

# THE LIFE AND ADVENTURES OF JOSEPH HOOLEY OF WOLLATON

*by*

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## INTRODUCTION

People of the 'common sort' in the 18th and 19th centuries left few records. From the writings of contemporaries and the work of historians and historical demographers there is building up a broad picture of the society they inhabited; from parish registers we can recover their names and details of marriage, children and, after 1812, occupations, but even these facts tell us little of the lives which the people they record actually lead. In the case of a few individuals, however, there exists one documentary source, Poor Law settlement examinations, which can tell us much that is simply not recorded about the majority of people.

Settlement examinations arose from the workings of the Poor Law with regard to the 'settlements' of individuals. The significant Act of 1662, generally referred to as the Act of Settlement and Removal, did not in fact create the system whereby every person was legally 'settled' in or 'belonged' to a particular parish. The concept had existed from time immemorial.<sup>1</sup> It did contain, however, the 'outrageous provision that any stranger settling in a parish may be removed forthwith by the justices, unless he rents a tenement of £10 or finds security to discharge the parish of his adoption from all expenses it may incur on his behalf'.<sup>2</sup> Further legislation followed, multiplying the means by which a legal settlement could be gained: by birth, marriage, apprenticeship, service for a year, service as a parish officer, by payment of certain amounts of rent or rates, and so on. Each new settlement so acquired nullified the last, and the whole system became extremely complex and productive of 'an infinity of expensive law suits between contending neighbourhoods'.<sup>3</sup> In this context persons seeking parish relief or considered likely to do so and about whose settlement there was any doubt were frequently examined, that is, required to make a statement, on oath before a justice or, less formally, before an attorney retained by the parish.<sup>4</sup> Their statements were written down and the examinations so recorded are to be found (when they have survived) among collections of parish records.

The documents usually conform to a standard pattern. The examinant's name, often his age, and (always) place of birth are first stated. Any actions by which he might subsequently have gained a new settlement are then related: movement from place to place, apprenticeship, periods and conditions of service, tenure of property, will all be dealt with in detail. Marriage and the birth of children will also be recorded and a brief resume of the examinant's life given, so far as relevant to the question of settlement.<sup>5</sup>

These documents are a valuable source of information on a number of social questions. They provide ample evidence of migration. A cursory study of any group of examinations is sufficient to dispose yet again of the popular myth of a static population before our own time. For unmarried labourers and servants the system of annual hiring involved frequent changes of master and movement often over some distance. In a great many cases the contract was terminated a few days short of the full year so as to avoid giving the man

a settlement. There is also much information about conditions of work for other groups of workers; craftsmen, for instance, were often employed by the week and again obliged to travel in search of work. War also acted as a stimulus to migration. A recent study of settlement examinations in Dorset noted frequent references to service in the armed forces, including impressed service. Increased mobility in wartime must often have resulted in difficulties over settlement sooner or later, hence the many examinations of soldiers, sailors and their wives. Apprenticeship is another recurrent theme; one is frequently struck by the number of examinants who began an apprenticeship but for a variety of reasons never completed it. There are less-frequent, but nevertheless useful, references to wages and rents, and occasional references to unusual trades and unusual parish offices which examinants claimed to have served.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, settlement examinations are perhaps the only source which deliberately sets out to relate at least a part of their subjects' lives and as such they contain direct evidence of the circumstances of individuals from the 18th- and 19th-century working classes. At their best they can be 'virtually autobiographies of persons in a class of which other biographical records are rarely found'.<sup>7</sup> Tate's statement needs some qualification. The limitations imposed by the documents' function and formal nature often mean that nothing not strictly relevant to the question of settlement is recorded; the details are disappointingly brief and no sense of the examinant's individuality emerges. Nevertheless, none is without interest and occasional examples are very detailed. The examination of Joseph Hooley is one such: a document atypical because of the character and experiences of its subject, yet illuminating on a number of points. His story is also extraordinary enough to bear telling in its own right.<sup>8</sup>

#### THE LIFE OF JOSEPH HOOLEY

Hooley's troubles with authority began on or about 2nd July 1814 when he arrived in Newark, travelling with a woman who was not his wife and quarrelling with her. Unfortunately, his wife was already living there and the result was that the parish officers first put him in gaol and then removed him and his wife, Elizabeth, to Wollaton, where he was presumed to be settled. At Wollaton the overseer of the poor, Thomas Woodward, had accepted Hooley with a different wife (his companion at Newark) rather less than a year earlier, and was understandably puzzled. With a certain William Wheatley he took the couple and Elizabeth Hooley's daughter, to Nottingham, where they were examined by Mr. Hopkinson, an attorney.<sup>9</sup>

Joseph Hooley stated that he had been born at Wollaton 60 or 61 years previously. In fact he probably added a year or two; the parish register records a baptism of Joseph, son of Samuel and Elizabeth Hooley, on 27th June 1757, so that he was probably in his 57th year. He was the fifth of the couple's six children, two of whom died in infancy, and their eldest surviving son. His parents were settled in Wollaton, and in 1814 Hooley still had a brother living there, probably Samuel, the couple's last child.<sup>10</sup>

As a young man he served six years as apprentice to John Flinders, a framework knitter of Basford, but by his early 20s he seems to have contracted the wanderlust which was to dominate the rest of his life. At 23 he enlisted in the Marines, went to Chatham and

served with Admiral Sir George Bridges Rodney for some years. How long he served is uncertain. Hooley himself said nine or ten years, but if he was 23 when he enlisted and was discharged after the American War in 1783, this must be an exaggeration. However, he may well have been present with Rodney at the victories against the Spanish off Cape St. Vincent in 1780 and against the French admiral de Grasse at the Battle of the Saints two years later.<sup>11</sup> When peace was concluded, Hooley was discharged at Plymouth, and from there made his way to London, where he worked at his trade of framework knitting for three years. He then went to Dublin and worked there for a further two years before returning to Nottingham, where he worked with one James Barker in St. Anne's Street for about two years. He then removed to Newark, where he stayed for a year-and-a-half working at his trade and as a labourer.

This period of relative stability, albeit marked by frequent moving about the country and to Ireland, came to an end when his next move, to Gainsborough, led him into the hands of the press gang. Again no precise dates are given, but this would seem to have been some time in 1791, when the country was preparing for war with revolutionary France. He was presumably in his mid-30s when he was taken as an impressed seaman aboard the *Ardent* man-of-war, and he remained in the Navy some three-and-a-half years.<sup>12</sup> He was eventually discharged at Portsmouth owing to a broken leg and again made his way to London. Here he was kidnapped, presumably by agents of the East India Company, and sent to the rocky island of St. Helena in the Atlantic, at that time a Company possession. It was, of course, to St. Helena that Napoleon was to be banished in 1815. Hooley remained on St. Helena for over six years before his rather forceful employers allowed him to return to the East India House, where he was discharged. This was probably during the temporary cessation of war with France in 1801 or early in 1802. We know nothing of his life on St. Helena, save that he met there a lady by the name of Jane Johnson, a married woman whose husband was also on St. Helena, and who was later to play some part in his life.

Hooley was now in his early 40s. With a wealth of experiences to relate and probably a little of the gift of the gab he now took to the road, 'going up and down the country as a quack doctor and hawking goods'. In the pursuit of this honourable trade he came to Southwell and there became acquainted with Elizabeth Smith, seemingly a widow and also in her early 40s. For reasons which are not now clear to us he told this lady that his name was Henshaw and married her at Southwell on 18th August 1802,<sup>13</sup> when he gave his name as Joseph Hooley Henshaw and signed the register with a cross. Whether the marriage was nasty and brutish we do not know, but their life together was certainly short, and eventful. Elizabeth had a daughter, whether by Hooley or her first husband is not clear. The couple lived first at Southwell and then at Newark, Gainsborough and Mansfield. Joseph seems then to have left his wife for a while, returned long enough to take her back to Southwell, and there abandoned her again. She remained at Southwell at the cotton mill<sup>14</sup> and only saw him three times in the next nine years. On the first occasion he stayed for nine weeks and was then taken as a deserter and 'marched into Ireland', where he remained a year. The second time he stayed 14 weeks before resuming his travels, and this time she had not seen him again until his unfortunate arrival in Newark ten days earlier.

Hooley met Jane Johnson, the cause of his downfall at Newark, by chance in Leicester some time after his return from St. Helena. Renewing their old friendship, they travelled together as man and wife 'but never was married', as the examination says, which is just as well, since they each had a spouse already. In August 1813 they had run into trouble in Wolverhampton when Hooley fell ill and was forced to seek parish relief. The Wolverhampton overseers quickly procured an order for his removal with his 'wife' Jane to Wollaton, but this was suspended for a fortnight because of his sickness.<sup>15</sup> Apparently his illness did not trouble him long. He seems to have stayed in Wollaton long enough to accept 7s. 6d. relief from the overseer (over and above the £1 19s. 6d. he had cost the parish while ill in Wolverhampton),<sup>16</sup> and then resumed his roving life with Jane Johnson. His name does not appear in the parish records again until his examination is taken in July 1814.

This, then, was the extraordinary tale related to Mr. Hopkinson the attorney and which he or his clerk wrote down on a piece of scrap paper, the form in which the document survives. Since there would probably be little hope of proving that Hooley had ever gained a settlement other than that at Wollaton there would be little point in writing the examination out formally. The draft was presumably handed to the overseer, Thomas Woodward, who deposited it with the other parish records.

And what now became of this inveterate rover? We know rather less about the rest of his life, but it is clear that he did not change his ways. The overseer's accounts for the following years give occasional glimpses of him and his family. On the day of the examination they ate and drank at the parish's expense, and then took their several roads, Joseph receiving 3s. to help him on his way, and Elizabeth and her daughter 12s. One imagines that relations between them were probably less than cordial and they may well have been only too glad to part again. Elizabeth Hooley seems to have returned to Newark, and in March 1815 the Wollaton overseers sent her 15s. towards a surgeon's bill for her daughter. Also among the overseer's papers is a letter, which must be related to this incident, from a gentlemen describing himself as 'Mr. George Green Doctor Corbor', who maintains that 'Elizabeth Hooley girle head is very bad and has been at three doctors and cannot macke a cure of it but i have light of one will make a cure of it but it will cost £1 11s 6d the cure of it and is in a very fine way of a cure'. It is hard to be sure quite what Mr. George Green's qualifications were, but he sounds rather like a professional associate of Joseph Hooley. Possibly he intended to describe himself as 'doctor—barber'?

Hooley seems to have returned periodically, each time claiming parish relief for a short while before presumably taking to his hawking trade again. He was in Wollaton in the winter of 1814–15, when the overseer gave him 6s. in December, and again in the winter of 1815–16, when he received another 6s. in January. Probably he continued this irregular life as long as his health lasted, interspersed with longer stays in Wollaton as the years passed. The Hooleys of Wollaton tended to live to a good age; Joseph's father, Samuel, lived to be 80, and several other members of the family were buried in their 70s and 80s at this period.<sup>18</sup> Joseph seems to have had a constitution as robust as the best of them and lived for another 20 years after his particularly well-recorded brush with the parish authorities. He was finally buried at Wollaton on 16th February 1836 when the parish clerk

gave his age as 78.<sup>19</sup> Probably the clerk looked in the earlier register for the date of his baptism, to see how old he really was, as the age given agrees exactly with this. Old men had a habit of adding a few years to their ages, especially as they themselves often did not know very accurately how old they were. Joseph Hooley was unlikely to have been exceptional in this.

#### CONCLUSION

Hooley's life *was* exceptional in its length and variety. He must have been something of a character and his story has more the ring of a picaresque novel than a Poor Law document. Nevertheless his individual experiences were not in themselves so wildly unusual. His originality lies rather in having gone through a variety of experiences, of which perhaps one or two would have befallen most men.

His mobility was notable. The laws of settlement do not seem to have been any hindrance to him. Provided he kept his health and strength and the native cunning which he must have had in good measure, he had the freedom of England. Only when he fell ill or his activities became too outrageous did the authorities trouble him. The overseer seems to have been only too pleased to give him a few shillings and send him on his way. There must have been many men who, if not as habitually itinerant as Hooley, moved about quite freely so long as they kept clear of the poor rates. In wartime this movement would be increased, as by more-recent wars, although Englishmen are no longer liable to be seized by the press gang, or by kidnappers in the pay of the East India Company! Finally, the hints (they are little more) of Hooley's personality are a pointer to the variety, richness and individuality of our ancestors' lives; aspects usually so lost to us as to be unsuspected. This individuality of ordinary people is one of the things least recoverable from the past. Joseph Hooley was born and died at Wollaton, and we would know nothing more of him had his settlement examination not survived. The entries in the parish register tell us virtually nothing of his life and one can only wonder how many more such extraordinary life histories lie buried there. His story is a valuable reminder that then, as now, communities were composed of such quirky individuals rather than simply the bearers of a list of names.

#### REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup>S. and B. Webb, *English Poor Law History, Part I: The Old Poor Law* (1927), 315.  
<sup>2</sup>W. E. Tate, *The Parish Chest*, 3rd ed. (1969), 192.  
<sup>3</sup>Blackstone, *Commentaries*, I, 361–362, quoted by Tate, *op. cit.*, 199. For the many legal complications see Webb, *op. cit.*, 333 *et seq.*  
<sup>4</sup>In Cambridgeshire, parishes employed lawyers on a regular basis to advise on settlement matters; E. M. Hampson, 'Settlement and removal in Cambridgeshire, 1662–1834', *Cambridge Historical Journal*, ii (1928), 3, 276. Attorneys' bills concerning settlement cases occur regularly among the Wollaton overseer's vouchers; N.R.O., PR 7935–7938, 7947.  
<sup>5</sup>An example from Shelford is printed by Tate, *op. cit.*, 203–204, and others are abstracted by R. Brocklesby in the catalogue to an *Exhibition of Nottinghamshire Poor Law Documents 1601–1834* at the N.R.O., January–March 1970. All illustrate the mobility of the examiners.  
<sup>6</sup>On all these points, see M. Weinstock, 'Dorset settlement examinations', *Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society Proceedings*, 92 (1970), 218–223; and also Hampson, *op. cit.*, 278–279.  
<sup>7</sup>Tate, *op. cit.*, 202.

- <sup>8</sup>Most of the subsequent details are taken from the draft settlement examinations of Elizabeth Hearnshaw and Joseph Hooley, alias Henshaw (12th July 1814), among the Wollaton parish records; N.R.O., PR 7949/8.
- <sup>9</sup>Wollaton overseer's accounts, 12th July 1814; N.R.O., PR 7929.
- <sup>10</sup>Wollaton parish registers; N.R.O., PR 7741, 7747. I am grateful to Mr. David Hooley of Coventry for information from his researches into his family history.
- <sup>11</sup>Hooley does not appear under his own name or his known alias of Henshaw or Hearnshaw in the Marines description books *c.* 1775–80 at the Public Record Office (from P.R.O., ADM 157 and 158), nor in the muster books of the three ships specifically detailed to accompany Rodney to the West Indies, *c.* 1779–80 (H.M.S. *Ajax*, *Montague* and *Terrible*, P.R.O., ADM 36/9005, 8490, 8352). However, the British fleet in the West Indies at Cornwallis's surrender on 19th October 1782 comprised in all 25 sail of the line, two 50-gun ships and eight frigates; J. Campbell, *Lives of the British Admirals*, vii (1817), 37.
- <sup>12</sup>The muster book of H.M.S. *Ardent* for the period February–December 1793 again fails to list Hooley; P.R.O., ADM 36/11206. On the other hand, the dates given in his examination are anything but precise and it is quite possible that he is yet to be found among the extensive Marine and Navy records. His story is altogether too circumstantial to be a complete fabrication.
- <sup>13</sup>Southwell Bishop's Transcripts; N.R.O., microfilm EA 298.
- <sup>14</sup>Probably the mill at Maythorn?
- <sup>15</sup>Removal order from Wolverhampton, 11th–25th August 1813; N.R.O., PR 7950/2.
- <sup>16</sup>Wollaton overseer's accounts, 28th August 1813; N.R.O., PR 7929.
- <sup>17</sup>Undated; N.R.O., PR 7931.
- <sup>18</sup>Wollaton parish registers; N.R.O., PR 7741, 7747.
- <sup>19</sup>N.R.O., PR 7747.