

The Allen Gift to the Poor of Whepstead.

In 1825, shortly before his death, John Wilson Allen of Bath paid £200 into his London Bank, to be invested by the Revd. Thomas Image and his successors for the poor of Whepstead. The Allen family home was at Stanhoe Hall, Kings Lynn. John Allen owned land at Whepstead in the early 1800's when he was living in Bury St Edmunds. A number of property transactions took place, notably in 1806, between the Revd Image and John Allen, both wealthy men. Mr Allen would therefore have been well aware of the extent of poverty in the village.

The context in which the Gift was made was this. The first decade of the 19th had seen farming flourish in the absence of imported food during the Napoleonic Wars. Many new houses were built in Whepstead and the population grew to almost 700. The church tower was opened up and a gallery created to accommodate a larger congregation. There were about 20 farmers and a dozen shopkeepers and tradesmen, mainly supporting the village's agricultural economy. These were prosperous times. The resumption of imports after 1815 brought a steep drop in the price of corn, and widespread unemployment. It is estimated that 25% of the working population was out of work. Abject poverty was ameliorated by a Poor Rate raised from the parish ratepayers, themselves in difficulty, and the amount of Poor Relief doubled.

The Gift required the Revd Image to distribute the interest to the poor on Christmas morning "in such proportions and in such manner as he should deem proper". There being other monetary charities at the time, he decided to distribute the interest (initially 4% later 3%) in the form of blankets or other bedlinen. The Account Book for 1825-74 gives a glimpse of the hardship at the time. It also provides substantial lists of inhabitants before the first 1841 census. The scale of poverty can be judged by the fact that a total of 90 households (there were then about 140 houses in the village) received a blanket in the first three years (1826-8). Those eligible were required to present themselves at Church on Christmas morning, failing which the blanket was held over for a month before being given to the next on the list. Householders were permitted to apply again after three years. From 1832-4 blankets were replaced by cheaper counterpanes allowing 50 households per annum to benefit, and from 1835-65 lengths of calico (to make sheets) were provided. A calico sample dated 1838 has been found amongst the records. Pressure on the Charity was apparently enormous. Initially people "belonging" to Whepstead but living elsewhere were helped, but were soon relegated to the end of the list. In 1841 a previous beneficiary re-presented himself, but it being known that he was employed as a master carpenter, was removed from the list, but with his name recorded for posterity! In 1848 one Sarah Underwood was accidentally left off the list, but later received a gift at Revd Image's expense.

Difficulties next arose in 1864 when distribution had to be held over for a year because of the high price of calico. In 1867 a note by the then rector, the Revd Steele, states that "these methods of distribution not being satisfactory to the inhabitants, the fund is now applied to distribution of coal throughout the village". The Account book after 1865 no longer records the name of recipients, and later accounts form part of the village Coal Account covering other small charities.

A cynic might suppose that the Gift came from a rich man approaching death and intent on securing his own Salvation. A more charitable view is that, many years before the Welfare State, this was the act of a compassionate man who realised that few are masters of their own destiny in times of economic difficulty.

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