areas of England; in the case of the latter, the relief given by the Act of 1793 to association provided the only means by which workmen could join together in their efforts to improve conditions of employment without incurring the drastic penalties against trade union combination. Many of the early societies in Sussex were supported and fostered by local landowners and farmers who saw the friendly society not only as a means of encouraging thrift, but also as an effective counterpoise to the efforts of agitators to stir up trouble in the countryside. It is significant that of the 156 places with societies, 109 were in the more markedly rural Western Division, including almost all the older societies.

As elsewhere in England, there was the closest association between the Sussex societies and the village inns. Only a handful of the earlier societies met elsewhere than at the "local."⁴ The early

¹ P. Colquhoun, *A Treatise on Indigence* (1806), quoted Halevy's *History of the English People in the Nineteenth Century*.

² The Registrar sent a copy of his printed list to the Clerk of the Peace in 1857 and this survives as QDS/3/EW3, in East Sussex Record Office, Lewes.

³ A number of these bonds of Treasurers survive as QDS/3/E1; the oldest is dated 13 March 1800, and was entered into by George Sawyer, shopkeeper of East Grinstead, in the sum of £2,000.

⁴ The Ditchling Amicable Society, whose Rules were first certified in 1794, was not shown as meeting at an inn but this may have resulted from some omission by its Clerk in making a return to the Registrar. After about 1835 efforts were made to form friendly societies linked with temperance and a number of the later Sussex societies met in the Church of England's National Schools, for example, Eastbourne (1835), Shipley (1841) and Stanmer and Falmer (1844).

societies were built round convivial gatherings at the inn and were as much "clubs" as insurance societies, but in any case there was no other meeting-place in most of the villages.¹

The oldest of the Sussex friendly societies which registered its rules under the Act of 1793 appears to have been the Chailey Friendly Society. This was instituted in 1782 and it met at *The Five Bells* inn. Happily, the Chailey Society's *Rules, Orders, and Regulations* have survived and these give a comprehensive account of the organisation and work of a typical village friendly society.² These rules were drawn up at a meeting at *The Five Bells* on 19 October 1818 to replace an earlier set which evidently had not been registered under the Act of 1793.³ The 1818 rules were witnessed by sixty-nine members, including eighteen who witnessed by making their mark. Many of the better-known Sussex surnames feature in the list, including Langridge, Beard, Coppard, Harman, Markwick, Holman, Funnell, Pickett, Newnham and Peckham.

The Society's motto was taken from 1 Peter 2, v. 17: "Love the Brotherhood—Fear God—Honour the King." There were twenty-one rules to implement the Society's primary objective of:

raising a Fund by Subscription of the Members; to be applied to their relief and maintenance in Sickness, old Age, and Infirmary; also to the relief of their Widows, and to such other purposes as are detailed in the Rules for its Government.

The first three rules regulated membership of the society:

Every person desirous of becoming a Member of this Society, shall deliver to the Stewards thereof, a true and regular Extract from the Parish Register of his baptism, and *shall* declare in writing his age, trade or occupation and residence. He shall also candidly, truly, and unequivocally answer all enquiries submitted to him by the Stewards, who are expressly directed and required not to admit any one under 14, nor above 30 years of age—nor any one who shall have been subject to the Gout or Rheumatism or afflicted with the King's Evil, Leprosy, or rupture; or who shall have *been* in any other respect ailing or unsound . . .

Bailiffs or Bailiffs followers cannot be admitted, and any Member accepting of either of these offices shall be excluded.⁴ . . . No person of drunken or disorderly habits, or of bad character can be admitted.⁵ . . .

¹ The Sussex list of 1856 may have some interest for those who wish to trace the careers of old inns in the county; the list suggests that the most numerous inn signs c. 1800-1850 were those of the *Bell, Swan, White Horse and Red Lion*.

² Rules of the Chailey Friendly Society, QDS/3/E2. The writer gratefully acknowledges the ready help of the East Sussex Record Office, Lewes.

³ It is unlikely that the form of the rules adopted in 1782 would have been compatible with the requirements of the Act of 1793, but it is somewhat surprising that the Chailey Society took so many years to revise their rules and enrol them.

⁴ One is led to wonder whether this exclusion of bailiffs and their followers reflected the hazards of personal injury to such persons or simply the traditional dislike of these officers.

⁵ But this stipulation can hardly have been as restrictive as it sounds, given the lenient treatment of insobriety, profanely cursing or swearing and challenging to fight in the Society's list of forfeits, *infra*.

A continuance of three successive years in this Society shall constitute a Free Member, and entitle to all the benefits of this Institution; provided that all payments shall have been made good during the whole time . . .

Any Member engaged in His Majesty's Service by Land or Sea, shall be excluded; but should he return with Limbs Health and Constitution unimpaired, he may be readmitted . . .”

The Chailey Society required an entrance fee of five shillings from members between 20 and 25 years old and of ten shillings from those between 25 and 30, but members under 20 were admitted free. The regular subscriptions were three shillings at each quarterly meeting, one shilling at the quarterly meetings next after the death of “Free Members,” one shilling on the 4th June for the expenses of the annual “Club Feast” and ninepence at each quarterly meeting from the members present towards the drink and food provided (members absent paid ninepence into the general funds of the society). These were, of course, substantial sums in 1818, particularly for members who were employed as labourers. The Society lost no opportunity of augmenting its funds by stipulating forfeits for a lengthy list of offences; there were twenty-one such offences for members with several more applying to the Stewards, the Treasurer, the Clerk and the Landlord of the inn ‘where the Club is held.’ The scale of the fines throws a good deal of light on the attitudes and customs of Sussex village life of the times. The most serious offence in terms of the size of the forfeit was: ‘For publickly or privately using expressions, either by speaking or in writing, tending to the dissolution of this society, or division of the stocks’ which carried a forfeit of ten shillings. The attitude to Royalty was not as solemnly respectful as we are inclined to suppose—the forfeit was sixpence only for ‘Speaking disrespectfully of the existing Royal Family’; perhaps the close association between the Royal Dukes and the county had something to do with this relative impunity for such an offence. One senses sound realism in the small fines imposed for swearing and for ‘coming into the Club Room when not sober’—sixpence and threepence respectively.

The forfeits imposed on the Stewards were more severe; insobriety in the Club Room cost a Steward one shilling and it was five shillings ‘For losing his Key.’ The latter forfeit is understandable in the context of Rule 15:

The money and securities, constituting the Society's Fund, are to be deposited in a secure Box, having five Locks varying in their wards. The key of one of which is to be kept by each Steward, and the fifth, or remaining key, is to be kept by the Treasurer, or such other person, bound by sufficient security for the safety of the Box and its contents, to whom he shall entrust it. The nomination of the person so to be entrusted is to be submitted to a General Meeting for its approbation, prior to any such appointment—which appointment a General Meeting shall at any time have power to withdraw, and to return to such person and his surety the securities given.

The four Stewards were elected to serve by seniority in rotation. In addition to their important part in the regular conduct of club

business, they were directly responsible for payments of benefits and for visiting those claiming benefit; Rule 18 required that:

The whole of the Stewards are in turn weekly to visit all sick and lame Members residing within ten miles of the usual place of meeting, and to deliver to such Members their respective allowances from the Fund. They shall also report to the Society the state and condition of the sick, lame and infirm at every General Meeting.

By consent of the Club, the Stewards may respectively be allowed three pence per mile for every mile above four which it shall be necessary for them to travel upon the Society's business, to be computed from the usual place of meeting, and upon extraordinary occasions, such compensation as shall be agreed upon . . .

The benefits available to members were set out in Rules 7 to 12 and the Society took good care to avoid what the Rules termed 'deceit or concealment.' Under Rule 7:

Every Free Member rendered incapable of working at, or following his Trade, profession, or business, by sickness or lameness, not the consequence of venereal disorder, nor of offensive fighting, or other unlawful conduct, shall be entitled to receive one shilling per day, whilst he remains so disabled:— But no member shall be paid less than three days of such indisposition. Every sick member is permitted to write or sign papers; also to give directions to his servants, or other persons employed in his own business and concerns. Every Member, labouring under such sickness or lameness, whose place of residence shall not be less than ten miles from the usual place of meeting, must transmit to the Stewards a Certificate of the nature of his case, signed by the officiating Minister and one Churchwarden of the parish in which he shall be resident; and also by the medical person attending him. Each sick Member receiving benefit from this Society shall, if required, deliver to the Stewards weekly, an Account of his expenses, to shew that the money allowed has been expended only upon articles necessary for him in such state of infirmity:— and every Member refusing to give a true, or delivering a fictitious account thereof upon demand, shall be excluded . . .

Rule 8 regulated the payment of a form of pension to the aged or permanently disabled members:

When the majority of votes at a quarterly meeting shall adjudge any Free Member to be unable to work for his living through age or permanent infirmity, he shall no longer be entitled to the benefits allowed to a sick or lame member by the last Article; but shall be assisted by the Institution in the following manner, so long as the Quarterly Meetings shall consider him as continuing under such disability:— Upon the Quarterly night in August, the Meeting shall enquire into the state of the last year's Account, and if it shall be found that the Surplus, of the proceeds of that year, above the disbursements on account of Sickness, Deaths, and the casual expences of the Society, when equally divided among such aged, and permanently infirm Members, will admit of four shillings per Week being paid to each, the Meeting is then to direct such payments (but no greater) to be made to each of them during the ensuing year:— But should it appear, upon such enquiry, that such surplus, so divided, will not admit of four shillings per Week being paid to each of such Members, the Meeting is then to decide upon the scale of weekly payments for the ensuing year;—which is to be taken as high as such surplus will admit of. All those who shall be added to the list of aged and permanently infirm Members within the Year, shall receive the same weekly payments as the rest.

Even imprisonment did not necessarily disqualify members from benefit; under Rule 9:

Any Member confined in Prison for debt (not incurred by notorious Idleness or Extravagance) shall have two shillings per Week remitted to him for his subsistence, until such time as he shall have obtained the allowance directed to be paid by Creditors to Debtors under the Statute;—provided that such Debtor shall take the earliest opportunity of applying for such Statute Allowance.

But any member who became a pensioner in any hospital where he was wholly provided for ceased to be eligible for benefit, except that his widow could still qualify for the death and funeral grants, provided that the member had kept up all his regular subscriptions. The death grant to widows was a substantial one:

At the death of a Member of this Society, having been ten Years or upwards in the Club, and having paid all the dues imposed upon him by these Rules and Regulations, his Widow shall be entitled to, and shall be paid on the next Quarterly Meeting after his decease the sum of fifteen Pounds Sterling. Unmarried Members, and Widowers, under the same circumstances may bequeath forty shillings to whom they please.

The funeral grant was three pounds for a Free Member and thirty shillings for a Free Member's wife; the Stewards were specifically required to see that 'the Money allowed for his interment be frugally and properly applied.'

The Chailey Society was much concerned with its social occasions and the quarterly meetings at *The Five Bells* were decidedly convivial occasions with each member paying the ninepence a head for the drink and food which were to be 'called for by the Stewards alone, if present.' In the winter, the meetings were held from 5 until 8 p.m. and in summer from 7 until 10 p.m. The Stewards were charged with ensuring that 'the Meetings are supplied by the Landlord with everything requisite and of good quality.' The landlord of *The Five Bells* was under a forfeit of five shillings for:

Not providing a decent and convenient room for the use of the Society, at its usual times of meetings, cleared of all other company, and provided with a good *fire* when requisite.

Socially, the Chailey Society's big day was 4 June—the Annual Feast—and Rule 13 regulated the proceedings on this day:

Annually, upon the 4th of June, a Feast Day and General Meeting shall be held by this Society. The Members are to assemble at ten o'clock in the Forenoon, and at the expiration of half an hour the names of the whole Club shall be called over, in order to ascertain who may be absent. The Members present then shall proceed to Church in regular procession, by two and two, for the purpose of hearing divine Service. On the occasion of this Meeting such sum as shall be necessary (not exceeding two shillings for each Member belonging to the Club, whether present or not) is to be disbursed by the Fund to defray the expence of the Feast.

The Society's Rules provided for a proper record of its activities to be kept by the *Clerk*:

The Clerk is required to enter in a book, to be provided by the Society, a just and perfect Account of all proceedings—he is to register, upon the admittance of Members, their respective ages, and places of Residence—and Annually, upon the feast day, to correct if necessary the account of the residence of every Member for the ensuing Year—and deposit in the Box all registers of Baptism

received subsequent to the preceding Feast Day. He shall assist the Treasurer and Stewards in all Accounts, Registers, letters and other writings whatsoever.

For his recompence, he shall, if a member, be entitled gratuitously to all the Benefits of the Club during such time as he shall continue to fill the office of Clerk, and shall be paid annually from the Fund two Pounds in addition. If not a Member of the Society, he shall be paid such annual Salary as may be settled and allowed by the decision of a Quarterly Meeting.

Unfortunately there is no trace of the Clerk's records of the Chailey Society; nor are there any records or relics at *The Five Bells* of the house's long association with the Society—perhaps somewhere in the Chailey district there are some papers which would throw more light on the society's work.

No doubt, some of these early village friendly societies in Sussex were more successful as convivial gatherings in the local inn than as effective providers of insurance against sickness and old age, but we have to remember that their work, like that of the Chailey Society, was in a community which knew nothing of national insurance and benefits beyond the despised meagre subsistence of the Poor Law. Those local worthies who organised these Friendly societies deserve to be remembered with gratitude.