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Jane Saul

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A Network of Contacts: Metropolitan Influences in the Delivery of Poor Relief in the London Hinterland (1778–1785)

JANE SAUL
University of Exeter, UK

Existing studies of poor relief have focused on parishes either metropolitan or wholly rural, whereas the focus of this article is on the distinctive experience of Battersea, a village in the London hinterland. Although the village suffered from the rising cost of poor relief experienced nationwide at the end of the eighteenth century, this article argues that the response of its vestry was shaped by Battersea's liminal location. Consideration is given to the central role that the workhouse played in the provision of poor relief, and demonstrating that the social networks of parochial leaders were key to the development of policy. Many of the vestry members had commercial and professional interests in the metropolis and elsewhere, and these, together with their patronage of London charitable institutions, helped both to shape their response to the problems of poverty that they encountered, and influenced their administration of the Battersea workhouse.

KEYWORDS Poor relief; London hinterland; poverty; networks; workhouse; eighteenth century; vestry

In the 1770s and 1780s, the poor relief system in England came under increasing pressure, and expenditure on it began to rise sharply.[1] Responses to the crisis varied, and the attraction of examining Battersea is the opportunity afforded to study a parish on the edge of London, and to engage with current debates about regional attitudes to poverty and the means by which policy was formulated. Historians studying the south-east of England have tended to focus on either rural areas

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or the metropolis, in the process largely ignoring the experiences of suburban London parishes. John Broad, Henry French, and Samantha Williams have all provided detailed studies of rural communities, while Jeremy Boulton and David Green have offered in-depth analysis of metropolitan poverty.[2] In his book, *Poverty and Welfare in England*, Steven King suggested the London hinterland as one of a number of sub-regions with a distinct experience of entitlement and relief giving.[3] Battersea, one of the many rural villages encircling London, formed part of that London hinterland, and was susceptible to the pressure of rising expenditure in spite of the high wage economy that seems to have prevailed there. Judith Hill's examination of relief in Surrey under the old poor law specifically excluded metropolitan Surrey parishes, including Battersea.[4] These gaps in the scholarship mean that an examination of the Battersea vestry's response to the problems it faced helps to enlarge our understanding of poor relief in the late eighteenth century.

A parallel development in the historiography of the subject has been to examine individual facets of the poor relief system. The lives of the elderly have been explored by Susannah Ottaway and Richard Smith, and those of children by Katrina Honeyman and Alysa Levene, while Alannah Tomkins has focused on the urban experience of poverty and Tim Hitchcock and others have extensively investigated the lived experience of the poor.[5] Meanwhile, recent publications by Peter Collinge and Louise Falcini, and Susannah Ottaway have shown that under-utilised archival sources and modern interpretative techniques can shed new light on the experience of the eighteenth-century poor.[6] The transmission of policy has formed another strand in research, and here David Eastwood, Joanna Innes, and Samantha Shave have all made important contributions.[7] While Eastwood and Innes have demonstrated how policy was disseminated and refined within the existing structures of central and local government notably by the Justices of the Peace, Shave has shown that geographical proximity and personal contacts both had a part to play in the transmission of policy and practice, identifying personal visits, correspondence between parish officials, publications and the influence of third parties as central means of policy transmission. Her work has highlighted how policy solutions were shared not just with neighbouring parishes but also with those further afield, complicating regional interpretations of poor relief provision. The influence of these exchanges was particularly apparent where parishes sought guidance with the practicalities of establishing a new workhouse.[8]

This article builds on Shave's work to show that the connections of the members of Battersea vestry, cultivated through their business and professional interests, their charitable endeavours, their religious commitment and personal friendships, and their involvement with many aspects of local government, were central to how they managed poor relief within the parish. Furthermore, the geographical proximity of the metropolis meant that these connections took on a distinctive tone. By examining the administrative records of the parish, notably the minutes of the vestry and workhouse committee and the accounts of the workhouse, alongside documentation such as insurance policies, correspondence, wills, and charitable subscriptions this study demonstrates how influential these personal connections were in shaping the actions of vestry members. It will be argued that these men learnt the skills of finance and governance from a combination of observation and direct experience, and that they brought these skills to bear on the relief system in their suburban parish.

Late Eighteenth-Century Battersea and its Experience of Poverty

Along with neighbouring parishes such as Wandsworth, Clapham, Putney, Mortlake, Wimbledon, and Streatham, Battersea formed part of a ring of parishes around London whose rural surroundings set them apart from the metropolis, yet whose economy was increasingly commercialised, and whose proximity to London and other neighbouring villages lent local society distinctive characteristics. Existing scholarship suggests that these features were shared by other villages around the perimeter of the metropolis.[9] King defines the London hinterland as incorporating part of those counties that bordered the metropolis, with the parishes within it offering generous but restricted pensions and a focus on casual relief, and with the elderly, especially elderly women, as the main beneficiaries of relief.[10]

In 1801, some 3,365 people resided in the parish of Battersea and in 1803 the workhouse accommodated fifty-six inmates.[11] Three decades earlier it was reported that the workhouse could accommodate seventy inhabitants.[12] The population of the workhouse typically reflected the seasonal nature of the agricultural work that dominated employment locally.

In the late eighteenth century, some 300 acres within the parish were given over to market gardens, which attracted a migrant, seasonal workforce. Daniel Lysons described them thus:

> Most of the women travel on foot from Shropshire and North-Wales in the spring; and, as they live at a very cheap rate, many of them return to their own country much richer than when they left it.[13]

By mid-century, some industry was established along the Thames shoreline, particularly at Nine Elms, including limekilns and timber docks, which formed the basis of a boat building industry.[14] Further along the foreshore were the sugar houses of the Smith family and the site of Bell's distillery at York Place.[15] The presence of these manufactories was reflected in the membership of the vestry, which included a timber merchant, a lime burner, a boat builder, a sugar manufacturer, and a distiller. The River Thames played a key role in the development of these industries, providing both a source of transport and a means of power.

Although a range of employment opportunities were available within the parish, Battersea was not exempt from wider economic pressures. Nationally, a growing population, rising under- and unemployment, enclosure, poor harvests, and pressures of war all led to an increase in demand for poor relief.[16] Battersea was linked to the broader economy, drawing in migrant agricultural labourers, supplying the London market from its market gardens and factories, and experiencing the pull of the London labour market. Its agricultural sector was vulnerable to poor harvests, and its associated distilling industry was susceptible to fluctuating grain prices.[17] When the cost of poor relief in Battersea began to rise in step with costs elsewhere, the concern of the vestry was evident. In April 1781, George Errington, the overseer, presented the vestry with a comparison of the cost of providing for the poor in 1780 and in 1770.[18] As the minutes record, the cost had 'considerably increased to the great disadvantage of the parish'.

The vestry reacted to the pressure of rising costs by reaffirming its commitment to the workhouse and institutional relief. In common with many other parishes, it provided out-relief in the form of a limited number of regular pensions, and the disbursement of irregular cash relief and benefits in kind. It also oversaw, through the workhouse committee, a substantial parish workhouse. The surviving sources only allow us to examine in detail the costs directly incurred by the workhouse but these had certainly risen sharply in the intervening ten years. The workhouse journal records expenditure for both 1770 and 1780, allowing a comparison to be made between the two sets of figures. In 1770, the workhouse spent a total of £279 6s 7d on consumables and by 1780 the comparable figure had risen to £400 15s 6d. The vestry that met in April 1781 was thus certainly correct in their perception that spending on the poor in the workhouse had risen over the preceding ten years, as had the number of poor accommodated there.[19] Although the workhouse journal records the number of inmates for only five months in 1770, the increase in their number is striking: in 1770 the mean number of inmates in the workhouse each month was fifty-two, whereas by 1780 it had risen to seventy-nine.

The number of inmates in the workhouse was to continue its upward trajectory in the next decade, peaking at ninety-nine in March 1785.[20] It might be supposed that sending the poor to the workhouse was a rational economic response to the increased demand for relief. An examination of the underlying figures, however, casts doubt on this explanation. Where we are able to make a comparison between the cost of indoor and outdoor relief it is clear that the per capita expenditure on consumables recorded in the workhouse journal considerably exceeded per capita expenditure on out-relief. Even the lowest weekly expenditure in the workhouse, at 1s 6d per head in May 1783, was fifty per cent more than the most common weekly payment of 1s per week made to those receiving outdoor relief. Between 1778 and 1782, the mean weekly expenditure per inmate ranged between 2s 3d and 2s 9d, representing a higher level of expenditure than most of the weekly outdoor relief payments authorised by the workhouse committee, which usually fell between 1s and 2s per week.[21] To this must be added the capital costs of maintaining the institution and the salaries of the staff. While in many cases out-relief was probably intended as supplemental relief, there are a number of instances where recipients pivoted between indoor and outdoor relief. The rising number of inmates in the workhouse, even in the face of the costs involved, suggests that in common with other parishes the Battersea vestry was deliberately ramping up institutional provision as a means of coping with the increasing number of poor within the parish boundaries. To account for the vestry's motivation we need to look beyond purely financial considerations to the wider influences on their actions.

The Population of the Workhouse

The population of the workhouse typically showed seasonal peaks and troughs, but from the winter of 1783 the number of inmates generally remained high, while its composition changed, reflecting a different pattern of usage. The number of adults

resident in the house fluctuated while concurrently the number of children accommodated there rose. Between May and September 1784, children formed 52% of the workhouse population, women 32% and men 16%.[22] Hitchcock has shown that across the river at St Luke's, Chelsea children accounted for 31% of workhouse inmates and women and men 50% and 19% respectively.[23] No discernible gender bias can be detected amongst the child inmates in Battersea, with the average number of girls in 1784 being 22 and of boys being 21. This accords with Boulton's findings for St. Martin-in-the-Fields and Levene's findings for St. Marylebone and is in marked contrast to the adult population where women inmates were predominant.[24] As such, these figures suggest a clear commitment, on the part of the vestry, to institutional provision for the poorest children of the parish.

An analysis of the Battersea inmates register for 1778 shows that the mean number of women in the workhouse fluctuated more than for men. Most male residents were over sixty years of age, while the age spread for women inmates was wider: women over sixty formed the largest group but other age cohorts were more uniformly represented. It appears that there was a greater degree of 'churn' amongst the female population of the workhouse than amongst the male population, and while it seems to have been recognised that elderly women who entered the workhouse were likely to stay there, younger women entered and left as their family and economic circumstances changed. In comparison, Jeremy Boulton has demonstrated that in the workhouse of St Martin-in-the Fields some quarter to a third of inmates were over sixty, while Ottaway has shown that the way in which workhouses outside the metropolis accommodated the elderly varied.[25]

Though the number of children provided for in the Battersea workhouse was high, the profile of inmates more generally matched that found elsewhere in being made up chiefly of women, the elderly, and the infirm. Meanwhile, the demand for irregular relief was met by a mix of remedies: by one-off payments of cash, by short term weekly payments, by gifts in kind, and by charity. The vestry's preferred means of providing longer-term, regular relief, however, was to admit claimants to the workhouse. This followed a pattern long established in Battersea, and we should note the workhouse's physical presence in the centre of the village.[26] By accommodating an increasing number of children within the institution, the vestry met their immediate care needs at the same time as providing education and skills to enhance their future prospects. The use of the workhouse as the prime means of providing poor relief had much in common with practice in neighbouring metropolitan parishes but sharply differed from that which Hill found in rural Surrey, where in the workhouses studied capacity had increased towards the end of the of the eighteenth century but the number of poor accommodated had not risen commensurately.[27] In London, however, as David Green shows, the numbers housed in workhouses outstripped the nominal places available.[28] Likewise in Battersea, the notional number that the workhouse could accommodate in 1776 was 70, whereas the actual number of inmates peaked at a figure far higher than this. In making the choice they did the vestry was influenced by increased contemporary interest in various forms of institutional provision for the poor, particularly in London, with its perceived virtues of economy and

deterrence, and by a local tradition of workhouse provision. The increasingly visible presence of children in the workhouse also suggests that the vestry were alert to metropolitan ideas regarding institutional care of children.

Governance of the Workhouse

The Battersea vestry was nominally an open vestry but was in practice dominated by a small group of active members. These men were, in turn, the dominant force on the workhouse committee, which controlled admission to and discharge from the workhouse and the distribution of outdoor relief. Between them they represented the agricultural and manufacturing elements within the parish and the concerns of those whose residence was in Battersea, but whose professional and business interests lay in London. As businessmen and lawyers, they brought the financial, administrative, and legal knowledge acquired in their professional lives to bear on the administration of poor relief.

This article examines the background and motivation of the twenty-one vestry members who, during the years under consideration, attended the vestry and the workhouse committee most regularly.[29] These men, together with the two local Justices of the Peace and the long-serving workhouse surgeon, were perhaps the most influential of the nearly two hundred men who made an appearance at the vestry during these years, and their experience is key to an understanding of local administration in Battersea.

Shave has demonstrated how knowledge flowed between parish officials, the clergy, and the upper classes in rural parishes of southern England.[30] In Battersea it was the connections and experience of a difference class of men that influenced parish governance. Speaking of the building of the new church in 1775–1777, the Survey of London refers to 'gathering bourgeois confidence, as local influence became shared between the rising number of Thames-side manufacturers and mercantile villa-dwellers, and an older agricultural constituency'.[31] The design chosen for the new church was that submitted by vestry member Joseph Dixon, and the contract for its construction was placed in the hands of his brother Richard. A handsome new Classical building with a tower and spire at its west end was erected on the site of the old church and the churchyard was extended.[32] Such an endeavour required strong political leadership and the same men who provided it took the lead regarding poor relief. Here, the influence of the manufacturers and mercantile class came to the fore. At the same time, the relative lack of influence of the agricultural constituency in the vestry is evident. Market gardeners represented as many as 24% of those qualified for jury service in 1778, a figure that presented a striking contrast to their lack of active representation on the vestry.[33]

Meanwhile, the small tradesmen who serviced the workhouse constituted a strong presence. These men were particularly prominent among the signatories of the monthly workhouse accounts. Orders for supplying the workhouse rotated amongst local suppliers; it is clear, however, that the vestry also made use of competitive tendering for more expensive work, and that those exercising oversight of the workhouse accounts were in a position of some responsibility.[34] Although other

vestry members signed the accounts regularly, it seems to have been in this capacity that men with a modest commercial background were able to exert the most influence. Furthermore, as Douglas Brown has shown in respect of nineteenth-century London, a policy of purchasing from local suppliers ensured that poor rates were directed back into the hands of ratepayers and employment was supported within the parish.[35] We can therefore see the emergence of two key groups within the vestry: those men whose outlook was shaped by business interests and careers which lay beyond Battersea, and a possibly more conservative group that serviced the workhouse in one form or another and whose livelihoods were in some measure determined by the decisions taken by the vestry.

A particular feature of the Battersea workhouse was the strength of the governance exercised by the workhouse committee. The arrangements for the management of the workhouse and the operation of the committee were first laid out in the vestry minutes in the 1750s, at a time when the nearby parish of Wimbledon was making similar provision.[36] Indeed, all the neighbouring parishes previously mentioned appointed some form of workhouse committee. In 1779, when the membership of the committee was restated, it was laid down that attendance was open to anyone paying an annual rate of £10 or upwards and that the vicar, churchwardens, and overseers should serve as *ex-officio* members. Fifty per cent of our group of active members (excluding the Justices) served as churchwardens or overseers during the period under consideration. On only one occasion did a vestry member seek to evade office during this period, in sharp contrast to the neighbouring parish of Clapham where fines to avoid serving office were a regular source of income for the parish. Moreover, these men demonstrated an ongoing commitment to oversight of the workhouse that extended beyond their legal obligations. The committee met weekly at the workhouse and such fines and orders as they approved were reported to the full vestry for the consent of the parish and became standing orders.[37]

The committee exercised close supervision over the placing of orders and invoices, and regularly checked the workhouse accounts.[38] The surviving accounts from the eighteenth century cover a fifty-year period, and it is clear that they were being kept in accordance with established accounting conventions.[39] The monthly check of the accounts was conducted by a *de facto* audit committee that usually included one churchwarden or overseer, and the accounts were signed: 'This account being duly Examined is allowed and approved of by us the underwritten Vestry'. The accounts and minutes that have come down to us show the committee engaged in a level of record keeping that was not legally required until the Sturges Bourne Act of the nineteenth century. These activities displayed a degree of professionalism comparable to that identified by Boulton and Black in the administration of London workhouses.[40] It is worth noting here that many committee members were business proprietors with metropolitan interests or suppliers to the workhouse in possession of basic accounting skills.

The committee's active oversight of the daily life of the workhouse extended to inspecting the goods supplied, supervision of the master and mistress, examining the condition of the inmates, and taking a close interest in the education of the children.[41] A monitoring regime such as this required a serious commitment from

committee members. Benjamin Dogett, for example, heard some of the girls read, and he was not unusual in making his time available for the benefit of the workhouse.[42] As will be shown, men such as Dogett had encountered formal structures of supervision elsewhere and utilised their experience within the parish.

Metropolitan Influences and Parallels

The mercantile interests of members of the Battersea vestry and other similar suburban vestries set them apart from the members of rural vestries that have previously attracted the attention of scholars such as Broad, French, and Williams. Benjamin Dogett had probably served as a member of the City of London's Court of Common Council, and several other vestry members were also members of City livery companies.[43] Several of their wills made clear that they owned property in the City, and residents of the City were numbered among witnesses to those wills. Indeed, at the time of his death, Joseph Dixon was Senior Bridge Master of London Bridge.[44] The firm administrative framework that was put in place in Battersea must owe something to the ideas of such men with extensive experience of administration elsewhere. For many of these ideas we perhaps need to look no further than those who first advocated setting up the workhouse committee in the 1750s, Mark Bell, owner of the local distillery and a substantial businessman, and Dogett himself.

In addition to these merchants, residents of Battersea included lawyers such as Robert Deleroy and George Errington; the architect Joseph Dixon, who worked with Henry Holland and Robert Mylne; and the shipbreaker and timber merchant, James Corrie, whose trade brought him into contact with the Navy Board. Insurance policies give us an insight into the wealth and business activities of such men. Mark Bell and his partners insured property to the value of £8,000, while James Corrie, although assessed on moderate property in the rate books, insured reasonably high-value property over several years—£1,500 in 1777, £500 in 1780, and £2,800 in 1781, reflecting the value of his timber stock or ships in his breaker's yard.[45] Many such men had professional interests and contacts that extended well beyond Battersea, and which allowed them to develop financial, legal, and administrative skills that they were able to make use of when supervising poor relief.

An examination of the Land Tax returns and the rate books illuminates the ownership of property in Battersea and we can also detect the presence of a landlord class. Earl Spencer, the lord of the manor, is naturally pre-eminent, but we also find the names of vestry members such as Thomas Barker, John Lumisden, the workhouse surgeon, and Mark Bell. We know little about Barker other than that he was a carpenter/builder, active on both the vestry and workhouse committee. It is clear, however, from the Land Tax assessment that he was the proprietor of many properties in Battersea. Individually, the assessed value of these was relatively low but in total they made Barker a significant landlord.[46] Not only were many vestry members bound together by such ties, but a number of their tenants were on the margins of poverty.[47] A stake in the local housing market in their role as

landlords perhaps affords one reason for the involvement of men such as Barker and Lumisden in the vestry. Complex relationships, founded on an identity of interests and a financial stake in the welfare of their tenants, were at play here. And certainly, such men would have been aware of the financial vulnerability of some of their tenants and neighbours. It is clear that the business interests of vestry members gave them an insight into the level of poverty in the parish and furnished them with the skills to implement and oversee a sophisticated system of relief.

In their commitment to the workhouse the vestry were drawing on a strong local tradition of workhouse provision. The workhouse at Battersea had been in existence since at least 1733 and the timing of its inception suggests that it was influenced by the wave of workhouses established around London under the auspices of the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge (SPCK).[48] The ideals that the SPCK espoused, those of the workhouse as a deterrent, the inculcation of habits of industry, and the provision of free education for children seem to have had some currency amongst members of the Battersea vestry, particularly the longer serving members.[49] Such men included Mark Bell, whose first appearance at the vestry occurred as early as the mid-1740s. At this time his fellow committee members included Thomas Emerson and the Reverend Thomas Church.[50] Church was closely associated with the SPCK and in his will left £30 for religious tracts for the poor of Battersea.[51] It was he rather than his successors as vicar of Battersea who provided an intellectual framework for the vestry's deliberations.

Emerson's role as a patron of the Foundling Hospital is significant in the transmission of ideas and policy in the middle of the century.[52] The actions of major philanthropic institutions such as the Foundling Hospital influenced contemporary attitudes to child poverty through the dissemination of the ideals that underpinned their work, the type of institutional care they offered to children, and the contacts of their patrons. Emerson, moreover, was not the only member of the Battersea vestry to have connections with the Hospital—George Errington's father had also been a benefactor. Referring to the Shrewsbury branch of the Foundling Hospital and its influence on the men who made up the local branch committee, one historian has commented, 'The charity consequentially exposed these men to metropolitan methodology, scale of working and rules'.[53] Familiarity with the great London charities must similarly have influenced those members of the Battersea vestry who subscribed to them and encouraged members of the vestry to emulate their working practices. A third of our group of the most active vestry members subscribed to such charities, encompassing fifteen different institutions and causes. Moreover, the experiment in institutional relief for infants represented by the Foundling Hospital's General Reception had strongly influenced Hanway's Act of 1767, which laid down that infant poor should be nursed in rural parishes outside London.[54] Recent research has suggested that this policy allowed the example of the capital to be disseminated more widely, through the links between metropolitan workhouses and the areas outside London that they used to nurse young children.[55] Battersea's geographical location and the use of nurses in the parish by the workhouses of St. Martin-in-the-Fields and other London parishes must consequently have exposed members of the vestry to ideas circulating in the metropolis.[56] While Hanway had questioned the ability of London parishes

to care adequately for young children in an institutional setting, the Battersea vestry remained committed to accommodating children of all ages in their local workhouse. In this respect, their ideas differed from those of the Foundling Hospital and Hanway. The Battersea vestry, however, drew lessons from the experience of their metropolitan connections regarding the importance of efficient governance, the thorough monitoring of staff and, close supervision of the day-to-day running of institutions.

It was not only the Foundling Hospital that helped to shape the ideas of leading Battersea vestry members. Supporters of leading London charities were joined 'through networks of acquaintance, friendship, family and business', and members of the Battersea vestry with their many connections exemplified this landscape of sociability.[57] George Errington senior's charitable interests included both the Foundling Hospital and the Smallpox Hospital, and his son followed his example in the breadth of his charitable patronages. The younger Errington subscribed to a wide range of charities including the Magdalen Hospital, the Lying-in charity, and the Asylum for Orphan Girls in Lambeth. This association with the London hospitals is one that Errington shared with other members of the vestry, most notably Isaac Akerman, one of the two local Justices. Akerman is found serving as a governor of at least eight of these organisations, most notably as the treasurer of the Smallpox Hospital for seventeen years. Writing of the Smallpox Hospital, the author of an early nineteenth-century survey of London charities recorded that:

> Mr. Akerman had been a zealous promoter of the charity, had served in the first list of stewards, had filled the office of chairman of the committee, and had assisted in all the efforts which were necessary towards its establishment … and possessed a fixedness of determination which was not easily diverted from his settled purpose.[58]

The Smallpox Hospital was a pioneering endeavour and an account of its work under the stewardship of Akerman was included in a digest of European pamphlets compiled by one of the French learned academies.[59] It seems not unreasonable to conclude that if the influence of the charity in which Akerman played such a prominent role extended to the continent, then its work and the principles that underpinned it must have been familiar to members of the Battersea vestry. Akerman was not an assiduous attender at meetings of the vestry, but he attended often enough for his voice to be heard, and his wealth and standing as one of the local Justices of the Peace must have given him influence amongst his fellow vestry members. Akerman's importance for the transmission of policy lay in his role as a channel for ideas and governance practices current in the metropolis, in addition to his formal status as a Justice of the Peace.

Several other wealthy members of the vestry also subscribed to the great London subscription charities of the age, particularly, as Andrew has noted, men with a mercantile background.[60] Like Akerman, Mark Bell served as a governor of St Thomas's, John Tuach subscribed to the Bridewell Hospital, and Allyn Simmons Smith joined Akerman and George Errington as governors for life of the London

Hospital, and subscribed to the General Dispensary for the Relief of the Poor.[61] Moreover, Richard Dixon, the brother of vestry member Joseph Dixon, and the building contractor for Battersea church, served as the surveyor and treasurer of the Westminster New Lying-in Hospital. Meanwhile, William Corrance and John Lumisden were actively involved in the Humane Society. The means by which these subscription charities set out their aims and published reports of their activities, while giving subscribers a voice in their management, has been highlighted elsewhere by Joanna Innes.[62] In a sermon preached before the benefactors of the Smallpox Hospital, the Bishop of Norwich took as his text 'Blessed is he that considereth the Poor, the Lord will deliver him in time of trouble'. While acknowledging the inequalities between rich and poor, which he saw as an inevitable result of the operation of society, he stressed the benefits that would accrue in this world and the next to those who assisted the poor.[63] The General Dispensary for the Relief of the Poor, with its emphasis on the mutual obligations of rich and poor, on the need of the industrious poor for aid in times of sickness and unemployment, and on the particular vulnerability of children, was typical of these metropolitan charities.[64] Likewise, the Westminster Lying-in Hospital in its promotional literature focused on the industrious poor and on the potential resource that children represented for the future of the country.[65] Such sympathies chimed with those that underpinned the relief made available to the poor in Battersea, which offered relief primarily to the elderly, the sick, and unemployed, and through the admission of increasing numbers of children to the workhouse. When they subscribed to the proliferating metropolitan charities, members of the Battersea vestry joined networks of association and sociability that brought them into contact with the latest ideas regarding relief of the poor. Many of these charities relied on the institutionalisation of those in need, for example in the London hospitals, and this helped to reinforce vestry members's belief in the merits of institutionalisation as their preferred means of delivering poor relief. Such men took an active interest in the governance of these charities: they attended their meetings, received their publications, and on occasion held office. They were able to transfer the skills and insights thus acquired to the delivery of poor relief in Battersea. The vestry brought together a concentration of men whose interests and connections helped to shape their ideas and to frame their intellectual and practical response to the poverty they encountered. Their range of experience and contacts was different from that of their rural counterparts and inclined them towards metropolitan ways of working.[66]

The metropolitan charities to which the Battersea members donated clearly set out for subscribers their rules and regulations and the accounting and management structures which supported them. Taking as an example the General Dispensary for the Relief of the Poor, we can see similarities with the way in which the Battersea workhouse was organised. Subscribers to the dispensary nominated a committee of fifteen governors to meet monthly, together with a committee to audit the treasurer's accounts annually. In addition, a monthly committee drawn from the governors was established to examine tradesmen's accounts and to authorise payment of them, and two members of the committee were deputed to attend the dispensary each week to check on the behaviour of employees and patients.[67] As already

discussed, this close oversight was mirrored in the activities of the Battersea workhouse committee. In the case of both the London charities and the Battersea workhouse, the firm administrative framework that was put in place owed something to the ideas of men with a commercial background and experience of administration elsewhere.

We have already noted the extensive record keeping engaged in by the Battersea vestry and its workhouse committee, together with the close oversight it exercised over the operation of the workhouse and its staff. The London charities to which they subscribed offered them models of corporate governance that they were able to combine with their own extensive business experience to ensure that the parish workhouse was effectively managed.

The contacts that these men made through their professional and charitable interests in the metropolis also brought them into contact with men who were wrestling with the problem of the rising costs of poverty elsewhere in the country. In the case of Benjamin Dogett, the contacts he made in the City of London seem both to have influenced his family life and to have shaped his attitude to poor relief. His landlord in Battersea was William Chapman, later Sir William Chapman, third baronet, of Loudham Hall, Suffolk, a partner in the sugar bakers Chapman and Emerson.[68] In 1729 Sir William, the first baronet, a member of the Mercers' Company, had been granted the freedom of the City and twelve months later, Dogett, likewise a Mercer, was also granted the freedom of the City.[69] William Chapman's illegitimate daughter was the first wife of John Revett of Brandeston Hall, Suffolk, whose second wife was Benjamin Dogett's daughter, Catherine.[70] These business and family connections take on additional significance when we note the involvement of William, the third baronet, and John Revett in the Loes and Wilford Poor Law Incorporation in Suffolk. Both men were among the Guardians present at the initial meeting of the incorporation and were elected Directors, with John Revett also being elected treasurer.[71] Parallels can be seen between the Loes and Wilford and the Battersea systems of relief: in the use of both outdoor relief and the workhouse, the emphasis on the provision of work for the inmates, the admission of children into the workhouse to relieve pressure on families, and the establishment of a weekly committee at which key decisions were taken.[72] It could be argued that this is true of many parishes, but the timing and family links do suggest a connection. Concerns were raised in July 1780 by the Loes and Wilford committee regarding the level of expenditure in the House of Industry, and members of the committee were requested to enquire at other Houses of Industry to establish what level of expenditure they were incurring.[73] It was at precisely this moment that the Battersea workhouse committee itself began to express concern about the level of expenditure it had incurred, asking the overseers to produce comparative figures from ten years previously. Given the ties between Dogett and Chapman and Revett, the timing is suggestive, and it is likely that ideas concerning policy were exchanged between Battersea and Suffolk.

Such policies can also be viewed as part of a wider public discourse. We have already seen that the London charities used promotional material to disseminate their aims and methods of operation. More wide-ranging debates concerning

reform of poor relief and its administration were the subject of pamphlets and newspaper articles, and increasingly emphasis was placed on the educational and reformative aspects of institutional provision.[74] As Shave has pointed out, the publication of pamphlets and surveys aided long-distance policy transfer.[75] More locally, in 1751 a member of the vestry at Kingston-upon-Thames, the location of one of the Surrey Quarter Sessions, had written a pamphlet outlining the case for a parish workhouse, setting it within the context of the relevant statutes.[76] Members of the Battersea vestry are therefore likely to have been familiar with contemporary debates that were influencing both nearby parishes and the London charities that they subscribed to.

Wider Social Ties

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the wills of the Battersea vestry members emphasise further the close personal relationships and the bonds that bound them together. Joshua Simmons Smith, the son of Allyn Simmons Smith, was named as the second of George Errington's executors, and although by the time Errington came to draw up his will he had long since left Battersea, the bonds forged there seem to have been long lasting. It is clear from family correspondence that Joshua Simmons Smith remained a close friend of Errington throughout his lifetime.[77] In a codicil to his will, Mark Bell released the Simmons Smiths, father and son, from their obligations under a bond that they had given to him. Everyone else similarly treated was a relation of Bell's, suggesting that the relationship between him and the Simmons Smiths was particularly close.[78] Isaac Akerman named Robert Dent, another wealthy vestry member, as one of his executors.[79] Akerman was a glass and china merchant, while Dent and his son John were bankers, and the ties between them were both those between neighbours and between business associates, with Akerman's company purchasing porcelain from the East India Company in which Robert Dent and his brother William had an interest.[80] The role of the East India Company as an administrative model for suburban vestries is made quite explicit in the case of Walthamstow, where in 1760 several sub-committees were set up to manage the workhouse: 'The business to be done at first setting out being a little complex it was proposed and agreed that something like the method used by the India Directors be adopted viz subdivisions of the committee for the several business'.[81] Again, the Dents' involvement in the East India Company serves to remind us how corporate governance could provide a model for those involved in parish administration.

The two families were to be linked on a wider public stage in the next generation, with John Dent, and John Dawes, Akerman's son-in-law, both serving as Members of Parliament. The connections forged among the vestry members were embedded in business contacts and extended between generations. Furthermore, a review of the pew register for St. Mary's, Battersea shows that most of the key members of the vestry leased pews in the church, whatever their underlying denominational loyalties, and their social interaction there would have lent added strength to the ties that bound them together and reinforced their sense of group identity.[82]

The wills that survive for this group of vestry members suggest that for a number of them religion was more than a matter of mere conformist observance. Mark Bell, for example, left £1000 for the benefit of the minister of the nonconformist meeting house in Battersea and £200 for the benefit of the dissenting meeting house in Beverley, Yorkshire. The family descent of Allyn Simmons Smith is complicated, with Allyn Simmons adopting the additional surname Smith in 1774.[83] It seems possible, however, that he was the son of the Reverend Thomas Simmonds of the Battersea Baptist Chapel and the beneficiary of the wills of his uncles, Joshua and Allyn Smith. In each case their wills included bequests to the poor of Battersea and to the poor of the dissenting congregation there, with Mark Bell acting as one of Joshua's executors.[84] George Errington specified in his will that 'as may regard the funeral nothing more expended than what decency may require', following the example of his father who had given detailed instructions for a simple funeral. Although we cannot determine Errington's religious beliefs from his request, there may be a suggestion here that he gave serious consideration to religious matters. Errington's fellow vestryman, Joseph Dixon, the architect of the new church at Battersea, exhibited a similar concern for his final resting place, asking to be buried in the most frugal manner in the south side of Battersea churchyard close to the wall under the centre window.[85] Dixon's will is relatively short, but as well as making provision for his funeral, he left his copy of the Bible, printed by Baskerville, to his nephew Joseph. Taken together, these requests suggest a genuine religious commitment on his part. It appears then that there was a section of the vestry for whom religious observance was important, and this may in part have underpinned their commitment to poor relief.

This activity stood within a tradition of nonconformist involvement in local government, particularly in London. Recent research has highlighted the prominent role that John Dogett, the grandfather of Benjamin Dogett, played in a group of nonconformist City merchants who made Clapham their home in the second half of the seventeenth century.[86] Allyn Simmons Smith was familiar with evangelical tracts and the female members of his household also subscribed to religious literature such as *Memoirs of Eminently Pious Women*.[87] Mark Bell and other members of his family who, as we have noted, were leading members of Battersea Baptist chapel, subscribed to a range of sermons and commentaries that must in some measure have helped to shape their attitude to contemporary social problems.[88] Certainly, it is mainly among members of the nonconformist community that we are able to detect an intellectual hinterland. The network of close personal connections between these men, the presence of an Anabaptist meeting house in the parish where they met, and the men's relatively high status amongst the members of the vestry all helped to reinforce their shared commitment to parochial relief.[89] The practical skills that these men acquired during their careers and through their associations with charitable bodies fused with the moral framework provided by their religious faith and the network of personal connections that it encompassed to shape their approach to poor relief.

The same group of men's commitment to public service was evident in wider aspects of local government. Among the commissioners appointed to hear cases

of small debts in the Western Division of the Hundred of Brixton in 1757 were Bell, Akerman, Lumisden, and Dogett.[90] These men played a key role in the parish's response to the problem of poverty in Battersea, while also representing their parish in a wider arena. In so doing they encountered vestry members from other neighbouring parishes, including men who served as overseers in Wimbledon, and were provided with a forum in which to network and exchange ideas.[91] It is evident that those who were most assiduous in their attendance at the vestry were also those most active in other aspects of local government and taxation, and that such activity reinforced the ties between these men and offered opportunities for exchange of policies with vestrymen from other parishes.

Conclusion

To the City merchants and bankers who built villas overlooking Clapham Common in the later eighteenth century, and to the factory owners whose properties fringed the banks of the Thames, Battersea represented 'rus in urbe'. To the majority of its inhabitants, however, it was first and foremost a rural and waterside settlement offering agricultural and river borne employment. It was the dichotomy between the largely rural nature of the greater part of the parish and the metropolitan links of its leading parishioners that defined the parish's response to poor relief during this period. This division was further underlined by the structure of local government. Battersea parishioners sat as Justices at the Surrey Quarter Sessions and took their turn administering other aspects of local government for the County of Surrey. Yet many of their social and business contacts lay within the metropolis and further afield.

The period under consideration (1778–1785) saw a rise in the cost of poor relief nationally, a trend from which Battersea was not exempt. The vestry was acutely aware of the growing cost of such relief, and in common with other parishes sought ways to cope with the problem. Paradoxically, since indoor relief was more expensive than outdoor relief, the vestry increasingly turned to the workhouse to provide for the poor of the parish. At no time did they question the central place that the workhouse held in providing for the poor. In failing to do so their approach contrasted with that of many other parishes, both in the immediate vicinity and further afield.[92] In forming their ideas they drew upon the example of metropolitan parishes and London charitable institutions, and a local tradition of workhouse provision.

Unlike the population of some more densely populated parishes south of the Thames, such as Lambeth, the population of Battersea was still low enough in the late eighteenth century for those dispensing relief to be acquainted with those who sought their aid. Applicants were already known to the overseers, churchwardens, and other vestry members as employees and as tenants. Furthermore, contracts to supply the parish workhouse often rotated amongst local traders who attended the vestry. There was therefore a strong case for poor relief policy to reflect the concerns of local ratepayers in their capacity as traders, landlords, and employers.

What is clear, nonetheless, is that the more active members of the body were bound together by a complex network of common interests and concerns, which linked them to ideas and practices emerging from institutions in London and beyond and set them apart from the vestries in the rural parishes studied by French, Williams, and others. Furthermore, the social composition of the vestry differed from that identified by Shave when discussing policy transfer, with leading members of the vestry coming from business and professional backgrounds. The most active and influential members of the Battersea vestry looked beyond the boundaries of the parish for solutions to their local problems. They embodied in their persons a range of social, business, and charitable networks and a committed interest in institutional provision and governance. In the case of Isaac Akerman, the local Justice of the Peace, his influence on policy perhaps lay as much in his wide range of charitable interests and responsibilities as in the formal connections associated with office identified by other historians, and thus his example allows us to consider other routes for the dissemination of policy in parallel to the more formal routes identified by Eastwood and Innes.[93] It is also clear that, as Shave has argued, both geographical proximity and personal contacts were important factors in the development of local policy and practice. In the case of Battersea, personal connections brought them into contact both with an incorporation of the poor in rural Suffolk and with London charitable institutions.

The policies that these men encountered influenced their approach to the administration of poor relief in Battersea, where they brought the administrative, accounting, and legal skills gained in their business lives to bear on the oversight of the workhouse and the distribution of relief. This practical experience, together with the administrative structures they encountered in the London charitable institutions that they supported, shaped their attitude to institutional relief and reinforced their belief that institutions were a key means of delivering that assistance. Similarities can be identified between the structures and procedures that operated in the Battersea workhouse and those that were commonly in place in the great London charitable institutions. In this context, vestry members learnt from observation and example rather than the more direct means of policy transfer identified by Shave.[94] The rising population in the Battersea workhouse also reinforces the view that unlike vestries in rural Surrey, the parish's policies were influenced by metropolitan institutional models.[95] In particular, the influx of children into the workhouse may reflect the values of the charities that vestry members chose to patronise, many of which were concerned with child and maternal welfare and the importance of education.

This commitment to institutional provision underpinned by a highly developed system of administration and supervision was modified by the inter-connected nature of parish life discussed above. It was the fusion of these influences, together with its geographical position, which gave Battersea its particular character as a hinterland parish. An examination of relief practices in the London hinterland fills a gap in the existing literature and reveals that, as Steven King suggested, there were distinctive aspects to the delivery of poor relief in suburban parishes, which have been overlooked by studies that have focused on either metropolitan or rural parishes. The prevalence of workhouses in suburban parishes close to

Battersea, such as those mentioned in the introduction, suggests that further examination of the influences on the men who oversaw these institutions is a fertile area for research. The Battersea vestry was able to draw on a wide range of policy and practice encountered through the myriad connections of its members, who demonstrated an awareness of the issue of poverty in the wider world around them. An analysis of their social and business contacts and their charitable patronages gives new insight into the ways in which policy and practice was disseminated. Battersea's geographical location and the wide horizons of its parishioners gave rise to a spatially specific response to poverty.

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Notes on Contributor

Jane Saul is a postgraduate student in the Department of Archaeology and History of the University of Exeter.

ORCID

Jane Saul http://orcid.org/0009-0007-2999-6680