

## CONVIVIALITY AND CHARITY IN MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN ENGLAND\*

A sixteenth-century ballad describes how an unfortunate minstrel from Tamworth was helped by the charity of his neighbours. The minstrel was a poor man who had been robbed of more than £60 that he had collected to satisfy his creditors. Philosophical about his losses, he determined to meet his debts through “some honest means”. Then his fortunes improved. His neighbours urged him to brew some ale, they gathered together to drink it, and the minstrel raised some £5 from their drinking. This is how he describes the affair:

My loving neighbours of the town of Tamworth where I dwell  
Did liberally reward me, this is true that I you tell.  
Which kindness of them hath right well provided  
That among all my neighbours I am well beloved.  
For liberally with me their money they did spend,  
And those that came not themselves their money they did  
send.  
My neighbours did cause me to make a pot of ale,  
And I thank God of his goodness I had very good sale.  
For a bushel of malt I do put you out of doubt  
I had five pound of money or nigh thereabout.<sup>1</sup>

The good fortune of the minstrel of Tamworth was that his neighbours came together for what was often called a help-ale or

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<sup>1</sup> Bodleian Lib., Oxford, Ashmolean MS. 48, fos. 95-8. I have modernized spelling and punctuation, as I have done with other sources quoted in this article. The ballad was ascribed to Richard Sheale in a nineteenth-century edition: see E. Brydges and J. Haslewood, *The British Bibliographer*, 4 vols. (London, 1810-14), iv, pp. 99-105.

bid-ale: a communal drinking-session to raise funds for an honest person fallen on hard times. The generosity of the minstrel's neighbours did not wipe out his debts, but it was nevertheless substantial. The minstrel probably paid only a shilling or two for his malt, invested a bit of labour in brewing it up, and ended with well over £4 in profit. His neighbours, for their part, must have paid dearly for their ale, at prices that exceeded by many times the statutory cost of ale bought from a brewer or tippler.<sup>2</sup> Yet in the context of this help-ale, the price did not matter — what mattered was the assistance being given to the poor but honest minstrel.

The help-ale of Tamworth eased a social dilemma created by the minstrel's hard luck. It allowed him to recoup some of his losses with dignity; it permitted his neighbours to help him without embarrassment; and it reaffirmed, through drinking, the social solidarity of the neighbourhood. We only know of the Tamworth help-ale from a ballad, but whether fictional or not it represents a very real part of English life during the medieval and early modern centuries: that is, the existence of a social institution through which neighbours and friends assisted each other in times of crisis or need. In England during these centuries, ordinary people — many of whom faced hard poverty during at least some portions of their lives — looked not only to the “better sort” for relief, but also to each other.<sup>3</sup> They raised charitable money through festivals whose proceeds benefited a designated person, group of people or cause.

The vernacular term for these money-raising festivals was usually “ale”: sometimes just “ale” alone, sometimes “ale” joined by an identifying prefix. Among the most common ales were church-ales (to raise funds for parochial expenses), bride-ales (to

<sup>2</sup> A bushel of malt yielded about ten gallons of ale, which would normally have sold for 1-2d. a gallon.

<sup>3</sup> In using the term “ordinary people”, I wish to distinguish the vast majority of English people from those whose actions have figured so prominently in our histories of poor relief: clerics, aristocrats, gentlemen and gentlewomen, and merchants. Many of these “ordinary people” were never themselves poor, for many master craftsmen, yeomen, virgaters, franklins and others enjoyed adequate incomes throughout their lives. Others, however, lived on the very margins of poverty: smallholders, petty artisans, journeymen and journeywomen, unskilled labourers and the like. As Paul Slack has recently noted, a history of those who moved in and out of poverty in pre-industrial England would essentially constitute a “history of the English people”: P. Slack, *Poverty and Policy in Tudor and Stuart England* (London, 1988), p. 7. In this general sense, the poor constituted perhaps between a third and one-half of the English population.

endow marrying couples) and help-ales (to assist those who, like the Tamworth minstrel, fell on hard times). In Latin, they were commonly described as a *potatio* or *cervisia*, but clerks also often used *scotallum* (and other Latinized forms of “scot-ale”).<sup>4</sup> Both the Latin and the vernacular thus emphasized the importance of drink and drinking at these occasions, and it is as drinking-festivals that they have been most often considered by antiquarians and historians. Yet charity was often as central to these events as drinking. People went to ales for the drink, food, games, plays, dances and conversations that kept them entertained, but they also often went to contribute money to worthy causes.<sup>5</sup>

In their mixture of conviviality and alms-giving, ales worked within contemporary notions of charity, an ideal that encompassed not only aid to the unfortunate, but also hospitality and sociability. Hence charity at ales derived from the amity of all present as well as from the generosity of guests.<sup>6</sup> This article will focus particularly on charity as alms-giving (its most enduring definition), yet even this narrower meaning of charity had a contemporary use that combined poor relief with social obligation. As W. K. Jordan has noted, ideas of charity in the Elizabethan Statute of Charitable Trusts essentially codified definitions of alms-giving that had been current for centuries. Thus the *Vision of Piers Plowman* had taught in the fourteenth century that money should be given to many causes:

<sup>4</sup> I have applied my own sense of order (and nomenclature) to the array of contemporary terms for these ales. For example, bride-ales were also known as “Welsh weddings”, “new drinkings”, “wedding ales”, “penny weddings”, “bride-wains”, “commorths” and “bidden-weddings”.

<sup>5</sup> T. N. Brushfield, “The Church of All Saints, East Budleigh, Part II”, *Rep. and Trans. Devon. Assoc.*, xxiv (1892), pp. 334-57; F. A. Carrington, “Ancient Ales in the County of Wilts. and in the Diocese of Sarum”, *Wilts. Archaeol. and Natural Hist. Mag.*, ii (1855), pp. 191-204; S. Denne, “An Attempt to Illustrate the Figures Carved in Stone on the Porch of Chalk Church”, *Archaeologia*, xii (1796), pp. 11-20; E. Peacock, “Church Ales”, *Archaeol. Jl.*, xl (1883), pp. 1-15. A few historians have briefly noted the charitable effect of these ales. W. K. Jordan dismissed church-ales (and other parochial charity schemes) as “very modest indeed” in his *Philanthropy in England, 1480-1660* (London, 1959), p. 82. Keith Wrightson characterized ales (and unlicensed ale-selling in general) as a “system of circulating aid”: K. Wrightson, “Alehouses, Order and Reformation in Rural England, 1590-1660”, in Eileen and Stephen Yeo (eds.), *Popular Culture and Class Conflict, 1590-1914* (Brighton, 1981), p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> S. Bridgen, “Religion and Social Obligation in Early Sixteenth-Century London”, *Past and Present*, no. 103 (May 1984), pp. 67-112; F. Heal, *Hospitality in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1990), esp. pp. 15-16.

And therewith repair hospitals,  
 help sick people,  
 mend bad roads,  
 build up bridges that had been broken down,  
 help maidens to marry or make them nuns,  
 find food for prisoners and poor people,  
 put scholars to school or to some other craft,  
 help religious orders, and  
 ameliorate rents or taxes.<sup>7</sup>

When ales raised money for local causes — not only for poor relief, but also for parochial buildings, local repairs and community expenses — they were working within this broad contemporary notion of charity.

Charity at ales was not always given freely, for people were sometimes compelled to attend and compelled to be generous. Charity ales could also be quite self-interested, for their profits often funded projects that directly benefited contributors. And some ales were motivated more by self-help than charity, for they raised moneys to pay officers, build halls, repair churches and defray a variety of local charges. None of these aspects of the ales, however, precluded their charitable purpose. We might wish that all charity was “spontaneous, free, disinterested, discreet, and habitual”, but few people in medieval and early modern Europe gave charity entirely freely or unselfishly.<sup>8</sup> Consider, for example, the pious gifts of the late medieval nobility, which have been examined by Joel Rosenthal. Their gifts were not only framed by a set of “expectations, prescriptions, and demands” that virtually required charitable action, but were also directly self-interested, as nobles and their families sought to purchase paradise through charity.<sup>9</sup>

In its sociability, broad orientation, compulsion and selfishness, the charity given at ales was thus typical of other charitable giving in medieval and early modern England. Nevertheless these ales have received scant attention in assessments of charity and poor

<sup>7</sup> I have used the rendering of this text provided by Jordan, *Philanthropy in England*, p. 112.

<sup>8</sup> M. Mollat, *The Poor in the Middle Ages*, trans. A. Goldhammer (New Haven, 1986), p. 154.

<sup>9</sup> J. T. Rosenthal, *The Purchase of Paradise: Gift Giving and the Aristocracy, 1307-1485* (London, 1972), p. 8. Almost all students of charity comment on the gap between ideals of charitable giving and the real practice of charity. See, for example, Mollat, *Poor in the Middle Ages*, pp. 153-7; B. Tierney, *Medieval Poor Law* (Berkeley, 1959), pp. 44-67; M. Rubin, *Charity and Community in Medieval Cambridge* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 1-2.

relief during these centuries. As that history now stands, two mechanisms are primarily credited with alleviating poverty — the charitable foundations of rich patrons, and the poor-relief schemes of governmental authorities. We have examined the doles offered at monastic gates, the hospitals and almshouses founded by pious aristocrats, the workhouses and schools established by worthy townspeople, and schemes for poor relief concocted first in towns and later by Tudor parliaments. We have not entirely ignored charity among kin, friends and neighbours, but we have assumed that such assistance was highly individualized, informal and probably minimal. The history of charity and poor relief, as it is now written, is largely a history of how the empowered rich helped the impotent poor.<sup>10</sup>

The inadequacies of this history are perhaps best illustrated by our failure, as yet, to understand how these provisions actually sustained the poor. In a recent survey of charitable institutions in medieval England, for example, Christopher Dyer admits that the charity of the well-off was so limited that the “survival of the medieval poor still remains something of a mystery”.<sup>11</sup> Charity does solve this mystery, at least in part. The charity of ordinary people was not always an *ad hoc* matter of a loaf of bread given by one neighbour, or a loan proffered by another. In fact, ordinary people had a social institution for offering ready assistance; through them, they were able to raise large amounts of money very quickly; they were able to raise such moneys in ways that reaffirmed social solidarity; and they were able to help their neighbours, friends and kin through the crises of need and poverty that afflicted them. For many people in need, an ale probably provided much more immediate and substantial assistance than any charity offered by a monastery, almshouse or poor-law overseer. Popular rather than privileged, secular rather than pious,

<sup>10</sup> See esp. Slack, *Poverty and Policy*; A. L. Beier, “Poor Relief in Warwickshire, 1630-1660”, *Past and Present*, no. 35 (Dec. 1966), pp. 77-100; A. L. Beier, *The Problem of the Poor in Tudor and Stuart England* (London, 1983); C. Dyer, *Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 234-57; M. K. McIntosh, “Local Responses to the Poor in Late Medieval and Tudor England”, *Continuity and Change*, iii (1988), pp. 209-45; Mollat, *Poor in the Middle Ages*; W. Newman Brown, “The Receipt of Poor Relief and Family Situation: Aldenham, Hertfordshire, 1630-1690”, in R. M. Smith (ed.), *Land, Kinship and Life-Cycle* (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 405-22; T. Wales, “Poverty, Poor Relief and the Life-Cycle: Some Evidence from Seventeenth-Century Norfolk”, *ibid.*, pp. 351-404; J. Pound, *Poverty and Vagrancy in Tudor England*, 2nd edn. (London, 1986); Rubin, *Charity and Community*.

<sup>11</sup> Dyer, *Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages*, p. 257.

convivial rather than deferential, ales offered ordinary people in medieval and early modern England a crucial means of charitable giving and charitable receiving.

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The earliest origins of ales are shrouded in mystery, although they probably owe their evolution in part to Germanic drinking-customs, Christian ideals of charitable feasting, and peasant customs of self-help. Anglo-Saxon evidence suggests that some of the later problems particularly associated with church-ales — drinking and feasting in church, drunkenness at vigils, playing games on feast days — were already troublesome by 1000.<sup>12</sup> By the thirteenth century sources are more abundant, and they suggest a particular twist to the development of charity ales, for they associate them with other kinds of ales, some of which were clearly not charitable. Moreover these different kinds of ales are difficult to distinguish, since a single term — scot-ale, or *scotal-lum* — was commonly used to describe them.

The term “scot” sometimes meant merely a contribution, but it often denoted a compulsory contribution or even — as in the phrase “scot and lot” — a tax. This compulsory connotation applied to the best-known medieval scot-ales: those held by officers to extort money from people under their jurisdiction. Out of fear of official harassment, people were forced to attend these scot-ales and spend their money. In 1278-9, for example, the people of Somerset complained to the king about foresters who:

come with horses at harvest time and collect every kind of corn in sheaves within the bounds of the forest and outside near the forest, and then they make their ale from that collection, and those who do not come there to drink and do not give money at their will are sorely punished.<sup>13</sup>

Other scot-ales placed greater emphasis on the contributory meaning of “scot”, collecting money only to cover the costs of the festival itself (in whole or in part). On one manor of St.

<sup>12</sup> *Councils and Synods with Other Documents Relating to the English Church, A.D. 871-1313*, ed. D. Whitelock *et al.*, 2 vols. in 4 (Oxford, 1964-81), i, pp. 217, 321, 324.

<sup>13</sup> *Select Pleas of the Forest*, ed. G. J. Turner (Selden Soc., xiii, London, 1901), p. 126. Scot-ales of this kind were probably once a common source of revenue for lords and officeholders throughout medieval England. William Raleigh, bishop of Winchester, complained in the mid-twelfth century about officers “who make

*(cont. on p. 25)*

Paul's, for example, scot-ales were jointly funded by the estate and its tenants.<sup>14</sup>

Most important for our purposes, however, were scot-ales that were neither extortionate nor contributory, but charitable. Even in the early thirteenth century, some scot-ales raised money for charitable purposes. After a devastating fire in 1212, for example, the council of London encouraged ales that raised funds for rebuilding in the city with stone. The council's ordinance suggests that in thirteenth-century London scot-ales were commonly held for charitable purposes, much like the help-ale described several centuries later by the Tamworth minstrel: "First, they advise that all scot-ales are to be forbidden, save to those who have a licence from the Common Council of the City at the Guildhall and also those who wish to build with stone, so that the city might be secure".<sup>15</sup> It is possible that charitable ales of this kind — hosted by an individual to raise money for his or her benefit — account for the *cervisia* sometimes mentioned in court records. Henry Mile of Minchinhampton, for example, was specially cited in 1273 by his local court for brewing an ale (*pro i cervisia braciata*). Perhaps he, like Londoners after the 1212 fire, was brewing a kind of help-ale.<sup>16</sup>

Contemporary bishops, concerned about drunkenness at scot-ales, nevertheless recognized the charitable intent of some of these gatherings. In 1257 Giles of Bridport, bishop of Salisbury, condemned as improper any gathering of ten men for drinking, noting that these drinking-sessions were sometimes "by a change of name called charity scot-ales". William of Britton, bishop of Bath and Wells, said much the same thing when in 1258 he prescribed excommunication for those who held or attended scot-ales, noting that these drinking-sessions were also called

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drinkings of this sort for the purpose of extorting money from their subjects": *Councils and Synods*, ed. Whitelock *et al.*, ii, p. 416. See also *Rentalia et custumaria Michaelis de Ambresbury, 1235-1252, et Rogeri de Ford, 1252-1262, abbatum monasterii beatae Mariae Glastoniae*, ed. C. J. Elton (Somerset Rec. Soc., v, London, 1891), pp. 74, 80, 82-9, 97, 101, 108-14.

<sup>14</sup> N. Neilson, *Customary Rents* (Oxford Studies in Social and Legal Hist., ii, Oxford, 1910), pp. 150-1. See also *Rentalia et custumaria*, ed. Elton, p. 143; *Cartularium monasterii de Rameseia*, ed. W. H. Hart and P. A. Lyons, 3 vols. (Rolls ser., lxxix, London, 1884-93), iii, p. 61.

<sup>15</sup> *Munimenta Gildhallae Londoniensis*, ed. H. T. Riley, 3 vols. (Rolls ser., xii, London, 1859-62), ii, p. 86.

<sup>16</sup> Public Record Office, London, SC2 175/79, m. 4. See also *ibid.*, Just 1/175, m. 38; Just 1/174, m. 27<sup>d</sup>.

“charities”.<sup>17</sup> At least by the thirteenth century, then, some money-raising ales were charity ales.

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All of these kinds of ales — extortionate, contributory and charitable — continued in the late medieval and early modern centuries. Ales held by officials became rarer after the thirteenth century, but even in 1530 the officer of the park at Castle Combe held a two-week-long ale (*cervisia*) during which none of the town’s brewers were allowed to work. Contributory ales also became less common, but did not disappear entirely. In Chester in the 1570s the officers of the town still gathered together for their “shot” on Sundays — a drinking-session to which they each contributed 1d.<sup>18</sup> Yet it is charity ales that seem to dominate the social landscape of late medieval and early modern England. Their prominence might reflect more the growth of documentation for later centuries than any social shift, but it allows, in either case, a clearer picture — from roughly 1400 onwards — of the various kinds of ales that raised money for charitable purposes. From the great diversity of charity ales in England during these centuries, three emerge as the most common: ales to meet parish expenses; ales to relieve impoverished neighbours; and ales to support newly married couples.

Church-ales are the best known of these traditional money-raising festivities. Documented in numerous churchwardens’ accounts, described by early antiquarians such as John Aubrey and Richard Carew, and used as a touchstone in early seventeenth-century struggles over religious practice, in England the church-ale was a central focus of piety and popular culture, charity and play, co-operation and community. Church-ales varied widely from region to region and parish to parish, but Carew’s description in 1602 of a church-ale in Cornwall offers a good general picture:

For the church-ale, two young men of the parish are yearly chosen by their last foregoers to be wardens, who dividing the task, make collection among the parishioners of whatsoever provision it pleaseth them voluntar-

<sup>17</sup> *Councils and Synods*, ed. Whitelock et al., ii, pp. 560 n., 604.

<sup>18</sup> G. P. Scrope, *History of the Manor and Ancient Barony of Castle Combe* (London, 1852), p. 326; R. H. Morris, *Chester in the Plantagenet and Tudor Reigns* (Chester, 1894), pp. 381-2.

ily to bestow. This they employ in brewing, baking, and other acates [provisions], against Whitsuntide, upon which holidays the neighbours meet at the church-house and there merrily feed on their own victuals, contributing some petty portion to the stock, which by many smalls groweth to a meetly greatness, for there is entertained a kind of emulation between these wardens, who by his graciousness in gathering and good husbandry in expending, can best advance the church's profit. Besides, the neighbour parishes at those times lovingly visit one another, and this way frankly spend their money together. The afternoons are consumed in such exercises as old and young folk (having leisure) do accustomedly wear out the time withal.

When the feast is ended, the wardens yield in their account to the parishioners, and such money as exceedeth the disbursements is laid up in store to defray any extraordinary charges arising in the parish, or imposed on them for the good of the country or the prince's service, neither of which commonly gripe so much but that somewhat still remaineth to cover the purse's bottom.<sup>19</sup>

Church-ales relied upon extensive co-operation from parishioners who planned the event, provided drink and other provisions, and spent their money freely on the actual day. Their participation was encouraged by social pressure and sometimes compelled outright; indeed some parishes even specified the exact sum that each parishioner had to contribute.<sup>20</sup> The profits taken varied widely, but many church-ales raised substantial sums, providing the single most important source of income for their parishes.<sup>21</sup> Church-ales are probably best remembered for the church-building projects that they funded — purchasing bells, rebuilding churches and constructing church-houses (in which to prepare and hold future ales).<sup>22</sup> Yet church-ales also directly benefited the poor, for in many parishes they raised funds for general poor relief. As John Aubrey noted in the late seventeenth century,

<sup>19</sup> Richard Carew of Anthony, *The Survey of Cornwall*, ed. F. E. Halliday (London, 1953; first pubd. 1602), p. 141.

<sup>20</sup> For the association of neighbourliness with attendance at ales, see an incident at Wells in 1607 described in David Underdown, *Revel, Riot and Rebellion: Popular Politics and Culture in England, 1603-1660* (Oxford, 1985), p. 55; William Shakespeare, *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, II.v.61-3. For obligatory attendance, see *Calendar of the Plymouth Municipal Records*, ed. R. N. Worth (Plymouth, 1893), p. 29; Bodleian Lib., Dodsworth MS. 148, 2nd foliation, fo. 97 (transcribed with only minor changes by Carrington, "Ancient Ales", p. 193). For obligatory donations at church-ales, see *ibid.*; Brushfield, "Church of All Saints, East Budleigh", p. 354.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, J. C. Cox, *Churchwardens' Accounts* (London, 1913), pp. 38-9; *Cratfield: A Transcript of the Accounts of the Parish, 1490-1642*, ed. W. Holland (London, 1895), pp. 18-21; *Boxford Churchwardens' Accounts, 1530-1561*, ed. P. Northeast (Suffolk Rec. Soc., xxiii, 1982), p. xiii.

<sup>22</sup> On church-houses, see, in particular, G. W. Copeland, "Devonshire Church-Houses", *Rep. and Trans. Devon. Assoc.*, xcii (1960), pp. 116-41; P. Cowley, *The Church Houses: Their Religious and Social Significance* (London, 1970).

“there were no rates for the poor even in my grandfather’s days: but for Kington St. Michael (no small parish) the church ale at Whitsuntide did their business”.<sup>23</sup> In some parishes church-ales were even held to benefit specific individuals: in 1493 at Cratfield, for example, the churchwarden noted that the parishioners had held a “church ale for Thomas Kebyll”.<sup>24</sup> When William Piers, bishop of Bath and Wells, wrote to Archbishop Laud in 1633 to defend ales against Puritan objections, he praised their usefulness in supporting both church fabric and poor relief: “I find that by church-ales heretofore many poor parishes have cast their bells, repaired their towers, beautified their churches, and raised stocks for the poor”.<sup>25</sup>

Help-ales assisted the poor even more directly. On the large Yorkshire manor of Wakefield in the fifteenth century constables kept careful track of help-ales, reporting to the manorial court the names of those men (and occasionally women) who sought charity in this fashion. Their reports are frustratingly laconic, but they clearly distinguish help-ales from ordinary commercial brewing in the Wakefield villages. On the one hand, commercial brewers in Wakefield in 1412-13 were usually women, who were cited for brewing and selling ale against the assize of ale (*brasit cervisiam & vendit contra assisam*), and who paid small ameracements of 4d. or 6d. On the other hand, persons who hosted help-ales in that year were usually males, who were cited specifically for brewing a help-ale and selling against statutory regulations (*brasit unum helpale & vendit contra formam statuti*), and who paid much heavier ameracements (usually a shilling). They were also much less numerous than brewers (29 compared with 136), and their activities were more seasonal, clustered in the temperate months of the year.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> John Aubrey, quoted in Underdown, *Revel, Riot and Rebellion*, p. 45.

<sup>24</sup> *Cratfield*, ed. Holland, p. 21; see *ibid.*, p. 18, for a second example.

<sup>25</sup> From a letter of Bishop Piers to Laud as transcribed in William Prynne, *Canterburies Doome* (London, 1646, S.T.C. P3917), p. 151. Bishop Piers noted that many parishes in his diocese had ceased to hold church-ales. See also the version of this letter in *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic, 1633-4*, pp. 275-6.

<sup>26</sup> The manorial rolls for Wakefield are deposited in the archives of the Yorkshire Archaeological Society, Leeds, MD 225. My comments here are based upon an analysis of the rolls for 1412-13 (MD 225/1/138/1-2) and upon samples taken from other rolls throughout the century. Wakefield is the only manorial jurisdiction in which I have found regular ameracements for help-ales; as a general rule, only commercial brewers were amerced by manorial courts. Brewers were amerced under the provisions of the thirteenth-century Assize of Bread and Ale; holders of help-ales in Wakefield were, perhaps, amerced for breaking regulations about the prices of victuals imposed by

These patterns, which continue until reports of Wakefield help-ales cease in the 1490s, suggest that help-ales were very lucrative events, usually hosted in good weather by established male householders.<sup>27</sup> Fortunately we can fill out this skeletal picture of help-ales in Wakefield from other sources. First, help-ales were usually informal events, providing immediate relief to persons who had fallen on hard times. In a crisis, assistance would come, in the words of Bishop Piers, through the “benevolence and contributions of friends at a feast”.<sup>28</sup> Such an *ad hoc* response to a special crisis not only occurred in the case of the Tamworth minstrel, but also reflects the pattern of help-ales in Wakefield (where it was rare for a person to host more than one such event).

Secondly, help-ales usually required the active efforts of the person struck down by misfortune. The Tamworth minstrel himself brewed the ale which he then sold to neighbours, as did the impoverished wife of George Seddon, who brewed “by reason that some friends . . . did promise for to come to do her some good”. Friends and neighbours would attend the ale, and church and manor might support it, but the basic impulse for the help-ale usually had to come from the person needing assistance.<sup>29</sup>

Thirdly, charity dispensed at help-ales was quite discriminating. Contributions at a help-ale were dependent, at least in part, upon the host’s popularity and the degree to which he or she was

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the mid-fourteenth-century Ordinance (and later, Statute) of Labourers. See *Statutes of the Realm*, 11 vols. (London, 1810-28), i, pp. 199-202, 308, 313.

<sup>27</sup> Only one change occurs later in the century: ameracements paid by brewers of help-ales slowly declined and eventually lapsed altogether. By the mid-fifteenth century commercial brewers still paid small sums, but brewers of help-ales were merely attached, with no ameracement actually levied (or collected). This change probably reflects seigneurial accommodation either to the difficulty of collecting fines from those needing charitable help or to local resentment of such collections from funds given as charity. In any case presentments of help-ales probably ceased in the late fifteenth century because they no longer yielded income.

<sup>28</sup> Pryne, *Canterburies Doome*, p. 151.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Wrightson, “Alehouses, Order and Reformation”, p. 5. See also M. Ingram, *Church Courts, Sex and Marriage in England, 1570-1640* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 100; *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic, 1637-8*, p. 551. Sometimes help-ales were assisted or organized by the parish. For examples, see Cowley, *Church Houses*, p. 61; Brushfield, “Church of All Saints, East Budleigh”, p. 340. The tradition of help-ales was at least occasionally used to plan events on a larger and more formal scale. In 1592, for example, some defendants in a poaching suit organized an ale at Skilgate to meet their expenses. They had the ale announced from the pulpits of surrounding parishes, and they even mustered soldiers in order to create a ready-made clientele: F. Brown, “On Some Star Chamber Proceedings, 34th Elizabeth, 1592”, *Somerset Archaeol. and Natural Hist. Soc. Proc.*, xxix.2 (1883), pp. 53-60.

judged deserving of aid. The Tamworth minstrel noted that the success of his ale showed that he was “well beloved”, and Bishop Piers specified carefully that a help-ale assisted an “honest man decayed in his estate”. The persons cited for hosting help-ales in Wakefield can often be traced within their communities as members of long- and good-standing (some were even constables). Help-ales offered charity to worthy, not profligate neighbours, and certainly not to strangers.

Finally, it is quite clear that help-ales could be very profitable. The Tamworth minstrel’s claim of a £5 profit was possibly meant to be outrageously funny, but it might reflect a realistic yield from charitable neighbours. Certainly the exceptionally large ameracements paid for help-ales at Wakefield suggest that they were considerably more lucrative than ordinary commercial brewing. In any case the profitability of a help-ale came not merely from sales of drink (at whatever price), but also from direct contributions. As reported by the Tamworth minstrel, neighbours who could not attend his help-ale sent money in their stead. Such gifts in particular emphasize the essential charitableness of these occasions.

Nevertheless, because help-ales were such informal and *ad hoc* occasions, their charitable nature might sometimes have been confused with commerce. When the seventeenth-century Lancashire apprentice Roger Lowe noted in his diary that “Grace Garard had an Ale, called neighbours, went to spend money”, or that he enticed a young woman to go to “an Ale that old Harvie’s wife had”, he was reporting events that were perhaps less charitable than full-blown church-ales, but more charitable than ordinary alehouse drinking. The distinction was occasionally blurred: when George Seddon’s wife brewed so that her neighbours might “do her some good”, she was presented by the constable for unlicensed ale-selling. Yet at other times and places the distinction between commerce and charity was quite clear (as, for example, in fifteenth-century Wakefield).<sup>30</sup>

<sup>30</sup> *The Diary of Roger Lowe*, ed. W. L. Sachse (New Haven, 1938), pp. 45, 72; Wrightson, “Alehouses, Order and Reformation”, p. 5. Eventually the ethic of charity ales does seem to have infiltrated the commercial ale market in at least two respects. First, J.P.s in early modern England often gave alehouse-keeping licences to people who could not otherwise support themselves, using ale-selling as a form of charity: see, for example, *ibid.*, pp. 2-5. Secondly, several towns in the seventeenth century — including Salisbury, Dorchester, Weymouth, Devizes and Lyme Regis — sought to raise funds for poor relief through municipal breweries: see Slack, *Poverty and Policy*, pp. 151-2.

Closely related to help-ales were ales and feasts that raised money to help persons whose familial circumstances necessitated special assistance, especially at christenings and weddings.<sup>31</sup> Bride-ales in particular provided regular occasions for the intermingling of conviviality and charity. The term “bride-ale” had many associations, including both the wedding *per se* and the ceremonial drinking in the church that followed some weddings, but it most commonly described the secular feasting that followed the marriage ceremony. Perhaps the most famous of all bride-ales was that celebrated in July 1575 before the Elizabethan court. Described by Robert Laneham, it seems to have been an aristocratic exercise in popular culture: the festivities included morris dancing, running at the quintain, a play and a long procession of participants.<sup>32</sup> Most bride-ales, however, contained a crucial element not mentioned in Laneham’s account: charitable giving. At many bride-ales, neighbours and friends contributed both to the feast itself and to the endowment of the new couple.

Communal feasting was a crucial part of marriage, allowing friends and neighbours to celebrate publicly a marriage that was often arranged and solemnized more privately. Yet even modest bride-ales could require substantial expense. To ensure a successful bride-ale, a host had at least to provide good food, good drink and good music for dancing and entertainment. Since many newly-weds and their parents were too poor to pay in full for such festivities, guests often contributed to the bride-ale itself, bringing dishes of food with them, paying for the ale they consumed, or even providing necessary utensils or other supplies. This very practical charity ensured that new couples could have their marriages recognized with appropriate festivity, but without crippling expense.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> For money-raising at churchings, see *The Boke off Recorde of Kirkkie Kendall*, ed. R. S. Ferguson (Kendal, 1892), pp. 89-90; John Brand, *Observations on Popular Antiquities* (London, 1813), p. 15 n. Funerals provided occasions for a mixture of conviviality and charity, but in a different form: testators often arranged in their wills for funeral doles (of food, drink and sometimes cash) to the poor. Occasionally called give-ales, these events ensured a mournful crowd. See Denne, “Attempt to Illustrate the Figures Carved in Stone”, pp. 13-18; David Cressy, “Death and the Social Order: The Funerary Preferences of Elizabethan Gentlemen”, *Continuity and Change*, v (1989), pp. 99-119.

<sup>32</sup> *Captain Cox, his Ballads and Books: or Robert Laneham’s Letter*, ed. F. J. Furnivall (London, 1871), pp. 20-6.

<sup>33</sup> For the purchase of ale at a bride-ale, see a regulation from Halesowen in 1573, printed in Carrington, “Ancient Ales”, p. 203. For the use of a church-house for a bride-ale, see *Records of Early English Drama: Cumberland, Westmorland, Gloucester-*

The more substantial charity at bride-ales, however, came through direct donations to the newly married couple. Sometimes these donations were gathered at the church or collected from door-to-door, but the bride-ale itself was the ideal occasion for neighbours and friends to contribute to the endowment of the new household.<sup>34</sup> A northern poet described the ceremonial moment of bride-ale charity as follows:

The bride now on a cobby stool  
Sits down in the fold suggestively  
With a pewter dish on her lap,  
On which her dower is gathering  
The folk like peas in a keel pot  
Are then grown together mingling  
And crowns and half-crowns, thick as hail,  
Are in the dish jingling  
Right fast that day.<sup>35</sup>

In a scene of this kind, both the bride and her guests could observe who was liberal or parsimonious in their contributions, and this social pressure, when combined with the drink, good food and general jollity of the occasion, encouraged plentiful giving. Indeed donations were so plentiful at bride-ales in the sixteenth century that some localities — Manchester, Chester, Halesowen, Wakefield and Kendal — sought to limit their takings. The aldermen of Kendal specifically commented that bride-ales were held “most chiefly for the taking of money”.<sup>36</sup>

The collection of money at bride-ales in medieval and early modern England was not a trivial matter. As one commentator

(n. 33 cont.)

shire, ed. A. Douglas and P. Greenfield (Toronto, 1986), p. 343; Brand, *Observations on Popular Antiquities*, p. 71 n. For the bringing of food, see William Harrison, *The Description of England*, ed. G. Edelen (Ithaca, N.Y., 1968; first pubd. 1587), p. 131.

<sup>34</sup> For a collection at the church, see William Vaughan's *Golden Grove* (1608), quoted in Brand, *Observations on Popular Antiquities*, p. 76 n. For door-to-door collections before the marriages of journeymen in some London companies, see S. Rappaport, *Worlds within Worlds: Structures of Life in Sixteenth-Century London* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 229. For further descriptions of gift-giving at bride-ales, see J. C. Jeaffreson, *Brides and Bridals*, 2 vols. (London, 1872), i, pp. 210-30.

<sup>35</sup> This verse is attributed to Stagge, the blind poet of Wigton, in R. T. Hampson, *Medii aevi kalendarium*, 2 vols. (London, 1841), i, p. 289.

<sup>36</sup> *A Volume of Court Leet Records of the Manor of Manchester in the Sixteenth Century*, ed. J. Harland (Chetham Soc., old ser., lxiii, Manchester, 1864), pp. 99-100; Morris, *Chester in the Plantagenet and Tudor Reigns*, pp. 334-6; Carrington, “Ancient Ales”, p. 203; “The Burges Courts, Wakefield, 1533, 1554, 1556, and 1579”, ed. J. W. Walker, *Miscellanea*, ii (Yorks. Archaeol. Soc., lxxiv, 1929), p. 29; *Boke off Recorde of Kirkbie Kendall*, ed. Ferguson, pp. 86-93.

put it in 1608, the custom of gift-giving at weddings was “only put in use amongst them which stand in need”.<sup>37</sup> And many people felt such need, as suggested by the relatively late age of marriage during these centuries, by the efforts of parish officers to prevent marriage between people considered too poor to support themselves, and by the popularity of so-called marriage subsidies in elite giving.<sup>38</sup> Without assistance from neighbours, the public celebration of a marriage would have simply been impossible for many young couples, and without generous “sales” of ale or outright gifts of money at bride-ales, many young couples — for whom marriage was, in any case, often put off until their late twenties — would have been simply unable to set up new households. In an age when many young people had to delay marriage or eschew it altogether, bride-ales were a crucial resource.

Scot-ales, church-ales, help-ales and bride-ales were the most ubiquitous of charity ales in medieval and early modern England, but many other occasions brought people together for conviviality and charity. In Lyme Regis the townspeople maintained the Cobb, a quay essential to the town’s economy, through an annual Cobb Ale that continued well into the seventeenth century. In many towns guilds met for ceremonial feasts that raised money for various corporate uses (including alms-giving). In many parishes the parish clerk and other officers were partially supported by annual ales, for instance the clerk at St. Edmund, Salisbury. Throughout England in these centuries, people gathered, on many occasions and for many purposes, to raise money for charity by eating and drinking together.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Vaughan, quoted in Brand, *Observations on Popular Antiquities*, p. 76 n.

<sup>38</sup> R. M. Smith, “Some Reflections on the Evidence for the Origins of the ‘European Marriage Pattern’ in England”, in C. C. Harris (ed.), *The Sociology of the Family: New Directions for Britain* (Sociol. Rev. monographs, xxviii, [Keele], 1979), pp. 74-112; Ingram, *Church Courts, Sex and Marriage in England*, pp. 130-1, 212-15, 234, 268; Jordan, *Philanthropy in England*, p. 274.

<sup>39</sup> G. Roberts, *The Social History of the People of the Southern Counties* (London, 1856), pp. 327-41; Underdown, *Revel, Riot and Rebellion*, pp. 57-8; *The Ancient Usages of the City of Winchester*, ed. J. S. Furley (Oxford, 1927), p. 39; *English Guilds*, ed. Toulmin Smith (Early English Text Soc., orig. ser., xl, London, 1870), esp. pp. 3-4, 175, 182, 217; A. M. Straton, “Introduction”, in *Churchwardens’ Accounts of S. Edmund and S. Thomas, Sarum, 1443-1702*, ed. H. J. F. Swayne (Wilts. Rec. Soc., i, 1896), p. xviii; P. H. Ditchfield, *The Parish Clerk*, 2nd edn. (London, 1907), pp. 41-2.

In sketching out the charitable characteristics of these celebrations, I have brought together information from many centuries and many regions. The resulting picture shows clearly that ales raised moneys for charitable uses, but it elides differences of time and place. These differences, which are very hard to trace in the incomplete sources at our disposal, range beyond the scope of this article, but a few preliminary observations can be made.

All types of charity ales were not equally common throughout England. I have been able to trace evidence of money-raising ales in all regions of England, but particular types of ales seem to have been especially common in certain areas. We know much more about church-ales in southern counties than in northern counties, and it is at least possible that the large, sparsely populated parishes of the north were less congenial to such festivities.<sup>40</sup> But other ales, such as help-ales and bride-ales, were clearly popular in the north, and survived there longer.<sup>41</sup> It is also clear that ales remained popular in rural areas much longer than in towns. Ales survived in some towns — such as Plymouth and Manchester — into the sixteenth century, but the records of many towns — such as London, Norwich, Exeter and Coventry — contain very few references to ales even in the Middle Ages.<sup>42</sup> Towns did, however, evolve their own forms of charitable feasting, as in the annual dinners of guilds. Hence although no specific type of ale was clearly ubiquitous, charity ales in general — and

<sup>40</sup> Some sources suggest that there were northern church-ales: for example, the promulgation of thirteenth-century prohibitions against scot-ales from Durham as well as other episcopal sees, and the importance of sixteenth-century saints' day festivities (known in the north as wakes) in many northern parishes. But I have yet found no firm evidence for a church-ale further north than Derbyshire. Sedley Lynch Ware believed that church-ales were confined to southern and central counties: Sedley Lynch Ware, *The Elizabethan Parish in its Ecclesiastical and Financial Aspects* (Johns Hopkins Univ. Studies in Hist. and Pol. Science, 26th ser., vii-viii, Baltimore, 1908), p. 75.

<sup>41</sup> Brand, for example, noted that people in the north still contributed generously at christenings in the early nineteenth century: Brand, *Observations on Popular Antiquities*, p. 15 n. Frederick Eden noted in 1797 that neighbours in Cumberland still gathered together to celebrate marriages (at which they raised £100-200) and other occasions: F. M. Eden, *The State of the Poor*, 3 vols. (London, 1797), i, pp. 598-9. David Underdown suggests that church-ales endured longer in the downland villages of Wiltshire and Dorset (reflecting both conservatism and communal spirit) than elsewhere in these counties: Underdown, *Revel, Riot and Rebellion, passim*.

<sup>42</sup> Many towns received charters in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries freeing them from extortionate scot-ales. See *British Borough Charters, 1042-1216*, ed. A. Ballard (Cambridge, 1913), pp. 84-6; *British Borough Charters, 1216-1307*, ed. A. Ballard and J. Tait (Cambridge, 1923), pp. 108-9.

the concomitant mingling of conviviality and charity — were celebrated throughout England: in Yorkshire as well as in Devon, in Lancashire as well as in Kent, in Suffolk as well as in Shropshire.

Secular trends are exceedingly difficult to trace, for medieval information about ales is simply too patchy and incomplete. For example, between thirteenth-century episcopal prohibitions of ales and fifteenth-century churchwardens' notes about the expenses and profits of ales, I have found precious little information about these festivities. Yet they certainly continued, despite the deceptive silence of the sources.<sup>43</sup> It is just as difficult to compare the popularity of ales across the medieval/early modern divide. Our information about ales becomes much more abundant in the sixteenth century, but this abundance perhaps reflects archival changes rather than developments in actual practice. By 1500 we simply have more churchwardens' accounts, more letters, more diaries and more information about opposition to ales than for earlier times.

One aspect of the chronology of ales, however, is quite certain. By the seventeenth century, all kinds of charity ales faced considerable opposition, not only from religious authorities concerned about drunkenness and inappropriate celebrations of holy festivals, but also from secular authorities concerned about maintaining good order. Opposition, it must be emphasized, was not new in the seventeenth century; even Anglo-Saxon clerics had worried about drunkenness and festivity in churches, and in the thirteenth century both ecclesiastical and royal officials had ordered the elimination of scot-ales. But seventeenth-century opposition seems to have been more effective, perhaps because it was combined with a general campaign against traditional culture, perhaps because it coincided with a decline in notions of hospitality, perhaps because it was part of a general move towards more

<sup>43</sup> Information about ales is scarcer from the late thirteenth century until about 1400 particularly because episcopal concern about these festivals waned. For some fourteenth-century references, see *Concilia magnae Britanniae et Hiberniae, 1350-1555*, ed. David Wilkins, 4 vols. (London, 1737), iii, p. 61; *The Red Paper Book of Colchester*, ed. W. Gurney Benham (Colchester, 1902), pp. 13-15. For examples of some early mentions of ales and gatherings in churchwardens' accounts, see *Churchwardens' Accounts of Croscombe, Pilton, Patton, Tintinhull, Morebath, and St Michael's Bath, 1349-1560*, ed. [Edmund] Hobhouse (Somerset Rec. Soc., iv, London, 1890); *Churchwardens' Accounts of S. Edmund and S. Thomas, Sarum*, ed. Swayne; F. G. Lee, *The History, Description and Antiquities of the Prebendal Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Thame* (London, 1883); John Nichols, *Illustrations of the Manners and Expences of Antient Times in England* (London, 1797), pp. 183-93.

centralized control of charity (and other matters), or perhaps simply because other mechanisms had evolved — like parish rates and charitable briefs — that could easily replace ales.<sup>44</sup> Whatever the reasons, the end results are clear: many parishes in the seventeenth century replaced their church-ales with a system of parish rates, and other kinds of ales also declined. Ales fell out of use in towns before doing so in villages, and, perhaps, in southern and eastern regions before the north and west. Nevertheless church-ales (and other charity ales) survived in at least some times and places until relatively recent times.<sup>45</sup>

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Charity ales manifested many aspects of charity, as the term was broadly understood at the time. Hosts offered goodwill and hospitality; guests displayed their amity and neighbourliness; and money was raised by all for charitable purposes. Like other contemporary charitable practices, the charity dispensed at ales was sometimes compulsory, sometimes self-interested and sometimes quite discriminating. Yet charity ales differed from the contemporary giving of clerics, lords and merchants in at least one important respect: they much more directly alleviated the plight of the unfortunate.

Given the informal nature of these ales (and hence, their sparse documentation), it is simply not possible to weigh their financial significance against the charitable actions of the “better sorts”. We cannot talk in precise terms either about how much relief came from these popular institutions, or about the relative

<sup>44</sup> For attacks on ales as part of a general campaign against traditional culture, see Underdown, *Revel, Riot and Rebellion*; for the decline in hospitality, see Heal, *Hospitality in Early Modern England*; for the force of centralization in charity, see Slack, *Poverty and Policy*; for political and religious factors, see T. G. Barnes, “County Politics and a Puritan Cause Célèbre: Somerset Churchales, 1633”, *Trans. Roy. Hist. Soc.*, 5th ser., ix (1959), pp. 103–22.

<sup>45</sup> Carrington, “Ancient Ales”, pp. 197–8, 201; Peacock, “Church Ales”, p. 14; R. W. Malcolmson, *Popular Recreations in English Society, 1700–1850* (Cambridge, 1973), p. 31; A. Howkins, “The Taming of Whitsun: The Changing Face of a Nineteenth-Century Rural Holiday”, in Yeo and Yeo (eds.), *Popular Culture and Class Conflict*, pp. 187–208. Some elements of charity ales are also found in later friendly societies and box clubs, as well as in modern wedding celebrations, rent parties, fund-raising events for political causes, church bazaars and the like.

importance of such relief.<sup>46</sup> We cannot even know whether the £5 collected in the Tamworth tale, or the crowns and half crowns described in the bride-ale poem, are fictional exaggerations or accurate depictions. Nevertheless there is no reason to assume that the sums collected by charity ales were insignificant. Churchwardens' accounts demonstrate clearly that church-ales raised considerable amounts for parish expenses. The Whitsun church-ale at Stogursey, for example, raised more than £6 per year in the early sixteenth century (an enormous sum in an age when most wage labourers worked for only a few pence a day).<sup>47</sup> Moreover income from church-ales, in at least some cases, was not easily replaced by other forms of parish money-raising (such as parish rates or pew-renting).<sup>48</sup> Information about other kinds of charity ales — both the high fines levied on help-ales by the Wakefield courts and the restraints on money-raising at bride-ales imposed by some civic officers — similarly suggests that these events could be very lucrative. Our evidence is admittedly slim — and perhaps more evidence will be forthcoming in the future — but the actual sums generated by charity ales could clearly be substantial.

Furthermore the money raised by charity ales was probably more immediately useful than the charitable donations of the rich. Many well-off donors established institutions whose basic endowment and management swallowed up enormous sums of money. In 1437, for example, William and Alice de la Pole spent over 400 marks to relieve the poor and provide free schooling in Ewelme, but most of that money went to license and build the almshouse and to staff it with two chaplains. Only thirteen indigents received regular aid from their foundation.<sup>49</sup> Bride-ales and help-ales, in contrast, provided immediate relief, and church-ales also raised funds that more directly aided the poor of a parish. Many well-off donors also sought to shape the uses of their

<sup>46</sup> Of course, even estimating the extent of charitable giving by social élites is fraught with numerous difficulties. See, for example, the criticisms levelled against W. K. Jordan's estimates, as summarized in Beier, *Problem of the Poor*, pp. 21-3.

<sup>47</sup> "Stogursey, or Stoke Courcy", *Somerset Archaeol. and Natural Hist. Soc. Proc.*, xxiii (1877), pp. 66-7. Stogursey's profits from church-ales might have been low. Wallace Notestein has observed that income from church-ales in some early sixteenth-century parishes reached "as much as £10 or £15 or even £20": see W. Notestein, *The English People on the Eve of Colonization* (New York, 1954), pp. 244-5.

<sup>48</sup> See, for example, the case of Bere Regis, described by Underdown, *Revel, Riot and Rebellion*, p. 91.

<sup>49</sup> Rosenthal, *Purchase of Paradise*, pp. 71-2.

contributions: they offered to feed the poor, or to house them, or to buy them clothes. Help-ales and bride-ales, again in contrast, provided money with no strings attached. Given the immediacy and open-endedness of charity ales, many needy people might have more enthusiastically welcomed 12s. from a help-ale than word of the endowment of a new almshouse in their village or town.

Charity ales also offered assistance to the poor in a different way from that dispensed by well-off donors. The charitable institutions of the powerful — whether medieval or early modern — clearly gave to the poor, and clearly differentiated in the act of giving between those who gave and those who received. They identified and isolated the poor as a group.<sup>50</sup> In contrast, charity ales obfuscated the divisions between givers and receivers of aid. To be sure, the alms-giving intent of ales seems to have been quite clear to all involved. The very term “help-ale” shows that people were aware of the assistance they offered at such festivities, just as both “church-ale” and “bride-ale” specify the main recipient of the generated funds. Nevertheless alms-giving at ales was partly obscured by long-standing traditions of communal conviviality. As the ordinances of one medieval guild described it, people gathered together for feasting and drinking in order that “brotherly love shall be cherished among them, and evil-speaking be driven out; that peace shall always dwell among them, and true love be upheld”.<sup>51</sup> In drawing upon these traditions of communal feasting, and in celebrating charitable amity as well as charitable alms-giving, charity ales celebrated the cohesiveness of communities within which, at any one time, some were givers of aid and others received their gifts.

At the very moment when charity could have prompted social division between the givers and receivers of aid, charity ales thus worked to confirm social cohesion. They also obscured in important ways the actual act of giving. Within the raucous setting of a feast, generous giving was certainly encouraged (since it is easiest to be benevolent when one’s stomach is full and one’s throat well lubricated), but it was also, in a sense, drowned out. In a charity ale, giving was part of a larger festivity, not a solemn charitable act of the kind that identified benevolent patrons and humble

<sup>50</sup> Slack, *Poverty and Policy*, pp. 7-8.

<sup>51</sup> “Stratford-Upon-Avon: Guild of the Holy Cross”, in *English Gilds*, ed. Smith, p. 217.

clients. Even the ritualized giving of the northern bride-ale described in the verse quoted above took place in a crowded setting, probably accompanied by talk, laughter and further feasting; at other charity ales, giving was probably even more casual and, therefore, more unnoticed.

The mingling of commerce and charity at ales further obscured the act of giving. At many charity ales people did, after all, actually purchase their food and drink; they just did so at grossly inflated prices.<sup>52</sup> Who was to say (or bother to say) what money had been expended in an ordinary commercial transaction and what money had been expended as charity? By merging almsgiving with both conviviality and commerce, charity-ales minimized the potential social divisiveness of poverty and charity. At a church-ale or bride-ale or help-ale, everyone had a good time (no matter what the expense), and even the poorest recipient of charity knew that his or her neighbours had taken some pleasure from the event.

Charity was further obfuscated by the reciprocity inherent to charity ales. All charitable giving involves some measure of reciprocity, but the giving that occurred at church-ales, help-ales and bride-ales involved more reciprocity than did the benevolence of the rich towards the poor. Well-off donors established almshouses, hospitals and schools, and the poor often accepted their charity anonymously and without obligation (save perhaps the obligation of deference). Charity ales were different. Because they occurred in familiar local settings, charity ales affirmed relationships between known donors and known recipients. These relationships were often marked by socio-economic divisions and riven by social conflict, but they were nevertheless more balanced and more reciprocal than relations between the very rich and the very poor. Neither of these latter groups played an important role at charity ales: the rich attended only perfunctorily, and vagrants, beggars or idlers were generally excluded from their charitable relief. Charity ales drew people from a middling range: some of these people (such as substantial yeomen and artisans) might never have needed charity themselves, but many others (cottars, unskilled labourers and the respectable poor) faced dire need themselves on an occasional basis. At any one time perhaps only a few local people would need relief, but many local people might

<sup>52</sup> At Stogursey in the sixteenth century, for example, ale was sold at the church-ale for 5d. a quart: "Stogursey, or Stoke Courcy", p. 66.

need relief at some point in their lives. In a world where marriages were often delayed for years because of economic need, poverty was a challenge for many young people. In a world where a bad harvest could put one-fifth of a town's families on the poor rolls, poverty was close at hand for many households. And in a world where many old and widowed persons passed their last years dependent upon parochial assistance, poverty was a threatening spectre for the ageing. Reciprocity at charity ales was not formally stipulated (and certainly not all who contributed would eventually need similar assistance), but many people could reasonably expect that they would both contribute to and benefit from charity ales during the course of their lives.

This sense of potential reciprocity might have been especially important for women, for whom the insecurities of their socio-economic position were exacerbated by the disadvantages of their sex. In medieval and early modern England, many women lived in desperate need of charity, and when relief schemes did not discriminate on the basis of sex, women — poor girls, single mothers, ageing widows — always sought aid in large numbers. By the late seventeenth century sexual divisions in poor relief seem very marked: male householders paid poor rates that were granted, via male overseers, to the worthy poor of the parish, a group that included large numbers of poor spinsters, widows and mothers. Charity ales seem to have offered women a more reciprocal relationship to the communities upon which they so often had to depend. Women were very active in charity ales — as hosts receiving charity, to be sure, but also as organizers and as guests offering charity.<sup>53</sup> Even those who lacked money to contribute could offer simpler gifts — such as their labour, or some food. For women, as for others, charity ales were a resource that

<sup>53</sup> Churchwardens' accounts often note payments to women for their help in brewing ale or otherwise preparing for church-ales. For examples, see *Records of Early English Drama: Devon*, ed. J. M. Wasson (Toronto, 1986), p. 310; Brushfield, "Church of All Saints, East Budleigh", p. 338; Cox, *Churchwardens' Accounts*, p. 290. In addition, women's gatherings often contributed large amounts to the parish chest. See, for example, the women's gatherings at St. Mary at Hill, London (where in the late fifteenth century women gathered two to three times as much as the sums gathered by the men of the parish): *The Medieval Records of a London City Church (St. Mary at Hill), 1420-1559*, ed. H. Littlehales, 2 vols. (Early English Text Soc., orig. ser., cxxv, cxxviii, London, 1904-5), i, pp. 221-32. See also C. Kerry, *A History of the Municipal Church of St. Lawrence, Reading* (Reading, 1883), p. 239. For a discussion of how some poor-relief efforts attempted to employ poor women, see Diane Willen, "Women in the Public Sphere in Early Modern England: The Case of the Urban Working Poor", *Sixteenth Century Jnl.*, xix (1988), pp. 559-75.

entertained, sustained and maintained them as members of their communities.

There is no need to romanticize charity ales. They excluded vagrants, strangers and others among the desperately poor from assistance. They gave rise to drunkenness, violence and crime. They coerced attendance and contributions from unwilling neighbours. But they were effective. They solve, at least in part, the “mystery” of the survival of the poor in medieval and early modern England. The poor survived because they did not have to rely exclusively upon the institutions of the generous rich. They survived because they had charitable institutions of their own.

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