

Paul Butler, *On the Breadline in Iffley and Littlemore: The History of the Stephen Field Charity from its Origins in 172 to its demise in 1997*, Oxford: Iffley History Society Publication, 2025, 56 pp, £5, available from Iffley History Society and Iffley Community Shop.

This well-researched booklet, though barely sixty pages long, opens a window onto an aspect of parish life which affected countless communities across Oxfordshire and beyond between the sixteenth century and the present day – the dispensing of poor relief not only through the administration (until 1834) of the national poor law, but also through oversight of a disparate range of local parish charities, established by local landholders from a mix of pious and social motives. As with so many other aspects of parish government, the responsibility for administering these charities fell on ordinary farmers, tradespeople, and craftspeople, acting generally unremunerated, and squeezing their parish responsibilities into their working lives. Small wonder, then, that nineteenth century charity commission reports show so many parish charities to have been misapplied, mismanaged, or lost, while conversely it is a credit to the people involved that so many continued to fulfil their founders' intentions, up to a point at least. The specifics of the Stephen Field Charity are peculiar to Iffley and Littlemore – but the practical difficulties its history illustrates were fairly universal, which is the wider value of this little study.

The account is well organized, beginning with the details of Field's bequest, examining the fragmentary evidence (much of it nineteenth century) for how income was distributed, and looking at the problems of dealing with the charity's small seven acre landed endowment – which were considerably exacerbated by the fact that it lay in Crowmarsh Gifford parish, some thirteen miles from Littlemore on the edge of the Chilterns, and probably largely unknown to most Littlemore residents. Later chapters look at the Charity Commission's increasing involvement from the nineteenth century in trying to tighten up the charity's administration (another common theme), and at its twentieth century history, culminating in its winding up in 1997. Appendices list some of the key local players, and the beneficiaries of the charity in 1895, supplemented by background information on landownership and tithe commutation in Crowmarsh Gifford, and a useful conversion table of contemporary and present-day monetary values.

Field (who died in 1727 age eighty-two) was a moderately prosperous yeoman farmer typical of the middling village élites so involved in parish government, and often also responsible for establishing charities in support of their poorer neighbours. His family had long roots in Littlemore, where he was a tenant of Lincoln College, Oxford, though the Crowmarsh land with which he endowed his charity was a little freehold estate bought from his brother-in-law John Allin in December 1726. The author finds the purchase 'puzzling', though as Field made his will establishing the charity just a few days later, he most likely bought the land precisely to fund a charity which he must have already been contemplating, his brother-in-law having presumably alerted him to the opportunity. Field appointed Allin and another local man as trustees of the charity, to distribute the rent 'amongst the poor on St Stephen's Day [26 December] in every year for ever as they and their successors chosen by either of them shall think convenient'.

So far so good, although the relative vagueness of Field's instructions (perhaps compiled in a hurry) were to contribute to myriad problems over the coming centuries. First (unlike many contemporary testators), he did not lay down any criteria for who qualified for help or specify in what form the income was to be distributed, and though one-off cash payments to people

'in want' were recorded in the 1720s, by the 1820s it had been decided to distribute the income in bread. The nineteenth and early twentieth century evidence is much fuller, and the booklet contains some interesting information on the practicalities of how this distribution was organized, including payments to local bakers such as W.T. Gibbons of Cowley, who provided sixty loaves as late as 1958. Early doles were probably made in public, perhaps at the church, though by the twentieth century a more discreet voucher system allowed recipients to collect their loaves direct from the baker. The number distributed varied considerably, the 1893 allocation giving a single loaf to 114 individuals, plus a second loaf to twelve poor widows (a category long seen as among the 'deserving poor'), to six old men, and to thirty families with several children. By then, however, there was mounting controversy over whether the charity was targeting the right people, prompting the churchwardens to define a 'poor man' as someone earning sixteen shillings a week or less, with the express exclusion of one man who 'notoriously drank away his earnings'. Distribution in bread (long misunderstood as a requirement of the original bequest) ended only in 1960, when other forms of help were decided to be more beneficial.

The charity's wider difficulties, however, stemmed first from the fact that there was no formal mechanism for replacing the trustees, whose responsibilities passed informally through the Allin family; and above all that the land lay scattered in the open fields of a distant parish, where changes of ownership and tenancy, exacerbated by agrarian reorganization, meant that by the 1820s the location and limits of the land were largely unknown, causing diminution or loss of rents. Legal interventions followed, although collection of rent (and identifying who was liable) remained problematic well into the twentieth century, with solicitors' fees further reducing charitable income. The twentieth century nevertheless saw the gradual rationalization (overseen by the charity commission) typical of most such parish charities, culminating in the Field charity's eventual amalgamation with two other parish charities in 1997.

Such problems meant that the charity's fluctuating income (a table of which would have been useful) remained small, failing to match either inflation or rising rental values, and by the early nineteenth century, in common with most such charities, it was almost certainly dwarfed by the astronomical increase in the costs of statutory parish poor relief, a context which the booklet does not address. By then the time and effort involved in administering it was probably scarcely worthwhile, and though it is easy to catalogue the numerous failings in its administration (as the author does on pages 48 to 49), it is also possible to sympathise with the difficulties its unpaid trustees faced, in common with all those who kept the various strands of parish government going between the sixteenth century and the reforms of the nineteenth. The prime interest of this study will no doubt be for residents of Iffley and Littlemore, as a slice of local history; but at the same time it provides insights into the realities of local charitable and parish administration over several centuries, and into some of the more recent social changes which have led to the winding up or reconfiguration of so many comparable charities.

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