

Chapter 1

‘I can barely provide the common necessities of life’: Material wealth over the life-cycle of the English poor, 1790-1834

Joseph Harley

1.1 Introduction

In 1901 B. Seebohm Rowntree published his ground-breaking research on York, in which he illustrated how individuals and their families were far more likely to be poor during several key moments in their lives. His model showed that impoverishment was more probable during childhood or when people had their own children, as the young were unable to contribute to household earnings and there were more mouths to feed and bodies to clothe. When the children became old enough to move out, some parents would enjoy a few years of relative prosperity. This was interrupted when the couple became old as they struggled to work and their earnings declined. Sickness could impact families at any point, but during the later years of life various illnesses, infirmities and eventually death and burial were all omnipresent.¹ Several historians have correctly argued that life was not always as neat as the model suggests or have emphasised how some phases of the life-cycle of poverty could be more important than others.² Nevertheless, historians have found that experiences of poverty often follow this broad sequence and thus continue to use the model as a tool to conceptualise poverty.³

Research in recent years has used parts of the model to analyse changes in the labouring sorts' consumption of goods. Beverley Lemire, Alexandra Shepard and others, for example, have shown that during more fruitful periods the poor were able to consume a wide range of items, but during difficult times they would often sell their possessions to make do. Their belongings were important stores of value which could be liquidated into cash or traded when needed.⁴ However, most of this research has concentrated on clothing and we have less sense of how the poor's ownership and consumption of other items including fuel, food, and household goods could shift over the life course.⁵ This oversight is unfortunate considering that it was not just the ownership of clothing that was affected during these difficult junctures. Additionally, these studies have tended to offer only imprecise assertions as to the reasons and points when people struggled to make ends meet. Research on pawnshops, for example, has primarily focused on the sorts of goods that people pawned, rather than the types of individuals who used them.⁶

This chapter addresses these issues by examining how the poor's ownership and ability to consume various items such as fuel, clothing, household goods, and food changed over the life-cycle

and times of sickness. The focus is on Essex households during the final decades of the old poor law (c.1790-1834), but examples are also occasionally used from other counties. Pauper inventories, pauper letters, and autobiographies written by the poor are principally used. They have never been used in combination to examine consumption over the life-cycle. The sources indicate that during relatively prosperous years the poor consumed a wide range of goods including various foodstuffs and fuels, clothing, and myriad household possessions. However, during difficult periods such as old age and sickness, people often went cold as they could not afford fuel, their children became malnourished and ill-clothed, and many of their household goods were pawned or sold. Family priorities shifted at these points and people redirected their resources to acquiring the most basic items such as bread and medicine for their loved ones.

Before proceeding it is important to outline what this chapter does not cover. The concluding decades of the old poor law have been characterised as 'crisis' years as more people became dependent upon poor relief and parish bills increased. The reasons for this are primarily economic and demographic. The country's population was growing which meant that the labour market was overpopulated, wages lagged, and food became more expensive. The years also witnessed several notable harvest failures which meant that even more able-bodied men and their families required relief.⁷ This is a considerable area of the historiography and the effect that these factors had on material wealth warrants investigation in its own right. Further to this, I will not be considering the detrimental effect that the irresponsible actions of individuals could have on households. As Emma Griffin has recently shown, when male breadwinners deserted their families or chose to prioritise drink, gambling, and other pursuits over supporting them, the result was often extreme hardship for their wives and children.⁸ This chapter will primarily concentrate on the effect that the life-cycle of poverty had on material wealth, while only mentioning these other factors when they exacerbated existing challenges such as old age and sickness.

1.2 Sources

This chapter is based on autobiographies written by the poor and the analysis of pauper inventories and pauper letters from Essex. Wherever possible these sources have also been further contextualised through family reconstitution. Pauper inventories were made by poor law officials to record the household possessions of people while they were dependent on poor relief. Their goods would then normally revert back to the parish when they died and would be sold, used to furnish the parish workhouse/poorhouse, or be given to other paupers. Ninety-two have been located for Essex for 1790 to 1834, but two have been excluded from this sample as they mainly list clothing and not household goods. They tended to be made of older parishioners who received a pension from the

parish due to life-cycle related problems, such as the death of their partners. Research suggests that these sources are broadly representative of other paupers with similar problems who did not have their goods appraised by local authorities.⁹

Pauper letters were written when non-resident paupers (or scribes of some kind) wrote to ask for relief from 'home' parishes of settlement. This chapter uses 217 pauper letters that were sent within Essex between 1803 and 1835.¹⁰ A handful of autobiographies written by the poor themselves are also used. Pauper letters and autobiographies are particularly useful as they provide personal testimonies of poverty and material needs. Such first-hand accounts should, however, be read with caution as they may be inaccurate or even significantly under-record people's needs. A number of writers outlined how they were struggling rather than specifying whether they needed food, clothing, and so on. Some chose to only mention their most pressing and expensive needs such as rent and medical bills, while others noted how they needed the 'common necessities of life', indicating that they had a range of material needs. Writers may have also misremembered information or exaggerated certain aspects to portray themselves in a better light. Pauper letters are particularly shrouded in myriad rhetorical elements, intended to stress plight, and make their applications more powerful or pleasing to readers. Despite there being some element of fiction and minor embellishment in the letters and autobiographies, they are on the whole surprisingly honest sources and the writers were subject to checks by editors, poor law authorities, or neighbours.¹¹ For example, parishes sometimes made surprise visits to pauper homes to check that their circumstances had not changed and that they were not being deceitful.¹²

1.3 Material wealth and material poverty

Pauper letters and autobiographies indicate that many people were lacking basic items to sustain the human body and warmth. Food made up half to three-quarters of working people's yearly expenditure, meaning that hunger was fairly common.¹³ In 1824 Davey Rising wrote his home parish of Chelmsford to ask for assistance, remarking that he and his family had 'not Ahad Abit of witells to Eat and I have not But my hand up to my mouth this Four days And I do not know when when I shall'.¹⁴ Various writers linked their ill-health to a lack of food. Samuel White of Halstead said that 'I am recommended by the Docter to take nourishing things... to enable me to get that I may be the sooner restored to health and strength' in 1828.¹⁵ William James was around 74 years old when he wrote to the overseer of St. Peter, Colchester in 1825 to plead for help:

Yesterday I walked four Miles only = and through fatigue, and lack of strength, in the dark of the Evening, I was forced to sitt down, on a stop in a Vilage, fainting, and with much dificulty

got home, this was Ocasioned, *through want of Necessary Nourishment* = and this day, I am very Unwell.¹⁶

Most of the documents comment on the absence of bread when food is mentioned, but other less essential provisions are also occasionally noted. In an earlier letter sent by William James, he stated that 'it have not been in my power, to purchase any meat, these 6 weeks past, we have now a piece of Bread only, we are in want of every Necessary, for the support of Nature'.¹⁷ In 1827 he stressed how 'both my self & daughter, are much reduced to a state of Extreme weakness, haveing chiefly fed on a scanty provision of bread & Potatoes'.¹⁸ Food was made even more difficult for the poor to acquire during periods of high prices and intermittent harvest failures. The Buckinghamshire labourer Joseph Mayett, for example, wrote how one failure meant that 'bread was very dear', which forced him into debt and left him to consider what to do with 'very few of my goods that I had to sell'.¹⁹

The need for clothing and/or shoes was found in around one in six letters. The sources indicate that people generally did not just want new garments to update their wardrobes, but that their clothing had become so old and tattered that attire was needed for warmth and to be able to leave the home with some decency. In 1834 James Davey stated that 'I am nearly naked my Self for I have not Get any Sharts nor StoCkens nor trouses to war hardly to Cover my nakedness'.²⁰ The plight of vulnerable parishioners such as children was often stressed to encourage authorities to take action. William Ardley asserted that 'my poor Children are in a Naked Situation',²¹ while the son of Sarah Manning needed 'Some Cloathes and Shoes as he is quite distress for he has no shoes hardly to his Feet'.²² The rhetoric of nakedness was common in pauper letters and was intended to illustrate how parishioners' dignity had been compromised to invoke the parish's moral responsibility to clothe its parishioners.²³

The hearth was central to running the household and the wellbeing and comfort of inhabitants, through the light, warmth, and cooking facilities that it provided. It was a place where families would gather to work, discuss their days, and relax in the evenings. Fuel could, however, be lacking in pauper homes, making the hearth a less hospitable and useful space. In September 1811 Mary Mayden of Colchester stressed that 'I can barely provide the common necessities of life, & when the cold weather sets in it will not be in my power to purchase a sufficient quantity of Firing'.²⁴ Ann Prig similarly asked for money 'to enable me to get some Firing for the Winter' in November of 1809.²⁵ Most of the letters requesting fuel were written from paupers in urban spaces during the autumn and winter months, who would have struggled to source their own fuel from hedges and commons compared to their rural counterparts.

In addition to food, clothing, and fuel, we have the fundamental need for shelter. Rent generally made up people's second highest outgoing behind food and was requested or mentioned in around 15 per cent of the letters.²⁶ Failure to pay one's landlord could result in eviction, homelessness, material destitution and even imprisonment. Robert Griffith from Dedham said that 'I have at this time a Distress in my house for the Sum of 6[£] 7^s 10^d & my Goods will be sold on monday next if not paid'.²⁷ Thomas Cleare of Braintree wrote that he had 'sold my Linnen off my back' to try and pay the rent and was worried that if he could not make up the shortfall he would be 'turned into the Street & Loose my work for My Loom will be taken'.²⁸ Harriet Twin said that she was 'left only a few things to furnish a small house', after recently pawning her late husband's clothes 'to defray the expence of moving here [Colchester] and the Rent of the house we inhabited at Glemsford'.²⁹ Over the early nineteenth century the numbers of paupers who requested help to pay the rent appears to have gradually increased, which may indicate that meeting this requirement became increasingly difficult for tenants.³⁰

	1790-1834 (%)
Furniture	
Bed (bedstead and/or mattress)	99
Bed (feather)	51
Bed (flock)	24
Bed (straw/chaff)	22
Chair	93
Chest of drawers	44
Cupboard	68
Stool	49
Table (any type)	92
Hearth and cooking goods	
Andirons/cobirons	19
Bellows	56
Boiler	48
Fender	21
Fire shovel	21
Frying pan	44
Gridiron	24
Kettle	23
Metal cooking pot	10
Poker	31
Saucepan	31
Tongs	53
Non-necessities	
Bed hangings	36
Clock/watch	27
Looking glass	33
Picture	12
Tea goods	72
Warming pan	40
Window curtains	11

Table 1: Percentage of pauper inventories which record various household items, 1790-1834

These first-hand accounts clearly show that life for paupers could be extremely difficult when they lacked basic provisions. Pauper inventories generally do not record food, clothing, fuel, and rent arrears, but they do allow us to study items related to cooking and the fireplace and other household goods. The inventories overall appear to show much more positive results than the ego documents (Table 1). Pauper inventories should never be assumed to be complete, but the figures strongly suggest that by the 1790s pauper homes contained a wide range of goods which would have enabled them to live in relatively comfortable and well-equipped domestic environments. This was the result of the poor gradually consuming more goods from the proceeding decades, many of which were probably second hand.³¹ Bedsteads and mattresses were almost ubiquitous by the 1790s and just over half of the inventories recorded feather beds, while less comfortable flock and straw/chaff mattresses were recorded in 24 and 22 per cent of the inventories respectively. Chairs and tables were almost always noted in the inventories and on average each listed 5.8 chairs and 2.7 tables. These items were sometimes made from decorative and expensive materials. The 1807 inventory of Widow Piggot's goods taken in Tolleshunt D'Arcy, for example, included a 'Mahogany Tea Table', alongside '½ doz. Beach Chairs';³² while the inventory of Mrs Wiffen's belongings taken several months earlier contained an 'A Square oak Table & draw. & an Elm Table, Three Leather bottom'd Chairs, & 1 Rush D^o'.³³ The poor also owned desirable, practical, and decorative storage items such as cupboards and chests of drawers in relatively high numbers.

A wide range of hearth goods can be found in pauper homes. Items such as fenders and poker tongs tended to be used with coal so had very specific purposes, which suggests that maintaining a fire had become more sophisticated in poor abodes by the late eighteenth century. People appear to have had ample vessels and utensils to grill, roast, fry, bake, and toast various foods and thus potentially create diverse meals. Saucepans, for example, were introduced to pauper homes in greater numbers from the late eighteenth century and they helped to make cooking easier and more efficient as they heated quickly.³⁴ Around one-third of the inventories included items described as 'old', but paupers also amassed a range of 'luxury' goods which were not necessary to support life and were often associated to decoration, status, vanity, and appearance.³⁵ Looking glasses appear in 33 per cent of the inventories and allowed users to maintain their appearance and light their homes more efficiently. Tea goods were found in around three-fourths of pauper homes, showing that tea had gone from a rare luxury to a national drink of the English population over the long eighteenth century. Clocks/watches were heavily associated to respectability and status and can be found in at least 27 per cent of pauper inventories. Some of these goods would have been highly sought after. For example, the inventory of Thomas Baker's goods recorded 'An eight day Clock' worth £3 3s.; John Whale's home in Little Wakering contained a range of tea paraphernalia alongside 'A Silver

Spoone, Silver Sugar Nipers'; and Jon Millbank owned a 'Swing [looking] glass' worth 5s.³⁶ The material wealth of the poor was, of course, smaller and much more modest than the middling sort who saw many of the same material alterations a century earlier,³⁷ but for the poor themselves these changes were significant and show that their homes contained myriad possessions.

1.4 Material culture over the life-cycle

The ego documents and inventories reveal two opposing images of material life. On the one hand, the letters show that many parishioners could not afford sufficient clothing for their families and to keep them warm. Many lacked the most rudimentary items such as bread, resulting in ill-health and malnourishment. Pauper inventories, in contrast, show that commensurate to income the homes of the poor could be well equipped with a range of possessions, such as cooking vessels, hearth items and 'luxury' goods. Owning an array of household goods was therefore not necessarily incompatible with struggling to feed and clothe oneself, but how do we account for these two polar accounts? The answer principally lies in the life-cycle of poverty and sickness. Many of the material goods that are listed in the pauper inventories had been amassed over many years, while purchases of fuel, clothing, and food were regular acquisitions, so when crisis hit it was these more perishable products that were missed first. The poor would sometimes sell their household goods to acquire these basic necessities and the inventories represent the goods that people owned after they had pawned and sold many of their possessions.³⁸ The fact that some were able to retain a wide range of belongings after this is indicative of their changing desire to consume more goods and their amassing of items over a lifetime. It indicates that during relatively prosperous times in their lives they could own a considerable range of goods. However, during very precarious stages the poor's material wealth shifted drastically as people relayed their resources to meeting their most fundamental needs such as medicine and food. Their material expectations at this point declined and many went without suitable clothing, food, and furniture to prevent total insolvency. This section will now examine these difficult phases and the effect that they had on material wealth.

The poor could find themselves in material poverty at the start of their married lives. These years could be particularly challenging when people married young or were expecting. Hugh Constable was approximately 19-21 years old when he wrote to the overseer of Chelmsford in 1827 to ask for help to marry his fiancé Susan Rising, who was around the same age.³⁹ He said 'I am very willing to Marry her but am quite unable to defray the expences of marrying or Getting a few Household Goods'.⁴⁰ The autobiography of the Lancashire mechanic/turner Benjamin Shaw reveals how the first months of marriage could be particularly difficult. He was still an apprentice when he wed his pregnant partner Betty in September 1793 and both were only 20 years old.⁴¹ The costs of

setting up a new home meant that they could not afford many goods and that Benjamin made some of the items himself:

we went to [our] House by our selves & had nothing to put in it, But a bed that [was] my fathers and me at dolphinholme, & Betty had a box for Cloaths, & a pair of tongs, & a fue pots, &c I made each of us a knife & fork, & 2 Stools, we got a pan, & a looking glass, & a few trifles ...⁴²

The couple moved into their new home during the winter and they struggled to keep warm and feed themselves. Benjamin remarked that 'coals were very dear here then... and turf was dear, & the house was very cold, we were nearly Starved'. The family resorted to 'gather sticks' and 'fetch seeds to burn &c'.⁴³ Many newlyweds had little choice but to move in with one of their parents or live somewhere as lodgers.⁴⁴ When Benjamin and Betty Shaw's 19-year-old son Thomas married his pregnant partner Ann in October 1826,⁴⁵ Thomas had been out of work for eleven months and so the couple were forced to live with his parents for 9s. a week. After Thomas found employment the couple 'got a few thing & we [Benjamin and Betty] found them a few more & and they went to house near the 3 tons north road'.⁴⁶ The early years of marital life could therefore be marked by owning few possessions, due to the high costs of setting up a new home, rent, and the expense of the wedding. It was also not unusual for couples to rush marriage despite it not making economic sense as they were expecting a child.⁴⁷ Some people made ends meet at this point by making their own furniture, foraging for materials, or relying on parental assistance.

Couples were generally at the peak of their earning powers when they were in their 20s and 30s, but at these ages people had most of their children. When Benjamin and Betty Shaw's second child arrived in July 1795, he noted how 'I had 4 to keep with 14^s a week, and few good in the house, & bread very dear, &c'.⁴⁸ Samuel White was around 36 years old and earning 15s. a week in 1825 when he wrote the overseer to say that 'flour and other nessecerais' are 'dearer' since 'one Death and two Births in the house'.⁴⁹ In October 1828 he and his wife had eight children to support, including a newborn and six that were under 10 years old.⁵⁰ He noted how 'I am quite unable to feed and Clothe so many by my own earnings'.⁵¹ Writing in Springfield in 1809, Thomas Sagger asked for 'a months pay' as 'our Children all eat so very harty that it Costs me 15 shillings a weak for flowr' and 'I Cand do to fill their bellys'.⁵² These problems were often perpetuated by economic factors such as stagnating wages, seasonal unemployment, and underemployment. Elizabeth Davey in 1833, for example, stressed how 'my Famileay Is very Large and my husbands Irnasings are so small that I find It hard to git my children brad'.⁵³ Most children did not enter employment until they were between seven to eleven years old and their wages tended to be around half of that of an adult.⁵⁴ Moreover,

average family size was increasing due to more people getting married at an earlier age from the late eighteenth century.⁵⁵ This put a lot of pressure on parents to provide for their families and could lead to material hardships.

Sickness is not technically part of the life-cycle of poverty, but it was often more probable and dangerous to people during certain stages of their lives such as childhood and old age and had a significant impact on material wealth. Steven King recently used nearly 13,000 letters written by paupers and officials to show that sickness was a common feature among indigent populations and that parishes allocated large amounts of money and resources to assisting the sick.⁵⁶ This, albeit much smaller sample of letters, reveals similar trends to King and adds to this by showing how ill-health could spell material destitution for families. A range of illnesses and injuries are recorded in the letters, such as smallpox and broken bones, as well as instances of disability. The stresses of sickness were amplified when the main wage-earner was unwell. John Hall was a journeyman fellmonger and increasingly struggled to find work during the 1810s. In 1819 at 52 years old his situation worsened when he said 'I Am Lane in my Leg through A Strain & am unable To Work'.⁵⁷ George Webb Baynell also injured himself, saying 'i have had a dad eye for a weak... so that i have not bean able to work through a pin getting in to it'.⁵⁸ This could be particularly emasculating and disheartening for men who had to outline their shortcomings as providers for their families.⁵⁹ During periods of unemployment brought on by ill-health, families needed to make cutbacks and sold off their belongings to make ends meet. In 1826 John Hall, now 59, wrote a letter to Chelmsford parish, indicating that as a result of his daughter being too sick to stay in service they had 'Sold all my things Except my bed'. He asked the overseer to 'Be so kind as to Send me A Something to buy her A Bed I Will get A fue things'.⁶⁰ The 1806 autobiography of the vagrant Mary Saxby said that while her husband was unwell, 'Our custom was, to go round the neighbouring villages, to sell our goods, and return at night'.⁶¹

Correspondence in this sample which recorded sickness increased from 52 per cent between 1800-1819 to 64 per cent between 1820-1835.⁶² This indicates that the numbers of sick poor or paupers who saw healthcare and medicine as a fundamental role of the parish was sizeable and possibly growing.⁶³ It was often beyond the means of the poor to pay bills for doctors, nurses, carers, or medicine themselves. The average wage of labourers in Essex was approximately 9s. to 12s. per week at the turn of the century,⁶⁴ making it very difficult for them to save a few shillings let alone the amount needed for healthcare. J. B. Crowest in Upminster asserted that there was a 'late long, & serious affliction' on his family, meaning that 'The Doctor's Bill (which is only in part) amounts to more than £12'. He claimed that 'I find myself yet much insolved... it will be impossible for me to extricate myself'.⁶⁵ For paupers who received a pension from the parish this was rarely

enough to cover medicine or healthcare. In 1824 the c.32-year-old Mary Baynes was under the care of her mother, Sarah, as she was 'suffering from diseased lungs'. This resulted in a prodigious bill of £4 12s. 6d. from the apothecary, which compelled her mother to ask for additional help from authorities as 'I am unable to Discharge it, having an allowance of only 2^s p^r Week from this Parish'.⁶⁶ Household priorities shifted during times of sickness and many would sell possessions and redirect funds from rent, fuel, poor rates, and clothing to healthcare for their loved ones. For example, during the 1820s Samuel White's wife Ann appears to have had a stroke, which meant that she needed a nurse. Their young children also required assistance on several occasions for measles and various other conditions. He wrote that from Ann's 'late attack she has not the full use of her left arm and her mental faculties are in a very weak state'.⁶⁷ Samuel said that she has been 'unable to Do for her Family... in such a state of stupidity and forgetfulness' and that 'her Paralattic attack Prevents her been able to earn any thing'.⁶⁸ This meant that Samuel had been 'unable to feed and Clothe so many by my own earnings' and that he struggled to keep the fires in his house burning.⁶⁹

Some paupers did not survive their sicknesses and their families were left in both emotional and material turmoil. From the passing of their husbands, women particularly found themselves in much reduced circumstances. Many widows were forced to downgrade their homes and material goods, as they lost their partner's pay and were left to support themselves and any children they may have had on menial pay.⁷⁰ Mary Saxby, for instance, recounted how she was left 'a poor disconsolate widow, with five children, four of them young' when her husband died. This meant that she fell 'deeply in debt' and 'sold what I had, and discharged all our debts... I then applied to the parish for assistance: and, for a short time, they gave me three shillings weekly, but soon reduced this allowance'.⁷¹ Losing children was also a common occurrence over the life-cycle and families would ask parishes for help with burial costs. In 1805 Hannah Wall wrote the overseer of Rainham stating:

my youngest Child Died this Morning... the Child has been Poorly this month Back, and has run me to a deal of Expence with Doctor & Medecins, I hope you will send me what Money you Think will Bury him, as to my Other Child, he is almost Naked for want of Cloths, and what to do I dont know, I am So much Distrested as to myself, my Cloths are all in the Pawn Brokers I hope you will send me Relief as Soon as Possible as I am greatly Distrest...⁷²

From this one example a number of facets relating to material poverty can be noted. First, the writer highlighted how sudden illness can strike and how quickly bills for medicine, healthcare, and funeral costs can build up. Second, she revealed that these financial burdens had resulted in the pawning of goods and the neglect of other important material needs such as clothing for her other child. Finally,

and perhaps most strikingly, she wrote this letter on the morning of her son's death, so desperate was her financial need.

At least one in ten of the paupers who wrote letters were old and/or lived with elderly family members.⁷³ The letters indicate that most people had little expectation of retirement and laboured until they were physically incapable or died.⁷⁴ They reveal that elderly people often felt a sense of shame as they could not work as intensely as they once could due to infirmity and their loss of strength and dexterity. These difficulties are best exemplified through the 53 letters of William James. He was around 67-69 when he wrote his first letter in 1818 and was 77-79 years old when he wrote the last in 1828.⁷⁵ Over the course of his letters he contracted rheumatism, grew weaker and his sight began to fail. He said that 'at our advanced Age, these things are hard' and that 'I experience the decays of Nature so much, that I cannot work as I have done'.⁷⁶ Unable to keep up with younger workers, he was paid less than them in his role as a bell hanger or labourer.⁷⁷ William also became more susceptible to falls: 'standing on the top of a pair of steps, & the string breaking, they fell, & myself with them... which Injured me, so much in my side & Arm, that I could not stir, nor speak for some minutes'.⁷⁸ William's mental health suffered as a result of this and he was less able to acquire basic necessities for his family. He stated 'my Spirits & strength are Quite worn down – Eye sight fail me so much, that I cannot see to do any thing by Candle light & work so little to do – & Strength failing me, that I cannot Earn enough to get bread'.⁷⁹ In 1822 he said that 'we live very scantily & hard' and 'my Earnings have been but small... with which we cannot procure Necessaries, to support health nor Nature'.⁸⁰ On top of this his elderly wife (born c.1748-1749) and adult daughter (born c.1777) were often unwell.⁸¹ This led to declining levels of material wealth and a growing dependence on the parish and friends to support their material needs. In 1818, for instance, William stated that 'the things we have, are only our Bed, & a few things bought in for us, by a friend or two, when my things were sold of... so that none of them are mine'.⁸² Such stories of multiple levels of struggle were common among the elderly. In fact, every letter that records old age also mentions sickness and/or infirmity of some sort. Furthermore, underemployment was more common among the aged, owing to the fact that employers probably chose younger workers over them. In total, 58 per cent of the letters which note old age also mentioned underemployment, while in contrast underemployment was recorded in 38 and 18 per cent of the letters written by widows/widowers and married couples respectively.

Pauper inventory, 1805	Workhouse admittance-related inventory, 1816
Dan ^l Drakes Goods Oct ^r . 15 1805	1816 An Inventory of Dan ^l Drakes
1 Sacken Bedsted & flock Bed	Jan-y 3 articles Removed To the
1 Blanket & Sheet	Workhouse
1 Coverlet & Pillows	3 Tables
3 Tables 3 Chairs	2 Cheers
1 Spinning Wheel 2 Boxes & Stool	Bedstead with Sacking Bottom
1 Tea Kettle & Tin Boiler	1 Hutch
1 Bellows fender & fire Shovel	2 Boxes
2 Candlesticks	Tea Kettle
Warming Pan	a five pint Bottle
Tongs Box iron	1 Tin Saucepan
1 old Saw & waterpot	1 Old flock Bed
1 Frying pan Dish & pan	1 Blacket & Coverlet
1 Saw Trammell	
1 Hammer	

Figure 1: Inventories of Daniel Drake's possessions in Little Waltham, 1805 and 1816

Pauper inventory, 1808	Workhouse admittance-related inventory, 1809
Inventory Of Rhoda Cook's Goods taken 25 th Feb ^r . 1808. –	Acco ^t . of Rhoda Cooks Goods carried into the Workhouse Sept ^r 30 th . 1809.
A sq ^r . Deal Table, a round Table & three Chairs, a kneading-trough, Scales & 1 p ^r r Weight, p ^r . Bellows, Trevett, Fender, poker, Tongs, Fry ^e . pan, Box Iron & 2 Heaters, 1 Iron Candle Stick & 3 broken ones, –a Spin ^e . Wheel, a pail & Wash tub, a Safe & small Tub, 2 Stools & Clothe Basket, a Small Chest of Drawers, 2 Feather Beds –2 p ^r . Sheets, 2 p ^r . Blankets, & 2 Coverlets –2 Stump Bed-Steads, 5 Curtain rods & 1 Curtain a hand Basket & an Oldp ^r . Racks –	Stump Bedstead, Feather Bed & 2 pillows – 2 Sheets, 1 Blanket & a Coverlet, a Deal Safe, 2 Chairs & a Linnen Basket, a Wash Tub and an Oak Box –

Figure 2: Inventories of Rhoda Cook's possessions in Tolleshunt D'arcy, 1808 and 1809

Ego documents clearly outline that during times of poverty the poor would often turn to selling their possessions to make ends meet. Pauper inventories occasionally record this process. The 1792 inventory of John Suckling's belongings, for example, listed 'A Clock pawned to Mr Clay' for £2.⁸³ More speculatively, one can use multiple inventories for the same paupers to examine how the poor's ownership of household goods changed over time. This approach is somewhat tentative,

since one should never assume that inventories are complete. Yet, in nearly every example the material wealth of paupers appears to have declined over time, indicating that their power to consume goods declined when they were on poor relief and that they would sell and pawn their belongings to make thrift. Figures 1 and 2 record the possessions of two paupers who had their goods appraised in pauper inventories and workhouse admittance inventories (which record the possessions that the poor owned when they moved from outdoor to indoor relief).⁸⁴ The first inventory of c.58-year-old Daniel Drake's possessions records 34 goods,⁸⁵ while the second inventory taken 11 years later only records 15 (figure 1). There is a similar decline in the number of items across the two inventories of spinster Rhoda Cook's belongings, from around 52 in 1808 to 14 in 1809 (figure 2). Both inventories also record smaller varieties of possessions over time. The second inventory of Daniel Drake's goods did not record candlesticks, various tools, and fire irons that are listed in the first source. Likewise, the latter inventory of Rhoda Cook's possessions was missing a feather bed, chest of drawers, chair, stools, tables, linen, cooking vessels and fire irons. Both paupers had received money and relief in kind from their parishes for a number of years and ended up in the workhouse. Daniel Drake's relief, for example, included £1 6s. towards his rent in October 1805 and Rhoda Cook received 1-2s. per week along with flour, coal, clothing, and shoes from the parish.⁸⁶ They were thus struggling like their counterparts in the pauper letters and probably used their household goods to their advantage to alleviate their problems.

1.5 Conclusion

The literature on material culture and consumption in poor households has been relatively positive in recent years, emphasising how the poor acquired new foods, clothing, and household goods from the early modern period.⁸⁷ Pauper inventories record the possessions of people who were reliant on parish funds and had gone through episodes of selling their goods when crisis struck. The fact that these sources generally record a variety of possessions strongly suggests that there were significant material advances for the poor, and that some could amass a considerable range of possessions. It is, however, important to not present too Whiggish an interpretation of change and remember that gains could be very precarious. When sickness, death, or other challenges of the life course struck first-hand accounts almost ubiquitously record how people struggled to pay rent and feed and clothe themselves. Household goods were often sold or pawned at this point to pay bills and acquire necessities such as food and medicine.

This chapter offers an important intervention by showing how people could go through several cycles of being materially rich and materially poor over their lifetimes. It shows that the poor were not passive victims of their circumstances, but would take active steps to address their

problems and keep their heads above water. People still had agency and used their items, or even their lack of belongings, to their advantage. Many paupers pointed out how destitute they were of food, clothing, and household goods to get help from parochial authorities, while others would choose which items they wanted to sell or pawn to make ends meet. Thus, even in the bleakest households people could make some decisions over their own fates and would use whatever means they could to avert disaster.

Notes

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¹ B.S. Rowntree, *Poverty: A study of town life*, 3rd edn. (London: Macmillan and Co., 1902).

² For example, B. Reay, *Rural Englands: Labouring Lives in the Nineteenth Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 81-82; S. Shave, 'The Dependent Poor? (Re)constructing the Lives of Individuals "on the parish" in Rural Dorset, 1800-1832', *Rural History*, 20 (2009), pp. 67-97.

³ Such as: T. Wales, 'Poverty, Poor Relief and Life-cycle: Some Evidence from Seventeenth Century Norfolk', in R.M. Smith (ed), *Land, Kinship and Life-cycle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 351-404; S. Williams, *Poverty, Gender and Life-cycle under the English Poor Law 1760-1834* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2011), pp. 101-130; S. King, *Writing the Lives of the English poor, 1750s-1830s* (London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019), pp. 282-308.

⁴ B. Lemire, *The Business of Everyday Life: Gender, Practice and Social Politics in England, c.1600-1900* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), pp. 82-109; A. Tomkins, *The Experience of Urban Poverty, 1732-82: Parish, Charity and Credit* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), pp. 204-234; J. Styles, *The Dress of the People: Everyday Fashion in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 229-245; A. Toplis, *The Clothing Trade in Provincial England 1800-1850* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2011), pp. 135-138, 146-149; A. Shepard, *Accounting for Oneself: Worth, Status, and the Social Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 277-302.

⁵ There are, of course, exceptions such as: J. Harley, 'Material Lives of the Poor and their Strategic Use of the Workhouse during the Final Decades of the English old poor law', *Continuity and Change*, 30 (2015), pp. 90-95; Shepard, *Accounting for Oneself*, pp. 277-302.

⁶ For example, Lemire, *Business*, pp. 90-97.

⁷ For further information, see: P. Dunkley, *The Crisis of the Old Poor Law in England 1795-1834: An Interpretive Essay* (London: Garland Publishing, 1982).

⁸ E. Griffin, *Bread Winner: An Intimate History of the Victorian Economy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), pp. 109-134, 147-152.

⁹ J. Harley, 'Consumption and Poverty in the Homes of the English Poor, c. 1670-1834', *Social History*, 43 (2018), pp. 81-104. For further background information on pauper inventories, see: idem, *Norfolk Pauper Inventories, c. 1690-1834* (Oxford: British Academy/Oxford University Press, 2020); idem, 'Pauper Inventories, Social Relations and the Nature of Poor Relief under the Old Poor Law, England c. 1601-1834', *Historical Journal*, 62 (2019), pp. 375-398.

¹⁰ These letters are transcribed in T. Sokoll (ed), *Essex Pauper Letters, 1731-1837* (Oxford: British Academy/Oxford University Press, 2001).

¹¹ As starting points for further information on these two sources, see: ibid.; King, *Writing*; E. Griffin, *Liberty's Dawn: A People's History of the Industrial Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), pp. 5-10; Griffin, *Bread Winner*, pp. 8-23.

¹² King, *Writing*, pp. 40-42; Harley, *Norfolk Pauper Inventories*, pp. 67-68.

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- ¹³ C. Shammass, *The Pre-industrial Consumer in England and America* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), pp. 123-133; C. Muldrew, *Food, Energy and the Creation of Industriousness: Work and Material Culture in Agrarian England, 1550-1780* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 29; Griffin, *Bread Winner*, pp. 193-226.
- ¹⁴ Sokoll, *Pauper Letters*, p. 177.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., p. 263.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., p. 458. My italics.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., p. 409.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., p. 477.
- ¹⁹ A. Kussmaul (ed), *The Autobiography of Joseph Mayett of Quainton (1783-1839)* (Chesham: Buckingham Record Society, 1986), p. 65.
- ²⁰ Sokoll, *Pauper letters*, p. 533.
- ²¹ Ibid., p. 170.
- ²² Ibid., p. 281.
- ²³ King, *Writing*, pp. 266-267; P. Jones, "'I cannot keep my place without being deascent': Pauper Letters, Parish Clothing and Pragmatism in the South of England, 1750-1830", *Rural History*, 20 (2009), pp. 33-38.
- ²⁴ Sokoll, *Pauper Letters*, p. 376.
- ²⁵ Ibid., pp. 567.
- ²⁶ F.M. Eden, *The State of the Poor*, Vols. 1-3 (London: J. Davis, 1797), passim; D. Davies, *The Case of Labourers in Husbandry* (London: G.G. and J. Robinson, 1795), passim.
- ²⁷ Sokoll, *Pauper Letters*, p. 250.
- ²⁸ Ibid., p. 104.
- ²⁹ Ibid., p. 280.
- ³⁰ Between 1800-1819 the need for rent was recorded in 8 per cent of letters (n=48), but between 1820-1835 it was noted in 17 per cent (n=164). More tentatively, between 1800-1815 it was not recorded in any letters (n=16), but 16 per cent 1816-1835 (n=196).
- ³¹ These changes in consumption are summarised in: J. Harley, 'Consumption and Material Culture of Poverty in Early-Modern Europe, c. 1450-1800', in D. Hitchcock and J. McClure (eds), *The Routledge History of Poverty, 1450-1800* (London: Routledge, 2021), pp. 185-205.
- ³² Essex Record Office (ERO) D/P 105/8/1.
- ³³ Ibid.
- ³⁴ J. Harley, 'Material lives of the English poor: A Regional Perspective', (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Leicester, 2016), pp. 134, 136-137.
- ³⁵ For further information on 'luxury' goods, see: M. Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
- ³⁶ ERO D/P 219/12/29; ERO D/P 194/18/4; ERO D/P 220/18/7.
- ³⁷ L. Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture in Britain 1660-1760*, 2nd edn. (London: Routledge, 1996); M. Overton, J. Whittle, D. Dean and A. Hann, *Production and Consumption in English Households, 1600-1750* (London: Routledge, 2004).
- ³⁸ Harley, *Norfolk Pauper Inventories*, pp. 64-65; idem, 'Consumption and Poverty', p. 102.
- ³⁹ Age calculated from: *National census*, 1841.
- ⁴⁰ Sokoll, *Pauper Letters*, p. 258.
- ⁴¹ A. G. Crosby (ed), *The Family Records of Benjamin Shaw Mechanic of Dent, Dolphinhholme and Preston, 1772-1841* (Stroud: Alan Sutton Publishing, 1991), pp. xvi, 120.
- ⁴² Ibid., p. 32.
- ⁴³ Ibid., p. 32.
- ⁴⁴ V. Holmes, *In Bed with the Victorians: The Life-Cycle of Working-Class Marriage* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 15-33.
- ⁴⁵ Crosby, *Benjamin Shaw*, pp. lxxv-lxxvi.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 97.
- ⁴⁷ G. Frost, *Promises Broken: Courtship, Class, and Gender in Victorian England* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995), pp. 98-117.
- ⁴⁸ Crosby, *Benjamin Shaw*, p. 34.
- ⁴⁹ ERO D/CR 164; Sokoll, *Pauper Letters*, p. 215.
- ⁵⁰ ERO D/P 36/28/3; Sokoll, *Pauper Letters*, pp. 264, 270.
- ⁵¹ Sokoll, *Pauper Letters*, p. 270.
- ⁵² Ibid., p. 566.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 529.

⁵⁴ Griffin, *Liberty's Dawn*, pp. 60, 64, 68-78; J. Humphries, *Childhood and Child Labour in the British Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 176; Muldrew, *Food*, pp. 233-234.

⁵⁵ E. A. Wrigley and R. S. Schofield, *The Population History of England 1541-1871: A Reconstruction*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 208, 431

⁵⁶ S. King, *Sickness, Medical Welfare and the English Poor, 1750-1834* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018).

⁵⁷ Sokoll, *Pauper letters*, 316; P. Sharpe, "'The bowels of compation': A Labouring Family and the Law, c.1790-1834, in T. Hitchcock, P. King and P. Sharpe (eds), *Chronicling Poverty: The Voices and Strategies of the English Poor, 1640-1840* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997), pp. 90-91.

⁵⁸ Sokoll, *Pauper letters*, p. 510.

⁵⁹ A. Tomkins, "'Labouring on a bed of sickness': The Material and Rhetorical Deployment of Ill-health in Male Pauper Letters", in A. Gestrich, E. Hurren, and S. King (eds), *Poverty and Sickness in Modern Europe: Narratives of the Sick Poor, 1780-1938* (London: Continuum, 2012), pp. 51-68.

⁶⁰ Sokoll, *Pauper Letters*, p. 326; Sharpe, 'Bowels', p. 90.

⁶¹ M. Saxby, *Memoirs of a Female Vagrant* (London: J. W. Morris, 1806), p. 25.

⁶² In contrast, the numbers of letters which noted bills for doctors and medicine were relatively consistent over the same period (21 and 18 per cent respectively).

⁶³ King also found that the frequency, duration, and costs of sicknesses was potentially increasing among the English poor over time. King, *Sickness, Medical Welfare*, pp. 33-68, 115-118.

⁶⁴ 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 E. Ochiai (ed), *The Logic of Female Succession: Rethinking Patriarchy and Patrilineality in Global and Historical Perspective* (Kyoto: International Research Center for Japanese Studies, 2003), p. 105; W. Page and J. Horace Round (eds), *The Victoria History of the County of Essex*. Vol.2 (London: Constable, 1907), p. 342.

⁶⁵ Sokoll, *Pauper Letters*, p. 624.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 195-196; ERO D/P 94/18/55.

⁶⁷ Sokoll, *Pauper Letters*, p. 233.

⁶⁸ Ibid., pp. 235, 264.

⁶⁹ Ibid., pp. 241, 270.

⁷⁰ Holmes, *In Bed*, 83-102; J-M. Strange, *Death, Grief and Poverty in Britain, 1870-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 195-203.

⁷¹ Saxby, *Memoirs*, pp. 51-52.

⁷² Sokoll, *Pauper Letters*, p. 562.

⁷³ This figure is based on the writer identifying themselves or members of their family as old. Thus, it is a subjective category and under-represents the numbers of elderly writers as many failed to have mentioned it.

⁷⁴ Empirical research on census materials supports this supposition. For example: Matthew Woollard, 'The Employment and Retirement of Older Men, 1851-1881: Further Evidence from the Census', *Continuity and Change*, 17 (2002), pp. 445-447.

⁷⁵ Sokoll, *Pauper Letters*, p. 390; ERO D/P 178/1/15; ERO T/R 300/1.

⁷⁶ Sokoll, *Pauper Letters*, pp. 409, 413.

⁷⁷ Ibid., pp. 411, 414, 417.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 479.

⁷⁹ Ibid., pp. 483-484.

⁸⁰ Ibid., pp. 414, 417.

⁸¹ Sokoll, *Pauper Letters*, p. 390; ERO T/R 61/3; ERO D/P 178/1/4.

⁸² Sokoll, *Pauper Letters*, p. 390.

⁸³ ERO D/P 219/12/29.

⁸⁴ For more information on workhouse admittance inventories see: Harley, 'Material Lives of the Poor and their Strategic Use of the Workhouse', pp. 71-103.

⁸⁵ Age calculated from ERO D/P 105/1/19.

⁸⁶ ERO D/P 220/12/3; ERO D/P 105/8/1-2.

⁸⁷ For an overview of this literature, see: J. Harley, 'Consumption and Material culture'.