

# Malthus, marriage and poor law allowances revisited: a Bedfordshire case study, 1770–1834<sup>\*</sup>

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## *Abstract*

The debate on whether poor law allowance payments to the families of agricultural labourers ‘encouraged’ early marriage and large families is still far from resolved, partly because the exact geographical prevalence and timing of such allowances has not been adequately established. A case study of two communities in Bedfordshire provides evidence on the timing, duration, and value of such allowances, as well as detailed information of the family circumstances of labouring families. The study finds that allowances were largely restricted to periods of particular economic hardship and that they were a necessary response to increasing family size rather than a cause of such shifts in demographic behaviour.

The debate concerning the impact of poor law allowances on the fertility of agricultural labourers and the extent to which allowances helped promote the population growth of the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is still far from resolved, although recent discussions have been relatively few. Contemporaries believed there was a strong link between the two. The Reverend Thomas Malthus was one of the strongest advocates of this viewpoint, putting his case in his *Essay on the Principle of Population* (first published in 1798 and revised frequently thereafter). He believed that parish allowances were one of the key mechanisms accounting for the rapid population growth of the later eighteenth century. He argued that relief by a scale which increased in value upon marriage and with the addition of each child was

a direct, constant, and systemical encouragement to marriage before removing from each individual that heavy responsibility which he would incur by the laws of nature for bringing human beings into the world which he could not support.

Such a mechanism would lead to a situation in which poor relief would, paradoxically, create more of the poor it was seeking to maintain. Malthus’s influence on contemporary debates was profound; it has been argued that Malthus formulated the terms of discourse on the subject of poverty for half a century.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>\*</sup> I would like to thank Richard M. Smith for all his advice with this paper. Financial support from the Wellcome Trust made this research possible.

<sup>1</sup> T. R. Malthus, *Essay on population* (London, 1798), p. 83; ninth edn (1888), p. 415; E. A. Wrigley, ‘Malthus on the prospects for the labouring poor’, *Historical J.*, 31 (1988), pp. 813–29.

Research by the Cambridge Group has established that during the 'long' eighteenth century the total population of England increased from 5.0 million in 1686 to 11.5 million in 1821, an increase of 133 per cent, and the intrinsic growth rate increased from zero to more than 1.6 per cent per annum. By the early decades of the nineteenth century population was growing faster than at any previous or subsequent period of English history. Wrigley hypothesised that 'either mortality fell very substantially or fertility increased sharply, or both changes occurred but on a more modest scale'. Wrigley attributes the lion's share of this rise to an increase in fertility rather than mortality improvement, and while more recent historiography has reasserted the importance of mortality, it would still appear that fertility played the more prominent role, via earlier and more universal marriage. The mean age at first marriage for women fell from 26.5 in 1650–99 to 23.4 in 1800–49. For first-time brides, those in the 20–4 age group became increasingly the most frequent and came to comprise almost half of all marriages 1775–1837. 'Marriage', contends Wrigley, 'was the hinge on which the demographic system turned'. Marrying three years younger would produce 1.2 extra children per marriage. With rapidly rising fertility, the proportion of children under 15 in the population increased from a low point of well under 30 per cent in the 1660s to 40 per cent in the 1820s; and it is reasonable to suppose that under such demographic conditions children would become a major burden on local ratepayers.

The Cambridge Group's analysis rests on data generated by two methods: registered demographic events in parish registers (baptisms, marriages, and burials) for 404 parishes and the family reconstitution of 26 parishes. This means that 'national' trends are calculated by averaging the results. The Group argue that the 26 reconstitution parishes are broadly representative of England as a whole in terms of occupational make-up, but due to the patchy survival of sources and the rigorous method of calculation, no urban centres are included. Regional studies such as that by Hudson and King for Sowerby and Calverley in West Yorkshire can reveal how far local communities converged or diverged from this national picture and the influence of occupation on demographic variables. There are not, unfortunately, many of these types of studies, and it is only through the completion of many more that a fuller understanding of population history in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries will become possible. Nevertheless, in Campton with Shefford and Southill (Bedfordshire), one of the Group's 26 reconstitutions which will be used for the analysis presented below, age at marriage did fall substantially throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This fall requires explanation and an assessment of the extent to which poor relief could have been a contributing factor.<sup>2</sup>

There is evidence that from the late eighteenth century, families were increasingly allocated

<sup>2</sup> E. A. Wrigley, R. S. Davies, J. E. Oeppen and R. S. Schofield, *English population history from family reconstitution, 1580–1837* (1997), chs 5 and 7, and in particular Tables 5.4, p. 141, and A9.1, pp. 614–15; E. A. Wrigley and R. S. Schofield, *The population history of England, 1541–1871: a reconstruction* (sec. edn, 1989), pp. 215–19, 228–36, 257–65, and Tables 7.15, p. 230, and A.3.1, pp. 528–9; E. A. Wrigley, 'The growth of population in eighteenth-century England: a conundrum resolved', *Past and Present* 98 (1983), pp. 121–50. On mortality see P. Razzell, 'The growth of population in eighteenth-century England: a critical reappraisal', *JEcH* 53 (1993), pp. 743–71. On the specific methodological problems associated with family reconstitution, see S. Ruggles, 'The limitations of English family reconstitution: English population history from family reconstitution, 1580–1837', *Continuity and Change* 14 (1999), pp. 105–30, and see the regional analysis of demographic trends by P. Hudson and S. King, 'Two textile townships, c. 1660–1820: a comparative demographic analysis', *ECHR* 53 (2000), pp. 706–41.

poor relief. Huzel has argued that, 'By any criteria, the 1790s must be viewed as a turning point, for it was in the critical middle years of this decade that poor relief underwent a major and, in some cases, radical transformation'. This transformation was the widespread adoption of parish schemes for the relief of able-bodied married labourers, in contrast to the period before the 1790s when the vast majority of parish recipients had been the impotent poor. Such schemes were a response to the harvest failures of that decade, the rapid price inflation of the Napoleonic War period, and the post-war agricultural depression, coupled with the demographic pressure of larger families, and an increasingly seasonal and insecure labour market. Parishes increasingly resorted to a wide range of schemes, including the provision of subsidised food; 'allowances-in-aid-of-wages', popularly known as 'Speenhamland' payments, which were payments to those men who were under- or unemployed, sometimes scaled according to the prevailing price of bread and/or the size of the labourer's family; 'child allowances', which could be flat payments according to the number of children in a labourer's family (commonly starting with the third or fourth child under 10 or 12), or as part of the 'Speenhamland' system; the 'roundsman system', whereby labourers without work rotated between the farmers in a parish and whose weekly income was paid in part from the farmers and topped up by the parish; the 'labour rate', under which local farmers chose to either pay the rate or employ labourers without sufficient work; the provision of work, usually on the roads; or the workhouse. These schemes were incredibly flexible and were on many occasions combined. While there is patchy evidence that payments to able-bodied men 'overburdened with large families' were not new to the 1790s, it is likely that the extent to which parishes gave allowances for large families was a new feature of the late eighteenth century. Likewise, it is probable that payments to 'top-up' the inadequate wages of labourers only became common after the high price years of the 1790s.<sup>3</sup>

The vast majority of research on the prevalence of parish allowance schemes and their impact on fertility and the local labour market relies on the *Select Committee on labourers' wages* of 1824 and the *Rural Queries* collected in 1832. Analyses of this evidence suggests that in 1824 almost 50 per cent of parishes reported that they were subsidizing wages out of the rates while by 1832 14 per cent were. Much more common were child allowances, with at least three-quarters of parishes responding that they gave this type of relief in 1824, but only 38 per cent of parishes in 1832. Boyer's calculations reveal that child allowances were particularly widespread in the grain-producing south-east, where more than 90 per cent of parishes used child allowances in 1824, declining to 80 per cent in 1832. There are substantial problems with these sources. The 1824 Return failed to indicate what proportion of the parishes per county responded to the questionnaire and their relative populations. It is therefore impossible to establish whether the replies constitute anything like a representative sample and makes any assessment of the extent of the allowance system difficult. The *Rural Queries* suffer from similar problems, since replies were returned for only 10 per cent of the 15,000 parishes in England and Wales, accounting for just 20 per cent of the population. The wording of the 1824 and 1832

<sup>3</sup> J. P. Huzel 'The labourer and the poor law, 1750–1850', in G. E. Mingay (ed.) *The agrarian history of England and Wales*, VI, 1750–1850 (1989), pp. 755–810, at p. 773. This chapter by Huzel provides the best overview of the debate. A review of the Speenhamland decisions and scales can be found in A. Aspinall and E. A. Smith (eds), *English historical documents, 1783–1832* (1969), pp. 414–15.

questionnaires are also problematic. The 1824 Select Committee asked: ‘Do any labourers in your district employed by the farmers receive either the whole or any part of the wages of their labour out of the poor rates?’ The use of the word ‘any’ allowed an area to answer positively while making only negligible or sporadic use of these supplements, and this could account for the extremely high level of parishes reporting the allocation of child allowances. The 1832 *Rural Queries* asked parishes whether they paid child allowances, whether they gave any outdoor relief or wages out of the rates to employed able-bodied labourers, and whether these allowances were paid according to a scale. It seems likely that by asking questions about different forms of poor relief in so quick succession, parish officers gave answers confusing the schemes. In fact only 910 parishes answered the question relevant to child allowances. Furthermore, Blaug does not assess whether the parishes giving answers in 1824 and 1832 were the same parishes or types of parish.<sup>4</sup>

More crucial, however, is the fact that reliance on this evidence has limited much of the discussion to the decade immediately preceding the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. Relatively little is known about allowances from their more widespread adoption in the late eighteenth century until these reports, or about allowance schemes between 1824 and 1832. If we hope to assess the impact of allowances upon fertility, it is crucial that we establish the extent to which parishes resorted to these schemes in the same time period as fertility soared and age at marriage fell: that is, after 1750. While it is argued by those historians relying upon official reports that allowance schemes were widespread in the 1820s and 1830s, much of the largely sporadic local evidence of allowances in the second half of the eighteenth century and up to the 1820s suggests that allowance schemes were largely temporary expedients in response to high prices, extremely localized at the parish level, and abandoned after the crisis had passed. These studies will be reviewed later in the article and their findings will be compared to those of Campton and Shefford. If indeed flexibility at the level of the parish is the key to child allowances and Speenhamland payments, then it seems it might prove difficult to establish the exact prevalence and timing of allowances on any widespread scale. As Poynter has asserted, the crucial question is how often allowances were ‘a mere temporary expedient,

<sup>4</sup> Amongst the historians relying upon this data are M. Blaug, ‘The myth of the old poor law and the making of the new’, in M. W. Flinn and T. C. Smout (eds), *Essays in social history* (1974), pp. 123–53, at pp. 129–30; id., ‘The Poor Law Report re-examined’, *JEC* 24 (1964), pp. 229–45, at pp. 234–5; J. P. Huzel, ‘Malthus, the poor law, and population in early nineteenth-century England’, *ECHR* 23 (1969), pp. 430–51, id., ‘The demographic impact of the old poor law: more reflections on Malthus’, *ECHR* 33 (1980), pp. 367–81; id., ‘Parson Malthus and the Pelican Inn protocol: a reply to Professor Levine’, *Historical Methods* 17 (1984), pp. 25–7; G. Boyer, *An economic history of the English poor law, 1750–1850* (1990). Other historians who have contributed to this debate are D. A. Baugh, ‘The cost of poor relief in south-east England, 1790–1834’, *ECHR* 28 (1975), pp. 50–68; D. Levine, ‘Parson Malthus, Professor Huzel, and the Pelican Inn protocol: a comment’, *Historical Methods* 17 (1984), pp. 21–4; J. A. Goldstone, ‘The demographic revolution in England: a re-examination’, *Population Stud.*, 49 (1986), pp. 5–33; M. Neuman, ‘Speenhamland in Berkshire’, in E. A. Martin (ed.), *Comparative development in social welfare* (1972), pp. 85–127; id., *The Speenhamland county: poverty and the poor laws in Berkshire, 1782–1834* (1982). The figures cited here for 1824 and 1832 are from Blaug, ‘Myth’, pp. 129–30; Blaug, ‘Re-examined’, p. 241; Boyer, *Economic history*, p. 153. The problems with these sources are discussed by Blaug, ‘Re-examined’, pp. 231–2, 234, and N. Verdon, ‘The rural labour market in the early nineteenth century: women’s and children’s employment, family income, and the 1834 Poor Law Report’, *ECHR* 55 (2002), pp. 299–323, at pp. 302–3.

abandoned after the emergency, and how much it became the normal method of maintaining labourers'.<sup>5</sup>

Those historians relying upon the government reports of 1824 and 1832, the most prominent of whom are James Huzel and George Boyer, have sought not only to establish the prevalence of allowances but also to test the relationship between poor relief and population growth. Both Huzel and Boyer have examined the impact of parish allowances on birth rates at the parish level, and drawn opposing conclusions from their results. Huzel argued in 1980 that parish allowance schemes were implemented in the 1820s following a period of high birth rates and concluded that:

The evidence suggests that the Malthusian proposition should, if anything, be turned on its head. It is much more plausible to contend that the allowance system, far from acting as a crucial catalyst to population increase, was a response to it.

Huzel's evidence was sufficiently persuasive to lead Joel Mokyr to comment in 1985 that 'the demographic argument against [the Poor Law] has been effectively demolished', but it obviously did not sway Roger Schofield, who, in the same year speculated that 'the fall in the age at marriage may ... have owed much to social attitudes that ... allocated welfare preferentially to married males as heads of families'. The most recent contribution to the debate came from Boyer in 1990. It has already been noted that Boyer estimates that up to 90 per cent of rural parishes in the south-east gave child allowances in the early 1820s. He contends that allowances which were scaled by the number of children in a family would have provided a strong incentive for marriage and parenthood. Such allowances could increase a labourer's annual income by around 14 per cent for each child granted an allowance, which would be a total of 85 per cent of his annual income if he had three children. Boyer claims to have established a strong correlation between parishes which allocated child allowances at the third child in the 1820s and 1830s and higher birth rates, calculating that parishes that began allowances at three children experienced birth rates 25 per cent greater than those parishes without allowances.

Proving the direction of causation is always problematic, but Boyer claims that the provision of allowances caused higher birth rates, and he concludes that 'the payment of child allowances did indeed cause an increase in birth rates. Malthus was right'. It is equally plausible that allowances were a necessary response to the poverty faced by large families in the early nineteenth century. Boyer assumes a high degree of voluntary control over childbearing in labouring families, an assumption which contradicts Malthus' view and modern demographic research that it was the age at marriage which was the crucial factor governing fertility rather than changes in marital fertility. If instead we take Boyer's findings to mean that in parishes where child allowances started at three children, couples decided to marry earlier, it would

<sup>5</sup> J. R. Poynter, *Society and pauperism. English ideas on poor relief, 1795–1834* (1969), p. 83. A detailed assessment of the debate so far concerning the influence of the Poor Law on fertility and age at marriage, and the severe limitations of the Parliamentary Papers, will be provided in Samantha Williams, 'Poor law practice and fertility change in England, 1700–1834: a review' (forthcoming).

imply that couples would have had to wait at least five years before they became eligible for such schemes.<sup>6</sup>

The fundamental flaw in previous research is that little is known about the family circumstances of the *actual recipients* of parish allowances. This methodological problem is fully realised by Huzel, who has suggested that in order to assess the impact of poor relief on fertility fully, the ideal methodology would combine parish registers and detailed poor law records, thereby allowing for family reconstitution of those actually in receipt of poor relief. This article presents the results of just such an exercise. The parish was the unit where the giving and withholding of allowances was a daily, concrete, business. The research covers the period from 1770 to 1834 and thereby illuminates the under-researched period from the 1790s to the 1820s. The technique of nominal record linkage between poor law sources and parish registers for the communities of Campton and Shefford in Bedfordshire allows us to know, for the first time, the demographic characteristics of recipients of poor relief. Such a methodology reveals the proportion of labourers' families in receipt of allowances, the sums such households received, the exact timing and duration of allowance payments, and the size of their families at the point of receiving relief and afterwards. This research thereby throws new light on the impact of family allowance payments on the marriage decisions of the labouring poor. At the centre of the discussion is the extent to which allowances encouraged, or were a necessary response to, population growth.<sup>7</sup>

## I

Campton and Shefford lie nine miles south-east of Bedford, in Bedfordshire, a corn-growing county in the south Midlands. Campton was an average-sized agricultural parish, while Shefford was the neighbouring small market town with a more diverse occupational structure. Common land in these communities was enclosed in 1798. From the first census in 1801 to the 1841 census, population in Bedfordshire increased in line with national totals at roughly 79 per cent; the rate was slightly higher in Shefford at 87 per cent, from 474 to 889, while the population of Campton increased less, at 58 per cent, from 316 to 501. By 1841 the populations of Campton and Shefford had, like the wider population, become particularly youthful: in Campton 38 per cent of inhabitants were aged under 15 and in Shefford the figure was 36 per cent. In terms of occupational structure, the censuses reveal that an increasing proportion of Campton's inhabitants were employed in agriculture, from a figure of 62 per cent of families in 1811 to over 80 per cent in 1831, while the number employed in trade, manufacture and handicrafts fell from 35 per cent of families to between 10 and 15 per cent. By 1841 two-thirds of men listed as occupied in the census were employed as labourers and 14.5 per cent in manufacturing occupations. In Shefford by contrast, the majority of families (61 per cent in 1811) were employed in trade, manufacture and handicrafts. By the following decade this figure had risen

<sup>6</sup> Quotes from Huzel, 'Demographic impact', p. 380; J. Mokyr, 'The industrial revolution and the new economic history', in J. Mokyr (ed.), *The economics of the industrial revolution* (1985), p. 11; R. S. Schofield, 'English

marriage patterns revisited', *J. Family History* 10 (1985), pp. 18–19; Boyer, *Economic history*, p. 150.

<sup>7</sup> Huzel, 'Parson Malthus', p. 27.

to 85 per cent, but by 1831 the proportion of families employed in this way had fallen to 40 per cent, while 51 per cent were now employed in the elusive 'other' category. The proportion of families employed in agriculture shrank from 35 per cent in 1811 to nine per cent in 1831. By 1841 38.1 per cent of men were returned as employed in manufacture and 12.6 per cent in distribution and trade, but a substantial section of the male labour force (22.2 per cent) were agricultural labourers. The trade was chiefly in corn, timber, coal and iron, which were transmitted by river to and from King's Lynn. Three times a year cattle fairs were held in the town. The lace and straw trades became significant employers of women and children in the county towards the end of the century, with lace-making predominant in the north and greater recourse to straw-plaiting in the south. By the early nineteenth century in the parishes outside the northern region of the county, lace-making had given way to straw-plaiting under the inducement of higher earnings. In 1801 Arthur Young had observed lace-making in Shefford, but by 1808 Thomas Batchelor noted that the expansion of the plaiting district in Bedfordshire had 'spread rapidly' over the southern, central and eastern district 'as far as Woburn, Amptill, and Shefford'. Central markets for straw plait were at Luton and Dunstable, in the south of the country, but Shefford also provided a local market for plaiters and dealers. By 1841, 54 per cent of women recording an occupation in Campton were classified as straw-plaiters and 28 per cent in Shefford. The market town offered more opportunities for domestic service than Campton, with 23 per cent of women recorded as female servants.<sup>8</sup>

Before proceeding, the representativeness of Campton and Shefford needs to be addressed. As a rural parish dominated by agriculture, Campton could be taken as a proxy for other agricultural parishes in the south and east of England. The presence of the lace-making and straw-plaiting trades, which provided employment for women and children throughout the period investigated here, would have mitigated the worst aspects of male agricultural labourer under-employment. Other regions in the south and east of England were experiencing the collapse of rural industry, in particular spinning, while opportunities in lace-making and straw-plaiting, although in decline after 1815, still provided employment for substantial numbers of women and children in Bedfordshire. In the 1830s it has been estimated that the earnings of women and especially children made substantial contributions to the family economy and it was child wages that had the major impact in offsetting the low earnings of men. This does not, however, rule out Bedfordshire as unrepresentative. This was one of the counties in which contemporaries (and many historians) believed parish allowances to have been widespread. Bedfordshire was identified by the 1824 select committee as one of the six counties most addicted to the allowance system and allowances were mentioned in the parliamentary reports

<sup>8</sup> The average population per parish in 1831 for English agricultural counties was 534 and the median was 394. See P. Laslett, *The world we have lost – further explored* (1983), pp. 53–5, 304. Enclosure in Campton and Shefford is discussed by A. Young, 'Minutes concerning parliamentary enclosures in the county of Bedford', *Annals of Agriculture*, 42 (1804), p. 27. The populations and occupational distribution of Campton and Shefford are taken from the abstracts of census returns, 1801–1841. For the national totals see Wrigley and Schofield, *Population history*, App. 6, Table A6.7, total (1). The age structure of Campton and Shefford in 1841 is given in S. K. Williams, 'Poor relief, welfare and medical provision in Bedfordshire: the social, economic and demographic context, c. 1770–1834', (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge, 1998), ch. 2 and specifically Tables 2.4 and 2.5, p. 62. 37–28 per cent of females recorded an occupation in the census. On lace-making and straw-plaiting in the country, see N. Verdon, *Rural women workers in nineteenth-century England: gender, work and wages* (2002), chs 1 and 5.

for 1824, 1827, 1830, and 1832. Bedfordshire was one of Mark Blaug's now infamous hard core of 'Speenhamland counties' in 1824 and 1832. In the final years of the Old Poor Law the county had one of the highest levels of per capita poor expenditure of any county in England and Wales, at 16s. 4d. per head of population in 1834. Bedfordshire, along with the six other counties of Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Cambridgeshire, Cheshire, Cornwall, and Cumberland were all cited by the Poor Law Report of 1834 as typical of the country as a whole: 'We believe, in short, that a fairer average of the whole country cannot be taken'. It is clear that Bedfordshire is an appropriate county upon which to test Malthus's thesis, but we might need to qualify the result as more typical of south Midland counties with the presence of lace-making and straw-plating: Buckinghamshire, Hertfordshire, and Northamptonshire. Shefford provides a useful point of contrast to Campton and highlights urban-rural differences in parish administration. Again, south Midland counties were smattered with small market towns.<sup>9</sup>

The primary source for the research presented here is overseers' account books for Campton (1767–1834) and Shefford (1794–1828), which give lists of sums spent weekly on the poor, the name of the pauper, the amount given, and frequently the reason for the payment. These account books have been nominally linked to the existing family reconstitution for the two communities. Reconstitutions link together the baptisms, marriages and burials recorded in the Anglican parish registers for families and across generations. The methodology of linking poor law accounts with family reconstitutions is extremely time-consuming but ultimately rewarding since it permits the reconstitution of paupers' families. In Shefford over 70 per cent of families could be linked to the family reconstitution, while in Campton the figure was even higher, at over 90 per cent. In the cases of those families who could not be linked, it was sometimes possible to glean further information on the size of the family from the entries in the overseers' accounts. For the purposes of this article, the poor law histories – or 'pauper biographies' – of families have been analysed. When we consult the parish accounts we find lists of men in receipt of poor relief, but it is only when this information is linked to the reconstitution that we know whether an individual was married with children, and in this manner it is possible to identify the majority of families in receipt of poor relief of some kind. Methodological problems still remain. It is difficult to distinguish between the different types of parish allowance schemes in both communities. Child allowances are only clearly identifiable in Campton between January and December 1800 and at no point is specific mention made of Speenhamland scales of relief in either parish. Allowances-in-aid-of-wages are made in both parishes in the period after 1815 in the form of payments to the unemployed and under-employed, but it is not known if these payments were linked to a scale which aimed for a minimum income for a family or whether they were merely intended to top up earned wages

<sup>9</sup> Sokoll charts the immiserating impact of the collapse of wool spinning in Essex in T. Sokoll, *Household and family among the poor. The case of two Essex communities in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries* (1993). On women's and children's contribution to the family economy in Bedfordshire and other south Midland counties with rural industry, see Verdon, 'Rural labour market'. For Bedfordshire in official reports, see P. Grey, 'The pauper problem in Bedfordshire from 1795–1834', (unpublished M.Phil dissertation, University of Leicester, 1975). Blaug, 'Myth'; id., 'Re-examined'. The Commissioners' view of Bedfordshire as average is cited in Blaug, 'Re-examined', pp. 232–3. Poor relief per capita from W. Apfel and P. Dunkley, 'English rural society and the New Poor Law: Bedfordshire 1834–47', *Social Hist.*, 10 (1985), pp. 37–68, Table 1, p. 40.



to prevailing rates. This suggests that the types of allowance schemes identified in the secondary literature might actually be artificial and that historians' definitions have been imposed on a situation which was seen in less precise terms by local poor law administrators. As we shall see below, poor relief to families in these case-study communities was highly flexible, and supports other evidence of the sporadic nature of poor relief payments to families, rather than the more established viewpoint of the widespread prevalence of allowance schemes in the south and east. The evidence from Bedfordshire is similar to that found by Mark Neuman in his study of 16 Berkshire parishes. Neuman concludes that it is usually assumed that Speenhamland payments were 'ordered, universal and persistent', but he found that allowances were in fact often sporadic and locally diverse.<sup>10</sup>

## II

At the turn of the century, magistrates in Bedfordshire recognized that cash payments to able-bodied men had increased rapidly since the late eighteenth century. At their meeting in 1801, county magistrates had rejected a specific scale because it was considered to be lacking in flexibility, but they recommended that the county's overseers 'afford such extraordinary relief to all their labouring poor in proportion to the size of their families and other circumstances as may be adequate to their necessities during the continuance of the present pressure'. A few years earlier, in the particularly high price year of 1795, Quarter Sessions had ordered that all bread had to be standard wheaten bread; in 1801 this order to bakers was re-issued, and it was recommended that some of the allowance was to be made up in kind and that substitutes for bread corn were to be provided at moderate prices. If overseers did not adopt the recommendations, magistrates were recommended to hear complaints of the poor. In Ampthill in 1797 parish officials had agreed to have monthly meetings to fix the level of allowances. The hundred of Clifton, which contained Campton and Shefford, reported that food substitutes were

<sup>10</sup> Poor law account books for Campton and Shefford are found in Bedfordshire and Luton Archives and Records Service, Bedford (hereafter BLARS), P18/12/1-2, X514/1-3, P70/12/1-2. Transcription of Campton's and Shefford's overseers' accounts into a MS Access database resulted in over 80,000 records. The family reconstitution for Campton-with-Shefford and Southill is held at the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure, University of Cambridge. Shefford was a chapelry in the parish of Campton at this time, but since the two places were separate for the purposes of poor law and church administration, it is appropriate to view the two places as separate communities. In the family reconstitution, Southill – a contiguous parish – was also reconstituted along with Campton and Shefford. The overseers' accounts for Southill survive, but do not always name paupers, thereby making it impossible to construct the detailed pauper histories assembled for Campton and Shefford. On reconstitution methodology, see E. A. Wrigley, 'Family reconstitution', in E. A. Wrigley (ed.), *An introduction to English historical demography* (1966), pp. 96-159. Higher linkage rates for an agricultural parish (Campton) compared to a bustling market town (Shefford) are to be expected, since we would anticipate a higher turnover of population in the latter. Those who were linked were more likely to have stayed in the parish long enough to record events in the parish register. This was especially true for families, who were receiving relief because they were in the process of having children, and baptisms for these children were recorded in the relevant parish register. For further details on linking poor law sources with family reconstitutions, see S. R. Ottaway and S. K. Williams, 'Life course and life-cycle: reconstructing the experience of poverty in the time of the Old Poor Law', *Archives* 23 (1998), pp. 19-29. Neuman, 'Speenhamland in Berkshire', pp. 99, 101-9.

generally used, and some parishes distributed flour and herrings to labouring families at reduced prices.<sup>11</sup>

In 1818 a magistrate acknowledged before a House of Lords committee that the granting of allowances had become very common in Bedfordshire.<sup>12</sup> The same general picture is apparent from the evidence collected for the 1832 *Rural Queries*, relied upon so heavily by many historians. At least 10 out of 16 parishes responding to the questionnaire gave allowances on account of children, commencing with the third or fourth child under 10. It is not clear how representative these parishes might be since they only accounted for 12 per cent of parishes in the county. The proportion of families in receipt of child allowances varied enormously: in Willington only one man, with a very large family, received an allowance; in Cople only four families out of 136 were allocated relief; in Kempston 53 families were in receipt of allowances from a possible 348 families; and in Westoning almost all labourers received allowances for their families. In Redbornstoke hundred, all of the 14 parishes were to some degree operating allowances for single men as well as those with a family. On average 14 per cent of families in each parish were dependent on relief, but there was a staggering variety parish by parish, the figure varying between 14 and 60 per cent. Child allowances in Lidlington were flexible and were frequently adjusted according to the cost of living: 'Of late, relief is given only if there be four children; formerly money was often allowed for the third child, and in dearer times I believe for the second child'. Again, the evidence suggests that considerable flexibility was the hallmark of the allowance systems in many parishes. Similarly, while allowances for families in Bedfordshire were mentioned in the early nineteenth-century parliamentary reports, payments varied with economic conditions and from parish to parish.<sup>13</sup>

Although this evidence points to the use of allowances in many Bedfordshire parishes, it is still too sparse for us to make an estimation of the prevalence of allowance in the county between 1790 and 1834. There were 141 rural parishes in the county and it is evident that we know little of the day-to-day parish administration of all of these places over this long time span. Where we do have detailed evidence of this type is our case study communities of Campton and Shefford and it is to the results of this detailed reconstitution of pauper's families that this article will now turn.

### III

The data presented here relates to all long-term poor relief payments to families. 'Families' are defined as married couples with children aged 14 and under. It has been assumed that children over the age of 14 were independent from their parents, working away from home as servants or apprentices, or living in lodgings. Although we do not know the age at which children

<sup>11</sup> BLARS, QSM 19, p. 135; 21, pp. 15–16, 35–6, P30/8/11; F. G. Emmison, 'The relief of the poor at Eaton Socon', *Bedfordshire Historical Record Soc.* 15 (1933), chs 31–4.

<sup>12</sup> BPP, 1818, V, Evidence of the Rev. Hugh Wade Geary in 'Report of Lord's committee on the Poor Laws', 1817, printed in *Report of the Select Committee on the Poor Laws* (1818), p. 73 (separately paginated).

<sup>13</sup> P.P. 1834, XXX, *Report from His Majesty's Commissioners for inquiring into the administration and practical operation of the poor laws*, App. (B.1), 'Answers to rural queries in five parts', part 1, qq. 24 and 25 [hereafter *Rural Queries*]. The government reports are discussed by Grey, 'Pauper problem'.

typically flew the nest in these communities, since there are no local censuses for Campton and Shefford, Wall has estimated that around 60 per cent of children left home between the ages of 15 and 19. Families were eligible for both long-term relief, called 'pensions' by parish overseers, and occasional relief in cash and kind. Casual forms of benefits included cash in times of temporary illness, food and drink, fuel, clothing, help with paying the rent, with the costs of childbirth, christenings and funerals, the apprenticeship of children, the provision of nursing and medical care, the topping up of benefits from friendly societies, and even exemption from liability for the poor rate. A poor house provided accommodation for a few of the poor in Shefford, usually the transient. Pensions have been defined here as regular weekly payments for at least six months, and such payments accounted for at least two-thirds of parish spending on the poor. This contrasts with King's findings for six parishes in the south and east where, as a proportion of parish spending on the poor, pensions increased over the eighteenth century to almost two-thirds by the 1770s but thereafter fell to around 40 per cent in the 1820s. Since both contemporaries and historians have assumed that allowances in some form were widely available throughout most of the post-1790 period, it is necessary to assess the extent to which families received these long-term pension payments from the parish. From the pauper biographies of 'family-pensioners' it is possible to establish exactly who was in receipt of a pension and their family circumstances. In order to assess the 'attractiveness' of parish pensions to families, this section considers the timing, duration, and value of relief to family-pensioners in the two communities.<sup>14</sup>

There is a great deal of evidence in the secondary literature that relief lists grew increasingly male and younger from the late eighteenth century. It has been claimed by Dunkley and Boyer that it was the under-employed male, and men overburdened with large families in particular, who came to dominate the relief lists after 1790. In Berkshire, for instance, the number of families in receipt of some sort of poor relief increased more than three-fold between 1764 and 1801. Other research has confirmed this picture. King has shown that the recipient lists in 14 rural south and eastern parishes moved from being heavily skewed towards women in the 1760s (only 30 per cent male) to being heavily skewed towards men in the early nineteenth century (just over 60 per cent male), although the decline in the numbers of women pensioners was far less dramatic and more women were again relieved regularly by the 1820s. It is clear that men took an increasing share of pension payments. Age-specific information from four parishes reveals that between the 1780 and 1815 relief was increasingly allocated to the young, although elderly men were reclaiming their place as recipients after the end of the Napoleonic Wars. King is not able, however, to establish that this increase in payments to those under 50 took the form of 'Speenhamland' type schemes which paid male heads of families. Ottaway's research on the elderly stops at 1800, but she has shown for Terling (Essex) and Puddletown (Dorset) that although there were increasing numbers of adults under 60 coming on to poor relief, the proportion of parish spending given to the elderly remained high at between one-quarter and

<sup>14</sup> Wall estimates that for every hundred offspring aged 10–14, resident with their parents, there might be fewer than 40 still present aged 15–19. R. Wall, 'Leaving home and the process of household formation in pre-industrial England', *Continuity and Change* 2 (1987), pp. 77–101, at p. 91. S. King, *Poverty and welfare in England, 1700–1850: a regional perspective* (2000), pp. 155–6.

40 per cent. It seems likely from these studies that families were increasingly allocated occasional relief but that the elderly were not marginalised from the relief lists.<sup>15</sup>

Over the entire period for which there are overseers' accounts for the two Bedfordshire communities, there were only 24 clear cases of pensions to families in Campton (1767–1834) and 21 in Shefford (1794–1828). As a proportion of all pensioners per decade, in Campton families made up 11 per cent in the 1760s and 1770s, none in the 1780s, and then rose to 29 per cent in the 1790s and 26 per cent in the 1800s, thereafter falling to 23 per cent, 15 per cent and 7 per cent in the 1810s, 1820s, and 1830s respectively. In Shefford the proportion was always much lower, with families accounting for 17 per cent of pensioners in the 1790s, rising to 31 per cent in the 1800s, falling to 15 per cent in the 1810s and rising slightly to 21 per cent in the 1820s. This somewhat distorts the picture, however, since families largely came onto poor relief at specific times. In Campton payments to families were largely restricted to the 'crisis' periods at the turn of the century and following the end of the Napoleonic Wars. In Shefford, there was a similar, although less pronounced, concentration of family-pensioners around 1800, but there was no clustering following Waterloo; rather, it was in the 1820s that most families came to require relief. In Campton and Shefford, it was lone women, as single women, unmarried mothers, widows with children, and especially elderly widows rather than families who dominated the relief lists throughout the period. In Campton lone women made up between just over half and three-quarters of pensioners until the 1790s, when their proportion fell to 43–58 per cent (but still the largest group) in the period 1790–1820, and thereafter rose again to 50 per cent. In Shefford, by contrast, lone women always made up a greater proportion of pensioners at between 50 and 62 per cent between 1790 and 1830. In a recent study of the north Lincolnshire parish of Broughton, lone women dominated the lists of pensioners. In terms of the proportion of parish spending, families were always allocated far less than lone women in these two Bedfordshire communities. In Campton, less than six per cent of all spending on the poor was allocated to family-pensioners before the 1790s, but this increased to 11 per cent in the 1790s, 15–24 per cent in the 1800s, 1810s and 1820s, before falling back to just three per cent in the 1830s. Of all the expenditure on out relief in the Essex parish of Ardleigh in 1796–7, child allowances accounted for just eight per cent. In Shefford not only were fewer families relieved, but they were allocated less in terms of pensions and occasional relief in cash and kind, receiving 12–20 per cent of these payments between the 1790s and 1820s. Again, lone women in both communities were given the bulk of money and relief in kind, with at least three-quarters of this spending going to them in Campton, and 69–71 per cent in Shefford, except for the 1820s then their share fell to just 30 per cent. It is likely that some of this increase in relief to

<sup>15</sup> P. Dunkley, *The crisis of the old poor law in England, 1795–1834: an interpretive essay* (1982); Boyer, *Economic history*. Other studies which reveal an increasingly male recipient list are R. M. Smith, 'Ageing and well-being in early modern England: pensions trends and gender preferences under the English old poor law, 1650–1800', in P. Johnson and P. Thane (eds), *Old Age from antiquity to post-modernity* (1998), pp. 64–95; P. Slack, *The English poor law, 1531–1782* (1990), pp. 54–5; B. Stapleton, 'Inherited poverty and life-cycle poverty: Odiham, Hampshire, 1650–1850', *Social Hist.*, 18 (1993), pp. 339–55; S. W. Taylor, 'Aspects of the socio-demographic history of seven Berkshire parishes in the eighteenth century' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Reading, 1987), p. 405; King, *Poverty and welfare*, ch. 6; S. R. Ottaway, 'Providing for the elderly in eighteenth-century England', *Continuity and Change* 13 (1998), pp. 391–418.

families in Shefford during the 1820s was due to chronic under-employment, with some of the male household heads being old, despite still having some children at home. This will be discussed further below.<sup>16</sup>

It is possible to calculate the proportion of families these pensioners constituted from the numbers of families given in the censuses of 1801–1831. In the decade 1801–1810 a large proportion of Campton's families were in receipt of pensions, at up to 28 per cent. After that date far fewer families received parish support, however, and the proportions fell to between 14 and 17.5 per cent between 1811 and 1820, and to around 10 per cent between 1821 and 1830. In Shefford, a much smaller percentage of the town's families received pensions: between 6 and 11 per cent between 1801 and 1810, 4.5 to 5.5 per cent between 1811 and 1820, and 5 to 6 per cent between 1821 and 1830. It seems likely that fewer families received allowances in the market town since agricultural labourers were a small, and contracting, group. This is hardly the flood of families relying upon the poor law which has been described by other historians, most notably Blaug and Boyer.<sup>17</sup>

Tables 1 and 2 lists all the family-pensioners in receipt of parish pensions over the period. Before the 1790s in Campton, only two families received a pension: John and Sarah Waller and their one-year-old daughter, who received a pension from October 1768 for seven months, until the deaths of Sarah and their daughter; and Thomas and Ann Hayes and their five children, who had a pension from 1777 until Thomas died in 1780, after which the parish paid Ann a widow's pension. In the 1790s, pensions began for William and Lucy Newman (1792–1798) and Charles and Ursula Bland (1798–1811, 1816, 1821). Before the crisis years of the turn of the century, therefore, only four families received parish pensions over the whole of the 31-year period 1767–1798. In Shefford, the overseers' accounts do not begin until 1794, and so we cannot establish the number of family-pensioners in the decades before the 1790s. Nonetheless, from the start of Shefford's accounts in 1794 and until the crisis years 1800–02, only two families, those of James Chapman (1795–1802) and Robert and Mary Savage (1794–1805) received a parish pension.<sup>18</sup>

Harvest failures and wartime inflation caused many families to seek relief from the poor law authorities at the turn of the century. In Campton between April 1799 and April 1800 11 new families received parish pensions which conform to 'classic child allowances' in that they were paid on a scale according to the number of children in a family and adjusted every few months in line with volatile prices. Table 3 gives the duration of these allowances in Campton. The highest price year at the turn of the century in Feinstein's cost of living index is 1800, but it would appear that local prices in Campton were higher in 1801: child allowance sums peaked in that year, as well as in terms of overall spending on all of the poor. Allowances started at the

<sup>16</sup> The handful of militia men's families have been excluded from these figures. R. Dyson, 'The experience of poverty in a rural community: Broughton, north Lincolnshire, 1760–1835', *Local Population Stud.*, 70 (2003), pp. 11–28; R. Wall, 'Families in crisis and the English poor law as exemplified by the relief programme in the Essex parish of Ardleigh, 1795–7', in Ochiai Emiko (ed.), *The logic of female succession: rethinking patriarchy and patrilineality in global and historical perspective*

(International Research Centre for Japanese Studies, international symposium 19, 2002), pp. 101–27, at p. 108.

<sup>17</sup> Numbers of recipients were calculated as a proportion of the census populations taken from the abstract of census returns, 1801–1831.

<sup>18</sup> Although there are no burials recorded for Robert and Mary Savage, their children are referred to in the overseers' accounts as if they were orphans.

TABLE 1. Family-Pensioners in Campton, 1767–1834

Name	Dates	Husband's age at marriage	Wife's age at marriage	Description c. 1800	Number of children	Ages of children	Completed family size <sup>a</sup>
John & Sarah Waller	1768–1769	–	–		1	1	2
Thomas & Ann Hayes	1777–1780	19	28		5	7, 6, 4, 2 baby born	6
William & Lucy Newman	1794–1798	–	–		2	14, 11	8
Charles & Ursula Bland	1798–1812	–	–	'family'	–		3 <sup>b</sup>
John & Kitty Deverix	c. 1800 1805	18	17	'2 children'	2	4, 14m	9
Joseph & Ann Whittemore	c. 1800 1817–1822	32	18	'4 children'	7	13, 12, 9, 7, 5, 3, 5m	13
Thomas & Elizabeth Knight	c. 1800 1816–1819	23	25	'4 children'	5	13, 12, 9 9, 8, 5, 3, 4 m	5
James & Mary Gregory	c. 1800	24	–	'children'	2	1, 14, 12	5
Cornelius & Jennima Johnson	c. 1800	–	36	'boy'	4	1, baby born 13, 11, 5, 2	10
James & Phoebe Austin	c. 1800	–	–	'children'	4	13, twins 9, 6	6
William & Elizabeth Newman	c. 1800 1804	22	19	'4 children'	8	13, 11, 9, 7, 5, 3, two babies born 14, 11, 9, 7, 4, 3, baby born	10
James & Mary Ingram	c. 1800 1816–1818	31	18	'2 children'	7	13, 10, 8, 6, baby born 13, 10	8
John & Ann Halfhead	c. 1800	–	–	'4 children'	7	14, 12, 9, 7, 5, 3, baby born	10
Henry & Mary Clarke	c. 1800 1805–1806	–	–	'3 children'	2	4, 2	7
Jonathan & Mary Jordan	c. 1800 1810–1826	–	–	'son Frank'	3	[Frank] 9, 7, 4	11
Thomas Stevens	1816–1817	–	–		5	12, 10, 7, 4, 1	3 <sup>b</sup>
William & Mary Smith	1817	15	17		6	13, 10, 8, 6, 3, 9m	5
John & Nelly Hathfield	1828–1831	–	–	'4 children'	–		12
James & Elizabeth Newman	1817–1821 1826–1827	21	24	'boy' James	7	6, 4, 2, baby born 13, 11, 8, 5, 2, baby born 9, 7, 5, 3, 1, 2 babies born	11
John & Mary Lennard	1817 1821–1832	–	–		1	[James] 14, 12, 10, 8, 6, 5, baby born 2	4
James & Sarah Devonshire	1820–1821	30	22		3	6, 3, baby born	6
William & Hannah Devereux	1828–1830	21	16		7	14, 11, 5 10, 9, 7, 5, 3, 1, baby born	12
Joseph & Mary Stevens	1828–1830	32	23		5	10, 8, 5, 3, 1	10
James & Harriet Devereux	1833	21	17		2	1 and one stillbirth	4

Source: BLARS, P18/12/1–2; X514/1–3; Campton, Shefford and Southill reconstruction.

Notes: <sup>a</sup> these figures are for families who have been successfully linked to the family reconstruction and include parents and all living children (excluding children who die, even after the end of the period here), except for those marked <sup>b</sup>, who are families who could not be linked to the family reconstruction and are described in the overseers' accounts as 'family', 'wife', 'boy', 'son', 'girl', 'daughter', 'child(ren)', and so these figures represent a minimum number of family members.

TABLE 2. Family-Pensioners in Sheffield, 1794–1828

Name	Dates	Husband's age at marriage	Wife's age at marriage	Number of children	Ages of children	Completed family size <sup>a</sup>
James Chapman	1795–1802	–	–	'child'	–	3 <sup>b</sup>
Robert & Mary Savage <sup>c</sup>	1794–1805	–	–	'boy' 2 children' 'girl'	10, 6, 3	5
William & Jane Herbert	c. 1800	25	24	2	3, baby born	4
Thomas & Mary Smith	c. 1800	–	–	3	4, 2, baby born	3
William & Ann Stephens	c. 1800	25	25	4	8, 6, 3, 1	10
William & Sarah Odell	c. 1800	21	23	4	8, 5, 2 6m	8
William & Mary Hanks	c. 1800	–	–	1	7	4
Thomas & Mary Seeley	c. 1800–1807	–	–	–	–	3 <sup>b</sup>
James & Ann Kempston	1811–1822	–	–	3	12, 1, baby born	7
William & Nelly Richardson	1811–1812	–	–	'family'	–	3 <sup>d</sup>
James & Ann Humberstone	1812–1813	23	23	3	13, 11, 6	5
Braybrook	1817–1824	–	–	'son'	–	3 <sup>b</sup>
James Sibley	1820–1821	–	–	'family'	–	3 <sup>b</sup>
John & Priscilla Smith	1820–1822	20	16	2	two babies born	11
William Clow	1821–1823	–	–	'3 children'	–	5 <sup>b</sup>
Austin & Elizabeth Bowers	1824–1826	53	–	1	12	3
Thomas & Sarah Stevens	1828–1829	–	–	2	4, 1	5
James & Martha Whitbread	1827–1829	19	–	2	14, 9	4

Source: Source as previous figure.

Notes: <sup>a</sup> these figures are for families who have been successfully linked to the family reconstitution and include parents and all living children (excluding children who die, even after the end of the period here), except for those marked <sup>b</sup>, who are families who could *not* be linked to the family reconstitution, but who are described in the overseers' accounts as 'family', 'wife', 'boy', 'son', 'girl', 'daughter', 'child(ren)', and so these figures represent a *minimum* number of family members. <sup>c</sup> Although there are no burials recorded for Robert and Mary Savage, their children are referred to in the overseers' accounts as if they were orphans. <sup>d</sup> William and Nelly Richardson are linked to the reconstitution, but, although they have registered no births in Sheffield, the overseers' accounts refer to a 'family'.

TABLE 3. Duration of Family Allowances in Campton, c. 1800

<i>Name</i>	<i>Dates</i>	<i>Months</i>
James & Mary Gregory	Apr 1800 – Oct 1800	7
James & Phoebe Austin	Feb 1800 – Aug 1800	7
Cornelius & Jemima Johnson	Apr 1799 – Aug 1800	17
John & Kitty Deverix	Jan 1800 – Aug 1801	20
Joseph & Ann Whittemore	Dec 1799 – Aug 1801	21
William & Elizabeth Newman	Dec 1799 – Aug 1801	21
James & Mary Ingram	Dec 1799 – Aug 1801	21
John & Ann Halfhead	Dec 1799 – Aug 1801	21
Henry & Mary Clarke	Dec 1799 – Aug 1801	21
Jonathan & Mary Jordan	Dec 1799 – Aug 1801	21
Thomas & Elizabeth Knight	Dec 1799 – Mar 1802	28

*Source:* as Table 1.

second child, with 6*d.* per child per family per week, and so initial child allowance payments for two children were 1*s.* 0*d.* per family per week, 1*s.* 6*d.* for three children, and 2*s.* 0*d.* for four children. Overseers did not follow the scale slavishly, however, and appear to have been extremely sensitive to changes in local prices and the personal needs of each family, since the level of payments varied enormously over the period 1799–1802. While on the whole the more children the allowance was supposed to be for, the higher the allowance, there were considerable variations in the allowance within each category of family size. At the beginning of the child allowance scheme, for instance, families with four children were given 2*s.* 0*d.* a week, which quickly rose to 3*s.* 0*d.*; thereafter, however, payments were between 2*s.* 0*d.* and 5*s.* 0*d.* for families with four children. The parish withdrew allowances to three of the families by the end of 1800 and to a further seven eight months later, in August 1801, while payments continued until March 1802 for Knight's family. The most common length of time that these child allowances were paid was 21 months but their length varied between seven and 28 months. It is evident that there was a high degree of flexibility in this scheme, with payments adjusted up and down according to need and the scheme only endured for as long as the crisis.

When the pauper biographies of these families are examined, however, it becomes clear that although all the payments were made for a set number of children, most of these couples had *more* children than the number specified in the overseers' accounts. William and Elizabeth Newman, for instance, were allocated 3*s.* 0*d.* a week for their 'four children', but they also had another two children, six in total, alive at the time of the pension: James Hine was the eldest at 12, Elizabeth was 10, William was 8, John was 6, Ann was 4, and Sarah was 2. In addition, the couple had a further two babies while in receipt of a child allowance. That the payments were intended for only four of their children suggests that the eldest were working or apprenticed (since there are no burial dates for them), that children at the breast were not included, and that these payments were intended for William, John, Ann and Sarah. Likewise, James and Mary Ingram were allocated 2*s.* 0*d.* a week for two of their children, but they had five children



TABLE 4. Duration of Family Allowances in Shefford, c. 1800

<i>Name</i>	<i>Dates</i>	<i>Months</i>
William & Jane Herbett	Nov 1800 – Jul 1801	9
William & Mary Hanks	Aug 1801 – Apr 1802	9
William & Sarah Odell	Oct 1800 – Jul 1801	10
William & Ann Stephens	Oct 1800 – Oct 1801	12
Thomas & Mary Smith	Dec 1800 – Apr 1802	17

*Source:* as Table 2.

under 15 and another who was only a month old. Jonathan and Mary Jordan received 3s. *od.* a week for four of their children, but they had in fact six children under 15, one of whom was only 14 months old. A large family with many young children, and in many cases a new baby, would appear to be the qualifications for these allowances. It would appear that many of the older children were not included in the calculation (even some under 10), suggesting that many of them were working, and this would seem reasonable considering the high proportion of children working in Bedfordshire in this period from a young age, in lace-making or straw-plaiting. This means that families were eligible for child allowances for shorter lengths of time than those in parishes where children were eligible until they were 10 or 12 years old. That many families had more children than for whom they were receiving relief is an important new finding and only results from the careful construction of pauper biographies.<sup>19</sup>

In Shefford, fewer families required parish pensions at the turn of the new century despite its larger size; six families were allocated pensions. Payments began in Shefford between October and December 1800, later than in Campton. The duration of these allowances is shown in Table 4. Payments ceased to the Herbetts and Odells in July 1801, to the Stephens in October of the same year, but not to the Smiths until April 1802. The family of William Hanks received a pension a little later, between August 1801 and April 1802. The average duration of these allowances was around 12 months. In addition, John Bird's family received two large payments of £2 1s. 10*d.* in May and £1 in December 1801. The pension allocated to Thomas and Mary Seeley started somewhat earlier, in February 1799 and continued much longer, until 1807. There was no explicit reference to allowances by scale in the overseers' accounts and so, unlike Campton, the number specified by overseers and the actual number of children per family cannot be compared. Payments in the market town were not perfectly synchronized with the number of children per family, but families with four children did generally receive more than

<sup>19</sup> Of the nine families where it was possible to compare the number of children stated in the overseers' accounts and the family reconstitution forms, only one family had the same number of children in each; that is, eight families contained *more* children than for whom the allowances were specified (40 children in total on the forms, compared with 24 given in the overseers' accounts). On the age of work for children, see Williams, 'Poor relief in Bedfordshire', ch. 7 and O. Saito, 'Who worked when? Life time profiles of labour force participation in Cardington and Corfe Castle in the late eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries', *Local Population Stud.*, 22 (1979), pp. 14–29. For the price series, see C. Feinstein, 'Pessimism perpetuated: real wages and the standard of living in Britain during and after the industrial revolution', *JECI* 58 (1998), pp. 625–58.

TABLE 5. Duration of Pensions in Campton c. 1815

<i>Name</i>	<i>Dates</i>	<i>Duration of pension</i>	
		<i>years</i>	<i>months</i>
John & Nelly Hathfield	1817		8
John & Mary Lennard	1817		8
William & Mary Smith	1816–1817		9
James & Mary Ingram	1816–1818	2	5
Thomas & Elizabeth Knight	1816–1819	2	8
James & Elizabeth Newman	1817–1821	4	11
Joseph & Ann Whittemore	1817–1822	5	5

*Source:* as Table 1.

those with fewer children. Considerable flexibility at the parish level can be seen once again: pensions were allocated to these families for differing amounts of time (between nine and 17 months) and pensions were assessed according to local prices and the personal needs of the families. Shefford's overseers also gave out shorter-term relief during these years: to James and Ann Cannon, who was heavily pregnant, and their two children, for the three months between November 1795 and January of the following year, and to Samuel and Martha Ebdon and their child for the five months between February and June 1801.

Of the families who received child allowances in Campton 1799–1802, six required further relief later in their lives. William and Elizabeth Newman returned to the relief rolls in 1804, John Deverix and his family in 1805, and the Clarke family in 1805–6 and again in 1808–13. The other three families came back onto poor relief during the agricultural depression following the Napoleonic Wars: the Whittemores 1816–22, the Knights 1816–19 and the Ingrams 1816–18. A further four families drew relief for the first time after 1815: James and Elizabeth Newman and their children 1817–21, the families of John and Mary Lennard and John and Nelly Hathfield in 1817, and William and Mary Smith and their two children (in 1816–17). Table 5 shows the duration of these post-war family pensions. Thomas Stevens and his family had joined the list of family-pensioners in 1810 and continued to receive a pension not only throughout the immediate post-war period along with these other families, but until 1826. Of those families receiving a pension after 1815, most began between November 1816 and January 1817, but there was no usual end point and pensions lasted for between eight and nine months for the Lennards and Smiths, around three years for the Ingrams and Knights, and between five and six years for the Newmans and Whittemores. Of the families relieved in the post-war depression, three required further relief: Lennard's family were again granted a pension between 1821 and 1832, the Newmans in 1826 and 1827, and the Hathfields between 1828 and 1831. Four new families came on to the relief rolls in the 1820s and 1830s. The Devonshire family received a pension in 1820–1. Two families required relief in 1828–1830: the Devereuxs with seven children and the Stevens and their five children. In the early 1830s only James and Harriet Devereux were allocated relief. Many other families also received short-term relief in the 1820s and 1830s for periods of unemployment.

In Shefford only ten families received parish pensions in the next three decades after the turn of the century. There was no concentration in the immediate post-war period as there was in Campton, but rather a steady trickle of families in receipt of long-term relief. Furthermore, in the case of four of these family-pensioners, it is clear that, although they had dependent children, the pension was in fact intended to assist in old age, unemployment and illness. John and Priscilla Smith received a weekly payment for two years between 1820 and 1822, during which time they had two babies, but the overseers recorded that John had a 'bad arm' which kept him from working. Thomas and Sarah Stevens had children aged four and one when they came onto relief in February 1828, but Thomas, who had been admitted to the Bedford Infirmary in 1820, required a further visit in August 1828 and substantial parish support. Austin Bowers still had one child under 15 (12 years old), but was himself aged 65 and received regular relief in the two years leading up to his death in 1826. Likewise, although a daughter is mentioned in the overseers' accounts for Thomas Seeley and his wife, Thomas is described as 'old'.

Tables 6 and 7 show the duration of allowances (excluding those paid *c.* 1800). In Campton over the entire period 1767–1834, 13 families received pensions for a year or more, but only five of these received longer-term pensions of five years or more. In Shefford, ten families received pensions for a year or more, but once again, only five of these families received pensions for five or more years. Shorter-term pensions – between 6 and 12 months – were awarded to six families in the rural parish and to two families in the market town. In addition in the market town, some families were paid large lump sums (see Table 8). In the majority of these cases the length of time these payments were intended to cover was not recorded by the parish overseer, but it is likely that these were out-relief pensions.<sup>20</sup>

It is evident that in these two communities family-pensioners were largely concentrated in the period 1798–1802, with a further concentration of family-pensioners in Campton after 1815; outside of these periods, far fewer families required assistance. It is no wonder that Bedfordshire magistrates thought allowances common in the county in 1800 and 1818, but this does not mean that allowances were pervasive throughout the period 1790 to 1834. These periods of pensions to families will not have been recorded in the parliamentary papers of 1824 and 1832 upon which so many historians rely. The evidence available before 1824 from other local studies confirms the picture that many parishes adopted allowance schemes in the short-term, usually only in times of exceptionally high prices. In the Essex parish of Ardleigh it was predominantly agricultural labourers' families with young children who were deemed as 'deserving' poor relief during the catastrophic winter of 1795–6 and they were allocated cash payments in proportion to family size, subsidized flour, and free coal. The parish again gave poor relief to families on the 'flour list' between October 1799 and October 1801. Other Essex parishes assisted large families with allowances between 1795 and 1801, but relief was limited to periods of very high prices and

<sup>20</sup> Out-relief pensions were paid to families legally settled in Campton or Shefford but living elsewhere. Those with a settlement in these two communities were eligible for relief from Campton or Shefford only, and not the parish in which they were residing. In practical terms, this meant that the overseers sent pensions in lump sums to the overseers in the claimants' parish of residence. See T. Sokoll (ed.), *Essex pauper letters, 1731–1837* (Records of social and economic history, new ser., 30, 2001).

TABLE 6. Duration of Pensions in Campton, 1767–1834

<i>Name</i>	<i>Dates</i>	<i>Duration of pension</i>	
		<i>years</i>	<i>months</i>
John & Kitty Deverix	1805		6
Henry & Mary Clarke	1805–1806		6
James & Elizabeth Newman	1817–1821		6
James & Elizabeth Newman	1826–1827		6
John & Sarah Waller	1768–1769		7
James & Sarah Devonshire	1820–1821		8
William & Elizabeth Newman	1804		10
James & Harriet Devereux	1833	1	0
Joseph & Mary Stevens	1828–1830	1	6
William & Hannah Devereux	1828–1830	1	7
John & Nelly Hathfield	1828–1831	2	3
James & Mary Ingram	1816–1818	2	5
Thomas & Ann Hayes	1777–1780	2	6
Thomas & Elizabeth Knight	1816–1819	2	8
William & Lucy Newman	1794–1798	4	5
Henry & Mary Clarke	1808–1813	5	0
Joseph & Ann Whittemore	1817–1822	5	5
John & Mary Lennard	1821–1832	10	11
Charles & Ursula Bland	1798–1812	14	3
Thomas Stevens	1810–1826	16	0

*Source:* as Table 1.

entitlement to them controlled. Generally, when prices fell, allowances were discontinued. In terms of the proportion of labouring families in receipt of such allowances, the Essex parish of Great Saling paid between 10 and 14 labourers out of a total of around 50 labourers in the parish. In a later period, allowances were allowed to families of four and above in the parish of Thaxted in 1812, but again only for the duration of high prices. Likewise, in Kent and Sussex systematic relief to the able-bodied in the form of bread scales was most often found in crisis years such as 1776, 1801 and 1813, and that the sale of subsidised flour and the lists of the casual poor were only short-term. Neuman, in his study of 16 Berkshire parishes, found that allowances were often temporary responses to unusually severe seasons and high prices. We have already noted his point that whilst it is assumed that Speenhamland payments were ‘ordered, universal and persistent’, allowances were in fact often sporadic and locally diverse. Sokoll, commenting on poor relief policy in Ardleigh in the 1790s, argues that it is striking how quickly the overseers responded to the worsening material conditions of the poor and that this is true for downward swings in wheat prices as well as upward ones. He suggests that this is evidence against any ‘revolution of rising expectations’ with regard to poor relief. The most recently published monographs by Alan Kidd, Steve King and Lynn Hollen Lees have concluded from these local studies

TABLE 7. Duration of Pensions in Shefford, 1794–1828

Name	Dates	Duration of pension	
		years	months
William & Nelly Richardson	1811–12		8
James Sibley	1820–21		8
James & Ann Humberstone	1812–13	1	2
Thomas & Sarah Stevens	1828–29	1	2
James & Martha Whitbread	1827–29	1	7
William Clow	1821–23	1	9
John & Priscilla Smith	1820–22	1	11
Austin & Elizabeth Bowers	1824–26	1	11
Braybrook	1817–1824	6	10
James Chapman	1795–1802	7	0
Thomas and Mary Seeley	1799–1807	8	2
James & Ann Kempston	1811–1822	10	6
Robert & Mary Savage	1794–1805	11	0

Source: as Table 2.

that allowances were a temporary expedient adopted during particularly hard times and were rapidly reduced or abandoned when conditions became easier.<sup>21</sup>

How much were these pensions worth to families? Pensions paid out during the crisis years at the turn of the century were likely to have been only ever supplementary to earned income, and this is reflected in the figures cited above whereby families were allocated proportionately less in terms of pensions and occasional relief than they accounted for in numbers. Allowances in the two communities ranged from between 1s. *od.* and 3s. *od.* per family per week, with the most commonly given sums of 2s. *od.* and 3s. *od.*, and depended on the size of the family and their personal needs and local prices. The fact that they were paid at all suggests that the parish authorities believed the incomes of labouring families to be insufficient in the face of harvest failures and wartime price inflation. Child allowances ‘topped up’ incomes to a ‘minimum’ standard envisaged by local overseers and magistrates. Local weekly male wage rates in Bedfordshire in the 1790s were between 7s. *od.* and 9s. *od.*, and so the average allowance of 25*d.* a week represented between 23 and 30 per cent of these wages. Horrell and Humphries have computed the average annual income of families employed in low wage agriculture at around £26 at this time, so the average allowance might have represented 21 per cent of annual income. It is likely that child allowances accounted for a *smaller* proportion than this in Campton and

<sup>21</sup> Sokoll, *Household and family*, ch. 5; Wall, ‘Families in crisis’; A. F. J. Brown, *Essex at Work, 1700–1815* (Essex Record Office publications, 49, 1969), pp. 151–3; Baugh, ‘Poor relief in south-east England’; Neuman, ‘Speenhamland in Berkshire’, pp. 99, 101–9; id., *The Speenhamland county*; A. Kidd, *State, society and the poor in nineteenth-century England* (1999), p. 15; King, *Poverty and welfare*, p. 34; Lynn Hollen Lees, *The solidarities of strangers. The English Poor Law and the people, 1700–1948* (1998), pp. 66–8.

TABLE 8. Family-Pensioners in Shefford: Lump Sums, 1794–1828

<i>Name</i>	<i>Dates</i>	<i>Husband's age at marriage</i>	<i>Wife's age at marriage</i>	<i>Number of children</i>	<i>Ages of children</i>	<i>Completed family size<sup>a</sup></i>
William & Mary Hanks	1798	–	–	2	4, 1	3
John Bird	1801	–	–	'family'	–	3 <sup>b</sup>
William & Nelly Richardson	1804–1808	–	–	'family'	–	3 <sup>c</sup>
James & Ann Kempston	1807–1808	–	–	3	13, 11, 8	7
	1811			2	12, 1	
Benjamin & Rebecca Gilbert	1810	31	–	4	twins 14 twins 10	11
Joseph & Rebecca Stonbridge	1822	–	–	'family'		3 <sup>b</sup>

*Source:* as Table 2.

*Notes:* <sup>a</sup> these figures are for families who have been successfully linked to the family reconstitution and include parents and all living children (excluding children who die, even after the end of the period here), except for those marked <sup>b</sup>, who are families who could *not* be linked to the family reconstitution, but who are described in the overseers' accounts as 'family', 'wife', 'boy', 'son', 'girl', 'daughter', 'child(ren)', and so these figures represent a *minimum* number of family members. <sup>c</sup> William and Nelly Richardson are linked to the reconstitution, but, although they have registered no births in Shefford, the overseers' accounts refer to a 'family'.

Shefford, since wives and children contributed to the family economy through their lace-making and straw-plaiting. During the French Wars, despite price inflation, the cessation of foreign imports had increased demand and so wage levels in the two trades. In 1795 women could earn from 6s. *od.* to 12s. *od.* a week straw-plaiting and children between 2s. *od.* and 4s. *od.* a week. In 1808 earnings over 12s. *od.* a week were recorded for women straw-plaiters and women lace-makers could earn between 5s. *od.* and 9s. *od.* a week. It must be remembered that straw-plaiting was seasonal and high earnings were restricted to the months between April and June, when the price of plait doubled. Due to this, it is difficult to estimate the annual income of a labourer's family. Of three budgets of labouring households from a neighbouring parish in 1795, the average allowance represented 16 per cent of annual income. Elsewhere, Wall has estimated the value of the crisis relief provided by the overseers in Ardleigh, Essex, between December 1795 and March 1796, taking £30 as a possible annual income of a labourer's family. He found that although the combined schemes of child allowance cash payments, subsidized flour, and free coal would have accounted for up to 55 per cent of a labourer's annual income. These benefits did not entirely compensate for the rise in wheat prices, falling short by around 15 per cent.<sup>22</sup>

It is more difficult to make similar calculations for allowances in Campton in the immediate post-war period since the duration of allowances and the sums received by each family varied enormously, and far less could be earned in lace-making and straw-plaiting. In 1832 women lace makers could only earn between 1s. 6*d.* and 3s. *od.* a week, and earnings had fallen sharply to between 5s. *od.* and 10s. *od.* a week in straw-plaiting, although these earnings still compared

<sup>22</sup> Wall, 'Families in crisis', pp. 113–15; F. M. Eden, *The state of the poor: or a history of the labouring classes in England* (3 vols, 1797), III, p. cccxxxix.

favourably with male earnings in agriculture of between 9s. *od.* and 12s. *od.* Lennard's family was allocated an allowance for just eight months and received £2 13s. 6*d.*, while Whittemore's family received an allowance for six years, averaging £11 per annum. Since a number of families received pensions over several years, it is clear that the post-war depression's effect was longer than the previous crisis. In addition, unemployment and under-employment became pervasive for the many men and boys employed in agriculture. It is unlikely that families received much assistance from local charities or self-provisioning, although rather more could be obtained from friendly societies in times of sickness and unemployment. In Campton charitable relief was limited to just £5 in cash and two-penny loaves distributed once a year, and in Shefford there was no charitable provision for the poor. Following enclosure in 1798 few families had access to common rights. Friendly societies rapidly increased in number in the first half of the nineteenth century, and in 1803–4 there were four in Shefford, with a total of 146 members. This could account for 31 per cent of the town's inhabitants, although it is likely that not all of these members were from Shefford, but that some members lived in neighbouring parishes, possibly including Campton. Payments could be as high as 8s. *od.* a week, but such pay-outs were restricted in duration and, moreover, they were only for bouts of illness or temporary unemployment. In times of high prices, such as 1799–1801 and 1815–22, or for longer periods without sufficient work, labouring families had no option but to turn to the poor law.<sup>23</sup>

In both communities, most families received less than £7 a year in regular poor relief. Some were allocated between £7 and £14, but only a handful received payments higher than £14 a year. In the case of one family only – the Kempstons of Shefford – were payments so high that the parish must have been their main source of income and the sums they received were quite exceptional; their average annual payment was £18 and between 1812 and 1820 the annual pension never fell below £14, and was as high as £28 in 1813 and £25 in 1814. In Campton, John and Mary Lennard received comparable sums, but only for 1824 (£30) and 1825 (£28); in other years they received around £10. Similarly, Charles and Mary Bland, Henry and Mary Clarke, and Thomas Stevens' family were all given sums as high as £15 or £20 in specific years, but they more commonly received far less.

There were important urban-rural differences in relief allocation to families between Campton and Shefford. As a proportion of pensioners, Shefford relieved fewer pensioner-families and spent proportionally less on them than Campton. This could merely reflect the fact that there were far fewer labourers, and a decreasing number, in the market town, although this would be to assume that only the families of agricultural labourers required parish assistance, and not the families of those employed in other occupations. After 1815 it is possible that women and children earned less in lace-making and straw-plaiting and the incomes of their families might have required supplementing by the parish. More broadly, Shefford did relieve a smaller proportion of the total population than Campton, giving pensions to around

<sup>23</sup> Wage rates taken from Eden, *The state of the poor*, II, p. 2; N. Verdon, *Rural women workers*, ch. 5. S. Horrell and J. Humphries, 'Old questions, new data, and alternative perspectives: families' living standards in the industrial revolution', *JECH* 52 (1992), pp. 849–90. The evidence on alternative sources of income is from: BPP, 1823, VIII, *Reports from Commissioners: charities in England and Wales*, pp. 7–9. BLARS, X465/320 (Indenture, 1834); Young, 'Minutes concerning parliamentary inclosures', p. 27; *Rural Queries for Bedfordshire*; BPP, 1803–4, XIII, *Abstract of Answers and Returns relative to the Expense and Maintenance of the Poor*, pp. 1–8.

15 per cent of inhabitants between 1811 and 1831, whereas Campton relieved up to 30 per cent of their residents. Campton also spent more on its resident poor. Many other urban centres relieved fewer families and spent considerably less on their poorer inhabitants. In 1792, Howlett had observed that not only large manufacturing towns, but also parishes that were partly town and partly country relieved fewer people and spent significantly less on their poorer inhabitants. In the Essex parishes containing the towns of Thaxted and Stebbing, one-quarter of their populations were relieved, whereas in four rural parishes up to one half received poor relief.<sup>24</sup>

We have seen that for the majority of families parish pensions were supplementary and limited to very specific years of great hardship. Couples could not have predicted that at some point in the future, when they had started to raise a family, they would be eligible for these allowance schemes. It is doubtful that poor relief, limited in terms of duration and amount, could have 'encouraged' couples to marry and 'breed recklessly'. We have also seen that many families in receipt of relief at the turn of the century had very large families and the wait between marriage and qualifying for relief would have been long. Rather, allowances were given in the crisis years of 1800–1 to families who already had a large number of children. The evidence presented to this point shows that families only received pensions on a large scale after 1790 and that allowances in Campton in 1800 were given to large families. This suggests that parish allowances could only have been a necessary *response* to previous falls in the age at marriage and the consequential increase in fertility which fuelled rapid population growth. The timing of the fall in the age at first marriage is therefore crucial if we are to confirm that allowances were the response to, rather than the cause of, this change.

#### IV

Age at marriage for all women in Campton and Shefford fell steadily throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The figures for female mean age at marriage in bachelor/spinster marriages in 50-year blocks are shown in Table 9 and reveal a steady decline. Age at marriage fell more sharply in Campton and Shefford than in the country as a whole.

Figure 1 shows much the same information but in greater detail, with data for the period 1700–1830 divided into ten-year periods. Age at first marriage for women declined from 25.3 in 1700 to 23.0 in 1790, to its lowest point at 20.9 in 1810, but rose slightly to 22.8 in 1830. Male age at first marriage declined more sharply, from 27.3 in 1700, to 23.4 by 1790, and fell further to 22.1 in 1830. When viewed in this long-term perspective, men's and women's ages at marriage had been falling for at least a century before allowances were introduced. It has to be conceded that the age of brides fell from a plateau of 23 in the 1780s, 1790s and 1800s, to just 20.9 in the decade 1810–19, and it could be suggested that this further and significant fall coincides with the allocation of allowances to seven families after 1816; but there was no similar fall for grooms and, taken in this broader chronological sweep, it is difficult to sustain this line of argument. It seems far more likely that allowances were a necessary response to the rapid population increase over

<sup>24</sup> Williams, 'Poor relief in Bedfordshire', ch. 4; Huzel, 'Demographic impact', pp. 369–75, and especially Table 2; Brown, *Essex at work*, pp. 151–3; J. Howlett, 'On the population and situation of the poor in England', *Annals of Agriculture* 18 (1792), pp. 573–81.

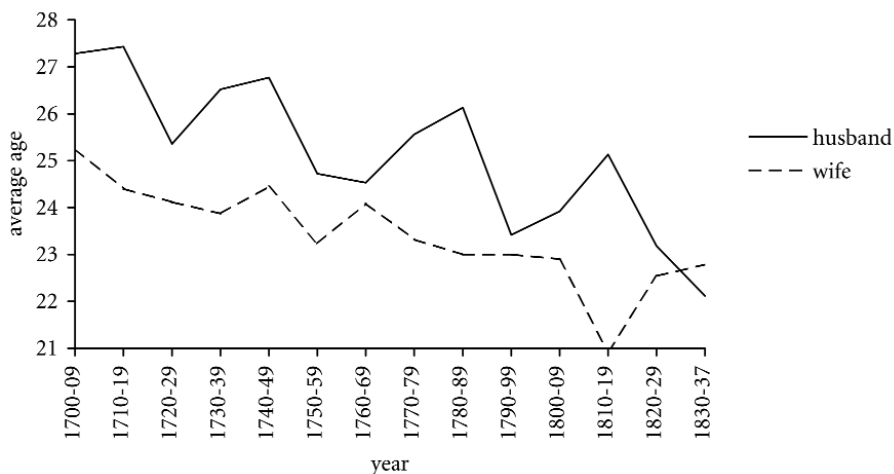


TABLE 9. Mean age at marriage in bachelor/spinster marriages in Campton-with-Shefford and Southill

Period	Male mean age at marriage	Female mean age at marriage
1600–49	27.3	25.3
1650–99	26.8	24.4
1700–49	26.6	24.4
1750–99	24.7	23.3
1800–37	23.5	22.4

Source: Campton, Shefford and Southill reconstruction.

FIGURE 1. Average age at first marriage in Campton-with-Shefford and Southill, 1700–1830



Source: Campton, Shefford and Southill reconstruction.

the century, as well as to the harvest failures of the 1790s and 1800s, the price inflation of the war years, and the unemployment and under-employment of the post-war period.<sup>25</sup>

All this suggests that some families came to require assistance after 1790 because they had

<sup>25</sup> Campton-with-Shefford and Southill family reconstitution; Wrigley *et al.*, *English population history*, pp. 134, 146–7, 184–5, 192–3. The numbers observed for average age at first marriage in Campton-with-Shefford and Southill per decade, 1700–1830, are: 1700–09 husband 18, wife 32; 1710–19, 24, 28; 1720–9, 25, 38; 1730–9, 23, 32; 1740–9, 15, 34; 1750–9, 17, 28; 1760–9, 40, 39; 1770–9, 30, 34; 1780–9, 27, 46; 1790–9, 39, 53; 1800–09, 44, 63; 1810–19, 31, 49. Ruggles has pointed out that because family reconstitution effectively misses late marriages after migration, it is possible that the average age at marriage is understated, although Wrigley argues that this does not pose a serious problem, as the mean age at marriage of ‘stayers’ is identical to ‘leavers’. S. Ruggles, ‘Migration, marriage and mortality: correcting sources of bias in English family reconstitution’, *Pop. Stud.*, 46 (1992), pp. 507–33; E. A. Wrigley, ‘How reliable is our knowledge of the demographic characteristics of the English population in the early modern period?’, *Historical J.*, 40 (1997), pp. 571–95.

married young and had a larger family. Tables 1, 2 and 3 give the age at first marriage, where known (and for only small numbers), for all the couples with children receiving parish pensions in both communities. In Campton the average age of brides was 21.5 and 24 for grooms, while in Shefford the average age for brides was 22.2 and 23.4 for grooms. These figures are similar to those given in Figure 1 and suggest that these brides and grooms were not so very different from their peers. A fair number did marry young, with just under half of all these women for whom we can establish an age at marriage marrying in their teens: Kitty Deverix and Harriet Devereux, for instance, were 17, and Priscilla Smith married at just 16. It must be remembered that the other half of the family-pensioner brides were in their twenties when they married. There were 143 marriages in Campton, Shefford and Southill between 1767 and 1834 of 'young marriers', that is where one spouse was known to be in their teens. These numbers are swollen since they include those also marrying in Southill, but of these 143 marriages only 10 couples later received poor relief in Campton or Shefford. Furthermore, Tables 1, 2 and 3 also make it clear that many of the families who required parish assistance went on to have more children without requiring further parish assistance, and this suggests that it was 'hard times' rather than marrying young or having a large family alone that tipped the balance for these families and necessitated a period of parish assistance.<sup>26</sup>

Other recent demographic research also supports the argument that there was no causal relationship between welfare provision and changes in marriage behaviour. Rather, it appears that age at marriage was falling for all social groups in many different regions and not just for those who might be in receipt of parish allowance payments. The unusually full records for the retail and handicraft town of Banbury, Oxfordshire, and the river port of Gainsborough, Lincolnshire, make it possible to calculate the age at first marriage by occupation. In both communities age at marriage fell throughout the eighteenth century for men and women of all social groups, and in Banbury there was a remarkable convergence in female age at marriage at around 24 by 1800. On a much wider scale, the most important trend to emerge from recent work at the Cambridge Group – Wrigley *et al.*'s *English Population History from Family Reconstitution* – is that nuptiality displayed similar patterns across all of their 26 reconstitution parishes. Despite marked differences in the occupational make-up of these parishes, all the communities experienced a marked fall in age at first marriage; the fall was, they argue, remarkably uniform both geographically and in socio-economic terms and the age at marriage for all social groups converged towards the end of the eighteenth century. They suggest that this evidence points towards a marked homogeneity in marriage behaviour throughout the country. It is not my purpose here to speculate on the reasons for the decline in age at marriage, but rather to insist that there is little substantive evidence from the perspective of welfare provision. If historians want to explain this phenomenon, then they will have to look elsewhere.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> These figures exclude Bowers, who married far later than the other grooms. It is possible that this is a second marriage.

<sup>27</sup> On age at marriage by occupation in Banbury and Gainsborough, see P. M. Kitson, 'Seasonal perspectives upon relationships between fertility, nuptiality and economic change in England, c. 1538–1800' (PhD thesis in

progress, University of Cambridge). Earlier work on Banbury was undertaken by S. Lauricella, 'Economic and social influences on marriage in Banbury, 1730–1841' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge, 1997), ch. 3 and in particular figs 3.9 and 3.10, pp. 81–2. Definitions of different types of parishes by Wrigley *et al.* were as follows: 'agricultural' – those where 60 per cent

## V

The findings presented here for the case-study of Campton and Shefford indicate that the poor law had little influence on the age at marriage of agricultural labourers. In these two Bedfordshire communities, while there was a long-term decline in age at first marriage, families received some form of allowances only after 1790 and usually for only limited periods, such as 1800–1 and the post-war years. Allowances in these two communities were a temporary solution to an immediate crisis and were rarely the normal method of maintaining labourers. Rather, the administration of payments to families was characterized by a high degree of flexibility. This study has also found that allowances were usually allocated to very large families only and, moreover, that many of these families went on to have further children but did not require additional parish assistance. After the crisis of c. 1800, only 10–20 per cent of families in Campton required pensions and the figure was half that for Shefford. In sum, it seems highly unlikely that allowances were the cause of early marriages and larger families, despite Malthus's protestations. Instead, the research presented here suggests that allowances to large families were a necessary *response* to the sharply worsened circumstances after 1790.

*Note 27 continued*

or more of the adult male labour force in the 1831 census were engaged in agriculture; 'retail, trade and handicrafts' – those with 40 per cent or more in this category at the same census; 'manufacturing' – 30 per cent or more; and 'mixed' – those parishes not complying with these other definitions. Wrigley *et al.*, *English population history*, pp. 28–39; ch. 5.