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## RESEARCH NOTE

# Sparrow Catching in Mattishall, Norfolk in the Early Nineteenth Century\*

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### Abstract

*This short note examines the role of payments for sparrow catching in the parish of Mattishall in Norfolk in the 1820s. Payments for sparrow catching were made by the poor law authorities to those who otherwise had no income, or an insufficient income to subsist. They were part of the economy of makeshifts. A plausible interpretation of the evidence is that the overseers of the poor in Mattishall felt that it was important that paupers do some work in exchange for their dole money, if suitable work could be found.*

The early nineteenth century poor employed a number of different coping strategies and different points in the lifecycle could influence the options available.<sup>2</sup> The term ‘the economy of makeshifts’ was introduced by Olwen Hufton in 1974.<sup>3</sup> It is a phrase that sums up the patchy, desperate and sometimes failing survival strategies of the poor.<sup>4</sup> The poor laws might intervene at different points in the experience of a household according to local custom, economic conditions and the persuasiveness of the person requesting relief.<sup>5</sup> Makeshift activities would be required either to supplement any poor relief allocated or to support paupers entirely if no relief were forthcoming. Sparrow catching was one such makeshift activity revealed in the accounts of the overseer for Mattishall in Norfolk as a form of pauper income.<sup>6</sup> Whilst poor relief might supplement more traditional employment such as farm labouring, some people (especially children), were employed by the churchwardens of Mattishall parish as sparrow catchers for which they were paid half

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2 R. Wall, ‘Work, welfare and the family: an illustration of the adaptive family economy’, in L. Bonfield, K. Wrightson and P. Laslett (eds) *The World We Have Gained: Histories of Population and Social Structure* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 261–94.

3 See O. Hufton, *The Poor of Eighteenth-Century France 1750–1789* (Oxford, 1974).

4 Hufton, *Poor of Eighteenth-Century France*, p. 3.

5 A. Tomkins, ‘Pawnbroking and the survival strategies of the urban poor in 1770s York’, in A. Tomkins and S. King (eds) *The Poor in England, 1700–1850: an Economy of Makeshifts* (Manchester, 2003), pp. 166–98.

6 Norfolk Record Office (hereafter NRO) PD703/105: Mattishall overseers’ bills and vouchers covering payments made from January to August 1825.

a penny per bird.<sup>7</sup> A unique approach is taken in this article, whereby the names of the sparrow-catchers are not only noted for their identification of children undertaking this work, but also compared with other sources such as a list in the accounts identifying the poor that rented cottages from the parish, weekly dole lists and supplementary payments found in the accounts. In doing this a wide-ranging picture of the functioning of a makeshift society is formed.

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Douglas Anderson, in his study of Hampshire parishes, found that, although the survival of churchwardens' accounts was patchy, parishes making vermin payments grew from 25 per cent in the early seventeenth century to over 80 per cent throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>8</sup> This shows that, during the years of economic crises, most parishes in Hampshire were making use of the vermin-catching laws. Anderson finds the most striking point to emerge from the churchwardens' accounts from the second half of the eighteenth century is that most parishes began to pay for sparrows to be caught.<sup>9</sup> He claims that the only surviving example of a sparrow catching account is one for 1832 for Whitchurch.<sup>10</sup> Whilst this period does cover that when most parishes undertook enclosure (usually in the early 1800s), it more importantly coincides with a period of poor harvests, high corn prices and widespread starvation of the poor. It seems to be no coincidence, then, that during the eighteenth century these Hampshire parishes began to transfer responsibility for payment of vermin catching from the churchwardens and the parish rates to the overseers and the poor rates.<sup>11</sup> Anderson finds that it is often not possible to say to whom the vermin bounties were given because the churchwardens often merely list the payments made. The accounts for Hampshire parishes show sparrow-catching work was often done by children, as do the Mattishall accounts. Although Anderson finds suggestions in the literature that payments for this work were made to children as pocket money, he feels this was, in fact, a means to supplement the household income at a time when adult wages were low.<sup>12</sup>

There were two key reasons for the parish to provide such employment; first, it protected the crops being grown for human consumption; and, second, it could provide food for the poor. Leigh Shaw-Taylor argued that, following enclosure, where common resources did continue to exist, access to them was strictly regulated.<sup>13</sup> Where the poor were allowed to gather fuel from wasteland, it was understood this permission was granted

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7 P. Greenhow, 'I do belong to Mattishall: obtaining poor relief from Mattishall, Norfolk, c. 1750–1834' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Leicester, 2021), Table 4.4.

8 D. Anderson, 'Noyfull fowles and vermin: parish payments for killing wildlife in Hampshire 1533–1863', *Hampshire Field Club Archaeological Society* 60(1) (2005), pp. 209–228.

9 Anderson, 'Noyfull fowles and vermin', p. 223.

10 Hampshire Record Office M76/PW1: see Anderson, 'Noyfull fowles and vermin', p. 224.

11 Anderson, 'Noyfull fowles and vermin', p. 212.

12 Anderson, 'Noyfull fowles and vermin', p. 224.

13 L. Shaw-Taylor, 'Parliamentary enclosure and the emergence of an English agricultural proletariat', *Journal of Economic History* 61 (2001), pp. 640–62, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022050701030030>.

in order to reduce the burden of the cost of the poor rate.<sup>14</sup> Vermin poached food grown for human consumption, causing increased hardship and starvation.<sup>15</sup> Faced with the problem of hunger, Tudor parliaments not only instituted arrangements for the care of the poor by making parishes responsible for the maintenance of the same, they also sought to remove the competition for scarce food supplies.<sup>16</sup> Under the 1532 and 1566 Acts for Protecting Grain, parishes were encouraged to make payments for the destruction of a long list of vermin such as various birds, foxes, hedgehogs, otters and rabbits.<sup>17</sup> Enclosure brought the planting of miles of hedgerow in which sparrows began to nest and, by the mid eighteenth century, they had become a particular pest, eating large amounts of grain.<sup>18</sup>

Whilst entries in churchwardens' accounts showing payments for vermin seem to be available for many parishes, it seems that separate surviving sparrow-catching lists are rare. This raises the question of whether parishes were paying only for sparrows to be caught or were making payments for the destruction of all vermin. The small number of historians who mention sparrow catching in the literature do so in the context of vermin catching generally. The sources they use are simply identified as accounts and do not imply a separate sparrow-catching list. Matthew Cragoe and Briony McDonagh, in their Northamptonshire study, found that not all the churchwardens' accounts give the names of the individuals paid for vermin; where they do, comparison with parish rate books, vestry records and estate rentals illuminates something about the people who brought vermin in.<sup>19</sup> They found that all classes of the community from farmers to labourers were represented in the accounts. At Ashby St Ledgers, for example, sparrows, polecats and hedgehogs were brought in by several of the biggest farmers on the Ashley estate in 1750, as well as by some of the cottagers, while, in later decades, the coachman and the gardener at Ashby Hall occasionally supplemented their incomes with a dead polecat or hedgehog. In Northamptonshire, 79 parishes paid to remove sparrows from the crops between 1685 and 1873.<sup>20</sup>

Those whose occupation was described in the mid nineteenth century censuses as 'scaring crows' were typically children, and often came from families who were poor or pauperised. These censuses also identify the occupations of 'bird boy' who caught birds

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14 S. Birtles, 'Common land, poor relief and enclosure: the use of manorial resources in fulfilling the parish obligations 1601–1834', *Past and Present* 165 (1999), pp. 74–106, <https://doi.org/10.1093/past/165.1.74>.

15 M. Fissell, 'Imagining vermin in early modern England', *History Workshop Journal* 47 (1999), pp. 1–29, <https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/1999.47.1>.

16 M. Cragoe and B. McDonagh, 'Parliamentary enclosure, vermin and the cultural life of English parishes, 1750–1850', *Continuity and Change* 28 (2013), pp. 27–50, here at p. 29, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0268416013000118>.

17 An Act for the Destruction of Crows and Rookes. 24 Henry VIII, c. 10 (1532); An Act for the Preservation of Grain. 8 Elizabeth, c. 15 (1566).

18 Cragoe and McDonagh, 'Parliamentary enclosure', p. 31.

19 Cragoe and McDonagh, 'Parliamentary enclosure', p. 33.

20 J. Palmer, 'Vermin catching in Northamptonshire and Bedfordshire', *Northamptonshire and Bedfordshire Life* 14 (1987), pp. 12–14.

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and 'bird catcher' who sold birds.<sup>21</sup> Keeping a separate record suggests sparrow catching had an important place in the support of the parish poor, perhaps forming a larger part of pauper income in such parishes than in others. In Mattishall a number of people undertook this work, some receiving payments several times per month, which indicates their efforts to work when employment was available.<sup>22</sup> Some brought their children along to increase the family income. Others only managed one day, perhaps finding the work difficult and unpleasant. The more experienced seemed to earn a good supplementary wage with one individual named Skipper earning 4s. 2d. in the month of January when the average annual pay for a labourer might be 1s. 6d. per day. Given that, in the month of May, when Skipper himself did not earn anything sparrow catching, his son earned 1s. 0½d., the family were obviously doing all they could to support themselves in whatever way possible.<sup>23</sup>

As Table 1 shows, the highest number of bird catchers was in January at a time when many of the poor would have run out of resources, and the highest number of birds caught was in May following none being caught in the previous two months. The lack of birds being caught in these months reflects the availability of agricultural work, especially for children who make up a large proportion of the sparrow catchers. The highest number of birds were caught in May reflecting not only a lull in agricultural work but also the Spring increase in bird population. The lack of any payments made by the poor law administrators for catching sparrows in March and April suggests it would make sense for farmers to employ sparrow catchers even if the churchwardens could not supply them. In 1755 the *Whitehall Evening Post* reported that sparrows had destroyed a whole field of barley near Galway despite the attempts of farmers to frighten them away by shooting and throwing stones at them.<sup>24</sup> It was 'the first instance of an entire Crop being carried off by Sparrows'.<sup>25</sup> Sparrows were regular pests across the corn-growing areas. John Middleton, in his account of agriculture in Middlesex, reckoned that sparrows cost farmers at least a shilling an acre on the whole value of a farm, taking into account both what they ate and the cost of hiring boys to protect the newly-sown corn in the spring.<sup>26</sup> This figure did not take into account other damage committed by jays, pigeons and rooks. In 1745, the *Dublin Journal* reported complaints that sparrows were even more destructive than rats.<sup>27</sup>

Whilst these reports make it clear that farmers did pay for sparrow-catchers themselves, there is nothing to suggest this was particularly in the spring when the Mattishall churchwardens made no payments as the newspaper reports were in the summer months

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21 Census of Great Britain, 1851, *Population Tables, II. Ages, Civil Conditions, Occupations and Birth-Places of the People with the Numbers and Ages of the Blind, the Deaf-and-Dumb, and the Inmates of Workhouses, Prisons, Lunatic Asylums, and Hospitals, Vol. II.* British Parliamentary Papers 1852-1853 LXXXVIII Pt 2 [C. 1691.II].

22 Greenhow, 'I do belong to Mattishall', p. 87.

23 Greenhow, 'I do belong to Mattishall', p. 88.

24 *Whitehall Evening Post*, 7 August 1755.

25 *Whitehall Evening Post*, 7 August 1755.

26 J. Middleton, *General View of the Agriculture of Middlesex* (London, 1813), p. 477.

27 *Dublin Journal*, 13 July 1745.

**Table 1** Number of people catching birds and number of birds caught in each month

Month	Number of catchers	Number of birds caught
January	24	410
February	16	193
March	0	0
April	0	0
May	15	507
June	15	305
July	12	178
August	8	128

**Source:** Norfolk Record Office PD703/105: Mattishall overseers' bills and vouchers covering payments made from January to August 1825.

of July and August. Table 1 also shows that the churchwardens paid for fewer sparrows to be caught in these two months and that in August only eight people were paid. These months are harvest months so the evidence supports the idea that the churchwardens did not need to provide this employment for the poor as agricultural work was available and, if crops were being harvested, there would be no need to protect them from birds.

The names of many on the sparrow-catching list, including Skipper, also appear on the list of those living at Mattishall Cottages, properties bought by money left in the wills of philanthropists for the use of the poor.<sup>28</sup> In turn, these names appear on both the Easter dole lists and, of course, the weekly dole lists. Whilst it might come as a surprise to see 'boy at Bruntons' on the sparrow-catching list, as he must surely have been his apprentice, and the worsening economic situation in 1825 leading up to the crisis of 1826 may have meant Brunton was unable adequately to support his apprentice necessitating the boy to earn additional money as he could.

Taking the unusual approach of comparing the names on the sparrow-catching list and the weekly dole lists we find that Key, who appears frequently employed catching sparrows, was a widow. She also appeared on the Easter dole lists and was housed in a pauper cottage. Of the 40 names on the Mattishall Cottages list for 1825, all appear on weekly dole lists, 14 also on Easter lists and 6 also on the sparrow-catching list.<sup>29</sup> Thus there were a number of people who were already receiving weekly dole, on the Easter lists, and in pauper housing, yet still caught sparrows, even if they were widowed or children. This effort to make ends meet reveals an expectation from the parish that those able to work should do so regardless of age or status.

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Linking these sources of income in this way has provided a unique insight into the makeshift economy of the resident poor of Mattishall. Mattishall parish did have other avenues of income available for those who were insufficiently employed. It is not surprising then, that we see a number of sub-employed labourers requiring additional help for one-

<sup>28</sup> Greenhow, 'I do belong to Mattishall', p. 88.

<sup>29</sup> NRO PD703/105.

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off expenditure, or that they were obtaining day-work through the parish, even if it was catching sparrows.<sup>30</sup>

This note has contributed to the literature of sparrow catching as very little has been published about this subject. Two things have been established. First, Anderson's claim that the sparrow-catching list he discovered in the 1832 churchwardens' accounts for Whitchurch, Hampshire is the only surviving example is now not the case, as I have found one in the 1825 overseers' accounts for Mattishall, Norfolk. Second, however, Anderson's assertion that the money raised from this activity was not pocket money for children as previously suggested, but a necessary form of income for the poor has been reinforced by the evidence from Mattishall. In addition to bringing attention to a further example of this source, this note adds to the literature about the makeshift society. Not only does it discuss a less-known source of income and food but also highlights the patchwork aspects of the makeshift society by identifying a number of paupers who appear on more than one list of names relating to the poor: the sparrow-catching list, lists of those renting cottages for the poor and names listed in the accounts of recipients of occasional or regular poor relief.

Highlighting the existence of this Mattishall sparrow-catching list has added to the meagre examples of this source and this discussion of it highlights the place of sparrow catching in the patchwork of a makeshift society. As few parishes appear to have kept such a record, this suggests that those parishes that did put a greater emphasis on assisting the poor to work, thereby reducing direct parish support. The parish's effort to enable paupers to find the means to reduce their reliance on poor relief indicates that Mattishall's attitude was to encourage those receiving relief to do something useful in return if useful work could be found. It is impossible to know to whom the vermin bounty was given as the sparrow-catching list only gives the names of those who were paid for the job but, as the payments were made by the overseers, it seems likely they gave the sparrows to the poor to supplement their diet. This would further assist in reducing poor relief payments.<sup>31</sup> This, of course, was the aim of the poor law officials.

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30 Greenhow, 'I do belong to Mattishall', p. 89.

31 Greenhow, 'I do belong to Mattishall', p. 88.