

Old Age and the Oxfordshire Agricultural Labourer— 1870-1914

By P. L. R. HORN

IT is just over sixty years since the first State Old Pensions scheme came into operation, on 1st January 1909. The idea was not a new one, for as early as 1878, the Rev. William L. Blackley had put forward proposals for a contributory pension scheme for male workers. Little progress was made, however, and the scheme foundered largely on the opposition of the existing friendly societies, who feared Government competition.¹ In 1891, Joseph Chamberlain tentatively supported the idea of a contributory scheme, while Charles Booth, the tireless investigator of London's poor, advanced 'universal, non-contributory, tax-supported pensions', in a paper read before the Royal Statistical Society in November of that same year.² Although none of these propositions proved immediately acceptable, their cumulative influence, and the growing evidence of need among the aged meant that sooner or later something must be done. It was in 1906, shortly after their victory at the General Election, that the Liberal Government finally promised that State pensions would be introduced. Two years later the requisite legislation was passed to bring in a system of non-contributory old age pensions.

To modern eyes, the first payments appear extremely modest. The full weekly sum of 5s., payable to men and women aged 70 or over, was only available to those who had an income of £21 per annum or less (i.e. 8s. per week) from other sources. For those with an additional income beyond this level, a sliding scale was introduced, reducing the pension from the basic 5s. to nil, for those whose income was more than £31 10s. per annum (or 12s. a week).

To most Oxfordshire agricultural labourers, however, these restrictions were a matter of indifference. Very few labourers had a personal income of even £21 a year, and the vast majority, if they had anything at all, merely received a friendly society benefit of about 5s. a week, or perhaps a small pension paid on a free-will basis by a former employer. The sums normally involved in friendly society payments can be illustrated by random examples. Thus John Blake of Charlton, Oxfordshire, aged 79, received the tiny weekly amount of 4s. 10d. from the Oddfellows Friendly Society, in 1903, while William Rouse, aged 69, of Souldern secured 4s. 6d. per week from his Society. But at the beginning of January 1904, this latter benefit was stopped by the Society, 'according to rule

¹ Bentley B. Gilbert, *Evolution of National Insurance in Great Britain* (1966), 162-4. Blackley first gave details of his pensions proposals in an article published in the *Nineteenth Century* of November, 1878.

² Bentley B. Gilbert, *op. cit.*, 182-4. Charles Booth, 'Enumeration and Classification of Paupers and State Pensions for the Aged', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, LIV, 1891, 600-43. In 1891 it was estimated that nearly 30 per cent of all people over 65 received some form of poor relief during the year.

for 1 year', and so poor relief of 5s. 6d. per week was allowed to Rouse and his wife by the Bicester Board of Guardians during the interim period.³

In the circumstances it is easy to understand the gratitude of these old men and their wives or widows when the State pensions scheme came into operation. Their reaction has been described by Flora Thompson in her *Lark Rise to Candleford*, a book principally concerned with rural life in North Oxfordshire and the neighbouring areas of Northamptonshire and Buckinghamshire: 'When . . . the old age pensions began, life was transformed for such aged cottagers. They were relieved of anxiety. They were suddenly rich. Independent for life! At first when they went to the Post Office to draw it, tears of gratitude would run down the cheeks of some . . . and there were flowers from their gardens and apples from their trees for the girl who merely handed them the money.'⁴ As a Post Office clerk herself, the author was well placed to witness at first hand this general response. And if such a small sum as 5s. per week could be greeted in that fashion, the extent of the hardship endured by many old people in pre-pension days becomes painfully clear.

There is little doubt that even at the end of the 19th century—despite the benefits of cheaper food—life for the aged labourer was extremely harsh. Where parish relief was obtained from the local Board of Guardians, it could either take the form of a small weekly payment of perhaps 3s., plus a loaf of bread, to be used by the pauper in his or her own home (and out of which rent had to be paid), or it could take the form of relief inside the Union workhouse.⁵ But the latter, which meant the end of freedom and independence, was considered a disgrace by most old country people; they feared the stringent discipline and the social stigma attached to entry into a workhouse. This is shown, for example, in the Bicester Union area. A 74-year-old labourer from Lower Heyford applied for relief on 13th October, 1870, as he was suffering from 'erysipelas in foot' and was unable to work. Outdoor relief was refused, but he was offered a place in the workhouse. This he rejected and, despite repeated applications, not until 18th November did the Guardians eventually relent, granting him temporary out relief in the form of goods to the value of 2s. and 2 loaves per week. During the first month or so of his disability, however, he had apparently no income at all (save what he could obtain from friends), but virtually destitute as he was, he preferred this to entry to the workhouse. At Kirtlington, another 78-year-old former labourer was eventually forced to enter the workhouse in December 1870, after he and his aged wife had been denied additional outdoor relief. For some months they had been living on 2s. and 2 loaves a week between them. On 23rd December, the Guardians authorized the payment of 7s. to cover the cost of the old man's conveyance to the workhouse. It is perhaps significant that

³ Of the Chipping Norton area in the early 1890s it was noted that 'the village clubs (had) only just ceased to break every five years, thus, to some extent, getting rid of aged members'. Charles Booth, *The Aged Poor in England and Wales* (1894), 312.

⁴ Flora Thompson, *Lark Rise to Candleford* (1963 edn.), 94.

⁵ '... the heritage of the agricultural labourer and his widow, when past work, is still the workhouse or the rates.' Charles Booth, *The Aged Poor in England and Wales*, 317.

shortly after admission he died, and funeral expenses 'to the value of 24s.' had to be authorized by the Guardians on 13th January 1871.⁶

It also seems that Boards of Guardians, aware of the hatred and fear of most old people for the workhouse, from time to time offered indoor relief as a means of avoiding cash outdoor assistance in what they deemed 'unnecessary' cases. For example, the 83-year-old widow of an Ardley agricultural labourer was refused out relief in November 1898, but was offered the 'House' instead. In the Relieving Officer's Report Book it was noted that her son was a grocer's porter in Banbury, and that his children were grown up. The Guardians were clearly prompting him to 'do his duty' and on this occasion they were successful. Early in 1899 the widow went to live with her son.

Yet the need to rely upon children was often seen as degrading by men and women who had worked hard and honestly all their lives. Flora Thompson, discussing the problem in *Lark Rise to Candleford*, wrote: 'It was a common thing to hear ageing people say that they hoped God would be pleased to take them before they got past work and became a trouble to anybody.'⁷ For even when old people received out relief, the Guardians might require children to contribute 1s. or so per week towards the cost of this. A similar contribution was levied in respect of indoor relief, where the means of the children allowed it, and those who failed to pay could be (and were) charged with the offence before Petty Sessions. The arrangement was one likely to place considerable strain on family relationships.

But the impassioned hostility to the workhouse recorded by the secretary of the Horspath Branch of the National Agricultural Labourers' Union in the Branch minute book perhaps conveys most clearly the despair of the aged when faced with the rigidities of institutional life '... as long as Poor Old Darby and Jone are alive they will manage to keep an Old Roof over their head on their out door half crown and loaf of stale Bread but if Either of the two is laid to Rest in the Parish Church yard there is no other Prospect for the [survivor?] than to end the long life of toil among Strangers and away from the Old familiar scenes and Surroundings.' The writer bitterly observed that Nonconformist preachers were excluded from the workhouse 'so that turks, dissenters, infidels, Heretics all meet to hear the Church service gabbled over. The Beauty of Religion is as much denied the Poor old Paupers as their bit of Bacca or Suggar.'⁸

It was the unimaginative regimentation of workhouse life which old people found particularly distressing. For example, despite the existence of legislation to the contrary, most old married couples were separated upon entry; in 1895 it was estimated that in the country as a whole, only a little over 200 of them had 'persisted in claiming (the) bedrooms', which they were entitled to occupy jointly. In Oxfordshire, the men and women usually slept in large dormitories,

⁶ Relieving Officer's Application and Report Book for September, 1870 to March, 1871, for Bletchington district of the Bicester Union at Oxfordshire County Record Office.

⁷ Flora Thompson, *op. cit.*, 70.

⁸ Horspath Branch Minute Book, Bodleian Library, MS. Top. Oxon. d. 533.

'often with the sick and elderly at one end of the dormitory and the able-bodied at the other'. The sexes were carefully segregated.⁹

Again, most paupers were required to wear distinctive clothing, or 'uniforms'. Visiting times were strictly limited and the inmates themselves were only allowed out of the workhouse at certain fixed intervals. This latter was a particularly bitter blow, and as one labourer witness to the Royal Commission on the Aged Poor declared in February 1894, he considered that if the old people 'were allowed to go out on a Sabbath day . . . to go to church or chapel where they thought proper', they would be more reconciled to their lot; 'it is the confinement that is the greatest evil'.¹⁰

At mealtimes silence had to be observed, and the food provided, although more plentiful than that available on out relief, was nevertheless monotonous in the extreme. A typical example was the diet authorized for the aged and infirm at Banbury workhouse in January 1892. Breakfast and supper each day consisted of bread, a little butter and weak tea (made with 1 oz. of tea to ten pints of liquid, and sweetened with $\frac{1}{2}$ oz. of sugar to 1 pint of tea). The mid-day dinner was, therefore, the only meal where variety was possible. On two days each week it comprised pea soup and bread, on two days, meat pudding and vegetables, and on three days, cooked meat and vegetables (4 oz. of meat for the men and 3 oz. for the women). Any deviation from the set plan was frowned upon, although by the end of the century Local Government Board officials were encouraging Guardians everywhere to improve the menus by offering a wider choice, including 'tea, cocoa, milk, sugar, butter, seed-cake, onions, lettuce, rhubarb or stewed fruit, sago, semolina and rice pudding'. It is not easy to decide how far the reforms penetrated into Oxfordshire. The Minute Book of the Banbury Poor Law Union for 20th October 1897, contains the recommendation that 'more Mutton and less Beef' be given to the aged and infirm and 'when practicable to have the meat Roasted'. 'Dough cakes with sugar and fruit' were to be substituted for bread and butter at 'Supper time on Sundays and Fridays'.¹¹ Yet these changes scarcely represented a significant improvement.

Although most old people sought to postpone their entry to the 'Bastille' (as the workhouse was often nicknamed) for as long as possible, they had very little room for manoeuvre. Illness or the death of a partner could place the

⁹ Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *English Poor Law History* (Part II) (1929), 358. S. Everett, 'The Workhouse in Oxfordshire', *Top. Oxon.* 14, Spring 1969. The aged had possessed the right to live together in the workhouses since 1847.

¹⁰ The witness was Thomas Pitkin of Swanbourne, Buckinghamshire. See *Royal Commission on the Aged Poor*, Parliamentary Papers, 1895, Vol. XV, Q. 14147 and Q. 14149. However, from the mid-1890s, the Local Government Board encouraged all Guardians to allow the 'well-behaved aged and infirm' to attend their own places of worship on Sunday. Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *op. cit.*, 360.

¹¹ Banbury Union Minute Book, T/G/1/1/32, preserved at Oxfordshire County Record Office. Elsewhere in the county a similar situation existed. Thus the dietary for the aged, infirm and imbecile at Chipping Norton Workhouse from June, 1896, consisted of bread, butter and weak tea for breakfast and supper each day; and for the mid-day meal, there was meat or bacon and vegetables on three days each week, bread and hash on one day, bread and soup on one day, meat pudding and vegetables on one day, and each Saturday, suet pudding, potatoes and 'other vegetables'. The suet pudding was made from flour, suet and water only. Minute Book of the Chipping Norton Union T/G/1.111/1/17 at Oxfordshire County Record Office.

most provident in serious financial straits—particularly with regard to rent. This is shown, for example, by the fact that many aged cottagers on the Ewelme Almshouse Charity Estate found great difficulty in paying even a small rent, and a number periodically fell into debt. Thus in February 1877, 'Widow Burgess', who lived in Marsh Gibbon, just over the Oxfordshire border in Buckinghamshire, was forgiven £2 arrears of rent, on the understanding that she paid the balance of £1 2s. and promised 'to keep up her payment more regularly in future'. Despite this, eleven months later, she was again in debt. The Trustees' minute book records: 'Widow Burgess—small cottage and garden, Widow between 60 and 70 years of age . . . Lives on parish allowance of 3s. per week, let at 10s. from Michaelmas last. Arrears £3 18s. to be struck off.' Similarly at the January 1888 meeting, it was noted that R. Walker, a seventy-year-old tenant, whose wife was an invalid, had arrears of £1 from the previous year. It was also reported that although he had rented under the Trustees for 'over fifty years' he had never before been in debt. The arrears were forgiven, but in the following year he had again fallen behind—the sum owed this time amounting to 10s. Once again, it was written off. But not all landlords were as accommodating as this. For the less fortunate, failure to pay rent could mean eviction and entry into the workhouse.¹²

In some cases, however, the need was recognized for small cottages to be made available for the aged. Thus at a meeting of the Ewelme Charity Trustees on 27th January 1886, the rector of Marsh Gibbon suggested that 'in the village, and it may be said of all village populations, a few two or three roomed houses are needed for old people, widows and widowers'. The Trustees accepted his argument and agreed to build several small dwellings at Marsh Gibbon. Elsewhere a landlord might keep a low-rented, inferior cottage in use so that it would remain within the financial reach of a poor tenant. Thus 'Widow Dipper's' cottage at Ardley, which was rented from the Duke of Marlborough for 30s. a year, was pulled down when she died a 'pauper' during the half-year ending Lady Day, 1872.

Evidence of the hardships suffered can also be obtained from other sources. Viscount Samuel, in his *Memoirs*, records the poverty of old people at Great Milton, for example. Although his account relates to the years 1890-91, the position he describes existed both before and after this date: 'The cottage rentals were usually 1s. 6d. to 2s. a week, but some of the housing was very bad . . . An ancient charity helped to provide clothes. All the old labourers and their wives, without exception, were "on the parish", receiving from the Poor Law 3s. a week outdoor relief and some bread. The vicar, who was one of the people I saw, had confirmed this. The last entry in my notebook was: "Martha W. 3s. parish relief, 1s. rent, almost starving . . ."'¹³ In certain of the Poor Law Unions, such as Bicester, the relief granted might be even lower than 3s. per week; 2s. and 2 loaves was a common form of relief for the aged pauper in the

¹² Minute Book of the Trustees of Ewelme Almshouse Charity, 1860-1923, MS. D. D. Ewelme, b.3, Bodleian Library.

¹³ Viscount Samuel, *Memoirs* (1945), 14-16.

Bletchington district of that Union during the early 1870s, and 1s. and 1 loaf certainly not unknown. By the beginning of the 20th century, however, the level had risen to 3s. per week for single people and 5s. 6d. for married couples in most—though not all—cases in the Bletchington area.

A further cause of discontent was the fact that the Relieving Officers who distributed the out relief, were often delayed on their rounds through the villages. As a result the old people who were waiting for their payments might have to stand about for several hours—even in wintry weather—in order to receive their 'relief' at the distribution centre. This treatment aroused the fury of the secretary of the Horspath Branch of the National Agricultural Labourers' Union and in March 1875, he attended the parish vestry meeting to protest that 'the Poor tottering old People bent down with age, were compelled to tramp to and fro for 3 hours on the Village Green all weathers till the Relieving Officer one of the greatest Vilens on Earth, came to Pay them the Paltry allowance. I am pleased to say regime was altered from the time I attended the Vestry Meeting.'¹⁴

Of course, certain more fortunate old people might be able to support themselves by earning a little money at some light employment, perhaps given on charitable grounds by a farmer for whom they had previously worked. On the Blount estate at Mapledurham in South Oxfordshire, such work was periodically provided for former employees. In the early 1890s, James Stone who had worked for over forty years on the estate at a variety of tasks, was paid 1s. 3d. per day for his 'jobbing and weeding'. Unfortunately, as his health failed, so his wage rate also dropped. By 1896-97 he and another old labourer, George Rush, were receiving only 9d. per day, and during periods of illness (which amounted to nineteen weeks in one year for Rush) the rate dropped to 1s. 6d. per week. Stone was born in 1819 and Rush in 1829, so that the latter was only in his sixties when his wage rate was drastically reduced. It is, indeed, clear that on this estate—as on many others—the financial difficulties of the older agricultural labourers were not so much caused by irregularity of employment as by the steady decline in the weekly rate of wages which occurred, especially when the worker reached sixty years of age and more.¹⁵ Records indicate that a wage rate of 9d. per day was quite common in many parts of Oxfordshire for farm workers in their seventies. Of course, some of the lucky ones might obtain a pension—like Thomas Baker, a 78-year-old ex-labourer from Bletchington, who received 7s. a week pension from his former employer, Lord Valentia, at the end of the 19th century. But examples like this were all too rare.

The anxiety of labourers to obtain work in old age is demonstrated by the relatively large numbers who continued in permanent employment after the age of 65. At the time of the 1911 Census of Population (even after old age pensions had become available), 1041 shepherds, agricultural labourers, etc., over the age of 65 were in employment in Oxfordshire, and aged labourers in fact formed

¹⁴ Entry in Horspath Branch Minute Book, Bodleian Library, MS. Top. Oxon. d. 533.

¹⁵ P. L. R. Horn, *Agricultural Labourers' Trade Unionism in Four Midland Counties, 1860-1900* (Leicester Ph.D. thesis, 1968), Appendix G.

about one-third of the county's total 65+ work force.¹⁶ Other old men, unable to obtain regular employment, might fall back on piecework, helping, for example, at harvest time or performing such tasks as weeding and hedging. According to official reports, most of those who were fit enough would be 'employed in summer by their old masters in light farm work, e.g. hoeing, stone-picking, earning 5s. or 6s. a week'.¹⁷ At Mapledurham, William Savage, aged 80, was paid for '3 days of gapping' at 1s. 8d. per day, in late April 1881; in 1874, when aged 73, he had been paid at the rate of 2s. per day for planting potatoes and for hoeing wheat during the spring, according to estate records.¹⁸ In other cases, cultivation of a cottage garden or allotment helped to boost the food supply, so long as a man had strength enough for the digging, planting, etc., which this involved. A few kept bees, chickens or a pig. But these occasional 'extras' were of themselves quite inadequate to support life and reluctant recourse to poor relief was also necessary, especially during the winter months.

With the formation of the National Agricultural Labourers' Union in 1872, a number of union leaders quickly showed anxiety to improve the lot of the aged members. Initially this was done on an informal basis, as a resolution of the Oxford District of the N.A.L.U. shows: 'The old members to be assisted and the amount to be decided by the Branch Committee.' (Meeting on 21st January 1873).¹⁹ Later, with the formation of a Union Sick Benefit Society in 1877, came the creation of a National Benevolent Fund designed to provide for those who were too old or too infirm to join the Sick Benefit Society. The income from the subscriptions of members of the Benevolent Fund was supplemented by collections at branch meetings and gifts from non-union sympathizers. Nevertheless, by 1883 a position was reached whereby national income for the year amounted to £35 12s. 9d. and expenditure to £184 16s. 6d.²⁰ Appeals were made for fresh collections to be organized by member branches in aid of the Fund, while outside well-wishers, like the Liberal M.P., Samuel Morley, also sent donations. In these circumstances, the Fund was able to limp along, paying 5s. a week to those eligible, until 1890, when it had finally to be wound up. By this date the expenditure was once more vastly exceeding the income and in the general state of imbalance, Oxfordshire villages were playing their part. For example, at Great Tew, £2 13s. was contributed to the Benevolent Fund in the year ending 31st December, 1888—while benefits distributed to the village amounted to £18 6s. On a national basis during that year, income from subscriptions to the Fund had been £54 4s. 10½d. and expenditure, £173 9s.²¹ For

¹⁶ For all occupations within the county at that time there were only 3,140 male workers still in employment at the age of 65 and upwards. The 1911 Census of Population, Oxfordshire (Occupations); Parliamentary Papers, 1913, Vol. LXXIX. In 1871, similarly, there had been 1,878 shepherds, farm servants and agricultural labourers in the county, aged 65+. They, too, had formed around one-third of Oxfordshire's total male work force over the age of 65. The 1871 Census of Population, Parliamentary Papers, 1873, Vol. LXXI, Pt. 1.

¹⁷ Charles Booth, *The Aged Poor in England and Wales*, 310.

¹⁸ Mapledurham Estate Records are preserved at the Bodleian Library, Oxford, and were consulted by kind permission of Mr. J. J. Eyston.

¹⁹ Oxford District Minute Book in Cole Collection, Nuffield College, Oxford.

²⁰ *English Labourers' Chronicle*, 19th May, 1883.

²¹ P. L. R. Horn, *op. cit.*, 256 and 264-5.

most aged farm workers, however, these provisions were of academic interest only. They were either not members of the Union or they realized that N.A.L.U. funds were too small to provide for their needs on any long-term basis. Only the poor law could do that.

Statistics are not available to show the total number of Oxfordshire ex-farm workers aged 70 or over who were in receipt of poor relief at the beginning of the 20th century. However, this group was likely to form a high proportion of the county's aged paupers since as late as 1911 agricultural labouring was Oxfordshire's major single occupation, employing 12,247 men out of a total of 46,720. In May 1906, 382 persons aged 70 or over within the county were in receipt of indoor (workhouse) relief and 2,078 were in receipt of outdoor relief.²²

Then, with the Pensions Act of 1908 a dramatic change occurred in the figures. By January 1913, the number of 70+ recipients of outdoor assistance in Oxfordshire had fallen to a mere 78; in other words, there had been more than a 96 per cent reduction in the number of aged outdoor paupers—with the decline especially dramatic in the rural poor law union areas, e.g. Bicester, where it was 98 per cent, and Chipping Norton, where it was 97 per cent, but rather less noticeable in the more urban area of the Oxford poor law union.²³ At the same time, the number of old age pensioners rose from the time the Act came into operation on 1st January 1909. By the end of March 1912, there were 4,743 old age pensioners living in Oxfordshire, or, in other words, 70 per cent of all persons aged 70 years or over were in receipt of an old age pension. This proportion was one of the highest county figures in the entire country, and given the stringent property and income restrictions imposed in connection with the granting of the pensions, it does indicate the degree of poverty among the aged in a county still predominantly agricultural. It is significant that the agricultural counties of Norfolk and Suffolk similarly had a high proportion of old people qualified to receive pensions.²⁴

The most important aspect of the old age pensions legislation was the fact that for the first time the State recognized the need to give help to its aged citizens, as a right and not as a concession. For the independent minded, the pensions were gratifyingly free from the social stigma—and political disfranchisement—which had always attended the receipt of poor relief. The Old Age Pensions Act of 1908 undoubtedly provided one of the most valued foundation-stones of the modern Welfare State—and to no group was it more precious than to the retired agricultural labourers.

²² *Old Age Pensioners and Aged Pauperism*, Cd. 7015, Parliamentary Papers, 1913, Vol. LV, 8 (Oxfordshire).

²³ *Ibid.* During the four weeks ended 28th January, 1911, 1,360 outdoor paupers aged 70 or over received old age pensions and ceased to be chargeable to Poor Law Guardians in Oxfordshire; this figure of 1,360 comprised about one-third of the total number of paupers of all ages in the county at that date. Accounts and Papers, Cd. 5612, Parliamentary Papers, 1911, Vol. LXIX.

²⁴ *Old Age Pensioners and Aged Pauperism*, Cd. 7015, Parliamentary Papers, 1913, Vol. LV, p. 6. Relief in kind or medical assistance was, however, still obtained from the poor law authorities by aged (and presumably sick) pensioners. The Relieving Officer's Application and Report Book for Bletchington district of Bicester Union for March–September, 1917, shows 9 pensioners aged 70+ in receipt of these benefits; but no-one aged 70 or above received monetary relief from the poor law at this date.