

*Managing Poverty: Cheltenham Settlement Examinations and Removal Orders, 1831-52.* John Simpson, ed. lxvii, 459 pp. BGAS: Gloucestershire Record Series, Vol 34. Hardback £22.50. [ISBN 978-0-900197-99-4].

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries saw a rapid expansion of Cheltenham as a fashionable destination both for permanent residency, and for seasonal and short-term visitors, with the population of Cheltenham parish increasing by over 170% between 1801 and 1811. Despite a gradual reduction in growth over the next 30 years the town was still ranked thirtieth of the 74 principal towns and cities in England and Wales by population size in 1841. With these people of substantial means came significant demand for those who could service their needs, such as domestic servants, builders and other craftsmen, laundresses and many others. These roles were often subject to seasonal variations and changes in economic growth, and some of those who started with little and came to the town looking for opportunities found that they were forced to beg for parish relief. The assessment of a pauper's right to receive that relief was known as settlement examination.

In 1969 Irvine Gray, then Gloucestershire's County Archivist, published the *Cheltenham Settlement Examinations from 1815 to 1826*. This slim volume was the first stand-alone publication by the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society (BGAS) which documented record holdings other than parish records. Sadly, this volume did not explore the impact of national economic factors in the 1830s and 1840s and the consequential poverty, misfortune and displacement.

Volume 34 of the Gloucestershire Record Series, published by the BGAS in 2020 and edited by John Simpson, looks to remedy those omissions, covering the settlement examinations of some 1,400 people and their dependents (about 3,530 people in all) who came to Cheltenham over a 20-year period between 1831 and 1852. The focus of this volume is on those paupers who the local Overseers of the Poor regarded as likely to belong to other parishes, both inside and beyond Gloucestershire, to which they might be removed.

Management of the country's poor was often a complex mixture of the law and personal responsibility. In his introduction John Simpson provides a useful overview of both the historical and local contexts of national Poor Laws following the dissolution of the monasteries in the 1530s. The earliest Poor Laws, such as the Poor Relief Act of 1601, emphasised that care of the poor was a family duty, rather than a parochial or national responsibility, but poor families often could not help, and individuals may have had no family to whom they could turn. Increasingly, government had to legislate for provision for the poor, typically through the parish, and by the beginning of the nineteenth century this was done through the local magistrates, vestry and overseers.

Cheltenham had possessed a poor house or workhouse since at least the eighteenth century, and most paupers recorded in this volume would have known the "Old" Workhouse in what is now known as Knapp Lane, or the "New" Union Workhouse which was built in Swindon Lane in 1837-41. Interestingly, it appears from the records that some paupers lived outside the workhouse and relied on "out-relief", a cheaper option than the workhouse, particularly between 1834 and 1840.

Gloucestershire is lucky and unusual in that the 19<sup>th</sup> century settlement examinations and removal orders are preserved in the Gloucestershire Heritage Hub. Through these and his other sources John Simpson highlights several themes surrounding settlement examinations in Cheltenham. There were just over 58 examinations per year in the town in the years between 1831 and 1852, well below the national average, but there was significant annual variation, depending on legislation and its application by the magistrates. There were also seasonal variations, with a general increase in the winter months. Immediate factors prompting the need for a settlement examination were many and varied and over 50% are explicit or can be inferred from the records. Often the reasons for having become a pauper relate to ability to work, mostly due to ill-health or occasionally disability which

often led to the absence of a breadwinner within a family. Nearly 20% were due to some form of mental incapacity, including senility. Pregnancy and childbirth, often of an illegitimate child, made up nearly 11%.

John Simpson takes six historical magistrates' records as his starting point for the main body of *Managing Poverty*: three registers containing settlement examinations and three containing removal orders. All relate specifically to the Cheltenham area. Every entry in the registers has been transcribed in full, allowing nuances of statement and interpretation, and demonstrating the tone and content of the original records. Each transcript is followed by a short editorial commentary which includes, where possible, a timeline for the years immediately before and after an individual's settlement examination. This additional information is drawn from national census returns, genealogical databases, contemporary newspaper reports and other historical records such as overseers' accounts, workhouse registers of admissions and discharges (from 1835 on) and workhouse births and deaths (from 1836). These commentaries can reveal details about the lives of the individual paupers examined, which might otherwise not have been made explicit in the examination itself, such as old age or infirmity.

John Simpson gives us a vivid insight into what he describes as the 'forbidding process' of the settlement examination day itself, when two local magistrates endeavoured to determine the pauper's place of last legal settlement. This might have been:

- Settlement by place of birth, marriage or parentage
- Settlement by hiring and service
- Settlement by renting
- Settlement by apprenticeship.

This cannot have been an easy process for many of the individuals being examined, especially as they often had little or no education and so could only make their mark, did not know where or when they had been born, or indeed have any knowledge of their early family history.

The descriptions in the examinations and removal orders reveal the way in which the parish authorities were required to help Cheltenham's paupers in the light of the existing Poor Laws. The process was often harsh, and it is telling that 80.5% of all settlement examinations in the town between 1831 and 1852 were deemed to be 'successful', resulting in the pauper being moved on to become the responsibility of another parish, in many cases in another part of the county or even a different area of the country. Sadly, those who achieved 'settlement' elsewhere might not have been familiar with the place or have had any family or acquaintances there.

The study of Cheltenham's settlement records and removal orders is of great value to the historian, whether it be for academic or genealogical research, or for those interested in the broader history of the town. In this volume John Simpson has successfully woven together a wealth of detail from a wide range of disparate sources. As a result, *Managing Poverty: Cheltenham Settlement Examinations and Removal Orders, 1831-52* is a rich and usable source of information, particularly for anyone researching those on the margins of society whose stories are so often omitted from the history of the town. The comprehensive and detailed index, which includes all the people, places and occupations mentioned in the examinations, will enable researchers to delve deep into the settlement and removal records in a way that would not otherwise have been possible without a great deal of time. Above all, John Simpson helps us to see that these are real stories about real people, emphasising that we should never forget that the record of each examination in this volume tells the story of a life or lives in crisis in Cheltenham.

SUE ROWBOTHAM

Cheltenham