

The Poor Law Migrant to Oxford 1700-1795

By E.G. THOMAS

The Elizabethan poor law of 1597¹ had made the parish the administrative unit. Thus the parish provided relief and needed to determine who was legitimately entitled to it. The problem of Settlement was not explicitly mentioned in the legislation, but became a crucial issue with the increased mobility in the 17th and 18th centuries amongst wide sections of the population.

As early as the reign of James I, parishes, more particularly in urban areas, insisted on migrants bringing bonds to provide security against the holder becoming a charge on the town. Such bonds were primarily for artisans and tradesmen, who could rely on their families to produce the necessary security. From the Act of 1662² Parliament gradually evolved a policy with regard to Settlement. Parish officers could remove not only migrants who were actual paupers, but also those who threatened to become paupers. However, the 1662 Act allowed the use of testimonials given by the parish officers and clergymen guaranteeing that the named married householder — the only status recognised by the Act — was settled in the parish he had left. This document enabled the bearer to secure temporary work; it was not meant to cover permanent residence.³

However, the 1697 Act⁴ legalised the granting of Settlement certificates both to married and unmarried persons. The certificate evolved out of the bond and testimonial and was a binding legal instrument. The holder of such a document, together with his family, were not removable until they actually became a charge on the parish that received them. The officers granting the certificate made themselves responsible for the migrants; they were pledged to receive them back or pay for their upkeep if they became chargeable.

The certificate thus encouraged fairly permanent movement of whole families in response to demand for labour. The fear of being sent back was removed, despite the fact that the certificate holder gained no settlement. There was no obligation to issue certificates; some parishes never did. Frequently the certificate was granted after the parishioner had moved. The system often caused legal complications — hence the survival of certificates in large numbers. On the whole, however, this part of the poor law worked well.

The Law of Settlement was taken a stage further by an Act of 1795.⁵ This act, in effect, gave everyone the status of a certificated person because no-one was to be removed 'until such person shall have become actually chargeable to the parish township or place in which such person shall then inhabit'. To all intents and purposes the certificate system thus came to an end.

¹ 39 Eliz., C.1.

² 13 & 14 Car. II, C.12.

³ Giving testimonials for harvest labour dates to the Statute of Artificers of 1563.

⁴ 8 and 9 Wm. III, C.30.

⁵ 35 Geo. III, C.101.

Oxford was an important centre for both road and river communications, as well as a market and county town, see and university. It ranked as the twenty-seventh provincial town in the 1524/5 subsidy and eighth in the hearth tax rating of 1662.⁶ By 1772 its population has been calculated at about 9,500 with some 1,500 university members. By 1801 it was still below 12,000.⁷ In the eighteenth century there was a decline in the university population, but this was offset by the increasing wealth and living standards of undergraduates. In 1721 it was noted that 'Oxford daily increases in fine clothes, and fine buildings, never were bricklayers, carpenters, tailors and periwig-makers better encouraged there'.⁸ In 1724 Defoe spoke of the city as 'large, strong populous and rich . . . The situation is in a delightful plain, on the bank of a fine navigable river, in a plentiful country and at an easy distance from the capital'.⁹

Oxford was thus quite prosperous. The clothing, food and drink and distributive trades flourished; transport facilities must have been in considerable demand; the building trades increased in wealth. In addition, there were opportunities for shoemaking, tailoring, metalwork and domestic service.¹⁰

In the eighteenth century the city certainly became a focal point for poor law migrants. Movement was continuous into the 1780s from a wide area in Oxfordshire and from outside the county. This survey is based on 1334 settlement certificates surviving in eight Oxford parishes.¹¹

Of the 1334 certificates, 883 were granted within the city. Presumably people had moved only a few hundred yards from their parish to find employment, yet the 1697 Act came into operation and certificates were granted lest those who sought work elsewhere in the city became a charge on the receiving parish.

The pattern of local movement to Oxford is quite clear, the city being the centre of a circle whose main catchment perimeter extended some ten miles.¹² Of the 218 certificates granted by parishes in Oxfordshire, 71 per cent came from areas within 10 miles, the average from all parishes in the county being 11 miles.¹³ There is evidence of migration from other towns in Oxfordshire over longer distances. Hence migrants from Banbury, Bampton, Chipping Norton, Henley, Witney and Woodstock travelled further than the average certificate-holder and in relatively greater numbers.¹⁴

There was considerable migration from further afield to Oxford from the beginning of the period under review. The 233 certificates in the sample granted from outside Oxfordshire represent more than half the total given from outside the city. Twenty-nine counties are represented, plus London, with an average distance of 39 miles, 71 of the certificates involving journeys of over 50 miles. London was influential, for one fifth of the migrants from outside Oxfordshire originated there.¹⁵

⁶ W.G. Hoskins, *Local History in England* (1959), 177.

⁷ *Victoria County History of Oxfordshire*, iv (The City of Oxford), 181.

⁸ Ibid. 119, quoting N. Amhurst, *Terrae Filius* (London 1726), ii.pt.xlvi. 258.

⁹ D. Defoe, *A Tour through England and Wales* (Everyman edn., Vol.II), 17.

¹⁰ V.C.H. Oxon. iv. 119-120.

¹¹ Oxford St. Aldate's parish chest, settlement certificates; Bodl., MS. D.D. Par. Oxford St. Clements, b.21; MS. D.D. Par. Oxford St. Cross, b.1; MS. D.D. Par. Oxford St. Ebbe's b.26; MS. D.D. Par. Oxford St. Giles c.26, b.34, b.35; MS. D.D. Par. Oxford St. Mary the Virgin, b.14, c.22; MS. D.D. Par. Oxford St. Mary Magdalen, b.56; MS. D.D. Par. Oxford St. Peter in the East, c.3, c.7, b.11.

¹² See map, fig. 1.

¹³ See table 1.

¹⁴ See map, fig. 1.

¹⁵ See table 2.

This movement to Oxford stemmed mostly from other towns; 64 per cent of the certificates originated in urban areas. Apart from London, there were migrants from Andover, Birmingham, Bury St. Edmunds, Cambridge, Chester, Coventry, Devizes, Gloucester, Lincoln, Liverpool, Newbury, Portsmouth, Reading, St. Albans, Swindon, Tiverton, Totnes, Worcester, Wolverhampton and Warwick. The longest distance migrants were from Cheshire, Devonshire, Lancashire, Norfolk, Pembrokeshire and Yorkshire.¹⁶

The occupation of the migrant is rarely mentioned on the certificates. In the sample analysed some sixty give an occupation, in some cases merely 'labourer'. However, certain crafts predominate — tailors, carpenters and glovers.¹⁷ Many of the craftsmen were long-distance migrants; locksmiths from Wolverhampton, for example, and carpenters, a leatherdresser, a printer and a corkcutter from London. Tailors moved long distances — from Cardiganshire, Rutland and Cheshire.¹⁸

The Settlement certificates have no distinctive chronological pattern. They were granted fairly evenly from 1700 through to 1770 when they tail off. This might possibly be due to the nature of the surviving sample, though the eight parishes retaining certificates should be fairly representative of movement to the city.

The certificate system did therefore encourage a good deal of mobility in the eighteenth century. Much of it was local, as the 218 certificates granted from parishes up to eleven miles from Oxford indicate. However, migrants, particularly craftsmen, were prepared to travel long distances. There were obviously employment opportunities for tailors, carpenters, peruke makers, barbers, joiners and shoemakers, for instance, who are included in the certificate holders. It is possible that there were family connections or personal contacts, and news of available employment would filter back from Oxford. Communications would have facilitated migration too. The city was at the focal point of a network of carriers' routes which reached to London and to the north and west of Oxford and this might well have been an influential factor.¹⁹

There might also have been factors encouraging people to leave their parishes for Oxford; lack of housing, low wages, underemployment, the depressed state of a particular trade could have provided motivation for migration. The majority of certificates do not provide a clue to the occupation of the holder. Many were probably agricultural labourers leaving parishes where farming provided few opportunities. The city of Oxford perhaps offered chances of a new urban life for those prepared to uproot themselves and take advantage of the certificate system.

¹⁶ See table 3.

¹⁷ Some trades were, in fact, well organised for long distance migration. By 1800 hatters, cordwainers and carpenters were accustomed to long journeys: see E.J. Hobsbawm 'The Tramping Artisan', *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, iii (1951). See also W.G. Hoskins, *Industry Trade and People in Exeter 1688-1800* (1968), 58.

¹⁸ Cf. the distances travelled by apprentices to Oxford in the sixteenth century analysed in C.I. Hammer's 'The Mobility of Skilled Labour in Late Medieval England: Some Oxford Evidence', *Vierteljahrsschrift für Sozial und Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, lxiii (1976), 194-210. On the basis of this evidence the largest single group of apprentices in the period 1513-1557 was from Oxfordshire and, to a lesser extent, from Berkshire. However, almost two-thirds of the migrants came from other counties. Three-fifths of the apprentices travelled more than 20 miles.

¹⁹ *V.C.H. Oxon.* iv. 115-116.

TABLE I
CERTIFICATES TO OXFORD FROM OXFORDSHIRE

<i>Parish granting certificate</i>	<i>Numbers</i>	<i>Mileage from Oxford (straight line)</i>
Cowley	12	2
Iffley	11	2
Marston	11	2
Headington	11	2
Chipping Norton	7	18
Witney	6	10
Banbury	6	22
Cuddesdon	6	6
Woodstock	6	8
Great Haseley	5	9
Beckley	5	5
Radley	5	5
Binsey	4	2
Stanton Harcourt	4	6
Garsington	4	5
Standlake	4	8
Thame	4	12
Wolvercote	4	3
Watlington	3	13
Cumnor	3	4
Dorchester	3	9
Stoke Lyne	3	14
Horspath	3	4
Kirtlington	3	9
Wootton	3	10
Charlbury	3	13
Eynsham	3	6
Kidlington	3	6
Benson	2	12
Bampton	2	13
Drayton	2	23
Henley	2	21
Islip	2	5
Handborough	2	8
Stanton St. John	2	5
Brightwell	2	11
Bladon	2	7
Wheatley	2	5
Hinksey	2	2
Water Eaton	2	4
Bletchington	2	7
Great Milton	2	8
Witham	2	3
Deddington	2	16
Sandford	2	3
Middleton Stoney	2	11
Single certificates from 35 parishes		11
TOTAL 218		Overall average distance 11 miles

TABLE 2
CERTIFICATES TO OXFORD FROM OUTSIDE OXFORDSHIRE

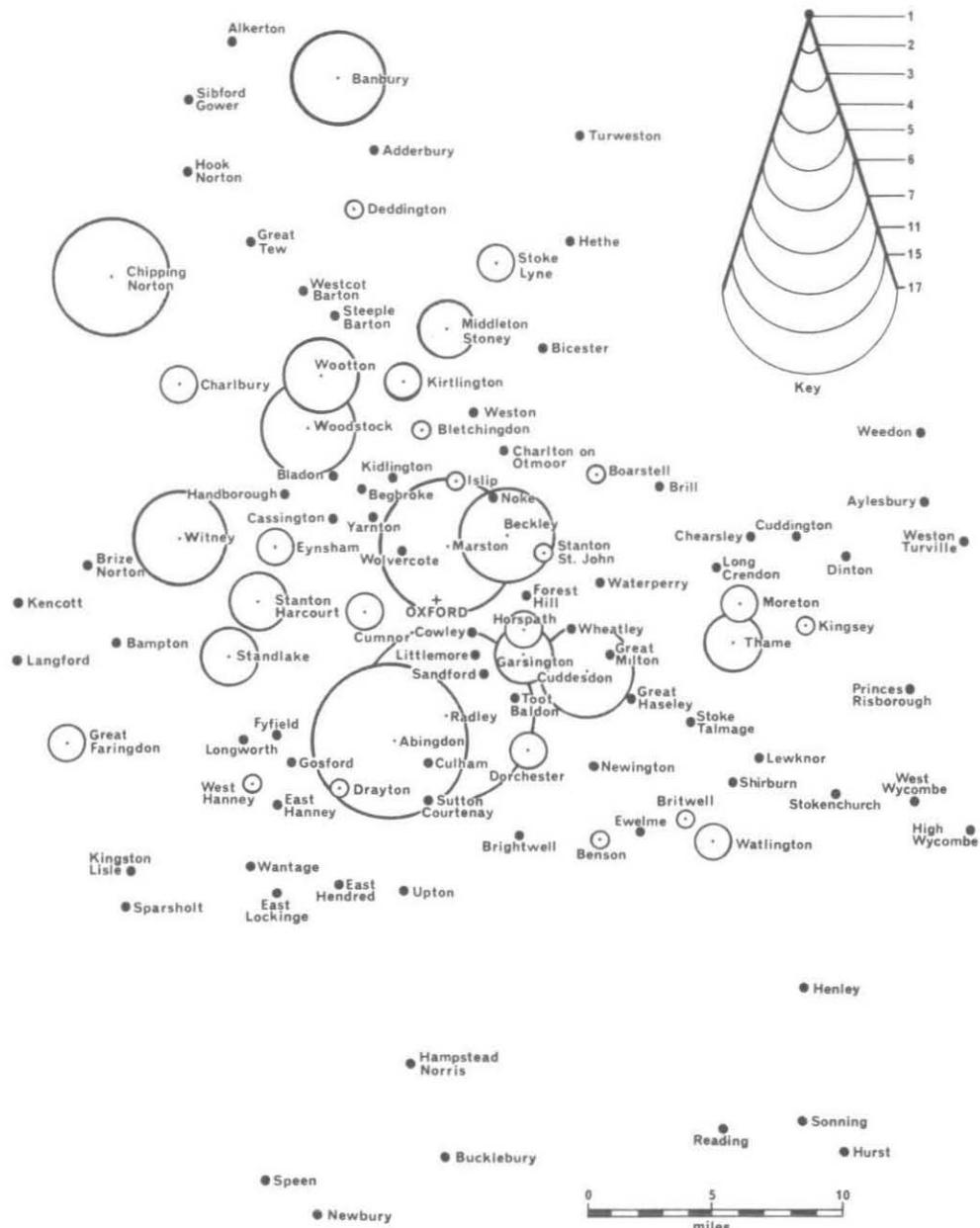
<i>County</i>	<i>Certificates</i>	<i>Average Mileage</i>
Gloucestershire	22	27
Berkshire	51	12.5
London	43	52
Buckinghamshire	38	19
Wiltshire	14	39
Warwickshire	8	46
Northamptonshire	6	31
Hampshire	6	42
Staffordshire	4	67
Worcestershire	3	35
Cheshire	3	120
Middlesex	3	41
Surrey	3	47
Norfolk	2	121.5
Pembrokeshire	2	161
Somerset	2	87
Hertfordshire	3	38
Kent	2	72
Herefordshire	2	66
Suffolk	2	119
Cambridgeshire	2	62
Bedfordshire	2	30
Yorkshire	2	162
Lancashire	2	145
Cardiganshire	1	132
Breconshire	1	77
Monmouthshire	1	66
	1	68
Devonshire	1	148
Lincolnshire	1	118
TOTAL	233	39

TABLE 3
MIGRANT TRADES

	<i>Outside Oxford</i>	<i>Within Oxford</i>
Tailor	7	2
Carpenter	6	
Glover	3	1
Barber	3	1
Labourer	2	3
Saddler		2
Locksmith	2	
Peruke maker	2	1
Joiner	1	2
Shoemaker	1	2
Cabinet maker	1	1
Blacksmith	1	1

Single examples outside Oxford: Baker, basket maker, butler of Oriel College, chapman, combmaker, clockmaker, corkcutter, leatherdresser, mason, printer, woolcomber.

Single examples within Oxford: Brewer, butcher, chandler, coachman, cooper, compositor and victualler, hempdresser, pipemaker, university cook.



CERTIFICATES TO OXFORD, 1700-1790

The Society is grateful to the Greening Lamborn Trust for a grant towards the publication of this article.