# Moral Paupers: The Poor Men of St. Martin's, 1815–1819

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*Not only did male inmates of the St. Martin in the Fields Workhouse in London manipulate the offered assistance to meet their needs, but in doing so actually demonstrated the very virtues the workhouse was intended to instil. The logic of the behaviour of these poor men becomes readily apparent from a close analysis of workhouse admission and discharge records between 1815 and 1819 and of parish officials' interviews with applicants. As an inculcator of moral virtue, the workhouse was redundant and, hence, unnecessary. This evidence begins to call into question one of the basic premises of nineteenth-century poor law reform: the need for moral regeneration.*

*Cette étude conclut que non seulement les hommes détenus dans l'asile de pauvres de St. Martin in the Fields, à Londres, manipulaient-ils l'assistance qui leur était offerte pour subvenir à leurs besoins, mais que, ce faisant, ils faisaient montre des vertus mêmes que l'asile était censé leur inculquer. La logique du comportement de ces pauvres hommes ressort clairement lorsqu'on analyse de près les dossiers des admissions et des sorties de l'asile entre 1815 et 1819 et les interviews des dirigeants de la paroisse avec les demandeurs. Comme lieu d'enseignement de la moralité, l'asile était redondant et, par conséquent, inutile. Cette donnée nous amène à nous interroger sur le bien-fondé d'une des prémisses de la réforme du droit des pauvres du XIXe siècle : le besoin de régénération morale.*

THE POOR have long been the absent centre in poor law studies. As David Englander recently noted, "Poor law history, for all its current advances, has precious little to say about the thoughts, feelings and reactions of those who were forced to seek assistance or accept poor relief."[1] The focus of historical study has been largely elsewhere. Changes to and the impact of poor law policies and practices have been frequently analysed, as has the behaviour of

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1 David Englander, "From the Abyss: Pauper Petitions and Correspondence in Victorian London", *London Journal*, vol. 25, no. 1 (2000), p. 72.

relief officers, government officials, and magistrates.[2] Shifting upper-class attitudes to the poor, especially in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, have been closely examined.[3] The development of the system's institutions has also been explored at length.[4] On those occasions when the recipients of poor relief have been studied, moreover, it has usually been in a truncated fashion. The ways in which parish officials managed the poor, for instance, have tended to preoccupy the attention of workhouse studies. As well, workhouse inmates have been studied in isolation from the rest of their lives, wholly as paupers rather than as members of families and neighbourhoods.[5]

Writing the poor out of poor law history, or at best allotting them space as isolated recipients acted upon by others, gives rise to several problems. First, as Englander rightly noted, it dehumanizes relief recipients. Paupers, in this kind of analysis, exist less as historical actors than as objects of social policy, "to be analysed as an administrative category, as surrogate measures of unemployment or as anticipations of modern residential practices".[6] As well, estimations of the success or failure of the poor law system have often centred on the degree to which it actually achieved the goals of poor relief reformers and parish officials — chiefly the extent to which costs and recipient numbers were contained. As Jeremy Boulton has recently pointed out, much less atten-

2 The poor law literature is vast. Some of the most relevant texts here are S. Webb and B. Webb, *English Poor Law History Part II: The Last Hundred Years* (London: Cass, 1963 reprint); Mark Blaug, "The Myth of the Old Poor Law and the Making of the New", *Journal of Economic History*, vol. 23 (1963), pp. 151–184; Anthony Brundage, *The Making of the New Poor Law* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1978); Anne Digby, *Pauper Palaces* (London, 1978); William Apfel and Peter Dunkley, "English Rural Society and the New Poor Law: Bedfordshire, 1834–47", *Social History*, vol. 10, no. 1 (1985), pp. 37–68; George Boyer, *An Economic History of the English Poor Law, 1750–1850* (Cambridge, 1990); K. D. M. Snell, "Pauper Settlement and the Right to Poor Relief in England and Wales", *Continuity and Change*, vol. 6 (1991), pp. 375–417; Norma Landau, "The Eighteenth-century Context of the Laws of Settlement", *Continuity and Change*, vol. 6 (1991), pp. 417–439, and "Who Was Subject to the Laws of Settlement? Procedure Under the Settlement Laws in Eighteenth-century England", *Agricultural History Review*, vol. 43 (1996), pp. 139–159; Peter Stolar, "Poor Relief and English Economic Development Before the Industrial Revolution", *Economic History Review*, vol. 48 (1995), pp. 1–22; Steve Hindle, "Power, Poor Relief and Social Relations in Holland Fen, c.1600–1800", *The Historical Journal*, vol. 41, no. 1 (1998), pp. 67–96; Andrea Tanner, "The Casual Poor and the City of London Poor Law Union, 1837–1869", *The Historical Journal*, vol. 42, no. 1 (1999), pp. 183–206.

3 See, for instance, J. R. Poynter, *Society and Pauperism: English Ideas on Poor Relief 1795–1834* (London, 1969); Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty* (New York, 1985); Peter Mandler, "The Making of the New Poor Law Redivivus", *Past and Present*, vol. 117 (1987), pp. 131–157, and "Tories and Paupers: Christian Political Economy and the Making of the New Poor Law", *Historical Journal*, vol. 33 (1990), pp. 81–103; Lynn Hollen Lees, *The Solidarities of Strangers* (Cambridge, 1998).

4 Recent institutional histories include M. A. Crowther, *The Workhouse System, 1834–1929* (London, 1983); Felix Driver, *Power and Pauperism: The Workhouse System, 1834–1884* (Cambridge, 1993); Frank Crompton, *Workhouse Children* (Thrupp, Stroud, Gloucestershire, 1997).

5 Englander has commented on this proclivity. See "From the Abyss", pp. 72–73.

6 *Ibid.*, pp. 80–81.

tion has been paid to the roles poor relief played in the makeshift household economies shaping the lives of the poor.[7] It is unclear why costs and numbers should merit more serious consideration in evaluating the system's success than its ability to meet the needs of the poor. Finally, studying workhouse inmates in isolation from the rest of their lives is in and of itself problematic. In shearing off their neighbourhood ties, historians set workhouse inmates apart from the larger labouring-class community. Whether intended or not, this is a *de facto* acceptance of the perspective of upper-class reformers and poor law officials, all of whom were increasingly demanding that paupers be seen as a degraded group, morally different and physically isolated from the larger labouring-class community. Surely, a more balanced assessment is in order. Lynn Hollen Lees's observation that welfare was a process emerging "from complex understandings of deprivation and responsibility some of which were shared and others contested"[8] makes clear that such a reassessment is needed and that unproblematic assumptions of the perspective of relief officials and reformers are not justified.

Recent historical work exploring household survival strategies is also contributing to the need to rethink the meaning of the poor laws. More is being learned about the preferences and priorities of poor women and men in making ends meet and about the formal and informal resources they deployed in this struggle. Acting within family and neighbourhood survival networks based on mutual assistance, credit, and pawning to meet short-term needs, poor men and women also turned to poor relief and charity in more dire circumstances. For a minority, theft and prostitution were also options to be pursued.[9] Boulton has explored the relationship between informal and formal forms of assistance, concluding that, within this nexus, poor relief was an important and valued resource. It was not sufficient in most cases to maintain

7 Jeremy Boulton, " 'It is Extreme Necessity that Makes me do this': Some 'Survival Strategies' of Pauper Households in London's West End During the Early Eighteenth Century" in Laurence Fontaine and Jürgen Schlumbohm, eds., *Household Strategies for Survival, 1600–2000: Fission, Faction and Cooperation* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 47–69.

8 Hollen Lees, *The Solidarities of Strangers*, p. 22. In the European context, Marco van Leeuwen has made similar arguments. See *The Logic of Charity: Amsterdam 1800–1850* (Basingstoke, Hampshire, 2000). It is a pity that, for all her sensitive insight, Hollen Lees's analysis of the Old Poor Law is conducted almost wholly from above.

9 See Ellen Ross, "Survival Networks: Women's Neighbourhood Sharing in London Before World War One", *History Workshop Journal*, vol. 15 (1983), pp. 4–27; Lynn MacKay, "The Mendicity Society and its Clients: A Cautionary Tale", *Left History*, vol. 5, no. 1 (1997), pp. 39–64, and "Why They Stole: Women in the Old Bailey, 1779–1789", *Journal of Social History*, vol. 32, no. 3 (1999), pp. 623–639; Boulton, " 'It is Extreme Necessity' ", pp. 47–69; Thomas Sokoll, "Negotiating a Living: Essex Pauper Letters from London, 1800–1834" in Fontaine and Schlumbohm, eds., *Household Strategies*, pp. 19–46; John Beattie, *Crime and the Courts in England, 1600–1800* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986); Judith Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society* (Cambridge, 1982); Tony Henderson, *Disorderly Women in Eighteenth-century London* (Harlow, 1999). Survival strategies and the social relations governing community life in lower-class London neighbourhoods are discussed in "Borrowing a Warm", chap. 2 of my forthcoming book, *The Value of Virtue*.

subsistence, but was combined with other resources.[10] As Englander has noted, even the workhouse had limitations for many of the casual poor: it "was a short-term resource to tide them over the emergencies that were a routine feature of their lives".[11] People who turned to poor relief, moreover, were not isolated from their labouring-class community. Speaking of mid-century London, Englander has concluded:

> The situation of the poorest elements within the working class was altogether more ambiguous than either Victorian middle classes or modern historians have allowed. Insufficient attention has been devoted to life cycle poverty and the shifting importance of public and charitable assistance within working-class families. Those who sought assistance form the Poor Law did not in consequence become isolated from their community. Their absence was temporary: they were not shunned and relatives did not cease to see them in the workhouse.[12]

Neither, according to Englander, were relief recipients isolated morally from their labouring-class community. The recipients were a transient population; turnover was high and consequently "descent into dependency was not accompanied by a radical shift in outlook".[13] If poor relief was an important part of survival strategies and did not ostracize the recipients, it is imperative that we understand clearly how this assistance was actually used by plebeian women and men.

Thomas Sokoll and David Englander have used pauper letters to poor law authorities to delineate priorities and practices of the poor and to explore the circumstances under which they resorted to poor relief. These letters reveal the difficulties that tipped the claimants and their families into destitution and the attempts they made to negotiate with authorities. The vast majority of relief recipients did not write letters of complaint to poor law authorities, however, and it is possible that the assertive individuals who did so were not typical. Workhouse records offer a way around this difficulty, and much can be gleaned from them. The seemingly formulaic listings of those entering and leaving a workhouse are, in fact, rich sources illuminating inmate behaviour. This is apparent from the records of a large London workhouse, that of St. Martin in the Fields, between 1815 and 1819. In particular, by focusing on the group that contemporary officials and reformers were coming to regard as most problematic — able-bodied men — we can uncover the limitations of an uncritical adoption of the upper-class and official perspectives. The admission and discharge records of men aged 16 to 44 who entered the

10 Boulton, " 'It is Extreme Necessity' ", pp. 50–55.

11 Englander, "From the Abyss", p. 77.

12 *Ibid.*

13 *Ibid.*, p. 80.

St. Martin's workhouse, combined with settlement examinations,[14] reveal patterns of use that allow us to infer the men's motivation.

St. Martin in the Fields was one of the largest parishes in the country; in 1811 its population stood at 27,000. In keeping with this impressive size, the parish workhouse, just to the west of St. Martin's church, was one of the largest in London. It was also well thought of by contemporaries, and at least one London guidebook recommended it to tourists.[15] The period just after the wars saw the height of the movement to abolish poor relief. Certainly, by 1817, when abolition sentiment peaked, many in the upper classes had come to believe that the guaranteed assistance embodied in poor relief actively promoted improvidence. There was a great fear that a legally established relief system undermined individual willingness to work hard and to practise thrift, while allowing men and women to marry young and breed prolifically.[16] The upper classes were especially concerned by the supposed impact of public assistance on able-bodied men. The parish officials of St. Martin's shared these anxieties; throughout these years the parish moved to tighten workhouse discipline with new rules of various kinds meant to instil regular work habits and a disinclination to rely on public assistance.[17] To ensure worthiness, the parish began in 1817 to examine the eligibility of many more applicants for relief than had previously been the case.[18] In 1820, to improve morals, it even erected internal barriers in the house to prevent male and female inmates mixing.[19] Throughout the period the parish also tried to control inmates'access to the community at large. Repeatedly, restrictions on

14 These were interviews of applicants conducted by parish officials to determine whether the individual qualified for assistance. Applicants' responses were recorded and kept.

15 William Carey, *The Strangers Guide Through London; or a View of the British Metropolis in 1809* (London, 1809), p. 253. Jeremy Boulton has described the parish in a slightly earlier period in "The Poor Among the Rich: Paupers and the Parish in the West End, 1600–1724" in Paul Griffiths and Mark Jenner, eds., *Londinopolis* (Manchester, 2000), pp. 197–225.

16 Upper-class perceptions and fears are fully discussed in Poynter, *Society and Pauperism* and in Hollen Lees, *The Solidarities of Strangers*.

17 The positive comments of June 1817 in which parish officers praised the willingness of inmates to work must be seen in context. They refer only to a small number of inmates, 26 men and 18 women, who agreed to discharge themselves with a small allowance lasting a month, in order to look for work. To put this in perspective, 458 women, 300 men, and 325 children were admitted to the St. Martin's house in 1817. This was a very difficult year economically and relief costs were very high. At the same June meeting parish officials also considered granting small allowances to some of the older inmates so that they could maintain themselves outside the house. This was done explicitly in the interest of keeping down costs (since out-relief was cheaper). The ongoing concern with costs was also apparent in minutes of a meeting of overseers in July 1818, when officers considered whether simply to force paupers under 30 to leave the workhouse. Generally speaking positive comments about inmates were rare, and in this instance high costs seem to underlie the apparent generosity. See WAC F3914 (a copy to be found in F3915) and F2077 (June 11, 1817 and July 15, 1818).

18 WAC, St. Martin in the Fields Rough Examination Book, October 23, 1816 – December 31, 1819.

19 WAC F3914, St. Martin in the Fields Workhouse Report of Sub-committees, December 4, 1820.

day leaves — called liberty of the gate — were tightened.[20] In 1817 paupers — other than those about to be discharged — were allowed out only on regular holidays and after divine service on Sundays. In all instances passes were issued to the paupers specifying the hour of return. Inmates were allowed to have visitors from outside twice a week, on Tuesday and Friday afternoons, provided the visitors were willing to be searched coming in and going out of the house. House officials clearly suspected that outside contact would have undesired effects on inmates' behaviour. In January 1817, for instance, it was felt necessary to threaten any pauper returning to the house drunk with one month's detention. Given the high level of concern about inmates' behaviour by parish officers during this time, the five years from 1815 to 1819 seem to constitute a good period in which to examine the behaviour of male paupers.

Economically, the labouring classes in London faced a number of constraints in this period. Because of high rents as well as fuel and labour costs, London remained a city of small workshops throughout the era of industrialization. This continuity did not guarantee stability in employment, however. As David Green has noted, quite the opposite was true, for London's economy in the first half of the nineteenth century was a volatile mix of bust and boom.[21] While Westminster was one of the wealthiest parts of the metropolis, it was also home to artists, skilled craftsmen, artisans, servants, porters, cooks, washerwomen, and shopkeepers, all of whom attended upon the rich. Casual workers, labourers, prostitutes, thieves, and beggars were also found in large numbers in the area.[22] Among the men of St. Martin's, domestic service was the greatest source of employment. Tailors, shoemakers, and labourers were next, while clerks, porters, coach makers, carpenters, house painters, publicans, and bakers were also numerous.[23] The year 1813 ushered in a decade of severe depression in agriculture, and 1815–1816 brought a trade depression as well. Although the industrial sector began to recover in

20 There had been a number of changes in the 1790s and the early years of the nineteenth century. Liberty of the gate had been allowed on every other Thursday (1793) and then only on Saturday afternoons (1795). By 1800, 24 hours' notice had to be given by the pauper and all food was stopped for the day. In 1803 paupers were allowed out only on Thursdays. By 1814 people about to be discharged were granted liberty of the gate just beforehand in order to find work. See WAC F2074–F2076.

21 David Green, "The Nineteenth-century Metropolitan Economy: A Revisionist Interpretation", *London Journal*, vol. 21, no. 1 (1996), pp. 10–16.

22 The fullest examination of Westminster's economy is contained in Charles Hervey, Edmund Green, and Penelope Corfield, "Continuity, Change, and Specialization Within Metropolitan London: Westminster, 1750–1820", *Economic History Review*, vol. 52, no. 3 (1999), pp. 469–493; see also L. D. Schwartz, *London in the Age of Industrialisation* (Cambridge, 1992); Green, "The Nineteenth-century Metropolitan Economy".

23 *British Parliamentary Papers*, Commons, "Occupational Abstract" (1844), pp. I–89, I–73, 103–123. With the exception of domestic service, all of these trades were to be found among the leading Westminster male occupations identified by Hervey *et al.* in "Continuity, Change", p. 483. The omission of servants was to be expected since poll books were used as the source.

**Table 1 Individuals Admitted to the House, 1815–1819**

| Age | Males | | Females | | Unknown |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 0–6 | 366 | (275 + 91)[1] | 366 | (278 + 88) | 34 |
| 7–15 | 297 | (215 + 82) | 248 | (170 + 78) | |
| 16–44 | 521 | (380 + 141) | 1,094 | (810 + 284) | |
| 45–59 | 295 | (205 + 90) | 378 | (256 + 122) | |
| 60+ | 238 | (185 + 53) | 317 | (254 + 63) | |
| No age given[2] | 7 | | 11 | | |
| Total adults (16+) | 1,061 | | 1,800 | | |
| Total children | 663 | | 614 | | 34 |

1 The first figure in parenthesis is the number of people who entered the house only once during this five-year period. The second represents those who entered the house more than once.
2 These people were clearly adults, but their ages were not specified.
*Source:* St. Martin in the Fields Workhouse Day Books, 1815–1819.

1817, unemployment levels and food prices remained high.[24] It was a difficult period during which social policy was being seriously rethought.

At first glance, the pejorative contemporary judgements concerning male inmates of the St. Martin's workhouse seem justified. Table 1 shows the adult population admitted to the house for the five years from 1815 to 1819. Table 2 provides admission figures for five-year intervals between 1790 and 1810, which give some idea of how things changed after the end of the wars. As one would expect, the figures for men entering the workhouse rose significantly. Rapid demobilization, coupled with less work in war-related industries and high food prices, brought dramatic increases in the number of men entering the house. Of the adults aged 16 to 44 admitted to the workhouse before the end of the wars, one in four — 26 per cent — was male; thereafter men formed almost half — 48 per cent — of the adults in this age group who entered the house.[25] For women, on the other hand, the situation was somewhat different. Whereas the number of male entrants aged 16 to 44 increased by 55 per cent with the end of the wars, the number of women in this age group entering the house decreased by 16 per cent. Indeed, as a percentage of adult admissions, the figures for women dipped in 1815 and 1816, but began to rise again in 1817 and thereafter.[26] The end of the wars had less impact on the number of women admitted since their situation was governed by other constraints. Elsewhere I have found that greater economic vulnerability, illness, and gendered responsibilities were all crucial in lead-

24 Hervey *et al.*, "Continuity, Change"; Arthur Gayer, Walter W. Rostow, and A. J. Schwartz, *The Growth and Fluctuation of the British Economy, 1790–1850* (Oxford, 1953), pp. 110–113.
25 Since demobilization proceeded rapidly, I have included 1815 in the second period.
26 The figures for women aged 16 to 44 as a percentage of adults are as follows: 1790, 45%; 1795, 46%; 1800, 42%; 1805, 43%; 1810, 43%; 1815, 36%; 1816, 34%; 1817, 39%; 1818, 39%; 1819, 41%.

**Table 2 Adults Admitted to the House Between 1790 and 1810**

| Age | Males | Females |
|---|---|---|
| 16–44 | 335 | 1,297 |
| 45–59 | 213 | 515 |
| 60+ | 210 | 326 |
| No age given[1] | 23 | 27 |
| Total adults | 781 | 2,165 |

1 These people were clearly adults, but their ages were not specified.
*Source:* St. Martin in the Fields Workhouse Day Books from the years 1790, 1795, 1805, and 1810.

ing women to seek out poor relief — in the face of marital dissolution, for instance, children almost always became the responsibility of the mother.[27]

In the five years from 1815 to 1819 some 4,172 individuals were admitted to the house, of whom slightly more than two-thirds were adults — 2,861 men and women in all. Of these adults, 37 per cent were men, but what was undoubtedly even more alarming from the point of view of the authorities was the fact that 49 per cent of the adult males entering the house were aged 16 to 44 — men who were in their prime earning years. Another 28 per cent were 45 to 59 years old, and 22 per cent of the men entering the house were elderly (defined as 60 years of age and older). On the face of it, then, it would seem that the parish authorities had good cause for concern. Nevertheless, a closer examination of the evidence reveals that the vast majority of this population was far removed from feckless irresponsibility.

In the first place, only slightly more than one in four adult men — 27 per cent — appeared in the workhouse admission and discharge records more than once during this five-year period. The figure for adult female recidivism, incidentally, was almost exactly the same — 26 per cent. Presumably, if recourse to poor relief had been a regular and integral part of the survival strategies for the majority of male inmates, the recidivism rate would have been much higher. Furthermore, there were few high-frequency users. Each admission record listed the number of times during his or her life that the individual had been in the St. Martin's house. Fewer than 7 per cent of those admitted (280 individuals) had been in the house five or more times. For the adult entrants, the figure was just under 9 per cent. Of these, only 22 men and 52 women — or slightly less than 3 per cent of the adult entrants — had been in the workhouse 10 or more times during their lives. Clearly, for the vast majority admitted between 1815 and 1819, reliance upon workhouse

27 Lynn MacKay, "A Culture of Poverty", *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. 26, no. 2 (Fall 1995), pp. 221–223.

**Table 3 Occupations of Male Repeaters, Aged 16 to 44, 1815–1819**

| Occupation | Number[1] |
|---|---|
| Shoemakers | 8 |
| Sailors | 8 |
| Tailors | 6 |
| Labourers | 4 |
| Pensioners | 4 |
| Woodworkers | 3 |
| Servants | 3 |
| Coachmakers | 2 |
| Printers | 2 |
| Former chimney sweep apprentices | 2 |
| Currier | 1 |
| Looking glass polisher | 1 |
| Lace weaver | 1 |
| Beadmaker | 1 |
| Coal heaver | 1 |
| Painter/glazier | 1 |

1 Three of the 45 men gave two occupations.
*Source:* St. Martin in the Fields Workhouse Day Books, 1815–1819.

assistance was not an integral resource in survival strategies over the long term.

When we examine adult male repeat entrants directly, patterns begin to emerge that also help to explain the men's decision to seek this kind of assistance. Of the 141 male repeaters aged 16 to 44, occupations were given for 45 individuals (see Table 3). The trades most represented, shoemaking and tailoring, were notoriously insecure at this time: both were already suffering from labour surpluses that only worsened as the century wore on. They were also subject to slack periods when it was difficult, if not impossible, to find employment. During the season from March to the end of July, the gentry and aristocracy came to town and work was plentiful.[28] The period around Christmas was also busy. For the rest of the year, however, work could be very hard to find and prolonged un- and under-employment was the norm. Another group was comprised of discharged sailors, whose skills seemingly did not transfer to land employment. Labourers were by definition unskilled and as such would have had limited employment opportunities — casual work as porters or on the docks would have been typical jobs.[29] It is unclear whether the pensioners (three Greenwich and one East India Company) were in good health. Once again, sea-going experience did not seem to prepare them for

28 Schwartz, *London in the Age of Industrialisation*, pp. 105–106.
29 Dorothy George, *London Life in the Eighteenth Century* (Chicago, 1984), p. 159.

employment at home. Service, another occupation represented, was age-specific. In St. Martin's, the average ages of male and female servants were 22 and 24 respectively, according to the 1841 Census, the first for which occupation was systematically given.[30] This work was done by the young and the single with few exceptions. Cabinet making, like tailoring and shoemaking, was a trade in which it was difficult to make ends meet; here, too, a labour surplus, seasonal demand, and falling wages were already a problem.[31]

Most of the men for whom occupation was given, then, were either employed in trades in which it was difficult to find full-time employment sufficiently well paid to guarantee subsistence or whose skills did not readily apply to other kinds of work. Moreover, patterns evident in the settlement examinations are very similar to those revealed in the workhouse daybooks. In 194 instances between October 22, 1816 and December 31, 1819 (the settlement examinations for January 1, 1815 to October 21, 1816 have not survived) occupations were supplied for the men questioned.[32] Almost half — 89 men — were found in just two of the trades discussed above: shoemaking (51) and tailoring (38). When sailors, labourers, porters, and house painters or cabinet makers are added, the figure rises to 119 — 61 per cent of the 194 men. The workhouse and examination patterns are themselves evidence for the precariousness of life for practitioners of these trades. This evidence, plus the wealth of contemporary and historical commentaries, leads to the conclusion that the male repeaters in these trades had pressing reasons for entering the house.[33] It is likely, moreover, that many of the men for whom occupation was not provided in the poor relief records were also to be found in these trades, given that they were among the largest trades in the parish.

Other evidence contained in the workhouse admission and discharge records also indicates that real hardship led men to seek this assistance. Of the 141 men aged 16 to 44 who entered the house more than once between 1815 and 1819, 52, or more than one-third, did so at least once because of illness. In 37 of these cases — more than a quarter of the male repeaters in this age group — illness completely explained the repeated entries. In yet another seven cases, children or spouses were ill or had died, and the stresses this placed on family finances seems to have accounted for the repeated entries of these men. In two more cases, young children disappeared

30 PRO HO 107/739–740, 1841 Census, St. Martin in the Fields Street Indexes, Book 12.

31 Henry Mayhew, "Cabinet-makers" in E. P. Thompson and Eileen Yeo, *The Unknown Mayhew* (Harmondsworth, 1973), pp. 432–482.

32 WAC, St. Martin in the Fields Rough Examination Book. This constitutes19% of the 1,016 men questions by the parish during these years.

33 See, for instance, Robert Campbell, *The London Tradesman* (Newton Abbot, 1969; originally published 1747); Henry Mayhew, *The Morning Chronicle Survey of Labour and the Poor*, 6 vols. (Horsham, Sussex, 1981; originally published in the *Morning Chronicle*, October 19, 1849 – December 12, 1850); George, *London Life*; John Rule, *The Experience of Labour in Eighteenth-century English Industry* (New York, 1981); Schwartz, *London in the Age of Industrialisation*.

between the family admissions to the house, likely indicating illness and death and consequent financial hardship.[34]

If the figures are corrected for overlap, then the repeated entry of 64 men — that is, 45 per cent of male repeaters aged 16 to 44 — can be completely explained by insecure employment, their illness, or illness in their families. For another 15 men — 11 per cent of male repeaters aged 16 to 44 — these reasons at least partly explain the multiple entries.[35] Among married men, the supposedly feckless individuals thought unwilling to support their families, the repeated entry of 25 individuals — 57 per cent of the married men who entered more than once — can be explained in this way.

A closer examination of the behaviour of the married male inmates aged 16 to 44 shows the ways in which these families tried to make use of workhouse assistance. There were 44 such male repeaters. Only five of these families entered and left the workhouse as units in my period.[36] Another four of these married men always entered and left the house alone; three of these were ill — two repeatedly so[37] — and the last said his family was in Hull.[38] In the 35 other families the pattern was one of fragmented entry and discharge. In eight instances, the husband left the house alone, often occasioning censorious comments on his discharge record that he had abandoned his family in the house. In each case, however, the husband subsequently reappeared with some or all of his family, or family members were discharged to him. James Hayes, for instance, entered the house on August 31, 1818, with his two sons, Henry, aged ten, and James, aged one. There was no mention of a wife, and the next day James junior, an infant, was discharged to his grandmother and disappeared from the records. Henry and his father left the house together on September 10. Two days later they returned together, and on September 16 both absented themselves. Thereafter, Henry entered the house alone on December 28, 1818, with the notation "deserted by his father".[39] Yet, on August 22, 1819, Henry was discharged to his father's care with 6d., clearly indicating that James, senior, had not, in fact, permanently abandoned his son.

Fragmented entry and exit patterns exist for 27 other families. Frederick and Frances Symonds, for example, had been removed with their daughter

34 WAC F4026 and F4028, St. Martin in the Fields Workhouse Day Books, 1815–1816 (James Taylor) and 1816–1819 (John Morris).

35 I have not included her the two instances — the Taylor and Morris families — in which children disappeared from the records.

36 Only the families of William Hamilton (in the house in 1815–1816), Thomas Ireson (in the house in 1816 and 1818), Isaac Powell (in the house in 1816 and 1818), Robert Quadling (in the house in 1817–1818), and Thomas May (in the house 1818–1819) moved as units. WAC F4026 and F4028.

37 WAC F4026, St. Martin in the Fields Workhouse Day Books 1817–1818 (John Rudd Johnson), 1815–1818 (Edward Rolls), and 1815 (James Smith).

38 WAC F4026 and F4028, St. Martin in the Fields Workhouse Day Books 1815–1819 (William Haddock).

39 WAC F4026, St. Martin in the Fields Workhouse Day Book, 1818–1819 (James Hayes).

Sophia, age two, from St. Giles in the Fields. They entered and left the St. Martin's house together. Thereafter, in August 1818, Frances and Sophia entered the house alone and were both placed in a sick ward. In mid-September, with the season drawing to a close and work opportunities presumably lessening, Frederick joined his family in the house. Frances gave birth to Sarah in November and several days later Sophia died. The whole family left the house in 1819.[40] Sometimes children would be entered alone without their parents;[41] sometimes only the sick family member or members would enter.[42] Thomas Lapworth's case illustrates the hard choices many of these families faced: Thomas and his wife Ann entered the house together after being removed from Kensington. Thomas was placed in a long-term sick ward and Ann left the house several days later. The next month Thomas left the house for two days, but then returned alone to the same ward and died several months later.[43] Similarly, Michael Coleman absented himself in May 1816, the early season in London, leaving his family in the house. His seven-month-old twin sons died within days of each other in July, at which point Mary, Michael's wife, discharged herself.[44] These families did not simply give up in the face of adversity and enter the house *en masse*. Rather, they used it as a refuge for their weak and incapacitated members so that the rest would not be overwhelmed by the burden of care and could continue to attempt to maintain the family's financial independence.

The workhouse records, then, yield information indicating legitimate reasons for almost half of the men aged 16 to 44 who repeatedly entered the house — and this in spite of many omissions in the records. The percentage would undoubtedly be higher if the records were more complete. Even accepting them at face value, however, one needs to remember that adult male repeaters constituted only 27 per cent of the men in the house. The 77 men for whom no pressing reasons for repeated entry can be identified make up slightly less than 15 per cent of males aged 16 to 44 entering the workhouse and a little more than 7 per cent of adult men entrants. This is not a huge group.

Moreover, if those who were considered the most disreputable of all among the male repeaters are considered, then the house records are also illuminating. A number of men and women each year chose to absent themselves from the house; that is, they left without properly discharging themselves. In all, 69 adult men chose to do so between 1815 and 1819, while 73 adult women did so. House authorities were keen to discharge inmates, but insisted it be done properly with 24 hours' prior notice (presumably to dissuade frivolous or impulsive discharges that would see the individual return-

40 *Ibid.* (Frederick Symonds).

41 WAC F4026 and F4028, St. Martin in the Fields Workhouse Day Books, 1816–1817 and 1819 (John William Edwards); 1816 and 1818–1819 (Paul Peregrine Phillips).

42 WAC F4026 and F4028, St. Martin in the Fields Workhouse Day Books, 1818–1819 (John Farrell).

43 WAC F4026, St. Martin in the Fields Workhouse Day Book, 1815 (Thomas Lapworth).

44 WAC F4026, St. Martin in the Fields Workhouse Day Book, 1815–1816 (Michael Coleman).

**Table 4 Male and Female Absentees, 1815–1819**

| | Number absenting | | Number not returning | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Age | Males | Females | Males | Females |
| 16–44 | 32 | 37 | 9 | 8 |
| 45–59 | 22 | 23 | 3 | 1 |
| 60+ | 15 | 13 | 2 | 0 |

*Source:* St. Martin in the Fields Workhouse Day Books, 1815–1819.

ing to the house in short order). The records do not directly offer the reasons for these individuals' behaviour, but certain patterns are discernible.

Of the male repeaters aged 16 to 44, 32 men or 23 per cent chose to absent themselves (see Table 4). This was a much higher percentage than was the case for women in the same age group; 37, or 13 per cent, of the 284 female repeaters aged 16 to 44 decided to absent themselves. The men were also more likely to remain outside the house than were the women. Of the male absentees, 9, or 30 per cent, did not show up in the records again; 22 per cent of the women did not reappear.[45]

The meaning of these patterns cannot be known with certainty. One possibility is that some men were trying to avoid being forcibly removed or had just been so. The records, however, do not bear this out. None of the absenting men of any age had been about to be removed from St. Martin's, and only two of the 69 had been removed to St. Martin's within two weeks before they disappeared.[46] Another obvious explanation would be that these individuals tired of the restrictive house discipline and were engaging in the nineteenth-century equivalent of joy-riding. Nevertheless, a number of patterns in the records are not consistent with this explanation. Men 16 to 44 were the best-placed group in the workhouse population to regain financial independence. Sally Alexander has estimated that single London women in 1848 earned only 6s. 10d. a week on average; married women with parental responsibilities very likely earned less.[47] It is unlikely that the average earnings of women between 1815 and 1819 differed significantly from these levels.[48]

45 The records of two men were unclear with respect to discharge information and so have not been counted.

46 WAC F4026, St. Martin in the Fields Workhouse Day Books, January 1817 (James Smith); September 1818 (James Hayes).

47 Sally Alexander, "Women's Work in Nineteenth-century London: A Study of the Years 1820–1850" in Anne Oakley and Juliet Mitchell, eds., *The Rights and Wrongs of Women* (Harmondsworth, 1983), p. 87.

48 In addition to Alexander, "Women's Work", see, for instance, Peter Earle, "The Female Labour Market in London in the Late Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries", *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, vol. 42, no. 3 (1989), pp. 328–353; Eric Richards, "Women in the British Economy Since About 1700: An Interpretation", *History*, vol. 59 (October 1974), pp. 337–357.

Unskilled male labourers at the end of the wars could expect to earn in the neighbourhood of 10s. a week.[49] The ability to earn would also decrease with age as physical strength, eyesight, and stamina all waned. The workhouse records show, in fact, that while the percentage of male repeaters absenting rose a little with age — 24 per cent of male repeaters 45 to 59 absented themselves and 28 per cent of those 60 or older did so — their ability to remain outside the house fell sharply. Only 14 per cent of the male absentees aged 45 to 59 and 13 per cent of those 60 or older were able to do so. For women, the pattern was even more marked. Of the female repeaters aged 45 to 59, 19 per cent absented themselves, while 21 per cent of those 60 or older chose to do so. Only 4 per cent of the female absentees aged 45 to 59 managed to stay out of the house, while none of the women 60 or older was able to do so.

The timing of the men who absented themselves also revealed patterns. The 32 men aged 16 to 44 who absented themselves did so 50 times in all. Thirty-three of these instances occurred in the months March through July. In other words, 65 per cent of this truancy took place during the months of the London season. It is clear, moreover, that these men were not merely leaving to enjoy the warm weather. Only three instances of absenting took place in July and none at all in August, the warmest month of the year. This pattern also weakened with age: 18 of the 32 instances of absenting among men aged 45 to 59 (56 per cent) took place in March through July. Among those aged 60 or older, 8 of the 17 instances of absenting (47 per cent) occurred in these months. It would appear that the men best placed to regain financial independence absented themselves in the months when they were most likely to succeed in finding work. Moreover, the elderly were most likely by far to leave on a Sunday; more men aged 60 and older departed on this day than on all others combined.[50] They may well have slipped away on the way to or from church. As well, this was the one day of the week when liberty of the gate was generally permitted, and it may be that in the comings and goings it was easier to slip out. Men in their prime, on the other hand, tended to leave during the week, which would make sense if they were leaving to take advantage of work opportunities as they arose.[51] These patterns would indicate that this behaviour, rather than being a manifestation of impulse and irresponsibility, in a number of cases is evidence that these men wished to support themselves and their families and to re-establish their financial independence. In short, they continued to behave in accordance with the basic priorities of labouring-class families generally.

If pejorative value judgements of these men seem largely misplaced, the

49 L. D. Schwarz, "Occupations and Incomes in Late Eighteenth-century London", *East End Review*, vol. 14, no. 2 (December 1972), p. 95, and *London in the Age of Industrialisation*, pp. 161–207.

50 The figures are as follows: 10 men aged 60 or older left on a Sunday, 2 on a Monday, 1 on a Tuesday, 1 on a Wednesday, 2 on a Thursday, 1 on a Friday, and none on a Saturday.

51 Of men in their prime (aged 16 to 44), 7 left on a Sunday, 6 on a Monday, 7 on a Tuesday, 6 on a Wednesday, 11 on a Thursday, 4 on a Friday, and 9 on a Saturday.

question remains why they were made at all. Several explanations seem plausible. In the first place, male paupers became the target of censure for practical and prosaic reasons. It is clear from the notations in the house records that authorities feared these men might desert their families, leaving the parish with an expensive, long-term maintenance burden. As well, men could be difficult to manage in the house. The parish had a policy of sending refractory inmates to an institution called the City Farm in Islington and 61 per cent of the 70 people who went were men. The workhouse, moreover, while reputedly one of the best in London, was not a well-oiled institutional machine humming along: staff changes were noted throughout the overseers' minutes and new regulations were introduced to curb staff theft and drunkenness.[52] It is clear from the records that keeping the house in good order was a constant struggle requiring unceasing vigilance. It may be that men in their prime were disliked quite as much for their nuisance value within the house as for any perceived moral failings. Finally, the changes in admission levels may also have contributed to the perception that these men were the most serious problem group among poor relief recipients. Where the steadiness in the number of women in their prime who sought the house may have seemed an instance of "the poor ye shall always have with you", the substantial jump in male numbers may well have increased suspicions of malingering.

Ideological preoccupations also came into play. As Mitchell Dean has argued, the emergence of liberal governance during this period meant that the poor had to become more "responsible", and this was especially the case for men. It was crucial that the individual liberty central to the liberal state be used responsibly — in ways that promoted social stability and economic growth. Thus, poor men at all times were to be held accountable for the well-being of their families: subsistence was to be achieved through their good efforts rather than through reliance on public assistance — money that could be better invested in economic expansion. As Dean notes, "in regards to matters of poverty, the private sphere is not so much one of personal freedoms and rights but of the economic responsibilities of a certain category of social agent, the male breadwinner."[53] Hollen Lees has added that men who did not "enter the labour market ... work hard, earning wages proportionate to their efforts and skills ... lost the defining characteristic of masculinity and forfeited their right to be treated as adult citizens".[54]

The central issue from the upper-class point of view and that of parish officials was not so much whether the poor were willing to struggle to maintain their independence; as the evidence indicates, they were. Rather, the preoccupation was to ensure the willingness of the poor to adhere to a particular formula for maintaining independence: the responsible male breadwin-

52 WAC F2075 and F2076, St. Martin in the Fields Overseers' Minutes.

53 Mitchell Dean, *The Constitution of Poverty* (London, 1991), p. 13. Lynn Hollen Lees discusses the new notions of male responsibility as well; see *The Solidarities of Strangers*, especially pp. 135–145.

54 Hollen Lees, *The Solidarities of Strangers*, p. 139.

ner had to provide for his dependents. Strategies for financial independence not based on this formula were ignored, misunderstood, or disparaged — the fathers excoriated in the records for "abandoning" their children, for instance. These strategies might at times bring short-term success in the battle to make ends meet, but they were not held to be in the best interests of either the poor or society: at most they brought survival, not betterment. The responsible male breadwinner became the only acceptable way forward, and from the upper-class and official points of view a workhouse system bent on inculcating independence according to this formula was vitally necessary. Hence, men in their prime were the target.

Finally, the practical and ideological reasons for focusing on able-bodied men were reaffirmed by what the upper classes and parish officials thought they saw in the behaviour of workhouse inmates. In struggling to maintain their independence and to avoid staying in the workhouse any longer than absolutely necessary, the poor seemed to validate the appropriateness of a deterrent system of assistance. Even though the workhouse increasingly undermined family and neighbourhood strategies and resources upon which the poor so crucially depended to make ends meet, it did appear to act as a deterrent to dependence. Thus, by 1834, when the system was overhauled, the workhouse seemed the most effective tool to deal with what was diagnosed as the root cause of indigence: the moral degeneracy of the male breadwinner.

Nevertheless, the values exhibited by the vast majority of inmates were not newly learned during their relatively rare forays into the workhouse, but were lifelong patterns of behaviour brought with them from London's plebeian neighbourhoods. Poor relief was one more resource in a constellation of makeshift strategies and sharing that made life possible. From the vantage of the poor, demands that they learn the value of independence were redundant and unnecessary. There was logic to the behaviour of these people as they incorporated workhouse assistance into their survival strategies. It is also apparent that they used the workhouse purposefully and selectively.[55] What they did not do, given the economic uncertainties and constraints of the period, was to accept the formula being put forward for them by their social betters.

A range of reasons, then, led the upper classes and relief authorities to target able-bodied men. This viewpoint made sense to them; it embodied what they thought they saw and jibed with their beliefs and practical concerns. Nevertheless, this perspective occluded as much as it illuminated. Many historians have pointed out the inappropriateness of the moral analysis: castigating the moral character of relief recipients ignored the structural problems of London's economy which made it difficult for poor men and women to find work sufficiently regular and adequately paid to maintain subsistence

55 Catherine Lis and Hugo Soly use this phrase to describe similar behaviour patterns of the inmates of the Antwerp workhouse in " 'Total Institutions' and the Survival Strategies of the Labouring Poor in Antwerp, 1770–1860" in Peter Mandler, ed., *The Uses of Charity* (Philadelphia, 1990), p. 53.

throughout the year. Seasonal demand, sweating, a burgeoning labour surplus, and economic booms and busts all helped make life exceedingly difficult at times no matter how hard one worked.[56] It is not enough, however, for historians simply to point out the shortcomings of the moral analysis. As long as the majority of work on the poor law system continues to be written from above, the occlusions and partiality of the contemporary analysis will be perpetuated: the agency of the poor will remain limited. The poor law system will continue to be judged according to its ability to contain costs and numbers. In short, the priorities, if not the actual analyses, of the upper classes and relief officials will live on.

56 Gareth Stedman Jones, in *Outcast London* (Harmondsworth, 1976) deals extensively with the impact these problems had on unskilled labourers and their families. More recently, David Green has explored the situation for artisans in *From Artisans to Paupers* (Aldershot, 1995).