

THE REPATRIATION OF IRISH VAGRANTS FROM CHESHIRE, 1750—1815

by G.W. Place, M.A.

Read 6 November 1985

Hugh Ruewark was an Irishman who came to England to look for work and failed to find it. When he was arrested in January 1758, he had been begging in Middlewich and so was declared a 'rogue and vagabond', to be returned to his parish of origin under the Poor Laws. In the statement he made to Thomas Swettenham, the magistrate in Middlewich, Ruewark declared that, 'about 15 years ago he was hired for a twelvemonth in the parish of Kilcullen in the County of Kildare, that he served the said twelvemonth . . . Since [then] he hath done no Act to gain him a legal settlement elsewhere as he believes.'

It is not known when, during those fifteen years, Ruewark came to England. As he had a son aged two in 1758, it seems quite probable that he married in England; and perhaps the expense of a family made casual labour inadequate as a source of income and so reduced him to begging. After the magistrate had taken down the statement, he filled in a pre printed form which would ensure that the Ruewark family was repatriated to Ireland:

Whereas Hugh Ruewark and Ann his wife were apprehended in the township of Middlewich as Rogues and Vagabonds, viz. wandering and begging there, . . . it doth appear that [his] lawful settlement . . . is in the Parish of Kilcullen in the County of Kildare in the Kingdom of Ireland. These are therefore to require you, the said Constable, Tythingman or other Officer of the Peace of the said Township of Middlewich, to convey the said Hugh Ruewark, Ann his wife and Child named Thomas about two years old, to the Township of Boughton, that being the first place in the next Precinct, through which they ought to pass in the direct way to the said Kingdom of Ireland . . . to be there conveyed on in like manner until they shall arrive in Parkgate in the County of Chester . . . apply for a warrant to the Master of any Ship or Vessel bound for Ireland, that shall lie at Parkgate . . . to take on board the said Hugh Ruewark . . . etc.

3 Jan 1758, Tho: Swettenham¹

¹ Cheshire R.O., Ref. QJF 186/1/140.

It took two days to convey the Ruewark family to the gates of Chester and thence in the care of the constable of Boughton the dozen miles to Neston, where they were booked in at the Old Quay House of Correction at Neston by the master, Peter Ryder, on 5 January. They had to stay in the House of Correction for four days before they could be put on board a ship at Parkgate for transmission to Dublin.

The accounts of the House of Correction at Neston survive in full for the fifty years between 1750 and 1800 and in part between 1801 and 1816.² This paper seeks to describe the lot of destitute Irish people who were returned to Ireland under the Poor Laws, as it is revealed by these accounts and to describe the background to Irish migration in Cheshire through the port of Parkgate.

Parkgate was in constant use as a port for Ireland, principally for Dublin, from about 1709 to 1815³ and in the early years its convenience for use by migrant labourers may well have been crucial to its fortunes. Many hundreds of seasonal harvest labourers passed through Parkgate to and from Ireland each year and it is ironic that only those unfortunates whose stay in England had ended in distress are known by name, through the meticulous records of these accounts. The published research material on Irish migration into Britain has almost wholly concentrated on the nineteenth century, when steamship travel encouraged and famine conditions obliged, very large numbers to migrate.⁴ For the eighteenth century, very little evidence seems to have been collected. Irish migrant labourers in England seem to have been divided into two kinds. There were the harvest labourers who came to England for a definite purpose and who returned home after a few months; and there were those who came for an indefinite time and for varying reasons in pursuit of any work they could find. Hugh Ruewark seems to have been one of these latter. Because of the indefinite nature of their life in England, it is scarcely possible to generalise about the second type of migrant except to say that there seem to have been plenty of them. The work of the harvest labourers, though, is better understood. They often worked in teams which specialised in haymaking. William Cobbett described the 'hundreds of squalid creatures tramping into London . . . without shoes, stockings or shirts.' He said 'it is curious to observe how the different labourers are divided as to nations. The mowers are all English; the haymakers are all Irish.'⁵

Although there is evidence of Irish vagrants in the Neston area in the last years of the seventeenth century, teams of harvesters are not mentioned so early. There were anti Irish riots in London in 1736, due to the Irish 'not only working at hay and corn harvest as has been usual, but letting themselves out to all sorts of labour considerably cheaper than English labourers have.'⁶

² In Quarter Sessions files and books in the Cheshire Record Office (Ref. QJF 178-228 and QJB 3/11-22).

³ See G.W. Place, 'Parkgate as a Port', *J.C.A.S.*, vol.66, pp.47-55.

⁴ See A. Redford, *Labour Migration in England, 1800-1850*, 1926; C.J. Ribton-Turner, *History of Vagrants and Vagrancy*, 1887; E.J.T. Collins, 'Migrant Labour in British Agriculture in the 19th Century', *Economic History Review*, vol.29, 1976; J.H. Johnson, 'Harvest Migration from 19th Century Ireland', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, vol.41, 1967; Barbara Kerr, 'Irish Seasonal Migration to Great Britain /800-38', *Irish Historical Studies*, vol.3, 1942.

⁵ W. Cobbett, *Parliamentary History*, 1806, vol.34, p.498; *Rural Rides*, 1830, vol.1, p.84.

⁶ W. Coke, *Life of Walpole*, vol.3, 1798, p.348.

Irish harvesters are recorded at Parkgate from the 1740s. Two young men who were waiting impatiently for a ship, wrote that:

We are returned to Parkgate, where we find the wind as obstinate as ever. We see every day vessels coming from Dublin, with great numbers of passengers for London, of all kinds, from men of rank to the lowest station; for as our harvest in England is earlier than in Ireland, they begin about London, work their way down to the west, and get back to their own country, time enough for their business there.⁷

The horses and luggage of these two travellers were carried on a vessel named the *Race Horse*, which is also mentioned in a play by Thomas Sheridan called 'The Brave Irishman', written at about the same time. The Irishman of the title is Captain O'Blunder, on his way to Virginia to fight the French. In London he was asked about his passage from Ireland:

Devil split it for a passage. By my shoul, my own bones are shore after it. We were on the devil's own turnpike for eight-and-forty hours. We were brought down from Rings-end in the little young ship to Pool-pheg, and then put into the great ship — the horse — ay, ay — the Race-horse they call'd it.

(He was seasick and asked the captain to stop the ship.)

Oh, kingrann, says I, turn her about and let us go home again; but, my dear, he took no more notice of me than if I was one of the spalpeens below in the cellar going over to reap the harvest.

(What brought him to London ?)

Fair, my dear jewel, the stage-coach; I sail'd in it from Chester.⁸

The hard life of these migrant labourers was described towards the end of the eighteenth century by Robert Bell:

These emigrations always took place in the beginning of autumn; at which time the roads leading to the metropolis might be seen covered with wretches, known as Spalpeens, half naked, and barefooted, with hardly the means of defraying the expenses of the journey, which their extreme frugality rendered very trifling; and sometimes without any other resource than the scanty stock of oaten bread which they carried along with them on departing from their homes.

The holds of the packets sailing from Dublin to Parkgate and Liverpool might, at this season, be seen crowded with poor wretches, who, after paying half-a-crown for their passage, had scarcely as much more money to defray the expenses of their journey to the counties situated near the Metropolis. This journey they generally performed barefooted, because they were obliged to spare their shoes for certain kinds of work which could not be performed without them.⁹

⁷ W.R.C. [Chetwood] ed., *A Tour Through Ireland*, 1746, p.34.

⁸ See L. Hughes and A.H. Scouten, eds., *Ten English Farces*, 1948. This was drawn to the writer's attention by Dr. E.J.T. Collins.

⁹ R. Bell, *A Description of the Condition . . . of the Irish Peasantry*, 1804, pp.10-11.

Bell went on to say that the labourers were often exploited by 'spalpeen-brokers', Irishmen themselves, whom he compared to 'West Indian negro-drivers' except that they made their men 'work ten times harder than their sable brethren of the torrid zone'. The fact that the harvesters walked barefoot explains why they preferred to sail one hundred and twenty miles by sea to Parkgate rather than half that distance to Holyhead. A long march through the Welsh hills, where there would have been little chance to beg the buttermilk they obtained from English farms,¹⁰ would have made an almost impossible journey.

The fare of half a crown mentioned by Bell compares favourably with the six shillings quoted in a ballad:

I paid the Captain six thirteens¹¹
 To carry me over to Parkgate;
 Before we got half over the waves,
 It blew at a terrible hard rate.¹²

All the men fell on bended knees
 And the ladies fell a-fainting;
 I fell on the bread and cheese,
 I always mind the main thing.

Said the sailors all, 'To the bottom we go!'
 Says I, 'Don't care a farthing:
 You've booked my passage to Parkgate, you know,
 And bejabers you'll stick to your bargain!'¹³

Such, then, is the background to Irish immigration in the eighteenth century. During its first years, those who found themselves destitute or in difficulties in England and who tried to return to Ireland by sailing from Parkgate were causing difficulties for the local overseers of the poor. Parkgate lies in Neston parish, Neston being a town a mile inland from Parkgate:

It appears unto this court [the Cheshire Quarter Sessions in 1698] that the Township of Neston Magna is very greatly overcharged and overburdened with their poor, by their being so very numerous, and also by being so charged and oppressed with passengers coming to take shipping at Neston for Ireland, and also coming back from there . . .¹⁴

The court ordered that all eight townships in the parish, rather than just one, should share the burden. In 1698, it is possible that Neston Quay was still in use, but it was certainly abandoned a few years later when Parkgate became established as a port.

¹⁰ *Chester Chronicle*, 6 July 1827.

¹¹ An Irish hog or shilling contained thirteen pence. See Sir J. Carr, *A Stranger in Ireland*, 1806.

¹² Mentioned in Mawdsley, *Directory of Birkenhead*, 1861, which quotes seven thirteens; and in H. Gamlin, *Memories of Birkenhead*, 1892.

¹³ As sung to the writer by Mr. J.E. Allison. This ballad, allegedly titled 'Billy O'Rourke' has defied detection as to its source: the writer would be grateful for further information.

¹⁴ Cheshire R.O. Ref. QJF 126/2/42, 1698.

In 1713, the two townships of Great Neston and Leighton, in which Parkgate lay, petitioned that they:

not only provide for their own very numerous and growing poor, and pay their proportion of the yearly charge upon the whole county for relieving of vagrants constantly travelling to Ireland in great numbers, but are also under the greater burden of their passage this way and long stay here before they can get 'em transported . . . their being any diseased and impotent persons not capable of going to sea. Women that fall into travail and are brought to bed, helpless orphans left with us by parents which happen to die or overrun 'em, and others that die among us and are buried at our charge. Besides the great difficulty and cost of prevailing with Masters of ships to carry so many persons who cannot pay for their sustenance or to pay for their passage. Most of our neighbours upon the prospect of peace having taken other employes, we have few merchant ships left to use the Dublin trade, and of those that do, some do not anchor here, and others refuse to carry vagrants upon any terms.¹⁵

This latter problem, of ships' masters refusing to accept vagrants, was very soon solved by an Act which obliged captains to take them under penalty of a £5 fine.¹⁶ The difficulties described here were sometimes resolved by shifting the burden elsewhere. The justices at Ormskirk had to complain in 1740 that, 'the passing of Irish vagrants out of Cheshire to the House of Correction at Manchester, is contrary to the Act, Parkgate being the next port.'¹⁷

The solution was provided in March 1750, when the Grand Jury at the Chester Assizes:

did, in order to lessen the great expence, which the inhabitants of the said county had been at, in conveying Irish vagrants, present, That it is necessary to have a House of Correction, in or near Great Neston . . .

[The magistrates] have contracted for the renting or purchasing of a house called the Key House, near Great Neston. If, therefore, any flax dresser, manufacturer or other proper person is willing to undertake the management of the said House of Correction, in punishing offenders that shall be committed thither, and in setting them to work . . .¹⁸

No doubt the appeal for a manufacturer to take advantage of cheap labour was designed to cut down the expenses, but the idea of work was central to the idea of correction, deriving from the Act of 1575/76 which required that 'in every Countye one or more Abyding Houses shal be provided and called the House or Houses of Correction, for setting on worke and punishing such as shal be taken as Rogues.'¹⁹

¹⁵ *ibid.*, Ref. QJF 141/1/63, 1713.

¹⁶ 2 Anne, cap.23, 1713.

¹⁷ Lancashire R.O., Kenyon MSS. 1207, 15 July 1740.

¹⁸ *Chester Courant*, 13 March 1750. The spelling tends to change from 'Key' to 'Quay' towards the end of the eighteenth century.

¹⁹ 18 Elizabeth I, cap.3, [1575-76].

However, in this case no manufacturer was forthcoming and no work ever seems to have been provided; nor was it necessary, for the inhabitants were rarely 'rogues' in need of correction, but destitute people in need of shelter, to be moved on as fast as wind and tide would allow.

The Old Key House itself was a large brick house²⁰ on the shores of the Dee, one mile up river from Parkgate. It overlooked the ruins of the stone quay, once Chester's New Haven or New Quay, later known as Neston Quay. It had become known as the Old Quay by at least 1743,²¹ perhaps because the opening of the New Cut canalization of the river in 1737 had brought about a New Quay on the Welsh side, later called Connah's Quay.²² The Old Key House was built in the seventeenth century, succeeding a wooden or wood frame building²³ and was mentioned in 1642 by Sir Richard Grenville.²⁴ There is no precise record of its use: it may have been used as a store, or as an inn, for in 1689, Colonel Bellingham 'lay at the Key House, at George Eaton's' after landing at Neston.²⁵ George Eaton held the lease which was transferred through his son in law to his grandson, Peter Ryder,²⁶ perhaps the same Peter Ryder who was master of the *Bennett*, a vessel trading with Spain and Portugal in the 1730s.²⁷ After the decline of the quay, the house was divided into three separate dwellings and in 1737, Ryder was able to buy the freehold.²⁸ In 1750, therefore, Peter Ryder was the owner who leased the Old Key House to the county of Chester for £26 a year and he was also appointed master of the House of Correction at an annual salary of £40.²⁹

The first task was to adapt the building for its new use. At the start, very little was done: the well was cleaned, some new window cases were fitted, a small amount of building work was done involving 1,000 bricks. It was not until the house had been in use for three years that more extensive alterations were made, by building a lavatory block, discreetly referred to as a 'Necessary House'. For that, a brickmaker was hired to make 53,000 bricks, possibly on the spot and a bricklayer made vaults for the 'Little House' and laid three hundred and forty yards of wall. A carpenter made doors and 'little house seats and easeboards', while the cooper provided a 'Necessary Tub'.³⁰ Apart from scattered repairs to such things as broken locks, virtually nothing else was done (or at least paid for by the county) until Cheshire gave up the building in 1803.

20 See A. Yarranton's plan for the Dee canal proposal in *England's Improvement by Sea and Land*, 1677, where it is marked as 'The Back House'.

21 Cheshire R.O., Ref. DHL 27.

22 T. Boydell, *A plan of so much of the lands and premises belonging to the River Dee Company, as lye between the City of Chester and the towns of Flint and Park Gate . . .*, 1772.

23 Chester City R.O., Ref. CAP/1.

24 Cheshire R.O., Ref. DCC 14/21.

25 *The Cheshire Sheaf*, 3rd series, vol.35, 1940, no.7857, p.64.

26 Cheshire R.O., Ref. DHL 3/9 11; *The Cheshire Sheaf*, 3rd series, vol.27, 1930, nos.6061, pp.61-62 and 6068, p.66.

27 R. Craig, 'Shipping and Shipbuilding in the Port of Chester in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries', *T.H.S.L.C.*, vol.116, 1965, pp.39-68.

28 *The Cheshire Sheaf*, 3rd series, vol.27, 1930, no.6077, pp.71-2.

29 Cheshire R.O., Ref. QJB 3/11, July 1750; QJF 128, June 1750.

30 *ibid.*, Ref. QJF 183/1, Jan. 1755.

During the fifty years from 1750, a total of 25,325 people were received at the House of Correction. Most of these were listed by name: those that were not, were described as wives or children of named parents. The average was five hundred and six a year and with few exceptions the numbers varied between three hundred and six hundred a year. In only one year were there substantially fewer (one hundred and sixty-two in 1777) and there were two periods of remarkably high numbers: 1763 and 1764 when there were nine hundred and eighty one and nine hundred and sixty five people; and 1783 and 1784 when the enormous total of 2,318 and 1,058 vagrants were passed through the House of Correction. Whether these high numbers were caused by bad harvests in England, by bad harvests in Ireland, or unusual activity by the justices, is not evident. Certainly the summer of 1783 was an unpleasant one, described by Gilbert White as 'an amazing and portentous one, full of horrible phenomena', with 'alarming meteors and tremendous thunderstorms' as well as a haze or smoky fog which hung over all Europe for a full month.³¹ From 1800 to 1815, the accounts have survived in a greatly reduced form which shows the quarterly expenditure only, with no details and no nominal roll. It is not possible to infer numbers at all accurately from the expenditure, but the accounts suggest that for these later years the average number of vagrants remained about the same, with no years of exceptionally high traffic.

There were three masters of the House of Correction in the sixty six years and their different personalities probably had considerable effect on the welfare of the inmates. The first, Peter Ryder, may well have negotiated his position as master while arranging the lease of his property. He lost his wife, Esther in 1753³² and for the last six years of his life he was assisted by his daughter, Ann. He does not seem to have been a great success, for a good many of the vagrants ran away during his mastership: in 1754, sixty nine vagrants or 10% of the total ran away. It is known that on one occasion he was faced with rebellion, because the county was asked to pay 5s. 'to Gate Men to help me when the Vagrants Reble'.³³

Peter Ryder died in January 1759.³⁴ It seems likely that his successor, William Aldcroft of Gayton, had already been chosen, for he was quickly confirmed in office by the Quarter Sessions. Many years later, one of Ryder's daughters complained that her sister should have continued at the Key House as the new superintendent. The reply was, 'I have never heard of a Female being appointed to keep a House of Correction . . . This I know of a Certainty, that before your Father breathed his last, the present Keeper [Mr Aldcroft] had obtain'd such Interest in the Appointment as cou'd not have been overrul'd'.³⁵

As Ryder had owned the building, the Old Key House was advertised for sale by auction at the Black Bull, Neston, although the county continued to hold the lease.

31 G. White, *Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne*, 1788. Dr. J.P. Dodd drew this to the writer's attention.

32 See Neston Parish Register, 6 Nov. 1753.

33 Cheshire R.O., Ref. QJF 180/1, Jan. 1755.

34 See Neston Parish Register, 24 Jan. 1759.

35 See a letter from Joseph Hayes to Mrs. E. Minster, 9 March 1779, Cheshire R.O., Ref. DHL 64/31.

The buyer was Samuel Williamson, a Parkgate sailmaker turned business man, who turned out to be in financial difficulty and resold the house to Joseph Hayes, a prosperous Neston brewer, for £365.³⁶ His ownership in no way affected the management of the House of Correction.

William Aldcroft was then thirty nine years old and he remained as master with his wife, Jane for the next thirty eight years. Almost nothing is known of him outside the evidence of the Old Key accounts, yet these suggest that he was a great success as master, being efficient and humane, with a genuine concern for his charges. His accounts display considerably more literacy than either Peter Ryder or Jonathan Bedson, Aldcroft's successor, could show. One striking tribute to Aldcroft's effectiveness is the complete disappearance of runaways. It was common for Ryder's charges to escape and after Aldcroft's death, Bedson had to report that vagrants had 'eloped'. Such escapes had to be reported, because the daily allowance for food for each inmate continued until passage money was paid to a ship's captain and any discrepancy represented a runaway. During Aldcroft's thirty eight years, on one single occasion only was such a discrepancy reported:

Instead of going with the rest down to Parkgate to be shipt, the other people told me, they [Samuel Wheyland, his wife and child] set off for Liverpool and that their intention was to have stay'd for her to have been deliver'd, as she to all outward appearance was near her time.³⁷

There must have been something in Aldcroft's manner which persuaded his charges that he was there to help them reach home, rather than to imprison them. There are many brief notes in the accounts which suggest that he was a kind man: 'To several little sundry articles for the benefit of the children in the smallpox, and other sick people, 10s 6d.'³⁸ In 1787, 'Sarah Campbell came very bad, her both feet by some means was in danger of being lost (some of her toes came off) by applying to Mr Jacson and others was admitted into Chester Infirmary'.³⁹ Aldcroft bought shoes and stockings for her when she came out of hospital: Roger Jacson was rector of Bebington and a magistrate.

The Aldcrofts had a daughter Mary, born at the Old Key in 1759, who died at the age of nearly seven; and a son William who died there in 1760.⁴⁰ Hannah Aldcroft, who may have been an older daughter or another relative, died in 1775. When William died in January 1797, at the age of seventy seven,⁴¹ his widow refused to leave her home of nearly forty years; the county treasurer had to write to her to 'induce her to quit'.⁴²

On Aldcroft's death, the office of master was temporarily filled for six months by Thomas Downward until Jonathan Bedson, appointed at the Quarter Sessions

³⁶ *Chester Courant*, 21 Aug. 1759; Cheshire R.O., Ref. DHL 3/16.

³⁷ *ibid.*, Ref. QJF 201/2, 1773.

³⁸ *ibid.*, Ref. QJF 204/1, 1776.

³⁹ *ibid.*, Ref. QJF 215/2, 1787.

⁴⁰ See Neston Parish Register, 17 Aug. 1759; 26 April 1766; 23 Aug. 1760.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, 15 Jan. 1797. His gravestone gives his age as seventy seven, but also spells his name wrongly.

⁴² Cheshire R.O., Potts Collection, Ref. DPB 1021, 14 July 1797.

in May,⁴³ could take over. Bedson's salary was £40 a year, as his predecessors' had been. Bedson was not as educated as Aldcroft: his first accounts are headed, 'Ann A Count of Pepol Takein by Pass and Shipt'.⁴⁴ The visiting magistrates must have found his accounts too disorganised to follow, because a printed form was introduced within a few months. Nothing else is known of Bedson's mastership, beyond the fact already noted that the vagrants began to 'elope'. After 1800, the Quarter Sessions files have unfortunately been weeded of most of the details which give them interest and only the quarterly summaries of expenditure remain of the House of Correction accounts. Although the last vagrant passed through in 1815, Jonathan Bedson remained nominally master of the House of Correction until the last small payment was made to him at the end of 1816.

There was one very important change after Bedson had been master for a few years. The Old Key House was in urgent need of repair and in 1794, the deputy clerk of the peace was ordered to enquire upon what terms the owner would renew the lease, if the county were to repair or rebuild the premises.⁴⁵ Joseph Hayes had died ten years earlier and the ownership of the building had passed to his nephew, Joseph Lyon. Lyon's response has not survived, but no repairs were done, so presumably he preferred the income of £26 a year rental to the capital improvement of the building. When the century turned, though, the state of the house had become urgent and the magistrates began looking for a new location. In 1802, the Quarter Sessions agreed an order relating to the purchase of a House of Correction at or near Neston and 'to make such contract for the Purchase of a House, outbuildings and other conveniences for the confinement of Prisoners and Vagrants to be passed to Ireland.'⁴⁶

The house chosen was half a mile down river, at the bottom of Moorside Lane in Neston and within much easier reach of the shipping at Parkgate. It was then referred to as 'the Moorside House' (a name given at different times to several houses in this locality), but it was later called Dee House, while the building now on the site is called Dee Side House. Nothing is known of the house before the county bought it for £600 in September 1802.⁴⁷ The local magistrates treated with a Mr. Hopkins, who may have been the owner or an agent. The first reference to 'the House of Correction at or near Great Neston called the Moorside House' being in use, was in July 1803, although fitting it up continued for another three years, including an advertisement to bricklayers and masons to see the plan of a new building in 1806.⁴⁸

Mention has already been made of the numbers of people detained at the House of Correction, averaging about five hundred a year. Their length of stay varied with the availability of shipping and they would be put on board ship as soon after their arrival as possible. It was usual, therefore, for there to be no more than about twenty people in the House at any one time. At times, though, when sailing was delayed

43 *ibid.*, Ref. QJB 3/17, May 1797.

44 *ibid.*, Ref. QJF 225/4, Oct. 1797.

45 *ibid.*, Ref. QJB 3/17, Oct. 1794.

46 *ibid.*, Ref. QJB 3/18, April 1802.

47 *ibid.*, Ref. DPB 1021, Sept. 1802.

48 *Chester Chronicle*, 4 April 1806.

for several weeks, the numbers would mount to the point of gross overcrowding. The worst such occasions were in 1764, when one hundred and seventy eight vagrants left together in three ships and in 1783, when two hundred and twenty eight left in two ships.⁴⁹

The diet allowed in the early years was probably very meagre, at 1d. a day. As it was possible to buy beef at 2d. a pound, it is difficult to judge how meagre the allowance was, but it compares very unfavourably with the 6d. a day which the Lancashire justices allowed in 1740 for the maintenance of vagrants while waiting in port.⁵⁰ In 1772, the allowance in Cheshire was raised to 1½d. a day and again in 1784, when it was ordered that 'the prisoners and vagrants at the Old Quay House are to be allowed 3lbs of potatoes (or the same value in some other wholesome food) in addition to the allowance now made to them.'⁵¹ This allowance was made in the form of 3d. a day.

Fortunately, the master was allowed the discretion to buy extra rations when sickness or special needs demanded them. In 1778, 'coarse beef at different times to make broath of, for the sick and lame people' was bought and in the same year, '4 measures of potatoes and 2 hundred of herrings for the benefit of the whole.' Often food was bought at Christmas: in 1779, 'To a piece of beef to make broath for the whole against Christmas Day, 7s 1d.'⁵²

When the vagrants left the House of Correction, the captains who shipped them were paid 2s. 4d. a head for 'bread, boatage and passage', made up of 2s. 1d. for passage and 3d. bread allowance. The Lancashire justices had allowed considerably more in 1740; they allotted 2s. 6d. to the captain and 1s. for maintenance while on board. The Parkgate Packet captains complained in 1787 that they could no longer take vagrants at 2s. 4d. a head, 'as they too often experience that the Allowance made them for Sea Store is often devour'd before the Vessel gets over the Barr and by having a long passage, they must starve if the Captain did not relieve them.'⁵³ As a result of this petition, the total passage allowance was raised to 3s. 1d.

Despite the diet, the health of the inmates seems to have been quite good. By the most crucial yardstick of all, the death rate was low, despite the poor physical condition in which many arrived. In the fifty years from 1750, one hundred and nine people died at the Old Key House (seventy men, nineteen women, twenty children), representing 0.43% of the total. Usually the deaths were well scattered, which suggests that they might have occurred whatever the conditions. There were five occasions when as many as five people died in a quarter and on four of these there were long delays in sailing due to bad weather, or unusually large numbers, or both. On the fifth occasion a pregnant woman was injured by the overturning of the cart which brought her, resulting in the deaths of both mother and child. Altogether thirteen babies were

49 Cheshire R.O. Ref. QJF 192/2; 211/2.

50 Lancashire R.O., Kenyon MSS. 1207, 15 July 1740.

51 Cheshire R.O. Ref. QJF 212/2.

52 *ibid.*, Ref. QJF 206/1, 4; 207/1.

53 *ibid.*, Ref. QJF 215/1.

born in the House, though three died and another three were born dead. When Margaret Soper gave birth to a child in 1763, six days after her arrival, the expenses were listed as: to a midwife, 5s.; to candles and sope, 1s. 6d.; to drink, spices, butter and oatmeal, 2s; to butcher's meat, 2s. 6d.; to a woman attending her, 1s. 6d.⁵⁴

The general health probably improved after the extra food allowance was made in 1785. Only ten died in the next fifteen years (0.16%) although the numbers were fewer then.

On two occasions, vagrants were sent to Chester Infirmary. Several times a doctor was summoned: Edward Branthwait, apothecary, submitted bills on five occasions between 1763 and 1774 for medicines and for bleeding; and a later apothecary, James Hargreave, was called twice in 1784-85. In 1773, a Neston surgeon, Stephen Bond, sent a bill for £2. 4s., 'to attend several persons who from their long confinement and the inclemency of the weather were extremely ill. I attended about thirty of them, some having gaol fever, others rheumatic fever, and others violent flux.'⁵⁵

Aldcroft often received vagrants who were already unwell and he did not try to ship anybody who was really ill. In 1767, he received 'Hugh Jefferys, hes upward of 70 years of age came very bad, and still continues so ill that hes not fit to be moved. Expecting him to die every day.'⁵⁶ However, Jefferys survived and was shipped after six weeks in the House. In 1773, when two mothers died, their daughters were kept for sixty one and sixty eight days until they were fit to travel. A year later, a mother with two children had to remain for fifty three days through illness. In 1782, two families were detained for eleven and thirteen weeks respectively because they were ill.⁵⁷

Occasionally there were vagrants who were insane; in 1795, 'John Carroll, an Idiot', died in the House.⁵⁸ More troublesome was 'James Quinn, he being Lunatick and a Ressalute man, confin'd him in the Dungenl were he broke 2 pare of handcuffs, broke through the Dungenl wall and pull'd up all the brick floor and broke the bricks in pieces, afterwards chained him down till a ship sailed.'⁵⁹ Twenty years later, there arrived 'William Murphy a Lunatick, he came handcuffed and chained fast in a cart, he was so bad, I was obliged to get a blacksmith to alter a pair of leg irons and handcuffs, he being a large boned man, that they would not fit him.' When Murphy was put on board the sloop *Sutton*, he threw things overboard and had to be returned to the House. The captain, Gwyn Brown, put in a claim for 17s. for the damage done.⁶⁰

One of the saddest cases was Roger Courtney, who arrived on 15 April 1788:

an old blind and lame man almost naked, I got him carried down to Parkgate in a cart, shipt him the 19th on board the Princess Royal Packet, Captain Brown,

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, Ref. QJF 191/4.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, Ref. QJF 201/3.

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, Ref. QJF 195/3.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, Ref. QJF 201/2; 202/1; 210/1.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, Ref. QJF 223/3.

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, Ref. QJF 189/1, 1761.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, Ref. QJF 210/3; 211/3, 1782-83.

which took him to Dublin Bay the wind blowing very hard, and a Werry Boat met them, took all the passengers in but this old man which could not help himself, was brought back the 25th. I got a cart to bring him here again, and had him down five times after, by this time he was become a Newsince for want of cloathing, I applied to Mr Jacson who order'd me to buy some flannen to make a jacket and trousers, when he went in the Queen Packet, Captain Miller, 7th May.⁶¹

After 1795, it was no longer permitted to remove sick persons under the Poor Laws.⁶²

If Aldcroft is revealed as a kindly man, then he received support from his immediate superiors, the local magistrates. One of them had to check his accounts each quarter and any extra expenses never seem to have been queried. As shown above, he sometimes asked for direct help. In 1774, the Quarter Sessions appointed three magistrates to inspect the House of Correction following 'an Act of Parliament for preserving the health of prisoners in gaol and preventing gaol distemper'.⁶³ One of the means of securing healthy conditions was to use whitewash and payments were sometimes made for 'Wightwashing the House'.⁶⁴ It is a pity that when James Neild visited Chester in 1804, as part of his nationwide inspection of prisons, he did not visit Neston. In Chester he praised the Castle but said the city's other two prisons 'are to be numbered among the very worst in the kingdom'.⁶⁵

Apart from the extra items of food which were bought from time to time, the county also paid for such domestic requirements as straw, coal, brooms, noggins (which are mugs) and piggins (which are wooden bowls with handles). When somebody died, the county paid for the coffin and funeral charges, which usually included 'drink', no doubt for the bearers.

Mention has been made of a dungeon in which an insane man was confined, not very successfully. Although the vagrants were under legal detention, there is little evidence of any physical restraint, especially during Aldcroft's mastership. On several occasions Peter Ryder bought iron shackles, leg irons and locks and once he conveyed two men in irons to Chester Castle, though the reason was not recorded. Aldcroft had to have the dungeon locks repaired once; and twice there were problems with deserters who pulled down the dungeon walls, door and floor.⁶⁶ Such visitors were unusual and the usual Irish vagrants seem to have been quiet enough.

How deserters came to be lodged in the House is not known, because the county did not pay for them. On two occasions some of the vagrants were discharged soldiers: in 1778, beef broth was made for sick and lame people, most of them being discharged soldiers from America.⁶⁷ Exceptionally, the House was used by the local justices.

⁶¹ *ibid.*, Ref. QJF 216/3.

⁶² J.D. Marshall, *The Old Poor Law, 1795-1834*, 1968.

⁶³ Cheshire R.O., Ref. QJB 3/14, Oct. 1774.

⁶⁴ *ibid.*, Ref. QJF 226/1, Jan. 1798.

⁶⁵ *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 1804, p.4.

⁶⁶ Cheshire R.O., Ref. QJF 221/4, Oct. 1793; 223/1, Jan. 1795.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*, Ref. QJF 191/2, 1763; 206/1, Jan. 1778.

In 1763, it was ordered that Catherine Reece, convicted of petty larceny for stealing coal, should be whipped privately in the Neston House of Correction⁶⁸ and twenty years later Mary Nelson, convicted of the same offence, was held in custody at the Old Quay House before being publicly whipped.⁶⁹ The accounts record that three people were committed to the House for vagrancy by local magistrates.⁷⁰

The usual inmates were, however, the Irish vagrants for whom the House was established. No doubt to make sure that the passage money was properly accounted for, the Quarter Sessions ordered in 1754 that vagrants being sent by ship from Parkgate had to be sent by the keeper of the Neston House of Correction and by nobody else.⁷¹ As in the case of the Ruewark family, they arrived in the custody of the constable of Boughton, many of whose delivery notes survive. Between 1770 and 1783, the constable was John Wheawell; between 1783 and 1815, he was Thomas Bleads. The charges they could make allowed for bringing the vagrants on foot, on horseback or in a cart, but nearly all vagrants arrived on horseback. For example, in the last quarter of 1777, Wheawell brought seventy vagrants on nineteen occasions; on three occasions he used carts and on sixteen occasions he brought horses.⁷²

The vagrants were taken on foot from the House to Parkgate to be put on board ship, unless walking was too difficult for some: 'To a hire of a cart to carry the sick and lame down to Parkgate to be shipt, 2s.'⁷³

In very few cases is it recorded where the vagrants had been sent from. In 1771, the magistrate who checked the accounts, Mr. Glegg, noticed that twenty six passes were signed by a Warwickshire justice, Mr. Whirley: 'I think the court should take some notice of it.'⁷⁴ A rather oblique clue may perhaps be found in a large number of removal orders signed by Neston magistrates in the early 1750s. Most of them refer to women and though there is no record of their reasons for being in Neston, there were so many of them (one hundred and twenty in 1751, two hundred in 1756)⁷⁵ that it seems likely they were seeking ships for Ireland. Many were ordered to be whipped before being returned, in no case to Ireland, but in over half the cases, to London.

The vagrants still had worries after they had been put on board ship. If the wind was contrary and the vessel did not sail, the vagrants were returned to the House of Correction to await the next opportunity and occasionally they were four times or even five times 'shipt'. The men may also have had to run the gauntlet of recruiting sergeants for the army and the Press Gang for the navy: although there is no evidence of these perils for vagrants, there are references to harvest labourers being caught by them.⁷⁶ On three occasions, vagrants from Parkgate are known to have suffered

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, Ref. QJF 191/2.

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, Ref. QJF 212/3.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, Ref. QJF 222/1, 1794; 223/1, 1795.

⁷¹ *ibid.*, Ref. QJB 3/11, Jan. 1754.

⁷² *ibid.*, Ref. QJF 206/1.

⁷³ *ibid.*, Ref. QJF 200/2.

⁷⁴ *ibid.*, Ref. QJF 199/3.

⁷⁵ *ibid.*, Ref. QJF 179, 184.

⁷⁶ *Chester Chronicle*, 6 June 1794; *Dublin Chronicle*, 3 Aug. 1790; Royal Archives, Windsor Castle, Ref. RA SP 380/1270.

shipwreck. In 1758, the *Dublin* under Captain White was lost with some seventy passengers. Twelve of these were vagrants from the Old Key and as the accounts record, 'all Losst'.⁷⁷ When the *Nonpareil* was wrecked in 1775, with not one person saved, forty three of those drowned were vagrants, although the accounts do not mention their deaths.⁷⁸ There were fourteen vagrants on board the *Queen* packet when she was wrecked on the Lancashire coast in 1797, but on this occasion the passengers were rescued and the vagrants were returned to the House of Correction.⁷⁹ On a further occasion, when the *King George* was wrecked in 1806 with heavy loss of life, it was reported that many passengers were Irish labourers,⁸⁰ but the detailed accounts which would have told us whether vagrants were aboard, are missing for that date.

The list of those lost on the *Nonpareil* gives an example of the structure of such a group. Of the forty three people on board, some had waited for up to eighteen days; twenty had been put on board a ship three times and another nine had been twice shipped. Sixteen were men on their own and there were two unaccompanied women. Sixteen were married couples accompanied by seven children and there was a mother with her child. In order to find out how typical this structure was over the fifty years as a whole, one full year has been analysed for each of the five decades.

Unaccompanied men	1,029	44%
Unaccompanied women	265	11%
Couples with children	432	19%
Single adults with children	592	25%
All children	482	21%

These proportions did not vary a great deal, although single men sometimes numbered over 50%. As harvest labourers would have travelled as single men, it would seem that most vagrants came from the less definite type of migrant.

Occasionally, children arrived on their own, though this practice was clearly frowned on. When three small children, the oldest aged six, arrived unaccompanied in 1767, they were sent back to Bromsgrove by order of the Quarter Sessions.⁸¹ Once, a woman died at the House leaving two children and Aldcroft paid 10s. 6d. to another woman to take the children to their destination.⁸²

The passage through Parkgate of so many Irish, often poverty stricken whether vagrant or not, could have occasioned some distrust amongst the local residents. There were certain incidents which must have alarmed them. In 1750, Bryan (or Edward) Molloy was murdered with a reaping hook by his three companions while returning to Parkgate from harvest labour. Two men were hanged for his murder at Chester and then gibbeted at the spot commemorated by the name of Gibbet Mill, on Two

⁷⁷ H. Gamlin, *Twixt Mersey and Dee*, 1897, pp.246-7; Cheshire R.O., Ref. QJF 187/1.

⁷⁸ *Chester Chronicle*, 23 and 30 Oct. 1775; Cheshire R.O., Ref. QJF 204/1.

⁷⁹ *Chester Chronicle*, 9 Dec. 1796; Cheshire R.O., Ref. QJF 225/1.

⁸⁰ *Chester Chronicle*, 19 Sept. and 17 Oct. 1806.

⁸¹ Cheshire R.O., Ref. QJF 195/2.

⁸² *ibid.*, Ref. QJF 202/1.

Mills Heath.⁸³ There was an outrageous robbery by Irishmen at a farm near Chester in 1752;⁸⁴ and a baby was abandoned in a ditch on the Parkgate road in 1775.⁸⁵ Fortunately the 'Irish joke' seems to have come to the rescue, then as now, as in this story from 1812:

An Irish Robbery! A butcher was stopped on the Parkgate road by two Irishmen, who not only robbed him of his money, but made him exchange his coat for one of theirs. He had not gone far into the night when he heard them pursuing him. He crossed a hedge and hid in the ditch. The Irishmen also crossed the hedge but continued across the fields. The butcher made his way to an inn, and there discovered that his new coat had £23 sewed into the lining, which amply compensated him for his losses and alarms.⁸⁶

The evidence suggests that the local people were sympathetic to the migrant Irish. In 1789, the *Chester Chronicle* reported that:

Not less than 140 haymakers, natives of our sister country, last week after embarking twice from Parkgate, had each time the mortification of being driven back by adverse winds; the benevolent inhabitants of Neston opened a subscription for them, when the sum of £20 16s was immediately collected by Captain Heird.⁸⁷

In addition, in the following story from 1784, a most unfortunate man seems to have been tolerated for some time:

Yesterday an Irishman, who has for several years wandered about Parkgate, in a fit of insanity, laid his leg on a block and nearly chopped it off below the knee; but seeing it hang by some flesh and skin, he deliberately cut it off with a knife.

The next day the parish register recorded his burial as 'John Moors' a poor man who cut off his own leg (lunacy).⁸⁸

The House of Correction accounts yield information, not only about Irish vagrancy, but also about shipping at Parkgate. In most cases the name of the captain who was paid to take vagrants is given and the accounts yield the names of eighty one captains who used Parkgate. Although the names of only eight ships are given, the ships of one third of the captains can be deduced from other evidence. Under the Act of 1713 already mentioned, the captains could not refuse to take vagrants, although they were sometimes regretted: 'They are very inconvenient to people of fashion.'⁸⁹ In normal times the number carried on each ship was not large and the eighty eight vagrants shipped by Captain Matthews in 1763 were an exception. In the

⁸³ *Chester Courant*, 1 Sept., 8 Sept. and 25 Sept. 1750.

⁸⁴ *The Cheshire Sheaf*, 3rd series, vol.19, 1922, nos. 4490, 4493, 4497, 4502 and 4506, pp.2-12.

⁸⁵ *Chester Chronicle*, 2 May 1775.

⁸⁶ *ibid.*, 1812.

⁸⁷ *ibid.*, 16 Oct. 1789.

⁸⁸ *ibid.*, 7 May 1784; Neston Parish Register, 8 May 1784.

⁸⁹ Cheshire R.O., Ref. QJF 215/1, 1787.

years of very high numbers in the House, 1783 and 1784, captains had to carry over a hundred vagrants on several occasions, the peak being two hundred and eleven persons with Captain Guile.⁹⁰ The county took fright at these alarming numbers, with alarming maintenance costs and claimed that vagrants should be sent to Warrington for Liverpool:

being the nearest port for them to take shipping for the north or other parts of Ireland, being sent through the county of Chester to Parkgate, where the opportunities of getting shipping for such vagrants are less frequent, and vessels very rarely sail from thence to the North of Ireland. [The people of Chester were put to excessive expense for] maintaining them at Parkgate.⁹¹

Although the War of American Independence had badly affected trade out of the Dee, the claim made by the court is not supported by evidence, for there were just as many sailings per quarter in these years as in the preceding ones. During the years 1750 to 1781, the number of sailings varied between three and twelve with an average of 6.6. The average for the year before the claim, 1782, was 8.5, perfectly adequate for the usual numbers of vagrants. It was the advent of the Parkgate Packet Company in 1785 which greatly increased the number of sailings per quarter to an average of more than twelve.

As well as frequency of sailing, the accounts also give precise evidence of the delays in sailing caused by adverse weather. Delays of three weeks were quite common and longer delays could be expected every few years. The longest period when no ships could leave was sixty five days, or over nine weeks, in 1757.⁹²

The number of ships calling at Parkgate declined rapidly after 1808⁹³ and the summary of expenditure at the House of Correction suggests a corresponding decline in numbers of vagrants, with relatively few in 1812 but a brief recovery in 1813. In July 1815, the *Chester Chronicle* carried this advertisement:

Irish Vagrants. The magistrates of this county have given notice, by circulars, that the Dublin packets do not now sail from Parkgate but from Liverpool. Magistrates . . . are requested to direct passes in future to Liverpool.⁹⁴

The final quarter of 1815 was the last occasion that Constable Bleds' payments specified 'to Great Neston'. In the accounts for the following April, he was recorded as conveying vagrants 'to Liverpool'. At the end of 1816, the last small payment was made to Jonathan Bedson, the master and Bleds was conveying his charges 'to Liverpool, Hawarden and elsewhere.'⁹⁵

The county found no further use for the Moorside House of Correction until 1822, when it was let to the Reverend William Hobson, a schoolmaster who moved his

⁹⁰ *ibid.*, Ref. QJF 211/3.

⁹¹ *Chester Chronicle*, 9 May 1783.

⁹² Cheshire R.O., Ref. QJF 185/2.

⁹³ G.W. Place, 'Parkgate as a Port', *J.C.A.S.* vol.66, 1984, pp.47-55.

⁹⁴ *Chester Chronicle*, 28 July 1815.

⁹⁵ Cheshire R.O. Ref. QJB 3/22, 1816.

school there from Childer Thornton.⁹⁶ His successor as schoolmaster was Robert Jones who owned the house by 1845.⁹⁷ Later the building became a private house and was demolished in the early 1920s. The Old Quay House became a private residence again in 1804 and remained so until the First World War. The building then became derelict until it was demolished by soldiers as a training exercise, about 1941.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ *ibid.*, Ref. QJB 4/2, 1822.

⁹⁷ Neston Tithe Apportionment, 1845.

⁹⁸ Water colour paintings by G.L. Behrend, showing the ruins of the Old Quay House in 1936, are displayed in Neston Library.

