

## **Indoor and outdoor poor relief in late 18th- early 19th century Suffolk: Observations on some Malthusian claims: Talk by Prof Richard M. Smith, Emeritus Professor of Historical Geography and Demography, University of Cambridge, on 10<sup>th</sup> December, 2016.**

In 1798, T Robert Malthus (1766-1834) published his famous *Essay on Population* against a background of years of poor harvests and rising prices, but also of record population growth. Between 1798 and 1826 he published six editions of the essay, updating each edition to incorporate new material, to address criticism, and to convey changes in his own perspectives on the subject. He wrote the original text in reaction to the optimism of his father against the background of the threat to England posed by revolutionary France.

As 2016 was the 250th anniversary of Malthus' birth, Prof Smith used evidence in various Parliamentary enquiries, particularly Abstracts of the Poor and Select Committees on Poor Relief along with early censuses (1801-1831) to construct a county-wide geography of poor relief expenditure. His aim was to test some of Malthus' arguments concerning the implications of poor relief expenditure within and outside workhouses for population growth and marriage rates.

Malthus argued that the Poor Law itself was causing higher prices, swelling the number of dependent poor and did nothing to increase the supply of food. Anyone who married and proceeded to receive Poor Relief he called an enemy to his fellow labourers. The poor, he claimed, were injured more by the Poor Laws than the rich who had to pay the Poor Rate.

In an essay written as a supplement for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in 1824 Malthus repeated these ideas since many parishes especially in eastern and southern England had adopted a system of poor relief scaled to benefit able bodied labours with 3 or more children. He believed that increasing poor relief from 1/6 to 5/- per day would not increase the supply of meat, but would increase its price as demand was intensified. He famously equated the capacity of agriculture to increase food output with the tortoise and the potential for population to rise with the hare.

Using the example of Suffolk, Prof Smith showed that, in fact, Suffolk's relatively high per capita spend on Poor Relief was not associated with higher population growth, as Suffolk had a lower than average population growth over the period of 1802 to 1831.

#### POOR RELIEF EXPENDITURE PER CAPITA

Year	1802	1812	1821	1831
Suffolk average	11/5	19/4	17/-	18/4
England average	8/11	12/9	10/6	10/1

Workhouses had been proposed to substitute outdoor relief for indoor relief in some parts of England between the 1750s and 1780s, and poor relief in such settings was given not as a form of family allowance to married men but on entry to a workhouse. In such places there would be no incentive to marry as a means of obtaining relief. These were set up under Local Acts of Parliament, and in the period 1740 to 1780 there were 28 such Acts passed incorporating 14 Suffolk Hundreds. By 1780 most of East Suffolk had parishes which were incorporated into Hundreds, set up to build and share a workhouse serving that hundred. West Suffolk did not adopt this practice, possibly to avoid the high initial investment required.

The incorporated hundreds had Directors of the Poor who were landowners, JPs and principal inhabitants and under them were Guardians of the Poor, appointed for three-year terms. Despite the strict workhouse rules, population growth in the incorporated hundreds of east Suffolk from 1781 to 1821 exceeded that in the unincorporated west of Suffolk. Growth in this period was 37% in the east and 24% in the west. (Lackford in north-west Suffolk, with its Fenland pastures, had population growth of 50%, proving the exception.) However, the cost of Poor Relief to the ratepayer of the unincorporated parishes was far greater in the west than in the east.

These differences were known at the time, and one Assistant Commissioner, Henry Stuart, appointed by the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Poor Laws for Suffolk wrote in 1834, that the differing costs reflected “a difference in the manner of administering them.” He claimed that Suffolk was uniformly agricultural. The incorporated hundreds saved money by their Directors being rigidly inflexible in the application of the rules, including the use of “capping”.

Over the course of the eighteenth century Suffolk had become increasingly agricultural. Evidence from wills and the occupations reported of fathers in baptismal registers suggest that farming had risen as a share of male employment from c. 48% in 1700 to 56% by 1817. This increase was far more marked in West Suffolk, which by the early nineteenth century had larger farms employing more labourers per farm, who received low wages and were subject to periodical unemployment, particularly in the winter months. By the same period the cloth industry had collapsed in the west and south-west, adding to the loss of

employment and also reducing the contributions of women to household earnings who had fewer opportunities in arable farming. The high costs of relief in the west reflected this greater demand for it as result of economic changes that impacted adversely on that part of the county and which were also most likely responsible for less buoyant demographic conditions than in the east.

By 1806, even Malthus himself, when writing about the Poor Laws, wrote that, "it is difficult to ascertain.....what has been their effect on population.....I will not presume to say positively that (they) tend to encourage population. " Suffolk exemplified Malthus' reticence.