

# The Good and the Needy of 18<sup>th</sup> Century Sampford Peverell

## Background

### *The Economy*

With fertile soil suitable both for arable use and pasturage, Sampford – ‘Sanforde’<sup>1</sup> as it was known in Saxon times because of its sandy ford across a stream – was ideal as an agricultural centre. A Saxon charter and Domesday give details of Sampford’s agricultural activity.

In the middle ages, like many parts of England, Sampford was involved in producing woollen materials, kersey and later (from about 1660) serge, often sold to wool merchants based in Tiverton or Exeter. From there they went to the continent where there was a substantial market for them.

### *The Good*

Early in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the manor of Sampford was granted to two members of the Peverell family<sup>2</sup>. Arguably the first of Sampford’s ‘Good’, this family retained the manor for nearly 300 years. They oversaw its early growth in size and prosperity, providing the village with a (short lived) castle, its church and its suffix. They also elevated its status to that of borough, allowing weekly markets and biannual fairs to be held. These attracted outsiders and raised taxes on goods sold.

When the last of the Peverells died, Sampford was given by Henry IV to his half brother John Beaufort in about 1400. A century later, Margaret Beaufort, mother of Henry VII, inherited the manor. A generous benefactor, she provided an aisle for the church and a magnificent rectory. When she died, the Crown sold the manor to the Poulett family of Hinton St George, Somerset. The manor remained with the Poulletts until the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when it was sold off piecemeal.

By the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century these families had seen Sampford become a self-sufficient, but not isolated, community with a tannery, smithy, mills and inns. Its markets and fairs, and its situation on the road from Wellington to Tiverton, meant drovers and other travellers frequently visited. There was no school, but there were a church and church house, the latter probably used for meetings and celebrations.

### *The Needy*

While the lords of the manor and their major tenants became wealthy, most inhabitants toiled on the land and lived just above subsistence level. They would feel most sharply the impact of changes to the community’s economy in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

## **The Eighteenth Century**

### *The Economy*

Threats to the wool trade in the first decade of the century led several Devon wool towns, including Sampford, to petition the House of Commons<sup>3</sup> to act. They cited losses at sea and also, more significantly, cheaper imports from Ireland. Separately, Bennet Bobish, a Sampford serge maker, sued a wealthy Tiverton merchant for the balance of money owed him<sup>4</sup>. The merchant was apparently having difficulty in recovering debts from Holland and Flanders, blaming war in Flanders and the death or insolvency of some of the merchants with whom he traded there.

Nevertheless, the parish’s economy still depended heavily on the wool trade for most of the century. Old field names show the location of rack parks where cloth was stretched out on tenterhooks to dry. Most households would have had a loom. However, the continued increase in overseas competition and, late in the century, the introduction of cotton cloth meant that woollen industry profits were badly hit. Cheaper goods made in mechanised mills left virtually no market for traditionally made serge. By the early 19<sup>th</sup> century the local wool industry was in free fall<sup>5</sup>.

Other sectors of the village’s economy were less turbulent. There was probably an increase in cattle husbandry to offset falling profits from wool. Unlike Tiverton, there were no major fires to affect the economy adversely. Nor does there seem to have been any serious epidemic, although the church burial register<sup>6</sup> shows two years with higher than average death rates, 1747 and 1758, the latter due to smallpox.

## *The Good*

The Pouletts, resident in Hinton St George, left running the parish to better-off residents and the Vestry, responsible for making appointments to many key roles. As spiritual head of the community, the Rector undertook its moral supervision. He chaired Vestry meetings of churchwardens, constable, waywardens and overseers to determine how ratepayers' funds should be spent. However, in the absence of surviving Vestry minutes or other evidence, we know little about the Rector's influence. His answers to the 1744 and 1779 Visitation Queries<sup>7</sup> show that a curate undertook ecclesiastical duties – sermons twice on Sundays and communion four times a year. It is not clear if the Rector lived in the parish in 1744 but, in 1779, he resided in neighbouring Uplowman where he had another benefice.

The 'Good' taking on unpaid roles of churchwarden, constable, overseer, waywarden and feoffee of the Poor Lands were mostly gentlemen or yeomen, often holding two or more of these roles in any year. They also acted as assessor for Land Tax, a paid office. We know the trades of some of them: John Cowlen<sup>8</sup>, tallow chandler; William Chave<sup>8</sup>, butcher; Henry Dickenson<sup>9</sup>, serge maker. Others rented out properties and employed labourers to farm their land. Most were eligible for jury service and so were named in the annual freeholder lists<sup>8</sup>. All appointees needed a basic education, whilst churchwardens, overseers and feoffees had to be able to keep books of accounts. This would have limited the numbers of local people eligible as the parish had no schools; education was at home or boarding school.

The Poor Law Act of 1601 dictated how poor relief operated. Overseers were the churchwardens plus two or more substantial landowners. In Sampford<sup>10</sup> they were appointed annually on a 15 year cycle, so that each year two of 30 named properties had to provide an overseer or nominate someone else to do it for them. They collected the Poor Rate and administered relief to the poor. They could remove strangers from the parish, and organise and pay for apprenticeships for children of poor families. They could commit paupers to the workhouse, but there is no evidence of this in Sampford – indeed, like many parishes, Sampford had no workhouse, probably because providing outdoor relief was cheaper.

The overseers' accounts<sup>11</sup> for much of the century have survived and record all income and expenditure. Those deemed to qualify received monthly payments. In 1744, when the Visitation Returns identified about 150 households, 24 people were receiving monthly payments ranging from 2/- to 8/-, averaging a little over 3/-, low compared with some other years. For example, in 1706, 37 people received relief averaging 4/6d per month; in 1768 relief to 30 people averaged 4/8d. Apart from these regular payments, extraordinary payments were made for such expenses as doctors' fees, shoes, removals from the parish, apprenticeships, caring for the sick, and funerals. In 1763, the constable received expenses for holding a reluctant bridegroom, James Morgan, until he could be married to Mary Sanders!

Administration costs were quite a high proportion of the overseers' outgoings. Expenses included: meetings from 1/- to 14/-; making various tax rates and entering them in the accounts, usually 5/- a time; apprentice indentures; meetings to choose overseers and waywardens and nomination warrants for these posts; travelling to court and associated legal costs; the Constable's costs in dealing with wrongdoers; settlements; the doctor's retainer; 'entertaining'; and, most importantly, ale for the parishioners on Easter Monday, at a cost of up to 14/-. (Overseers and other officials were chosen at the Easter meeting.) Other odd payments include: ninepence for a new bag for the parish books; 1/6d for William Sweetland to buy a violin; 10/6d for David Webber, by the consent of parishioners, to buy books for the better instruction of the singing in church!

During the century more legislation was passed to regulate parish officials because, owing to the 'incapacity, negligence or misconduct' of overseers, 'the sufferings and distress of the poor are grievous'<sup>12</sup>. The only evidence of this in Sampford is a comment made in the accounts of April 1767 that 'what follows was paid by Mr Cowlen through Mr Taylor's ungenerous behaviour in refusing to pay the poor. For Saunders children 7/6d; several other entries totalling in all £8 10s 7d'. William Cowlen and Francis Taylor were joint overseers from April 1766 to April 1767.

The parish had Charity Lands to supplement the Poor Rate support, donated 'beyond all time of memory'<sup>13</sup> (before 1610, the date of the earliest surviving document<sup>14</sup>) by whom we don't know as 'the length of time which devoureth all things had eaten out both the name and the memory of the donor'<sup>13</sup>. At the beginning of the century the estate comprised 10 burgages; later John Lock gave £100 which the Charity used to purchase two more properties, Webber's and Smoke-alley. The trustees ('feoffees') were responsible for letting them out to tenants. Rents and fines levied on these tenants provided money which the feoffees distributed to poor people not receiving poor relief, especially those considered most in need. The Charity Lands' trust deed required that the properties be conveyed to 16 feoffees. When their number had reduced through mortality to four, the properties were conveyed again to another 16 inhabitants. In 1750, John Cowlen, one of the feoffees, had two wooden tablets made listing the properties owned by the Charity and their rental value. They probably hung originally<sup>15</sup> in the Church House where, each year, the trustees had to account to the minister, churchwardens, overseers and other principal inhabitants for how monies had been distributed.

Some properties were let to yearly tenants who had to pay the full rent, but not for property maintenance. Other properties were mostly let on 99 year leases, determinable on three lives. Rents for these were much lower, but the tenants had to carry out repairs. When a new lease commenced, a 'fine' was payable, often £10 or more. In years when a fine was paid, money available for distribution could easily be double that of a normal year. Typically, the amount for distribution in a year with no fines was £6 to £8. For example, in 1766 the feoffees distributed £7 9s 6d amongst 99 people. Most received 1/- but a few, with greater need, got more: Thomas Brice J<sup>nr</sup> received the most at 8s 6d. By contrast, a substantial fine was received in 1789. The feoffees paid out £19 19s to 92 people (79 men and 13 women). They also paid £10 'towards inoculation of the children': such a payment was unprecedented (from surviving records) and shows how far the 'Good' of Sampford would go to reduce the incidence of smallpox, in view of the risks involved with this comparatively new procedure<sup>16</sup>.

In 1766, 99 people received from the feoffees the small annual payment for the needy and 31 received regular payments from the Overseers of the Poor. The records suggest, and the Charity Lands trust deed allowed, only one payment per family. There were said to be 178 families in 1763<sup>17</sup> and 143 in 1801<sup>18</sup>. Assuming that there were 175 families in 1766, and 130 of those were considered poor or needy, then only about 45 families were better off; from these the 'Good' were drawn.

A few names recur, one generation succeeding another. Members of the **Cowlen** (otherwise Cowling) family were prominent, acquiring more land throughout the century. Benjamin Donn's map of 1765<sup>19</sup> shows (William) Cowling's name beside 'Sampford Peverell' highlighting his importance. In 1779, William occupied properties amounting to a greater yearly value<sup>20</sup> than anyone else. The **Rowe** family enjoyed significant economic success, having acquired 11 properties by the end of the century. However, Thomas Rowe's account book for 1728 to 1741<sup>21</sup> shows he accumulated the properties gradually and had to borrow from relatives to do so. The **Dawbney** family lived at a property known as Riverton. They were related to the Dawbneys<sup>22</sup> who held more extensive lands in Misterton and South Petherton, Somerset. Other families, with less valuable land holdings but nonetheless influential, were **Ballamy**, **Saunders** and **Taylor**.

### *The Needy*

The Poor Law Acts of the 17<sup>th</sup> century delegated many powers and responsibilities to parishes for the relief and management of needy inhabitants. The Act of 1662 concerning Settlement and Removal was particularly potent as it prevented inhabitants moving out of the village if likely to become a charge on the rates elsewhere and people from other parishes could not move in without showing sufficient means of support.

The Overseers Accounts<sup>11</sup> show the requirements were applied, no doubt causing much distress to individuals involved, at considerable cost to the parish in examinations before a magistrate, travel to court, removal expenses, etc. They record just 14 removals<sup>23</sup> to or from Sampford between 1714 and 1750. 5 single persons and 7 families were removed from the village, 2 families removed inwards from elsewhere. From 1750 to 1795 there were 42 removals. This increase was perhaps due in part to changes in farming practices and poor harvests in the 1790s leading to a growing number of displaced persons. These years saw 25 removals outwards, 9 for single people, mainly women, and 16 for families or couples. They included: an infant of 6 months deserted by her mother in 1786 sent to East Stonehouse where she was born; and in 1762 a soldier's wife and her two children. 12 families and 5 single people were allowed to settle<sup>24</sup> in Sampford having been removed from elsewhere, usually neighbouring parishes but some in Somerset or North Devon or even further away. Margaret Baker, aged 60, widow of William Baker born in Sampford was apprehended as a vagrant in St Martins in the Fields, Westminster, and removed to Sampford in 1761. In 1765 a vagrant pass, and copy of her settlement examination, was issued for 'Elizabeth, widow of John Saunders, late a soldier in the first Regiment of Foot Guards, and her two children, from Willoughby, Warwicks, to "Stanford" Devon, where her husband served an apprenticeship' which gave him a right to settlement in the parish.

Grace Coombes, in 1759, was removed from the village after falling on the parish 'in necessity'. The overseers allowed her 2/-, but then applied for a summons (6d) to have her examined before a magistrate. The examination and removal order cost 6/-, wagon hire to take her to Bristol 8/-, their four days' travelling 4/-, and the overseer's expenses for himself and his horse £1 – a total of £2 0s 6d. Costs of 2/6d were incurred opposing the officers of Thorverton who were keen to remove Mary Davy and her daughters to Sampford Peverell.

Many people found life very difficult and had to suffer the indignity of applying to the overseers for help. The Poor Law Act of 1697 required every pauper, his wife and children to wear a badge on the shoulder of their right sleeve to show they were receiving relief and not allowed to beg. The accounts have several references to buying badges - 2½ dozen in 1758, 1½ dozen in 1762, 1 dozen in 1764. Later in the century people could be excused from wearing the badge 'upon proof of very decent and orderly behaviour'<sup>12</sup>. (This Act was repealed in 1810.)

The names of people receiving long term relief crop up repeatedly, many getting weekly payments of 2 or 3 shillings for years until their deaths. In 1753, for example, 33 people were getting regular payments adding up to approximately £6 a month. The parish then often paid the funeral expenses, although the pauper's goods were sometimes seized and sold as reimbursement. Some entries detail short term relief for sickness and nursing or attendance by a doctor, paid approximately £5 pa as a retainer specifically for treatment of the poor. Many entries are for help with clothing, often for a specific item only – from a few pence for a shift to a full outfit of clothes. Other payments include attendance at childbirth, equipment for craftsmen, etc. As the cloth industry declined, more relief was given to skilled workers such as weavers, woolcombers and sergemakers. During an outbreak of smallpox in 1758 affecting 4 families and 12 children, a total of £2 19s 6d was paid, as well as 6/- for the funeral of one of the children. There are instances of payments for travelling to Exeter for ill children seeking specialist advice and for children with serious disabilities such as blindness.

A considerable amount was spent chasing putative fathers for maintenance, 'encouraging' marriages (including the already mentioned James Morgan and Mary Sanders), removing pregnant women to other parishes to give birth so their child had a settlement elsewhere, and supporting single mothers and their children. The 1732 Act required a woman pregnant with an illegitimate child to declare herself and name the father, who could, by agreeing to a bond (lump sum), discharge himself of further responsibility. The accounts have several references to these bonds<sup>25</sup>. A man charged on oath with being the father could be apprehended and committed to gaol until he gave surety to indemnify the parish from expense.

In March 1745 expenses of 7/6d were incurred at Bampton Sessions for Margaret Kerslake's examination, two orders and summary 'concerning her base child charged on Mr William Chave.' The constable received 1/- 'for attending the justice and obtaining an order of Bastardy on the said William Chave.' Margaret received 2/6d per week. In April she gave birth, her childbed expenses being 10/6d. She then received 3/4d per month until August 1749. Thanks to the court order, the parish could recoup these expenses from Mr Chave. He could hardly avoid it as one of the better off villagers, himself an overseer the following year!

In 1760 a woman's marriage expenses of £2 9s were paid and, in 1744, the overseers paid £3 7s 6d to get banns of matrimony between Henry Pullman and Mary Stephens published in the parish churches of Willand and Sampford Peverell.

Apprenticeships<sup>26</sup> were one way of dealing with the problem of poor, orphaned and illegitimate children. There are many records of indentures made and of money paid (usually £1) to parishioners for these children's maintenance. Between 1700 and 1798, 243 children apprentices, 160 boys and 83 girls, are recorded. They were bound to their 'masters' for many years, but the indenture could be cancelled if the master died. Occasionally apprenticeships were within the family. In 1771, the overseers' accounts record 'William Facey of Taunton St Mary Magdalen, Somerset, by consent, serge weaving endorsed: "John Gillard is the son of Wm Facey's wife – was born before her marriage, she did not swear to the father, but it is supposed to be the said Facey".'

Most apprenticeships were unspecified and so, rather than learning a trade, the children were probably used as domestic servants or agricultural labourers. Specific apprenticeships include four to serge weavers, five to weavers, one to a woolcomber, and one each to a cooper (at Culmstock), a tanner and a tailor. Four were taken on by yeomen, presumably to learn husbandry. The apprentice's ages are not generally recorded. They might have been as young as 7, but some were much older. Sarah Salter, bound to Thomas Row for Lee Ditch in 1762, already had a child and had received relief since 1756. In 1759 Captain William Kerslake was apprenticed, but in 1762 he needed assistance and was granted 2/- regularly until his death.

We don't know much about the apprentices' fate. In October 1769, Mr Broom was fined 5/6d for refusing to care for his apprentice. It seems likely that parishioners were reluctant to take these children. 1792 legislation provided that masters be punished for ill usage of apprentices.

Maintenance for dependants of serving militiamen<sup>27</sup> included payments between 1779 and 1782 to Mary Carter and one child 'being the wife and child of William Carter of Tiverton, admitted to the 2<sup>nd</sup> battalion of the Devon Militia as a substitute for Edward Trevelian of Sampford Peverell'. Four further entries for maintenance were recorded, the family having two further children. Payment was made to Henry Brice and Nicholas Curwood who had provided other men to serve in the militia in their place.

## References and Notes

1. Sampford Peverell – The Village, Church, Chapels and Rectories p3. Ed. Charles Scott-Fox, Sampford Peverell Society, 2007.
2. Ibid. pp 4 to 8.
3. Journal of House of Commons 19/12/1707, 1705-1708, 476.
4. National Archives C6/482/4.
5. Magna Britannia vol.6, part1 (Devon), Reverend D. Lysons and S. Lysons, London 1822.
6. Registers of Baptisms, Marriages and Burials, Devon Records Office (DRO), 1198A/PR1 -10
7. Episcopal Visitation Returns 1744 and 1779, transcribed @ [www.foda.org.uk/visitations](http://www.foda.org.uk/visitations).
8. Devon Freeholders Books, Devon Quarter Sessions, DRO QS/7/1-57
9. Sun Fire Office policy registers, Guildhall Library.
10. 'List of estates that does the office of Oversier together', undated. DRO 1198A-1/PO548.
11. Overseers' accounts books DRO 1198A-1/P01, P01a, P02.
12. The Parish Chest, W E Tate, Phillimore, 1989.
13. Inquiry into Charity Lands 1910 for Parish of Sampford Peverell, section II, referring to the 1820 inquiry.
14. Lease agreement between the foeffees and William Darch 20/1/1610. DRO 1198A-1/PF6.
15. These two boards now hang in the bell-tower of St John the Baptist Church, Sampford Peverell.
16. Patrick Pead of the Wellcome Library writes 'Inoculation against smallpox (by the introduction of smallpox matter into the skin with a lancet) was indeed widespread during the last 20 years of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It continued in some areas into the first few years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century until vaccination (with cow pox) became more accepted'.
17. Bishop Heppel's Visitation, as recorded in the Parish Registers DRO 1198A/PR1-10.
18. 1801 Census Return.
19. A map of the County of Devon, Benjamin Donn, London, 1765.
20. Values totalled for each individual in a document about the funding of part of the Tiverton Turnpike. DRO 5948B-0/AK, 1779. Also available by property in Land Tax Returns. DRO 1198A-1/PC1.
21. Personal account book of Thomas Row, DRO 1044B-0/M/E/1.
22. Will (1750) and Probate (1797) of Henry Daubney Esq., Somerset Records Office DD/BR/hk/4.
23. Removal orders. DRO 1198A-1/PO 11/1-83.
24. Settlement certificates. DRO 1198A-1/PO106-172.
25. Bastardy Bonds. DRO 1198A-1/PO511-547.
26. Apprenticeships. DRO 1198A-1/PO190-454.
27. Militia orders. DRO 1198A-1/Po183-188.

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The Sutton Companion to Local History, S Friar, The History Press, 2004.

### **About the article**

Inspired by Dr. Simon Dixon, who was undertaking a two-year research project into 18<sup>th</sup> century Devon records, the Sampford Peverell Society set up a 12-member team to undertake the research for this article. Three of team went on to write it up, and the whole was edited by another member who had not been involved previously. The Society intends to make much of the transcribed research material available on its website [www.sampfordpeverellsociety.com](http://www.sampfordpeverellsociety.com)

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