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### ‘Support for the elderly during the “crisis of the Old Poor Law”, c.1790-1834’

The history of ageing dates largely from the late 1970s and that since that time there has been considerable progress.<sup>1</sup> Richard Smith is one of the most prominent historians contributing to this growing body of scholarship, particularly in relation to the elderly poor. This research indicates that, under the old poor law, the aged were deemed the most deserving of parochial relief. Those who could no longer work due to age and infirmity were generally preferentially treated by the parish authorities: they accounted for the largest group of recipients and they were allocated the largest pensions, often for many years. Smith has been able to comment upon the extent to which the elderly were relieved by overseers in a variety of locales, the generosity of that relief, and how this changed over time. He has linked welfare policy and provision to household structure, kinship and/or collectivity, and the demographic regime in early modern England (and with reflections on contemporary welfare policy for the aged).<sup>2</sup> Historians have responded in a variety of ways to Smith’s work – with some offering reinforcement through their findings, or further nuance, whilst others have challenged his interpretations.<sup>3</sup> This paper will review these themes and will then provide some new evidence drawn from two case study communities in east Bedfordshire, Campton and Shefford, during the period of ‘crisis’ under the old poor law from the late eighteenth century up

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<sup>1</sup> P. Johnson, ‘Historical readings of old age and ageing’, in P. Johnson and P. Thane (eds), *Old age from antiquity to post-modernity* (London, 1998), 1-18, at p.1.

<sup>2</sup> R. M. Smith, ‘Some issues concerning families and their property in rural England 1250-1800’, in R. M. Smith (ed.), *Land, kinship and life-cycle* (Cambridge, 1984), 1-86; *idem*, ‘The structured dependence of the elderly as a recent development: some sceptical historical thoughts’, *Ageing and Society*, 4 (1984), 409-28; *idem*, ‘Charity, self-interest and welfare: reflections from demographic and family history’, in M. J. Daunton (ed.), *Charity, self-interest and welfare in the English past* (London, 1996), 23-49; *idem*, ‘Ageing and well-being in early modern England: pension trends and gender preferences under the English old poor law c. 1650-1800’, in Johnson and Thane, *Old age from antiquity to post-modernity*, 64-95; M. Pelling and R. M. Smith (eds.), *Life, death and the elderly: historical perspectives* (London, 1991); R. M. Smith and N. Tadmor, ‘Kinship in Britain and beyond from the early modern to the present: Introduction’, *Continuity and Change*, 25 (2010), 13-14.

<sup>3</sup> S. R. Ottaway’s work engages with many of Smith’s findings and has taken the history of ageing further: ‘Providing for the elderly in eighteenth-century England’, *Continuity and Change*, 13 (1998), 391-418; *idem*, *The decline of life: old age in eighteenth-century England* (Cambridge, 2004). Pat Thane has offered an alternative perspective: ‘Old people and their families in the English past’, in Daunton, *Charity, self-interest and welfare*, 113-38; *idem*, ‘The family lives of old people’, in Johnson and Thane, *Old age from antiquity to post-modernity*, 180-210; *idem*, *Old age in English history: past experiences, present issues* (Oxford 2000). Other critics of the household structure approach include B. Reay, *Microhistories: demography, society and culture in rural England, 1800-1930* (Cambridge 1996) and R. O’Day, *The family and family relationships, 1500-1900: England, France and the United States of America* (Basingstoke 1994). Some of the most important other works on the subject of the elderly poor include: L. A. Botelho, *Old age and the English poor law, 1500-1700* (Woodbridge 2004); M. Pelling, ‘Old age, poverty, and disability in early modern Norwich: work, remarriage, and other expedients’, in Pelling and Smith, *Life, death and the elderly*, 74-101; T. Sokoll, ‘Old age in poverty: the record of Essex pauper letters, 1780-1834’, in T. Hitchcock, P. King and P. Sharpe (eds), *Chronicling poverty: the voices and strategies of the English poor, 1640-1840* (London 1997), 127-54; D. Thomson, ‘The decline of social welfare: falling state support for the elderly since early Victorian times’, *Ageing and Society*, 4 (1984), 451-82; *idem*, ‘I am not my father’s keeper: families and the elderly in nineteenth century England’, *Law and History Review*, 2 (1984), 265-86; *idem*, ‘Welfare and the historians’, in L. Bonfield, R. M. Smith and K. Wrightson (eds), *The world we have gained: histories of population and social structure* (Oxford, 1986), 355-78; *idem*, ‘The welfare of the elderly in the past: a family or community responsibility?’ in Pelling and Smith, *Life, death and the elderly*, 194-221.

to the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. Smith commented briefly on the period up to 1800 but the impact of the crisis is generally under-researched with regard to the elderly poor. The findings from this research support Smith's contention that there were important shifts in parish provision for elderly persons from the later eighteenth century but the findings for Campton and Shefford differ in significant respects.

There was a legal obligation to relieve the aged poor enshrined in the Elizabethan poor law legislation of 1598-1601 (39 Eliz., c.3, 39 Eliz., c.4, 43 Eliz., c.2).<sup>4</sup> The strong association of sixty with old age dates from at least the medieval period.<sup>5</sup> As Smith and others have pointed out, however, this did not mean that there was a recognised age of 'retirement' or that there was any automatic right to relief. Instead, poor relief was paid to the aged only when they were becoming infirm.<sup>6</sup> This was a process and it could take some time for the elderly to withdraw entirely from the labour market. Ageing involved growing debility, being unable to do hard work, episodes of illness, weakness and fatigue, the exhaustion of body and soul.<sup>7</sup> Smith interprets increases in parish pensions over an individual's life as indicating increasing infirmity and a reduced ability to work.<sup>8</sup>

Research on seventeenth-century poor relief by Tim Wales and W. Newman Brown, in the volume *Land kinship and life-cycle* edited by Smith, emphasised the prominent position of the elderly in the relief rolls and an increase in the value of relief to this group.<sup>9</sup> Smith has similar findings for a sample of communities in the period c. 1650-1750, a phase when 9-10 per cent of the population was 60 years and over (a figure that would not be reached again until the 1930s).<sup>10</sup> Smith has linked some of the major findings of the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure on population trends and household structure to his own on poverty and ageing. He argues that demographic factors contributed to the need for the community rather than the family to provide substantial levels of welfare assistance: nuclear, rather than the extended, households predominated in pre-industrial populations and there was a high rate of geographical mobility.<sup>11</sup> Households frequently suffered from 'nuclear family hardship' brought on by, in Smith's words, 'the death of a spouse, unemployment, sickness or senility – such that households found it difficult to be economically self-sufficient even though their formation rules insisted that couples should be so'.<sup>12</sup> He argues that adult children were frequently unable to care for their elderly parents because they became needy at the same time as the couple's resources were tied up in rearing their own children.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Smith, 'Structured dependence', 419; Ottaway, *The decline of life*, 173-4; E. M. Leonard, *The early history of English poor relief* (Cambridge, 1900, repr. London 1965), 140; M. J. Daunton, *Progress and poverty: an economic and social history of Britain, 1700-1850* (Oxford, 1995), 449; G. Taylor, *The problem of poverty, 1660-1834* (London, 1969), 4; P. A. Fideler, *Social welfare in pre-industrial England* (Basingstoke, 2006), 99-101.

<sup>5</sup> Ottaway, *The decline of life*, 20-1 and ch.1 *passim*; Johnson, 'Historical readings of old age', 3-5; Thane, *Old age*, 21-7; M. Barker-Read, 'The treatment of the aged poor in 5 selected West Kent parishes from settlement to Speenhamland (1662-1797)' (PhD, Open University 1989). Pelling and Botelho have argued that some people in their fifties were often considered old: Pelling, 'Old age, poverty, and disability', 78; Botelho, *Old age*, 12-13.

<sup>6</sup> Smith, 'Ageing and well-being', 78; Ottaway, *The decline of life*, ch.1.

<sup>7</sup> T. Sokoll, 'Old age in poverty', 143-5.

<sup>8</sup> Smith, 'Ageing and well-being', p.78.

<sup>9</sup> T. Wales, 'Poverty, poor relief and the life-cycle: some evidence from seventeenth-century Norfolk', in Smith, *Land, kinship and life-cycle*, 351-404; W. Newman Brown, 'The receipt of poor relief and family situation: Aldenham, Hertfordshire 1630-90', in Smith, *Land, kinship and life-cycle*, 405-22. See also Botelho, *Old age*, ch.4.

<sup>10</sup> Smith, 'Ageing and well-being', 70, 88; *idem*, 'Structured dependence', 414.

<sup>11</sup> P. Laslett, 'Family, kinship and collectivity as systems of support in pre-industrial Europe: a consideration of the 'nuclear-hardship' hypothesis', *Continuity and Change*, 3 (1988), 153-75, 153; Smith, 'Some issues', 73. For recent contributions to this debate see *Continuity and Change*, 15, special issue, 'Kinship in Britain and beyond from the early modern to the present', eds R. M. Smith and N. Tadmor.

<sup>12</sup> Laslett, 'Family, kinship and collectivity', 153; Smith, 'Some issues', 73; *idem*, 'Ageing and well-being', 67-9; *idem*, 'Charity, self-interest and welfare', 26-7.

<sup>13</sup> Smith, 'Some issues', 73. See also R. Wall, 'Economic collaboration of family members within and beyond households in English society, 1600-2000', *Continuity and Change*, 15 (2010), 83-108, at p.94.

Much of the research on the aged poor relates to the period before 1800, yet from the late eighteenth century the old poor law was in ‘crisis’. Annual national costs had risen from an average of £689,97 for the three years ending in 1750, to £1,912,241 for the period 1783-5, to £4,077,891 in 1803, and to £7.9 million in 1818.<sup>14</sup> The crisis – which was particularly evident in the south Midlands, south and south east – was due to rapid population increase, parliamentary enclosure, the decay and decline of cottage industries, especially those of hand-spinning and weaving, the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, harvest failures, and post-war depression that brought with it widespread seasonal under-employment.<sup>15</sup> Attitudes towards the poor hardened and there were repeated calls for reform of the poor laws, finally resulting in the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834.<sup>16</sup> There has been a strong and remarkably enduring assumption in the secondary literature on this crisis period that 1795 marked a decisive turning point in parish policy, with the Speenhamland decision to give relief scaled by the price of bread and the size of families. James Huzel has argued that, ‘By any criteria, the 1790s must be viewed as a turning point, for it was in the critical middle years of this decade that poor relief underwent a major and, in some cases, radical transformation’.<sup>17</sup> A great deal of the discussion on this period has been related to relief to families and able-bodied unemployed men, but some historians have shown how the growing crisis impacted upon the aged in a variety of ways. Ottaway argues that up to 1800 the welfare net spread more widely and that parishes continued to accommodate elderly women as well as men, while increasing relief to couples with young children.<sup>18</sup> Smith finds a masculinisation of pensioners, most probably due, he suggests, to a growing number of families requiring relief and possibly also resulting from a shift in policy from the allocation of outdoor relief to elderly women to provision for them within a workhouse (such as in Terling, Essex).<sup>19</sup> In his study of fourteen south-eastern parishes and fourteen north-western communities Steven King also charts the rising importance of male recipients in the early nineteenth century.<sup>20</sup>

The rest of this paper engages with these themes in the context of further research on provision for the elderly poor in Campton and Shefford, east Bedfordshire, between the 1760s and 1834. Campton was a small, rural, and predominantly agricultural parish, with a population of 449 in 1831, while Shefford was Campton’s neighbouring market town, with 763 inhabitants and a more varied occupational structure, with 40 per cent of families employed in manufacture.<sup>21</sup> Like elsewhere in the south and east the crisis in Campton and Shefford was marked by rapidly rising expenditure and numbers claiming relief.<sup>22</sup> Campton’s spending increased ten-fold over the period from an average of £26 in the 1770s to a high-point of £312 in 1829; there was a peak in spending around 1801 of £310, followed by a fall, and then expenditure climbed once more with the post-war depression. In Shefford spending lagged somewhat behind Campton until 1815, when expenditure out-stripped that in Campton, and costs peaked in the 1820s at just over £300 in 1820 and again in 1827. The cost of

<sup>14</sup> D. R. Green, *Pauper capital: London and the poor law, 1790-1870* (Farnham 2010), 27.

<sup>15</sup> A. Kidd, *State, society and the poor in nineteenth-century England* (Basingstoke, 1999), 14.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 13-29.

<sup>17</sup> P. Dunkley, *The crisis of the old poor law in England 1795-1834: an interpretative essay* (London, 1982), 47; J. P. Huzel, ‘The labourer and the poor law, 1750-1850’, in J. Thirsk (ed.), *The agrarian history of England and Wales, VI 1750-1850* (Cambridge, 1989) 755-810, at p.773.

<sup>18</sup> S. King, *Poverty and welfare in England* (Manchester 2000), ch.6; Ottaway, ‘Providing for the elderly’, 409.

<sup>19</sup> Smith, ‘Ageing and wellbeing’, 83-8. See Ottaway’s in-depth study of Terling’s workhouse: *The decline of life*, ch.7.

<sup>20</sup> King, *Poverty and welfare*, 166-7, 210-11.

<sup>21</sup> *Abstract of census returns*, 1831. A detailed study of these communities appears in S. Williams, *Poverty, gender and life-cycle under the English poor law, 1760-1834* (Woodbridge, 2011). See also: ‘Poor relief, labourers’ households and living standards in rural England c.1770-1834: a Bedfordshire case-study’, *Economic History Review*, LVIII (2005), 485-519.

<sup>22</sup> D. Eastwood, *Governing rural England: tradition and transformation in local government, 1780-1840* (Oxford, 1994), Table 6.1 at p.135; King, *Poverty and welfare in England*, ch.6.

living was volatile in this period, with rapid inflation from the 1790s and deflation after 1815.<sup>23</sup> Parish overseers were unable to take advantage of the reduction in the cost of living, however, and the agricultural depression kept spending high. There was a substantial rise in the total number of recipients. The end of the period is in sharp contrast with the beginning: in the 1770s Campton's overseers relieved 37 recipients in total; by the 1820s they gave relief to 180 beneficiaries. It is evident that the nature and 'problem' of poverty had altered substantially.

80,825 payments were recorded in the overseers' accounts for the two communities, 63,775 of which were regular weekly 'pensions' (given to all categories of the poor, not just the elderly). Over the entire period, therefore, three-quarters of payments were pension payments and, although the proportion fell over time, it was never below 70 per cent.<sup>24</sup> This is slightly higher than the two-thirds of spending found by Smith for the early to middle eighteenth century and a great deal higher than the 40 per cent found by Steven King in his sample of south-eastern parishes by the 1820s.<sup>25</sup> Smith also found that pensioners and their dependants accounted for between 2 and 8 per cent of the population between the late seventeenth century and c.1780.<sup>26</sup> In Campton the figure was between 7 and 12 per cent in the period 1811-1831 and between 5 and 7 per cent in Shefford; however, in the crisis years around the turn of the century 31 per cent of Campton's residents were in receipt of pensions and around 13 per cent in Shefford.<sup>27</sup>

There were over one hundred elderly paupers in Campton (1767-1834) and Shefford (1794-1828) and their 'pauper biographies' have been analysed for this paper, assembled through nominal record linkage between poor law sources and family reconstitution.<sup>28</sup> Such an approach reveals far more about the family circumstances and pauper 'careers' of recipients over their entire life courses than a study of the overseers' accounts alone. A similar approach was adopted by Smith, but the depth of analysis is far greater in the present study.<sup>29</sup> It has been possible, for instance, to isolate the elderly more discretely from other age groups and to ascertain their family circumstances more precisely. Age information was available for almost 60 per cent of these aged paupers, whilst for the others either their family circumstances or their paupers 'careers' indicate that they too were old. John Ivory, for instance, was given occasional relief and then a regular weekly pension from 1795 until his burial on Christmas Eve 1797. He had grown up children aged 40 and 44, and so he was likely to be in his mid-60s.<sup>30</sup> There are two ways in which regular relief to the elderly can be assessed: a snap-shot approach per decade and a longitudinal approach which follows each individual over their life courses; the first shows important trends over time, while the second reveals all the interactions

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<sup>23</sup> C. H. Feinstein, 'Pessimism perpetuated: real wages and the standard of living in Britain during and after the industrial revolution', *Journal of Economic History*, lviii (1998), 625-58, Table 2 at p.640.

<sup>24</sup> 'Pensions' were defined as regular weekly payments for a minimum of six months: Williams, *Poverty, gender and lifecycle*, 39.

<sup>25</sup> Smith, 'Ageing and well-being', 73; King, *Poverty and welfare*, 155-9.

<sup>26</sup> Smith, 'Ageing and well-being', 71.

<sup>27</sup> Williams, *Poverty, gender and lifecycle*, Table 5 at p.54.

<sup>28</sup> 104 elderly paupers' biographies. Bedford and Luton Archives Service [BLARS], P18/12/1-2, X514/1-3 Campton overseers' accounts (1767-1834), P70/12/1-2 Shefford overseers' accounts (1794-1828), and the family reconstitution for Campton-with-Shefford and Southill, Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure. Other sources used were: BLARS, P70/8/1 Shefford's vestry minutes, P70/11/1-3 Shefford's ratepayers' books, and Campton-with-Shefford's baptism, marriage and burial registers. Where couples were relieved, both husband and wife have been included in the figure of 104 elderly individuals.

<sup>29</sup> Smith, 'Ageing and well-being', 69.

<sup>30</sup> In both communities just over 71% of elderly paupers had family reconstitution forms and thus potential age information (baptism and burial dates, age at burial information, or information from the 1841 census). Of those at least 82% did have age information. This means that just over 58% of all aged paupers had accurate age information.<sup>30</sup> Age information was also available from Campton's overseers' accounts which listed the age of pensioners in December 1834. For others without baptism dates but with first marriages, it was possible to estimate their age by using the average age at marriage in Campton and Shefford. Average age at marriage is given in S. Williams, 'Malthus, marriage and poor law allowances revisited: a Bedfordshire case study, 1770-1834', *Agricultural History Review*, 52 (2004), 56-82, at pp.79-80.

between individuals and the parish authorities. Both will be employed in this paper, but first it is necessary to establish the age at which the elderly might qualify for a parish pension.

In Campton and Shefford the most common age for a pension later in life was when recipients were in their sixties (70 per cent), but regular relief was awarded for others only when they were older, in their seventies (24 per cent) or even their eighties (6 per cent) (see Table 1). Women tended to be younger than men when they collected their first ‘old age’ pension: four-fifths were in their sixties, with one-fifth in their seventies; Susannah Brawn, for instance, was aged 74. In contrast, 50 per cent of men were in their sixties, 41 per cent in their seventies and 9 per cent in their eighties.

**Table 1: Age distribution of elderly pensioners, Campton and Shefford, 1760s-1830s**<sup>31</sup>

Age	per cent
60-64	37
65-69	33
70-74	12
75-79	12
80 or over	6
[70 or over	30]

The ‘elderly’ have been defined as those aged sixty and above for the purposes of this paper, in line with the findings above and with the definitions of other historians.<sup>32</sup> However, pensions were given to a small number of men and women in their fifties, such as Mary Rogers, whose pension began when she was aged 54 following the death of her husband and she had two children under 15 (as well as other grown up children). It could be argued that her pension was a ‘widow’s pension’ rather than an ‘old age’ one, but her regular payments continued into her old age, until she was aged 78. One-third of recipients in their fifties were widows. In the other two-thirds of cases the beneficiaries were couples, such as William and Lucy Newman and Thomas and Elizabeth Knight. Both couples had received relief earlier in their lives (when they were families) and were then allocated pensions again when they were in their fifties. In both cases they too still had adolescent children at home (as well as grown up children) and in both instances the pensions were small at first but substantial at the point of the deaths of William and Thomas. These pensions then continued to Lucy (now aged 59) and Elizabeth (aged 65), initially at reduced rates but rising again as they grew older. In all the instances where couples in their fifties were in receipt of a parish pension, when the husbands died the weekly sums continued to their widows. These weekly sums could be interpreted equally as ‘widows’ pensions’ or ‘old age pensions’ and for older women the distinction between the two has to be seen as blurred. Another small group of women came on to long-term relief when they were widowed in middle age and they were responsible for dependent children, and their pensions continued into their old age; this group lived particularly pauperised lives.

The elderly were heavily over-represented on the relief rolls: in 1841 7-8 per cent of Campton and Shefford’s populations were aged 60 or over, but the aged poor accounted for 40-48 per cent of all pensioners between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; thus this age group were over-represented six times more than their proportional share of the population.<sup>33</sup> This is roughly in line with Smith’s findings: he found that elderly pensioners were over-represented by between five to

<sup>31</sup> Williams, *Poverty, gender and lifecycle*, 114.

<sup>32</sup> Ottaway, *The decline of life*, 21, 26 and ch.1 *passim*. See the discussion of the definition of old age in M. Pelling and R. M. Smith, ‘Introduction’, in Pelling and Smith, *Life, death and the elderly*, 1-38, at pp.5-8.

<sup>33</sup> Williams, *Poverty, gender and lifecycle*, 64-5.

nine times their share of the population in the period 1663-1742.<sup>34</sup> By the late eighteenth century, in the 1790s, Ottaway found that the aged accounted for an average of 34 per cent of pensioners, but the figure could be as high as 41.8 per cent in agricultural areas.<sup>35</sup> Smith also estimated the proportion of those over the age of 60 who were likely to have a parish pension for some period prior to their deaths: in Whitchurch, Oxfordshire, at the end of the seventeenth century the figure was between 40 and 50 per cent.<sup>36</sup> In the early nineteenth century in Campton the proportion was around 50 per cent, but slightly lower in Shefford at around 30 per cent.<sup>37</sup> David Thomson's investigation into poor relief under the new poor law in Bedfordshire in the 1840s also revealed high levels of support for the elderly: of those aged 70 or more, two-thirds of women and half of men were pensioners; of those aged 65-9, one-half of women and a 'significant minority' of men were regularly relieved.<sup>38</sup> These figures suggest some continuity, in the south and east at least, in the extent to which communities were prepared to support the aged.<sup>39</sup>

A decadal approach reveals that the number of elderly pensioners increased over time, except for the final period which was a period of four (rather than ten) years for Campton (1830-34) (Table 2).<sup>40</sup> The elderly accounted for a large proportion of all pensioners; the percentage of the aged did not fall below 23 per cent after the 1780s and was as high as 46 per cent in the 1810s in Campton. This is similar to the situation that Ottaway found in Terling and Puddletown.<sup>41</sup> The masculinisation of pensioners found by Smith and King was also evident, to a limited extent, in Campton and Shefford from the 1790s. This was for two reasons: there was indeed an increase in the number of families who were allocated regular weekly sums, but pensions to families were primarily restricted to particular periods of hardship (1799-1802 and 1815-1822), and there was as a growing number of elderly couples after 1815 (with the payments given to the husband).<sup>42</sup> In terms of occasional payments, there was a massive rise in relief to unemployed adult men and boys after 1815, although this never accounted for more than 13 per cent of expenditure on the poor.<sup>43</sup> Single elderly women were not squeezed out by this masculinisation of the outdoor relief lists, however, as is shown in Table 2. In Campton the number of solitary aged women in receipt of a pension rose slowly and then remained largely constant, while in Shefford the number of elderly women increased in each decade. In both communities the number of elderly men remained at fewer than five while the number of elderly couples in receipt of pensions rose. However, the concept of 'masculinisation' is largely a product of analysis of named recipients in overseers' accounts rather than of actual family circumstances. Pensions to families and elderly couples were usually paid to the husband – and hence a masculinisation of names – but these payments also benefited wives and, in the case of families, children. This is an important point. Payments to aged couples were intended for the husband and his wife; this is evident in the sums allocated couples, which were generally higher than those for the single aged (this is discussed further below). There is little evidence in Campton and Shefford that elderly women were the casualties of the masculinisation of outdoor relief given in pensions. Instead welfare provision appears to have broadened to accommodate families in times of particular hardship and elderly couples alongside solitary elderly men and women.

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<sup>34</sup> Smith, 'Ageing and well-being', 75, 70.

<sup>35</sup> Ottaway, *The decline of life*, 184-9. See also King, *Poverty and welfare*, 168.

<sup>36</sup> Smith, 'Ageing and well-being', 74.

<sup>37</sup> S. Williams, 'Poor relief, welfare and medical provision in Bedfordshire: the social, economic and demographic context, c. 1770-1834', PhD, Cambridge 1998, Tables 2.4 and 2.5 at p.62.

<sup>38</sup> Thomson, 'The welfare of the elderly in the past', 202.

<sup>39</sup> Thane, on the other hand, finds a much lower proportion at 2.7% in the 1790s for a variety of English parishes: *Old age*, 147-8.

<sup>40</sup> Williams, *Poverty, gender and life-cycle*, 57

<sup>41</sup> Ottaway, *The decline of life*, 222-7.

<sup>42</sup> Williams, *Poverty, gender and life-cycle*, 56-65.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, 131-44.



**Table 2: Number of elderly pensioners by decade in Campton and Shefford, 1760s-1830s**<sup>44</sup>

Period	All pensioners <sup>45</sup>	Elderly	Elderly as %	Men	Couples	Women
<b>CAMPTON</b>						
1767-69	9	1	11	0	0	1
1770-79	9	4	44	1	1	2
1780-89	23	9	39	2	1	6
1790-99	41	9	22	3	0	6
1800-09	46	15	33	3	0	12
1810-19	39	19	49	1	7	11
1820-29	46	19	41	3	8	8
1830-34	29	14	48	2	5	7
<b>SHEFFORD</b>						
1794-99	23	8	35	3	1	4
1800-10	35	12	34	4	3	5
1810-19	34	14	41	2	4	8
1820-28	42	17	40	1	4	12

Smith suggested that in some communities elderly women were transferred from outdoor relief into the workhouse, and, indeed, this was found by Ottaway for Terling, Essex, and Ovendon, Halifax, West Yorkshire.<sup>46</sup> Was this the case in these two Bedfordshire communities? There were workhouses (usually termed ‘poor houses’) in both Campton and Shefford. There is a paucity of information on the people accommodated in these houses, but it would appear from what there is that most of those living in Shefford’s house were the transient – described as ‘man’ or ‘woman’ – not settled pensioners. There were three exceptions: John Newman (age unknown) stayed in the house in the months while he awaited removal to Shillington; a one-off payment in 1811 for ‘Refreshment to Jas Humberstones [aged 53] Family at the Workhouse’; and there was at least one longer-term inmate, John Bowers (aged 62) (and presumably his wife, Ann, aged 64). The JP Samuel Whitbread and the parish overseer agreed in November 1811 that Bowers was to live in the workhouse and to be given 4s. a week. It would appear that Ann left the poor house some time after her husband’s death, since in 1818 and 1824 the parish paid her poor rates, and she continued to receive a weekly pension.<sup>47</sup> In Campton’s house there is information on three inmates: William Collip (exact age unknown but elderly), Ann Briant (exact age unknown but elderly) and Ann Herbert (aged 64), who were accommodated towards the end of their lives. This amounts to evidence of at least two old women in the workhouse (a small number); however, they continued to be listed in the overseers’ accounts and so they did not ‘disappear’ from the relief lists as did the older women in Smith’s study. Only a few elderly women were accommodated in other local workhouses. In the nearby parish of Cardington in 1782 the elderly accounted for 21.9 per cent of those in the workhouse: three were widowed women and two married couples; similar numbers were in receipt of outdoor relief. In 1808 the men were all elderly and there were still a few elderly women housed

<sup>44</sup> Column ‘all pensioners’ is from Williams, *Poverty, gender and lifecycle*, 57. The other data is new and generated from the pauper biographies.

<sup>45</sup> This column is of groups of pensioners not individuals (couples, families, lone parents). Total individuals would be men plus women plus couples (counting as 2 individuals).

<sup>46</sup> Smith, ‘Ageing and well-being’, 84-5; Ottaway, *The decline of life*, ch.7.

<sup>47</sup> *Samuel Whitbread’s notebooks, 1810-11, 1813-14*, ed. A. F. Cirket (Bedfordshire Historical Record Society, 50, 1971), entries 381, 384.

there.<sup>48</sup> In another nearby parish, Hayes, only one elderly widow was in the workhouse.<sup>49</sup> Institutionalisation of the elderly was not apparent in Bedfordshire workhouses.

Taking a longitudinal approach to the pauper biographies reveals a great deal more about the lives of the elderly and it also adds a rich layer of detail to the quantitative evidence. Analysis of the pauper biographies reveals the patterns of poor relief receipt over entire life times. Of those persons who received a pension in their old age, almost two-thirds were given to recipients only when they were aged 60 or over. The vast majority were part of couples: 85 per cent of individuals (24) were married. There were just 4 lone elderly people: one man, James Austin (aged 82), and three women, Mary Devereux (aged 62, and who had a gap of 6 years between being widowed and the start of a pension), Elizabeth Gaunt (aged 60, relieved at widowhood), and Mary Rogers, mentioned before (aged 54, relieved six months after the death of her husband). When one of the spouses of a pensioner-couple died, many of these pensions continued to the remaining widow(er). Of all elderly couples 3 were still married when the overseers' accounts stop in 1834. Of the 11 other couples, 6 pensions continued to widows when their husbands died, 3 continued to widowers when their wives died, and 2 were women who were widowed but who did not continue to receive relief. One such widow was Letita Briggs, whose husband Benjamin died in 1826; it is possible that she was younger than him since she was his second wife, but we have no age information for her and so her exact situation is unknown. More women outlived their husbands and continued to receive their pensions alone, but the numbers are small and, when wives died first, pensions to widowers also often continued.

In just over one-third of cases aged pensioners had also received a parish pension at some earlier point in their lives or their pensions had started while they were middle aged and had been paid continuously from that point into their old age. This latter situation was experienced by a number of middle aged widows with dependent children, such as Esther Merryweathers, who came on to long-term relief when her husband died (she was aged 42), leaving her with young children to care for, and she remained on relief for the next 37 years (dying when she was 79). Of those aged paupers who had previously been in receipt of a parish pension, 56 per cent (9) had also been relieved when they were part of a couple heading a family ('family allowances'), 38 per cent (6) were lone parents with children (5 of whom were headed by women), and the last, Sarah Odell, had been a middle aged widow with adult children. Many elderly pensioners – whenever their pensions began – had also previously received occasional relief in the form of cash or kind.

The relative generosity of relief to the aged poor has generated considerable debate. Smith, Wales, Solar, and Ottaway point to substantial levels of assistance and a relatively high proportion of the aged receiving such benefits, particularly in the first half of the eighteenth century when pension sums were rising while wages were static and prices falling.<sup>50</sup> Thane and King, on the other hand, have drawn a more pessimistic picture of the restricted nature of poor relief to the elderly and their reliance upon the wider 'economy of makeshifts'.<sup>51</sup> There were important shifts in the later

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<sup>48</sup> *The inhabitants of Cardington in 1782*, ed. D. Baker (Bedfordshire Historical Record Society, 52, 1973), Tables 2.6 and 2.7 at pp.47-8; Whitbread Collection, BLARS, W1/767.

<sup>49</sup> Whitbread Collection, BLARS, W1/762.

<sup>50</sup> Thane, *Old age*; King, *Poverty and welfare*; Smith, 'Ageing and well-being'; P. M. Solar, 'Poor relief and English economic development before the industrial revolution', *Economic History Review*, xlviii (1995), 1-22; S. King, 'Poor relief and English economic development reappraised', *Economic History Review*, 1 (1997), 360-8; P. M. Solar, 'Poor relief and English economic development: a renewed plea for comparative history', *Economic History Review*, 1 (1997), 369-74; Thomson, 'The decline of social welfare'; Ottaway, *The decline of life*; Wales, 'Poverty, poor relief and the life-cycle'.

<sup>51</sup> Thane, 'Old people and their families'; *idem*, *Old age*, ch.8; King, *Poverty and welfare*, ch.s 6-7; *idem*, 'Reconstructing lives: the poor, the poor law and welfare in Calverley, 1650-1820', *Social History*, 22 (1997), 318-38, at pp.330-2. See also S. King and A. Tomkins (eds), *The poor in England 1700-1850: an economy of makeshifts* (Manchester, 2003).

eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries which meant that the value of relief was coming under pressure: pension sums failed to keep pace with inflation and a greater proportion of expenditure was allocated to occasional relief.<sup>52</sup> What was the situation in the case study communities?

There are a number of ways that generosity might be calculated in this study. One is the proportion that the elderly comprised of paupers and it has already been noted that this group were highly over-represented as pensioners in Campton and Shefford, accounting for six times as many pensioners as their proportion of the underlying population. This is compelling evidence that the aged were perceived as particularly deserving of relief. The best marker of generosity is the value of pensions and this group do particularly well here too. Those aged 60 or over received the highest value pensions of any group at up to 62 per cent of neighbouring labouring households' adult-equivalent income, compared to lone, non-aged men and women, who received up to 45 per cent, lone parents at up to 37 per cent, and families at up to 29 per cent.<sup>53</sup> Elderly couples usually received higher mean pensions than lone aged pensioners: in Campton couples' pensions were 1.5 to 2.8 times higher, while in Shefford they were 0.8 to 1.8 higher.<sup>54</sup>

When viewed at the individual level elderly pensioners received 'welfare packages' of weekly pension payments, additional cash and relief in kind that were highly tailored, reflecting personal circumstances (including illness and growing debility), the seasons, and a volatile cost of living. There was no 'standard' old age weekly pension sum, but rather payments rose and fell as needs required. This finding is similar to that of Ottaway's study of Terling, Puddletown and Oviden; Ottaway terms relief to the aged as 'customised care packages'.<sup>55</sup> William Barber and his wife Mary, for instance, were admitted to the pension list for nine months in February 1818 (when they were aged 67 and 68) and their pension sum varied, almost weekly: 7s. 6d., 5s. 6d., 2s., 1s., 5s. 1s., 4s., 2s., 5s., 1s., 4s. 1s. After Mary died in June 1820 William received his own pension, as a widower now aged 69, until the end of the overseers' accounts in 1834. His weekly sum started at 5s. a week, but the amount changed frequently, falling at times to 3s. The sum he received most often was 3s. 6d. He also received additional cash when he was ill, plus clothing, shoes and a new 'bedtick'. William did not necessarily receive more when his wife was alive, as an elderly couple, than when he was a widower. Instead, payments were highly tailored. In the case of Ingram and Ann Chapman higher payments to couples than the widowed are more evident. When they were aged 67 and 66 they were given weekly sums of 5s., 3s., and 4s. (1815-1818); these payments were higher than the regular 2s. a week that Ann was given when she was widowed. Her elderly widow's pension remained at the constant sum of 2s. until her own death in January 1826. These pauper biographies make it clear that it can be difficult to generalise. These cases also reveal that pension sums did not necessarily increase as a person aged, although this too did happen.

Relief in kind was worth an additional 8 per cent to pension values. It is worth breaking down payments in kind into their constituent parts: fuel, clothing and shoes, care and nursing, and burial costs, in order to establish the proportion allocated to the elderly.<sup>56</sup> Fuel was worth, on average, 1-2s. Campton made hundreds of payments for fuel (628 payments, 1767-1834) but Shefford gave fuel far less frequently (59 payments, 1794-1828). Faggots and coals were generally given to pensioners (87 per cent) rather than occasional recipients (13 per cent) and in both communities fuel was given to a core group of pensioners: 45 individuals in Campton and just 8 in Shefford. In Campton 44 per cent

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<sup>52</sup> Smith, 'Ageing and well-being'; Barker-Read, 'The treatment of the aged poor'; Ottaway, *The decline of life*, ch.6; King, *Poverty and welfare*, ch. 6; J. Broad, 'Parish economies of welfare, 1650-1834', *Historical Journal*, 42 (1999), 985-1006, at pp.985-6.

<sup>53</sup> Williams, *Poverty, gender and lifecycle*, 65.

<sup>54</sup> Williams, 'Poor relief, labourers' households and living standards', 101-4.

<sup>55</sup> Ottway, *The decline of life*, 189-90.

<sup>56</sup> Botelho has undertaken a similar exercise for her Suffolk parishes of Cratfield and Poslingford in the seventeenth century: *Old age*, Table 4.3 at p.119.

of those in receipt of fuel were elderly and, of these, elderly widows (70 per cent) dominated over elderly couples or aged men. Of the 45 individuals given fuel in Campton, just 5 individuals were given more than half of all the fuel payments (63 per cent) and 4 of these paupers were elderly: Widow Rogers, Sarah Lincoln, William Kilby and Widow Devereux. The other beneficiary, Mary Clark, was married with children, but fuel payments continued to be given to her after she was widowed and elderly. Widow Rogers was given fuel on 97 occasions and William Kilby on 104 occasions.

In terms of the allocation of parish clothing and shoes the elderly accounted for the largest share of recipients – at 33 per cent – followed by lone parents (30 per cent). Elderly pensioners were also provided with caring services. For instance, ‘doing for’ was paid for by Campton’s overseers on behalf of Sarah Lincoln weekly for almost three years between 1790 and 1793. Three different carers provided this service for her and they were paid between 6*d.*-9*d.* per week. It might be expected that illness and growing debility, associated with old age, would mean that the elderly would loom large as recipients of care work, but in fact they comprised a smaller proportion of care recipients – at one fifth of those receiving care in Campton and one quarter in Shefford – than were given fuel and clothing and shoes. Nursing care was clearly distributed more evenly among all age groups.

Parish burials were another payment in kind where it would be expected that the elderly would again loom large. The expenses paid for funerals were comprehensive – for laying out of the corpse, the coffin, the cap, muffler and wool the body was wrapped in, the affidavit and church fees, and the bread, cheese and beer for the mourners – and could amount to as much as £1 16*s.* 8*d.* Forty per cent of all those buried at the parishes’ expense in Campton and Shefford were aged over 60.<sup>57</sup> Tim Wales found that most of those receiving pensions in seventeenth-century Norfolk died on the parish.<sup>58</sup> In Norfolk this was because many of the pensioners were elderly; this was not the case in Campton and Shefford because other groups were also in receipt of parish pensions and many of them became independent of the parish later in their lives.<sup>59</sup> For elderly pensioners in these two communities, however, pensions were almost always paid up to the point of death (83 per cent). The parish authorities did not pay for all the funerals of those dying on the parish: such expenses were met in just over 70 per cent of cases. In 30 per cent of cases, therefore, burial costs were paid for by someone else – either relatives or through membership of a friendly society. Elderly pensioners who did not die on relief (17 per cent) fell into three groups: a small number of widows who had received couples’ pensions with their husbands but once they were widowed the pension did not continue to them, such as Letita Briggs (discussed above); a number of non-resident recipients who were receiving their pensions in another parish; and a number of pensioners whose payments simply stopped, there was no payment for a funeral in the overseers’ accounts, and no burial recorded in the parish register.<sup>60</sup> It is possible that some widows were able to support themselves without parish pensions, or that they moved away. In the case of the non-resident, lump sums payments to overseers elsewhere might have covered funeral expenses, and in the cases of those with no entry in the burial register it is likely that the register was deficient.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Williams, *Poverty, gender and lifecycle*, 41-2.

<sup>58</sup> Wales, ‘Poverty, poor relief and the life-cycle’, Figure 11.1 at pp.362-4.

<sup>59</sup> Williams, *Poverty, gender and lifecycle*, 118-19.

<sup>60</sup> A number of the elderly were still in receipt of pensions at the end of the overseers’ accounts (Campton 1834, Shefford 1828) and so it is not possible to know if they died on relief.

<sup>61</sup> P. Razzell, C. Spence and M. Woollard, ‘The evaluation of Bedfordshire burial registration, 1538-1851’, *Local Population Studies*, 84 (Spring 2010), 31-54.

Smith has also contributed to the debate on the contribution of kin to the care of the elderly.<sup>62</sup> The pauper biographies of Campton and Shefford's elderly poor can be analysed in order to comment on the availability of adult children. Of course, it needs to be recognised that not all children who had been baptised in these communities and were now grown up would have continued to live near by; many would have moved away from the parish during apprenticeship or service, in search of other employment or upon marriage. From the point of view of elderly parents the important criterion would have been the proximity of the nearest child. It would seem that the availability of kin was relatively high in east Bedfordshire. In the nearby parish of Cardington in 1782 a third of parents had a child resident in the same parish and nearly half of all married sons lived within five miles.<sup>63</sup> The proportion of elderly pensioners who had grown up sons and daughters was 63 per cent in Campton and 58 per cent in Shefford. Only one-third of adult children in the two communities could be linked to their own marriages, indicating that many must have married in other parishes.<sup>64</sup> Around 30 per cent of the elderly in both parishes could not be linked to the family reconstitution, which might indicate that they were 'kin-poor', although these individuals may well have had family living in neighbouring parishes or further afield.<sup>65</sup> It would appear from the pauper biographies that the proportion of the elderly with surviving adult children potentially able to help was high and yet these elderly pensioners were receiving long-term financial aid from the parish. The most likely explanation for the high levels of assistance from the parish would be Smith's: that adult children were not able to care for their elderly parents because the couple's resources were tied up in rearing their own children.<sup>66</sup> B. Seebom Rowntree highlighted in 1901 that the periods of 'primary poverty' associated with parenthood and old age coincided.<sup>67</sup>

One of the most important findings of these case studies is the growth in the number of elderly couples in receipt of pension payments. This shift dated largely after 1815 and it was a response by the parish authorities to the worsening economic situation in the south and east following the end of the Napoleonic Wars, with demobilisation, agricultural depression, and widespread under-employment. Older men were increasingly crowded out of an over-stocked labour market at younger ages and on to occasional and regular relief. The number of adult men (and boys) in receipt of occasional cash payments for periods without work rose rapidly after 1815 (and accounted for up to 45 per cent of occasional recipients by the 1830s) and the parish provided make-work schemes.<sup>68</sup> E. H. Hunt has argued that pensions to older men in the context of over-stocked labour markets (such as Bedfordshire) were essentially 'unemployment or 'disability' pensions, rather than the 'old age' pensions claimed by David Thomson.<sup>69</sup> Parish overseers would rather have relieved these men than younger ones with families, whose claims for poor relief were especially unwelcome, and

<sup>62</sup> Smith, 'Structured dependence'; *idem*, 'Charity, self-interest and welfare'; *idem*, 'Ageing and well-being'. See also L. Bonfield, 'Seeking connections between kinship and the law in early modern England', *Continuity and Change*, 15 (2010), 49–82, at pp.72–6; Botelho, *Old age*, 98–100; Thane, 'Old people and their families', 116–23; Ottaway, *The decline of life*, ch.4 *passim*, 174–6.

<sup>63</sup> Wall, 'Economic collaboration', 97. Wall also assess the extent to which family members supported each other financially and the extent of co-residence. On co-residence in the eighteenth century see also Ottaway, *The decline of life*, 116–40, 150–71, 209–11.

<sup>64</sup> At a time when only 10% of people never married: Ottaway, *The decline of life*, 165.

<sup>65</sup> These individuals did not marry or baptise children in Campton or Shefford. On the 'kin-poor' see M. E. Fissell, 'The "sick and drooping poor" in eighteenth-century Bristol and its region', *Society for the Social History of Medicine*, 2 (1989), 35–58; *idem*, *Patients, power, and the poor in eighteenth-century Bristol* (Cambridge, 1991), 101, 105; King, *Poverty and welfare*, 169–70.

<sup>66</sup> Smith, 'Some issues', 73. See also Wall, 'Economic collaboration', 94.

<sup>67</sup> B. S. Rowntree, *Poverty: a study of town life* (London, 2nd edn., 1902), 136–8. The approach of the Cambridge Group has been challenged to some degree by Thane, who has reviewed the fragmentary evidence on intergenerational support between kin and who concludes that such support was generally greater than historians had believed. She argues that there was 'intimacy at a distance': 'Old people and their families', 134; *idem*, 'The family lives of old people', 180.

<sup>68</sup> Williams, *Poverty, gender and lifecycle*, Figure 15 at p.133, Table 13 at p.134.

<sup>69</sup> E. H. Hunt, 'Paupers and pensioners: past and present', *Ageing and Society*, 9 (1989), 407–30; Thomson, 'The decline of social welfare'.

contemporaries certainly believed that men with young children were favoured by farmers to keep them off the poor rates.<sup>70</sup> If it is assumed that Ottaway's finding – that the average age of all male pensioners was around 70 in the eighteenth century – had also held true for Campton and Shefford in the eighteenth century, then it would appear that for some men the age of male dependency had decreased after 1815.<sup>71</sup> While this was not true in all cases, since half of all men were still expected to continue to work until they were in their seventies or even their eighties, many men (and their wives) had now become pensionable in their sixties.

There is some limited information on the previous occupations of elderly male pensioners.<sup>72</sup> In Campton all the men had been labourers (94 per cent), with the exception of one blacksmith, while in Shefford the majority of men had also been labourers (two-thirds), but there was also a carpenter, a gardener and a woolcomber. To some extent these occupations reflect the underlying occupational structures of the two communities, but the high proportions of labourers also highlight the difficulty of older men in making ends meet, and getting sufficient work, in the depressed agricultural sector.

### **Conclusion**

This paper finds that commitment to the elderly poor remained high in Campton and Shefford throughout the 'crisis of the old poor law' but it also argues that there were important shifts in the composition of aged pensioners. The number of the elderly relieved by the parish authorities increased between the 1760s and 1830s, the aged were over-represented in the relief rolls, and they were paid the highest value pensions. Before 1815 most elderly pensioners were solitary men and women, who were either single or widowed, but after 1815 the number of elderly couples increased markedly as a result of widespread un- and under-employment. Older men were increasingly discriminated against in this over-stocked labour market and were pushed on to long-term relief. These pensions might be interpreted as a mixture of long-term unemployment benefits and recompense for increasing infirmity. Before the problems in the local economy these men had not been regarded as beyond work, however, and now found that they were. The paper also finds that elderly women were not marginalised and that the 'masculinisation' of relief – for pensioners at least – is only evident in the overseers' accounts and not the pauper biographies. Wives also benefited from pension payments. These biographies also reveal that for some elderly pensioners (one-third) this was not their first pension. During this period of long drawn-out crisis, the poverty life-cycle points of childhood, parenthood and old age became more difficult to navigate without (sometimes repeated) assistance from the parish.

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<sup>70</sup> *Report of royal com. of inquiry into administration and practical operation of poor laws*, PP 1834, xxvii.1 C.44.

<sup>71</sup> Ottaway, *The decline of life*, 201-2.

<sup>72</sup> Father's occupations were sometimes recorded at the baptism of their children. Of the elderly men in this sample occupations were given in 16 cases in Campton and 8 in Shefford.