# An economic history of the english poor law $$1750\mathchar`-1850$$

## AN ECONOMIC HISTORY OF THE ENGLISH POOR LAW 1750–1850

GEORGE R. BOYER Cornell University



CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge New York Port Chester Melbourne Sydney CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

> Cambridge University Press The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521364799

© Cambridge University Press 1990

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 1990 Reprinted 1993 Hardback version transferred to digital printing 2006 Digitally printed first paperback version 2006

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Boyer, George R. An economic history of the English Poor Law, 1750–1850 / George R. Boyer.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references. ISBN 0-521-36479-5

 Great Britain – Economic conditions – 18th century.
Great Britain – Economic conditions – 19th century.
Poor – Great Britain – History.
Poor laws – Great Britain – History.
Title. HC254.5.B64
HC254.5.B64

362.5'85'0942 - dc20

89–22365 CIP

ISBN-13 978-0-521-36479-9 hardback ISBN-10 0-521-36479-5 hardback

ISBN-13 978-0-521-03186-8 paperback ISBN-10 0-521-03186-9 paperback

> For my mother Louise Coulson Boyer

## CONTENTS

	Acknowledgments	<i>page</i> xi
	Introduction	1
1.	The Development and Administration of the Old Poor	
	Law in Rural Areas, 1760–1834	9
	1. The Administration of Poor Relief	10
	2. Timing of Changes in Poor Law Administration	23
	3. Changes in the Economic Environment	31
	4. Conclusion	43
	Appendix A: Agricultural Laborers' Wages, 1750–1832	43
	Appendix B: Labor Rate for Wisborough Green	49
2.	The Old Poor Law in Historical Perspective	51
	1. The Historiography of the Poor Law Before 1834	52
	2. The Poor Law Report of 1834	60
	3. Fabian Interpretations of the Poor Law	65
	4. Polanyi's Analysis of the Poor Law	71
	5. The Revisionist Analysis of the Poor Law	75
	6. Conclusion	83
3.	An Economic Model of the English Poor Law	85
	1. The Effect of Seasonality on the Rural Labor Market	86
	2. Seasonality in English Agriculture	88
	3. The Parish Vestry and the Financing of the Poor Rate	94
	4. An Economic Model of the Rural Labor Market	99
	5. The Effect of Migrant Labor on the Rural Labor	
	Market	113
	6. Conclusion	118
	Appendix	119

Cambridge University Press			
978-0-521-03186-8 - An Econo	mic History of th	he English Poor	Law 1750-1850
George R. Boyer			
Frontmatter			
More information			

viii	Contents	
4.	The Old Poor Law and the Agricultural Labor Market in	
	Southern England: An Empirical Analysis	122
	1. Explanations for the Long-Term Increase and Regional	
	Variations in Relief Expenditures	123
	2. Data	127
	3. Estimation of the Three-Equation Model	133
	4. Regression Results	138
	5. Implications for the Long-Term Increase in Relief	
	Expenditures	142
	6. Conclusion	145
	Appendix A: Data Sources	146
	Appendix B: Representativeness of Sample	149
5.	The Effect of Poor Relief on Birth Rates in Southeastern	
	England	150
	1. The Historical Debate	150
	2. The Economic Value of Child Allowances	153
	3. An Analysis of the Determinants of Birth Rates	155
	4. Regression Results	162
	5. A Test of the Exogeneity of Child Allowances	165
	6. Implications for the Long-Term Increase in Birth Rates	167
	7. Conclusion	172
6.	The Poor Law, Migration, and Economic Growth	173
	1. The Effect of Poor Relief on Migration: The Redford	
	Model	175
	2. The Effect of Poor Relief on Migration: The Polanyi	
	Model	182
	3. The Effect of Poor Relief on Migration: Model Three	187
	4. Conclusion	191
7.	The New Poor Law and the Agricultural Labor Market,	
	1834–1850	193
	1. The Revision of the Poor Law	194
	2. Historians' Analyses of the New Poor Law	204
	3. An Economic Model of the Impact of Poor Law	
	Reform	212
	4. Movements in Real Income, 1832–50	216
	5. The Regional Labor Market, 1832–50	224
	6. Conclusion	231

	Contents	ix
8.	The Economics of Poor Relief in Industrial Cities	233
	1. The Economic Role of Poor Relief in Industrial Areas	234
	2. The Economic Role of the Settlement Law in Industrial	
	Areas	244
	3. The System of Nonresident Relief	257
	4. Urban Attitudes Toward the Poor Law Amendment	
	Act	259
	5. Conclusion	262
	Appendix: Occupations Contained in Each Classification	
	of Worker in Table 8.6	264
	Conclusion	265
	1. Summary of the Argument	265
	2. The Old Poor Law in Perspective	268
	References	273
	Index	288

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book began in 1981 as a Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Wisconsin and has continued to evolve and expand ever since. I have accumulated many debts in the process of writing the book, and I am happy to be able to thank those people who have generously taken the time to improve it.

My greatest debt is to Jeffrey Williamson, who supervised my dissertation, and who has helped in every stage of the development of this work. Over the past decade Jeff has been my teacher, my critic, and my friend. He has consistently helped me to clarify my thinking and insisted that I find data to support my hypotheses. Without his enthusiasm and encouragement this book would never have been written.

I also owe a major debt to Peter Lindert. Peter played an important role in the early stages of the project, helping me to formulate my ideas and directing me to the data necessary to test them. Since then he has read several versions of almost every chapter of the book and always improved them with his detailed criticisms.

I owe my understanding of implicit contracts theory to two of my colleagues at Cornell, Kenneth Burdett and Randall Wright. Ken taught me contracts theory at the University of Wisconsin, and has continued to give me the benefit of his insights since we both moved to Cornell. Randy offered me invaluable help in revising the model into the form that appears in Chapter 3.

Joel Mokyr (who once called my model of poor relief a "neoclassical soap opera") and Mary MacKinnon read drafts of most of the chapters of the book, and greatly improved them with their criticisms and suggestions. Stanley Engerman and Michael Edelstein read the entire manuscript, and their detailed comments significantly improved the final version of the book.

Several other people have read and criticized drafts of chapters and

#### xii

### Acknowledgments

deserve thanks: Kenneth Snowden, Claudia Goldin, Daniel Baugh, Donald McCloskey, Tim Hatton, Nick Crafts, Nick von Tunzelmann, David Galenson, Paul David, Lars Muus, Roger Avery, Michael Haines, Glen Cain, Henry McMillan, Patricia Dillon, and Carl Dahlman. In addition, I would like to thank my colleagues at the School of Industrial and Labor Relations, especially George Jakubson and Ronald Ehrenberg, for their help and constructive criticism. For their helpful comments, I also thank the participants at the 1982 Cliometrics Conference; the Tenth University of California Conference on Economic History (1986); and the economic history workshops at Northwestern, Chicago, Harvard, Pennsylvania, and Columbia.

For their patient assistance and cooperation in locating books and manuscript sources, I thank the staffs of Olin Library at Cornell; the British Library; the Public Record Office at Kew; and the Essex, Suffolk, Bedford, Cambridge, and Norfolk county record offices. I thank Joshua Schwarz and Phyllis Noonan for their able research assistance. Nancy Williamson at Wisconsin and Eileen Driscoll at Cornell provided invaluable computer programming assistance. Pat Dickerson typed the dissertation, the book manuscript, and every draft in between, and cheerfully put up with my increasingly compulsive behavior during the latter stages of this project. I gratefully acknowledge the assistance and encouragement of my editors at Cambridge University Press: Frank Smith, Janis Bolster, and Nancy Landau.

Financial support for my research was obtained from several sources. A Vilas Travel Grant from the Graduate School of the University of Wisconsin enabled me to spend three months in England during the spring of 1981. The Committee on Research in Economic History of the Economic History Association provided an Arthur H. Cole grant-in-aid that permitted me to spend part of the summer of 1986 doing research in England. The School of Industrial Relations at Cornell provided several small grants to help defray research costs.

While researching this book in England I enjoyed the hospitality of Tim Hatton and the members of the economics department at the University of Essex. Tim generously provided me with lodgings at the Hatton Hotel, and he and his colleagues spent innumerable hours at the Black Buoy, the Rose and Crown, the Horse and Groom, and the Flag passing on to me the famous oral tradition of the economics department (see O. E. Covick, "The Quantity Theory of Drink: A Restatement," *Australian Economic Papers*, December 1974).

### Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the Economic History Association and the editors of *Explorations in Economic History* and the *Journal of Political Economy* for permission to reprint portions of my earlier articles: "An Economic Model of the English Poor Law circa 1780–1834," *Explorations in Economic History* 22 (April 1985): 129–67 (copyright 1985, by Academic Press); "The Old Poor Law and the Agricultural Labor Market in Southern England: An Empirical Analysis," *Journal of Economic History* 46 (March 1986): 113–35 (copyright 1986, by the Economic History Association); "The Poor Law, Migration, and Economic Growth," *Journal of Economic History* 46 (June 1986): 419–30 (copyright 1986, by the Economic History 46 (June 1986): 419–30 (copyright 1986, by the Economic History Association); "Malthus Was Right After All: Poor Relief and Birth Rates in Southeastern England," *Journal of Political Economy* 97 (February 1989): 93–114 (copyright 1989, by The University of Chicago).

My friend and companion Janet Millman has offered advice, criticism, research assistance, and encouragement throughout the project. She has suffered through my fixation on this book during the past three years with only a minimum of complaints.

Finally, I thank my mother, Louise Boyer, and my aunts and uncles for their encouragement over the years. When I was young, Muz always found the time to take me to museums and historic sites, and she passed on to me her love of England. For these and so many other reasons, this book is dedicated to her.

Ithaca, New York January 1990 xiii