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Introduction: Accommodating Poverty: The Housing and Living Arrangements of the English Poor, c. 1600–1850

Pamela Sharpe & Joanne McEwan

Francis Place’s ringing words describing the effect that adjustments to his housing circumstances had on his financial status, providing ‘a saving of some importance to us’, resound through this book.¹ Our authors aim to trace the symbolic and material value of the housing of the poor in ‘long’ eighteenth-century England in the first four chapters. The four that follow consider household composition in a situation of high mobility in industrialising England. The third section looks at the way in which parishes and charities provided housing for single people and families in both institutional and individual settings.

Stretching the ‘long eighteenth century’ back to 1600 might raise some academic eyebrows. However, assimilation of the wealth of recent scholarship about poverty, and placing it in the context of economic and social change, provides ample justification for expanding the boundaries in this way and moving away from the political history division that found post-1750 to be ‘modern’ and pre-1750 to be ‘early modern’. Reaching further back to the beginning of the seventeenth century gives us a long context within which to place the restructuring of the countryside and associated urbanisation and industrialisation.² Access to, and provision of, housing is an important and overlooked factor in the changes to society and landscape over this period.

Despite the fact that ongoing debates within social and economic history about the standard of living in industrialising England find rent to account for a large proportion of the expenditure of labouring people, surprisingly little can be said about it with any certainty. In this sense, the essay here by Jeremy Boulton is a pioneering effort. While historians over the last few decades have been interested in material culture and consumption, the accoutrements used by the poor in domestic settings have still received little scholarly attention. Housing
remains an area of study that will benefit from an interdisciplinary approach. Archaeological and historical studies still do not often inform each other (though Adrian Green’s chapter in this book marries both approaches). Architectural historians have only rarely (and recently) interested themselves in small or multi-occupied dwellings. The history of interiors and exteriors seem to be scarcely studied together. It is a still a rare scholarly endeavour to find art history and economic or social history blended together in pursuit of a common problem. If studies have drawn on a combination of historical, archaeological and architectural records, as for ‘The Rocks’ area of early Sydney, they remain absent from mainstream history journals.3

The spaces inhabited by the poor in the period from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century were small and sometimes of ephemeral construction. As a result they have been overlooked by historians and leave too few traces on the ground for adequate analysis. Green finds one or two room houses in the countryside. In the cities, poor families often inhabited one room and sometimes shared this with fellow lodgers. In workhouses or almshouses, private space was similarly restricted.

The poor must have spent much of their time out of the home: either in the dwellings of others, in workplaces, on the streets or in the fields. In such circumstances the poor were certainly not invisible, and to contemporaries it would have been apparent that, as the Bible reminded them, ‘the poor are always with us’. It was the visible presence of a ragged family on a country road that drew the Bristol Quaker Joseph Allen’s attention to the plight of George Watts’ family in the cold winter of 1747. He wrote to John Frederick Pinney, who was both Lord of the Manor and probably took on the role of parish officer:

Friend Pinney
I am one of the People call’d Quakers who in my Journey Pas’d by the cottage of George Watts in the Parish of Broad Windsor & on the road saw some of his Children I think as miserable Objects as Most I Ever Beheld & can’t help thinking that the Parish Officers Must Much Neglect their Duty towards them the Man’s Wife told me that thee Wast so kind as to order them 16 shillings per month but that the officers Lets them Have but 4. Nothing but Compassion to my fellow Creatures Induces Me to be thus Troublesom to a Person in thy Station to Desire thou wilt be so good as to Remind the Officers to fulfill thy orders that the Poor Starving Creatures may have some mannor of cloathing to hide their Nakedness an Sustenance to keep them from Perishing which I think they are as Near too as Most ever I saw
Several aspects of this letter are interesting. Firstly, relief of the Watts family at a shilling a week apparently fell far short of what was both necessary and had actually been agreed for the family. This case also underlines the danger of the old academic approach to the history of poverty that placed undue reliance on the administrative recording of the Old Poor Law. Overseers accounts, of which many thousands survive, might hoodwink the historian into a false optimism about the generosity of relief. As Lynn Hollen Lees has reminded us,

Over time the granting of relief became an increasingly formal process, depending more and more upon written records and decisions. Yet it still involved intangibles: deference, paternalism, notions about gender, old age and childhood. ‘Appropriate’ relief was a protean, changeable concept.5

Notably, Joseph Allen makes no mention of the cottage except that the children were on the street in freezing weather. The first priorities for this family were clothing and food, and perhaps the cottage was their only bastion against hardship. Allen spells out that, in his experience, the wretched circumstances of this family are unprecedented. However, the presence of the cottage certainly contributed to his belief that the Watts family was part of the ‘settled poor’, and therefore had an unequivocal right to relief. This underscores the pivotal role of housing within social arrangements and local economies, which is a point to which we will return.

The picture that has emerged from the scholarship of the last 15 years is that the experience of the poor was extremely diverse. Not only were Poor Laws amended over time, but regional and local differences in both the capability and the desire to apply the law made for a complex pastiche of the availability of poor relief and charity. Local applicability of the Poor Laws meant they were open to manipulation. The capacity of an individual to negotiate for relief varied enormously, as we demonstrated in Chronicling Poverty by examining verbal protests, writings and belongings of the poor.6

Research has taught us to adopt a wider definition of who the poor actually were than was previously common. For the purposes of this collection, we have adopted the common sense definition of the poor as those who were unable to live unaided, as in the Oxford English
Dictionary definition: ‘The condition of having little or no wealth or material possessions.’ As Alex Shepard found in her study of statements made by deponents before church courts, while ‘the labouring poor’ were commonly lumped into one group by their contemporaries, there were fine status distinctions within this term that can be teased out with careful analysis. 

Hoyle and French adopted the term ‘poor householders’ for the group they were interested in researching. Similarly, when late eighteenth-century metropolitan legal opinion was brought to bear on the long running dispute over the poor pasture in Slaidburn, Lancashire, a differentiation was made between ‘poor householders’ and the ‘indigent poor’.

Paul Slack has suggested a fourfold increase in poverty over the period 1500–1700. By 1700, around 5 per cent of the population was permanently supported by their parish. However, given that poor relief recipients constituted only a fraction of those vulnerable to poverty, Arkell estimated that from 35 per cent to 50 per cent of the population was suffering material hardship in the late seventeenth century. For the time period 1700–1850, Steve King has estimated that perhaps 20 per cent of the population could be seen as ‘poverty stricken’, yet some 70 per cent of people suffered poverty at some stage of the lifecycle. The implications of these figures are far-reaching. Not only do they render accuracy of statistical analysis of poverty impossible during the early modern period, but they also mean that the housing conditions we describe in this book could have been a life-cycle stage for the lives of a very large number of people prior to 1850.

Dwelling with poverty in rural areas

John Broad’s research has opened up our understanding of the housing of the rural poor in southern England. His research suggests that both parishes and charities played a significant part in housing the rural poor in the long eighteenth century. In a microscopic examination of the case of John Butcher, who was refused access in 1660 to housing in Middle Claydon, Buckinghamshire, by Sir Ralph Verney, the sole landowner and Lord of the Manor, Broad found that Butcher’s marriage was delayed by three years in an increasingly bitter legal dispute. This demonstrates the importance of access to housing in the marriage decisions of young people who did not have money, property or prospects of either. The local social structure and economy had a decisive effect on these matters. As an improving landlord, Verney had recently enclosed the parish to concentrate on stock raising. The supply of labour then outstripped
the demand and Middle Claydon promoted policies to encourage out-migration. The Settlement Law of 1662 ‘defined residence rights more clearly and sharpened parish and landlord politics’. Migration from these ‘close’ villages like Middle Claydon was not only to urban areas but also to ‘open’ villages. In villages that were not actively pursuing plans to reduce their labouring population, Broad identified a move to convert existing larger properties into subdivided tenements. There was also a rise in newly constructed accommodation, often of a temporary type and frequently built on common land. Poor families might also turn to parish and charitable foundations for help. In Broad's contribution to the present volume, he expands on his consideration of parish and charity-built housing in this era. By contrast to the ‘close’ situation, a small town like Colyton in Devon proved open to any migrants who moved to the parish as work prospects expanded in the late seventeenth century, and cheap housing and doles awaited those who became the settled poor.

Steve Hindle also approaches questions about negotiations, entitlement and allocation of poor relief in early modern rural England, through a series of detailed case studies from different parts of the country. In the seventeenth century and first two decades of the eighteenth century, growth in the provision of rental accommodation for the poor was in part driven by the magistracy, who legitimised housing on wastes or common lands and insisted that overseers provide cottages or tenements for the poor, and maintain existing ones when they fell into disrepair. Yet the provision of housing by no means necessarily guaranteed settled housing for the poor, and supply never met demand. Paupers might be moved to cheaper housing when overseers were paying their rent, transferred into a local almshouse as rooms became available or relocated to parts of the parish where they could be more regularly supervised by parish officers or neighbours. Co-residence, promoting economy, might also be made compulsory, especially in the case of elderly paupers who were expected to care for each other. In a micro-study of the strained relations between Anne Bowman and the poor relief officers of Kirkoswald in Cumbria at the end of the seventeenth century and in the early eighteenth century, Hindle used a source that has been little studied by social historians of the early modern period – petitions to the quarter sessions bench asking for judicial intervention in poor relief matters. The housing situation of the Bowman family reflects the backdrop that Broad has painted so well for us. Kirkoswald was a parish where the better-off inhabitants were concerned about incomers, and about meeting the heavy costs of
housing the poor. In turn, the proliferation of housing had attracted poor migrants. Hindle’s meticulous dissection of the Bowman case led him to draw several important conclusions. Overall, ‘the households of the poor were pieces on the parish chessboard to be moved in accordance with the gambits of the overseers’. Discipline was maintained by withdrawing access to relief.\(^{15}\) As Hindle asserted, this shows ‘the extent to which administration of poor relief not only permeated social and economic relations in the local community but also intersected with the survival strategies of individual paupers and their families’.\(^{16}\)

Lynn Botelho has also used micro-analytical methods to probe specific questions about the aged poor, who have long been held to represent the ‘deserving poor’. In *Old Age and the English Poor Law*, she reconstituted the Suffolk villages of Cratfield and Poslingford and mapped biographies for 337 individuals who lived there in the seventeenth century. In analysing the household economy of those people over the age of 50, she argued that poor relief did not, nor did it intend to, offer complete support to the elderly, and that the individual efforts of the paupers and their kin were as important as parish support. However, the comparative wealth of the parish would determine the generosity of its relief schemes. Cratfield was relatively effective in providing weekly stipends combined with gifts of clothing, food and cash. Relief in Cratfield provided rent so that the aged poor were maintained in independence rather than being forced into subordinate positions or complex housing arrangements with friends, family or other poor. By contrast, the much less magnanimous and abundant circumstances in Poslingford meant that few of the elderly poor could be adequately supported and were forced to survive by their own devices, as the village was ‘limited by the very poverty it sought to alleviate’.\(^{17}\) Terms such as ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor are perhaps inappropriate Victorian imports?

Any serious future study of the property of the poor must also consider the widely variant lease-holding circumstances in differing areas and parishes. Sub-tenancies leave few traces in records, yet were critical to determining whether those subject to poverty could establish themselves as settled persons under the Settlement Laws that prevailed through most of the period covered in this book.\(^{18}\) An older scholarship considered that the poor had time-honoured rights to cottages along with commonage, but more recent work has cast doubt on how widely such rights were enjoyed.\(^{19}\) It is clear that entitlement to housing and the removing of poor dwellings played an important part in shaping the English countryside and rural society.
Transience and overcrowding

Most of the essays in this book are testament to the fact that poor lives were transient lives. Boulton associates the high rates of residential mobility in early modern London with the survival strategies of poor households. Such strategies commonly involved downsizing by leaving a house where the householders had a lease with a non-resident landlord and were liable for rates, to move into cheaper ‘lodgings’ with a resident landlord and little or no security of tenure that might be no more than a single room or cellar but enabled the important saving that Francis Place alluded to. While Boulton reminds us of ‘Engels’ Law’, it was nevertheless common to find the less wealthy moving fairly frequently to marginally better or slightly worse houses. Often a move to a more expensive house facilitated combining living space with an area for work, cellarage or a shop. As families grew bigger, it would have been common to add on extra rooms where possible but as children left home, to rent out rooms or subdivide and sublet. Hindle’s apprentices of the ‘late’ early modern era are found either in alehouses or in the houses of their masters. By implication youths were not generally resident in the parental home contributing to the household economy of his or her parents, and apprenticeship was an extremely common life-cycle stage. Schwarz and Boulton in this book uncover a population whose acquaintance with the workhouse was so usual that it has to be seen as part of their life strategy. The London lodgers described by McEwan habitually kept their possessions in a moveable box or trunk, and Williams’ pregnant but unmarried mothers, often country girls who had found a place in an urban household but were then deserted by the man they planned to marry or seduced by their master, usually found themselves in lodgings if their employers were unsympathetic to their plight. Samantha Williams has found that these women often became wet nurses, putting their own children out to be nursed by still poorer women while waiting for a place at the ‘foundling’. The chain of poverty was long and finely graduated.

Hitchcock’s chapter provides insights into the largely hidden and ambiguous world of the vagrant. In Essex, as in London, the travelling poor met the officials not only with subservience but also sometimes with downright audacity. Chelmsford parish recorded casual pay to the transient poor in 1829 and 1830, when travellers were either offered a one-night stay in the workhouse or given an occasional meal. The price the travelling poor were paid in Chelmsford was based on a careful consideration of their characteristics and points of merit (or not) – especially
age, origins and idiosyncrasies. Most pitiful were those travelling ‘anywhere’ such as Robert Anderson and his family: ‘Scotch, nailmaker, a distressed looking set’. William Halyard alias Milliard, aged 40, stayed for three weeks ‘supposed to be Welch, will not tell where he belongs, sent in ill, Irish no doubt’. His sickness earned him ‘1 pint of beer per day and extra meat everyday’. Other travellers included a German stonemason with the invented name of David Hunn, a French dyer, Americans, a Portugese, a New Zealander, a ‘Black from Baltimore’ and the Jewish Mother Took. But those poor who were not foreigners often rejected the accommodation that was offered. Thomas Meredith, aged 25, travelling with George West, 33, were both hatters going from London to Colchester and ‘went on, did not approve of the accommodation’. William Fletcher, a corkcutter from Staffordshire with his young wife, was described as being in great distress when shown the apartment. He ‘was Impertinent, and said he would not sleep in such a place, went out’; and William Gaywood, aged 21, a blacksmith travelling to Lowestoft, appeared to ‘scoff at the place’. The man supervising the casual house seemed to carry no responsibility for making a judgment on whether those who sought accommodation at the expense of the local ratepayers were indeed needy or not, and admitted that some of the travellers were ‘a compleat take in’. When the Murphys, a family of Irish labourers, arrived and were asked whether they had any money, ‘the woman said she’d devil got a halfpenny, she believed it was two pence she’d got’.

Examining London housing shows a complex use of rooms within buildings and shared use of space. Early modern Aldgate was full of sheds, stables and single rooms inhabited by single people and families. Diarist, author and lawyer James Boswell may not have been in an unusual position when he rented rooms in London where he was allowed use of the parlour ‘in the morning only’. If it was the case that those with means shared rooms, the multiple use of space by poorer people must have been extremely common. It would no doubt have confounded those making listings for the purposes of hearth or other taxes, who may have been forced to place some administrative order on the household and the apparent use of space. Overcrowding was certainly not a novel aspect of life by the mid-nineteenth century when it came to be systematically investigated at the same time as the term ‘slum’ came into regular use.

William Baer has recently surveyed the types of poor housing and living arrangements in London evident from the Certificates and Returns of Divided Houses, which give us a rare insight into ordinary accommodation in the 1630s. The close succession of surveys carried
out at this time gives an unusually complete picture of the housing market. Baer outlines the tension between the desire of the authorities to control and limit London’s growth and the need for cheap housing. Small time entrepreneurs and speculators defied building prohibitions, ‘while scurrying opportunistically to meet the need in unconventional ways’. Baer identifies a ‘shadow housing market’ of new habitations created from older, usually non-residential buildings aimed at those with low income, and often on the margins of being legal. Grand houses were subdivided into tenements, habitations were created within inns and company halls, and old hospitals were divided into numerous small dwelling houses. Even small houses were divided, and structures such as cow houses, outhouses and stables were turned into homes.

The ‘People in Place’ project has identified the development of alleyways in former gardens or yards as an important development in the intensification of housing. All but one of the 17 households in Ship Alley, Aldgate were poor in 1630s in the sense of being unable to earn enough to support themselves. Proliferation and subdivision clearly continued, because there were 23 households in the same alley by 1666. There were myriads of such alleys in Aldgate by the second half of the seventeenth century. Early industrial towns expanded in a similar way and urbanisation was rapid from 1810 to around 1830. Development of housing for ordinary people was often hemmed in by privately owned land and this meant that particular urban landscapes developed, as in Nottingham where sprawling urban villages developed rather than suburbs closer to the centre. Maurice Beresford has shown how Leeds’ back-to-back houses were a result of the constrained areas of land open to development.

‘Improvement’ of towns during this era usually created more work opportunities, but sometimes less attractive living conditions, for the poor. When the New Town of Edinburgh was created as a smart middle-class area, across Princes Street in the Old Town, there was ‘a grand repository of history; a deep pool of jostling struggling humanity’ as two Edinburghs developed, divided by Princes Street. In Old Town, the poor population doubled between 1800 and 1870 and were ‘single unconnected phenomena, owning no relation apparently to any other human being … It is little to say they are scarcely covered’. Youngson described the gross overcrowding of the Old Town:

A wide range of the most sordid and the least productive occupations might be carried on by the inhabitants of a single room, let alone of a single tenement – shebeening, out-of-door apple selling or dram
selling, match-making, speech-crying, organ-grinding, thieving, prostitution, or ‘subletting’ for an hour to vagrant couples not intent upon singing psalms.33

‘Improvement’ might, of course, involve trying to upgrade the housing of the poor or at least trying to situate poverty in aesthetically pleasing surrounds. Orphanages, workhouses, almshouses and estate villages were often rebuilt, sometimes as urban showpieces and perhaps using gothic revival styles in an attempt to beautify poverty.34 There was really nothing new about this. Guilds, companies and corporations often vigorously tried to meet the accommodation needs of the poor associated with their trade. Bristol’s Merchant Venturers, for example, opened new almshouse buildings in the seventeenth century and sometimes met the needs of poor seamen by other means, such as by buying them a boat and thus meeting both their occupational and accommodation needs with one donation.35 The urban almshouses described by Tomkins in this book operate in a somewhat similar way by removing the poor from areas where they might be a slight on the environment, and providing a visible civic symbol of charitable beneficence. Less decorous institutions of relief have received almost no historical attention. Jeremy Boulton has identified a type of ‘nursing home’ in late seventeenth and early eighteenth-century London and Elaine Murphy has investigated pauper farms around London in the century that followed.36 By the early nineteenth century, busy vestries like St Botolph’s in Colchester – an example of what John Black has called a ‘casualty parish’ – showed an intense preoccupation with the rental of rooms and houses, and there was an expectation that the rental bills of the poor would be met if they were unable to pay them.37 A warehouseman resident in Shoreditch in 1813 complained that he and his family were about to be evicted. He wrote a vivid narrative of his predicament:

A Person I dealt with for Bread last winter has served me with an execution on my Goods … two Men Came into my Place and saw me Ill and my Children almost Naked. Looking Round at my Things says he these things are not worth my Taking I must Gett an[ ] Execution an[ ] take You and it appears to me you will be as comfortable in Jail as in your present Situation.38

It was also an expectation of overseers to pay regular relief in advance against debt. Elizabeth Hinds wrote from London in 1820 that she
wanted a pound in advance of the quarter money she anticipated to have to ‘plage [pledge] all my things’.39 A letter of 1827 informed the overseers that one of their parishioners who now lived in Cambridge and rented a house from St Peter’s College had seven pounds of rent arrears; ‘he informs me the overseers of the parish will pay it for him’.40

Such ‘casualty parishes’ were at the generous end of the spectrum in providing housing for the settled poor who were located in situations other than their settlement parish but where there was a shared sense of optimism about their future economic prospects. Yet for many of those who had migrated due to poverty, it is clear that they missed ‘home’.

**The meanings of home**

When looking at the many documents about the poor it is useful to consider historical meanings of ‘house’ and ‘home’. ‘House’ could mean the portion of a building occupied by one family, whereas ‘home’ could often mean the village or town rather than the conventional contemporary definition that denotes one’s dwelling place.41 While strategically wise to claim a connection with a home parish, there does seem to be a strong emotional tie of belonging in many migrant writings. If relief was in doubt, it was common to an almost formulaic extent for the poor to write letters threatening to ‘come home’ to their settlement parish. This is an element in the dogged independence of the people that Steve King describes in his essay in this volume. Both Green and Lloyd consider the emotional space occupied by cottages. Green explores the connection between hearthlessness, heartlessness and unhomeliness. Poverty is a failure to maintain a homely space as a refuge from insecurity: the cottage is a cornerstone of domestic ideology. While nineteenth-century domesticity has largely been seen as a woman’s sphere, Tosh has shown the crucial role of the home in formation of male identity. These ideas are generally seen as bourgeois ones but there are many hints in the remnants of the less articulate that these ideas also permeated their home lives and may have done for hundreds of years.42 The importance of housing in defining status might also be understood through the extent to which it provided individuals and families with privacy. As Amanda Vickery has suggested, ‘Life with no vestiges of privacy was understood to be a most sorry degradation which stripped away the defences of the spirit’.43

Eighteenth-century observers ran together specific but sometimes divergent meanings of the cottage in debates and discourses about the
condition of the poor. A cottage was a philosophical resource to political economists, philanthropists, moral reformers and others. By the nineteenth century, sentiment added an emotional perspective to descriptions of cottages. Lloyd finds they figured in discussions of migrations, manufactures, agricultural profit, the economics of poor relief and the reformation of manners. In particular, the cottage ‘provided a new arena for exploring ideas about poverty, crucially one that accommodated both sentiment and attention to individual human behaviour’.44

The impact on understanding past households

In his writings from the 1960s to the early 1980s, strongly influenced by Hajnal, Peter Laslett described ordinary households as being a result of the ‘Western European marriage pattern’.45 His analysis was based on consideration of 100 parish ‘census type listings’, which showed a mean household size of 4.75 people from the sixteenth century to the twentieth century. Western households contained one simple family. Age of marriage was relatively late; there was usually a small age gap between spouses and marriage was the basis for a companionate relationship. The family and the household were largely synonymous. Laslett argued such households were recognisable, ‘normal’ and anglocentric – the past could therefore be claimed as ‘ours’. It was a view that stressed individualism and the primacy of blood relationships. Servants for example were, in his words, ‘imported personalities’. The result of units consisting only of parent and children was ‘nuclear hardship’. Such small units could not always withstand the ebb and flow of the economic tide and parish poor assistance had to substitute for the assistance of extended family members that would be resorted to in other social arrangements. Laslett was writing in reaction to earlier ideas that families had traditionally been complex and extended and had become simpler with modernisation. He believed such self-sufficient small family units were the ideal form for adapting to changing economic imperatives. Wittingly or not, other historians and journalists appropriated a similar description of the English family as a co-operative team who proved to be the perfect fit for capitalist development.46 The suggestion proceeding from the singular nuclear family, that kinship was loose and shallow in early modern English society, found ready acceptance.

The influence of Laslett’s formulation means that scholars have ascribed less importance to kin in the past than is warranted, and it is probably fair to say that a preoccupation with the nuclear family as the predominant shape of past households has been steadily diluted over the
last few decades. Far from providing a comprehensive safety net of support over a number of centuries, an accumulation of scholarship, in fact dating from the inception of poor relief in the Elizabethan era, shows that those who needed parish pension would also need a supplemental form of support. In many cases kin must have provided this financial and physical support. Other research has shown that sometimes the ‘imported personalities’ were actually ‘hidden kin’ furthering our understanding of blood ties. Brodsky Elliott found that approximately 37 per cent of migrant women in London had kin also living in the capital; in just over 20 per cent of cases they resided with them. Sam Barrett’s work has contributed significantly to our understanding of the kin links of the poor. However, as Margaret Pelling has commented,

the literature does not tell us when or how domestic space began to exclude those not members of the family of blood, or how, at the level of the household, the domestic servant diverged from the apprentice and the employee.

In her examination of life-cycle service, Sheila Cooper has noted that by the nineteenth century, servants were not considered part of the family and housing arrangements increasingly relegated them to separate staircases and quarters.

Probably most significant of all for the purposes of this book, Sokoll’s very detailed study, mainly based on the households of the poor in the two Essex communities of Ardleigh and Braintree in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, found that households were neither small nor simple. Research on the Celtic fringes of England also showed large and complex households usually living in shared housing situations in the early modern period. Rather than being adaptable as Laslett claimed, sheltered and subsidised housing brought about the sort of adaptable labour force and neighbourhood that landlords, gentry and the better-off desired. This view is echoed in the chapters found in this book.

**Poor housing in wider context**

If the new social historians have found households to be less recognisable than the earlier generation of demographic historians, it is the case that houses and hovels were more ephemeral and less enduring than we may have imagined. Green has been able to find very few surviving examples of the housing of the poor. In the colonies in Australia, described by Lloyd, the few surviving houses of those of ordinary rank
from the 1820s are so tiny and fragile they can have provided little more than shelter. Some houses were known to be built to be portable in England and this was even more common in Australia. Furniture might have also been constructed so as to be easily moved. Gardens may have been scanty or non-existent. Twentieth-century writings by Flora Thompson or Laurie Lee evoke a misleading timeless rusticity to rural homes. When Laurie Lee arrived at the Gloucestershire village of Slad in 1918, he came to a cottage that stood in a half-acre of garden on steep bank above a lake, with three floors and a cellar and a treasure in the walls, with a pump and apple trees, syringa and strawberries, rooks in the chimneys, frogs in the cellar, mushrooms in the ceiling, and all for three and sixpence a week.

Such a house for one family would have appeared to be a palace to the poor of three generations earlier.

In the late eighteenth century, Samantha Williams’ study of the east Bedfordshire villages of Campton and Shefford found that up to a third of residents in these villages received regular relief at some point in their lives. This number increases when occasional relief is taken into account, and there was a rising dependency of labouring families on the parish in the early nineteenth century. Williams suggests that pensions were received by the elderly for considerable lengths of time, especially older men. By contrast, relief to families was supplementary and limited in duration. In the case of widows and lone women with children, the parish did not make up for the absence of a male wage and these families encountered deeper poverty than that experienced by other families at the time. As Jane Pearson argued in her doctoral thesis about the village of Great Tey in Essex, the implications of the poverty of the early years of the nineteenth century were far-reaching, affecting gender relations and emotional relationships within households. Analysing change over a century from 1730, Pearson wrote that the overseer’s job changed from assisting all of the population who fell on hard times to that of providing chiefly for married men and their growing families. She sees this change as ‘profound and extraordinary, potentially destabilizing of traditional paternalist attitudes and deeply threatening to the security of all levels in village society. This was a change that brought the stark inequalities of male power into sharp focus.’

Social welfare arrangements, effectively ‘public housing’ (a forerunner of council houses), were more extensive than hitherto shown. By the
early nineteenth century under the Old Poor Law, parishes still demonstrated some willingness to assist in keeping a roof over the heads of their parishioners’ heads. Despite rapid population growth, urbanisation and migration to cities and industrial villages, some parishes still maintained and built housing for public use. However, several poor people or families would now share a dwelling that perhaps previously would have housed a single elderly pauper in the seventeenth century, and this type of provision was increasingly threatened and subject to the decisions of parish officials who might be under pressure to put the money to other uses. In fact, by the late eighteenth century Peter King found that poor law officials made inventories of pauper property so they could take control of their possessions in exchange for maintaining them. As the Chapter 1 by Boulton shows, the poor effectively evicted themselves from lodgings in order to match their changing circumstances with their income. Women who were widowed or whose husbands went into the military, families who could not sustain businesses or employment, those with very many dependent children all might have had to downsize, and in some cases family disintegration was the result of the ‘saving of some importance to us’.

Following the 1834 Poor Law Amendment, Act arrangements were far less generous and supportive than the out-relief described here. Eviction, while a possibility often mentioned in letters to poor relief officials before 1834 and, as we have argued, a common way of restructuring rural areas, combined with increasing class-based stigma about poor housing. Forced ejection was a very real fear when inability to sustain a household meant either forcing relatives to support poor kin or entering the workhouse.

While the ability to maintain a home had long been a marker of status and independence, its importance rose in combination with a huge expansion in home ownership in the twentieth century. Far from going away, poverty has become more visible in contemporary societies. Experiencing a poor upbringing in a bad neighbourhood and an inadequate house has spawned an entirely new genre of autobiographical writing. Young homeless people are a glaring reminder of the fragility of modern social welfare arrangements. There are few starker social polarities than the extremely high social, political and economic value placed on home ownership in contrast with the minority who cannot access the rental sector and have no choice but to live on the streets. Rented housing – the majority experience within living memory – has become a relatively degraded sector. Council housing, the most significant attempt to house the poor in twentieth-century Britain, largely disappeared in the Thatcher years.
Hopefully this volume makes a contribution to the accommodation experiences of the poor in the same way that recent scholarship has unveiled many more details about the clothing of the poor than we had previously known.63 The burgeoning of scholarship about poverty has been helpfully accompanied by the publication of many primary sources.64 As researchers in the history of poverty are well aware, this area of academic endeavour still presents a number of challenges in the archives and those who work in the area need to use ingenuity to advance this area of scholarship. The result of documentary discoveries can still prove to be enlightening and rewarding. As Steve Hindle has aptly put it:

This is a field in which the scholarship repeatedly bumps up against the limit of what is historically possible. Despite the achievements of the new social history, the doors of the humblest households remain, if not closed altogether, then at least only just ajar.65

We are still peering at houses and their inhabitants from the outside in, but at least we are now able to raise a candle to the dark interior and see a glimmer within.

Notes

* Unless otherwise stated, place of publication is London.


2. In capitalist and commercially orientated areas of England, a permanent poor were apparent by the sixteenth century. For example M. Williams, “‘Our Poor People in Tumults Arose’: Living in Poverty in Earls Colne, Essex, 1560–1640’, *Rural History* 13:2, (2002), 123–43 is able to build on the research of many predecessors regarding social structure in the Essex village of Earls Colne in the century from 1540 to 1640. He excludes life cycle and other types of poverty and concludes that sons and daughters of tenants and husbandmen were reduced to a permanent state of poverty by demographic and market forces. They were forced all their lives to depend upon the scattered generosity of the wealthy, or upon their own imaginations and the inability of the wealthy to hold every miscreant to account’ (129–30). For a broader picture see J. Whittle, *The Development of Agrarian Capitalism: Land and Labour in Norfolk, 1440–1580* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).


4. Bristol University Library, Pinney Papers Box 17.


23. For further background see J. Boulton, “‘It is Extreme Necessity that Makes me do this’: Some ‘Survival Strategies’ of Pauper Households in London’s West End During the Early Eighteenth Century’, *International Review of Social History, Supplement 8*, (2000), 47–69.


25. See especially the work of the ‘People in Place: families, households, and housing in early modern London, 1550–1720’ project, as summarised in V. Harding et al., *People in Place: Families, Households and Housing in Early Modern London* (Centre for Metropolitan History pamphlet, 2008).


30. Harding, ‘Families and Housing’. 


38. ERO, D/P 203/18/1, St Botolph’s Overseers Letters, 24 April 1813.

39. ERO, D/P 203/12/51, St Botolph’s Overseer of the Poor, Vouchers and Bills, 1820.

40. ERO, D/P 203/12/51, St Botolph’s Overseer of the Poor, Vouchers and Bills, 1827.


46. F. Mount, *The Subversive Family* (Cape, 1982).


53. T. Sokoll, *Household and Family among the Poor: The Case of Two Essex Communities in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries* (Bochum: Brockmeyer, 1993).


56. Campaign beds, which could be taken apart and easily moved were popular in the colonies. M. Ponsonby, *Stories from Home: English Domestic Interiors 1750–1850* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007) finds middle class households to be more transient than has perhaps been thought. She mentions that furniture could be hired from cabinetmakers and furniture brokers, pp. 59–60.


62. An early example of this was F. McCourt, *Angela’s Ashes* (Harper Collins, 1996), which describes the author's upbringing in a terrible house in a poor part of Limerick.


65. Hindle, ‘“Without the Cry of any Neighbours”’, p. 156.
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