

RESEARCH NOTE

OUT-PATIENT MATERNITY RELIEF IN LATE GEORGIAN BUCKINGHAMSHIRE AND HERTFORDSHIRE

Stuart Basten

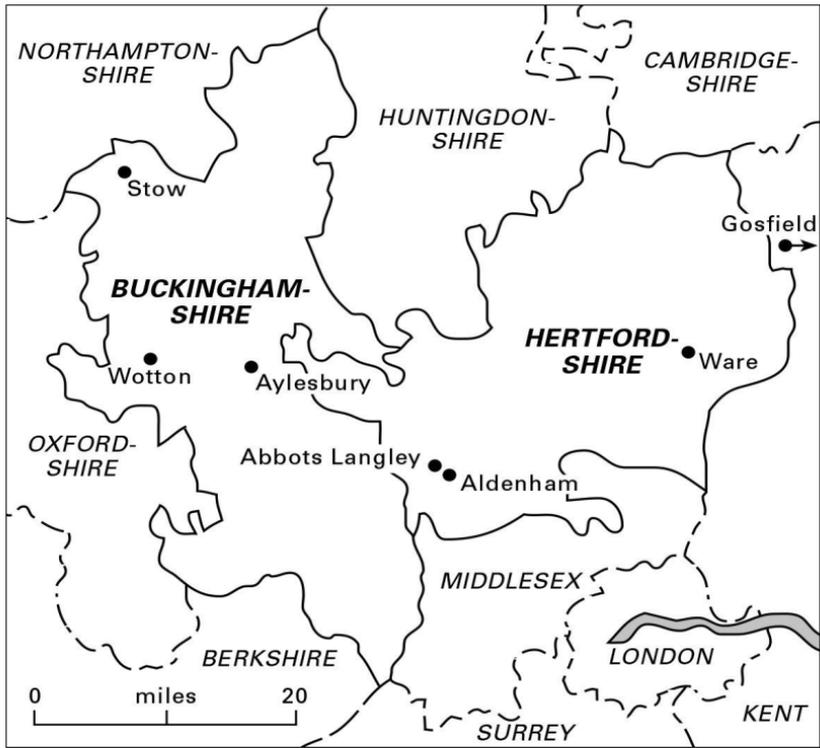
Stuart Basten is a PhD student working at the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure, University of Cambridge. His thesis, 'Measuring Infant Health in late-Georgian Northern England,' is due for completion in 2007.

Introduction

Maternity care provision expanded and diversified significantly during the eighteenth-century.¹ This was the era of the development of famous institutions such as the London Foundling Hospital, and lying-in hospitals in London, Newcastle, Edinburgh, Dublin and elsewhere.² However, while these hospitals have been the subject of much historical investigation—exploring their social, demographic and medical implications—charities which provided aid to patients *at home* in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, particularly in provincial England, have been largely ignored.³

These charities performed a significant function in the communities in which they were established. Some gave a comprehensive service of out-patient maternity care, while others merely provided child-bed linen for poor mothers while in labour. Indeed, a significant tension existed in numerous British and Irish cities between lying-in hospitals and out-patient charities, which often generated heated debates regarding medical, financial and moral efficiency.⁴ However, the story of these charities is long and complex, and cannot be adequately covered here.⁵ Rather, this brief research note will demonstrate the variety of methods of out-patient maternity provision available in two neighbouring counties—Hertfordshire and Buckinghamshire—where the range of provision seems to form a microcosm of the various tiers available elsewhere in England. Four charities are discussed which exemplify the variety in the scope and funding of maternity provision, while alone of the four the Ware charity provides some insight into the motives that lay behind them.

Figure 1 Location of maternity charities in Buckinghamshire and Hertfordshire



'Linen charities': Abbots Langley and the Marchioness of Buckingham's Charity

In the south Hertfordshire parish of Abbots Langley and in central and north Buckinghamshire we find perhaps the most basic type of maternity charity discussed in the introduction—one which lends supplies of child-bed linen to poor women. Unfortunately, the only existing records of these charities are the 1839 Charity Commissioners Report for Hertfordshire and the reports of the Society for Bettering the Condition and Increasing the Comforts of the Poor respectively. Consequently, only a relatively static picture can be presented. The reports do, however, allow reconstruction of brief histories of the charities, and provide an outline of their main functions.

Mrs Susannah Freeman, in her will dated 26 February 1803, left two large sums for the benefit of the poor of the parish of Abbots Langley: one £200 bequest the interest of which was 'to be laid out in clothes for the use of the poor', and a further £200 'for the purpose of purchasing child-bed linen and sheets for the

use of pregnant women in the said parish.' Both the distribution and the return of this linen were to be administered 'by the said vicar and churchwardens as they shall see proper.'⁶

This model can also be found elsewhere in the local area, most notably in the bequest of the Marchioness of Buckingham who, *circa* 1787, instituted a charity for the purchase of 'sets of child-bed linen' for poor women about to enter labour. Under the scheme, 'three sheets, two blankets, one leathern sheet, two-bed-gowns, two night caps, three bed shifts, three children's caps, three children's shirts, one cotton wrapper and a sufficient quantity of small articles' were to be lent out to new mothers for 'a fortnight, three weeks or a month, according to circumstances.' Each woman was to be allowed to 'retain a cap, a shirt, and some flannel for the child', while occasional provision was also to be made of broth and 'beer caudle' during confinement, as well as medical aid in particular cases.⁷ The coverage of the Buckinghamshire charity was, however, much wider than its counterpart in Abbots Langley. Here, 'Fifteen sets of childbed linen and clothes [were] distributed in parcels at Stowe, Wotton, Buckingham and Aylesbury, and at Gosford Hall in Essex, under the care of persons at those places', who would also 'receive applications and inquire into the characters of the persons applying.'⁸

In terms of gauging the effect of this type of charity, the only observation was furnished by Reverend Robert Holt, the author of the account of the Buckinghamshire charity in the 1798 report of the Society for Bettering the Condition and Increasing the Comforts of the Poor. Here, he observed that the lending of child-linen,

affords the poor, at a small expence, much more relief and comfort, than they could provide for themselves with the same sum, even if they possessed it: for one set of articles may, in the course of a year, serve a dozen families successively, who either might not have the means of purchasing them, or, if they had, would be obliged to buy them merely for temporary use, and then to sell them again to disadvantage.⁹

Further advantages of the scheme were felt in the wider community. In both Buckinghamshire and Abbots Langley, children at the local parish schools were involved in the charities. In Abbots Langley, for example, Mrs Freeman stipulated that any dividend arising from her bequest should 'be laid out in placing female children at some proper school in [Abbots Langley] (at the discretion, and on the recommendation, of the said vicar and churchwarden), and employing them in keeping the said child-bed linen and sheets in repair.' For this, the fund paid £4 16s. 0d. *per annum* to Mrs Taylor at the local school of industry, and £3 for clothing, while straw bonnets and Easter frocks were also purchased for the girls every so often. This function was financed by the expansion of the funds of the charity in the early nineteenth century, the result of sound management. The purchase of £94 7s. 0d. worth of 'New Four Per Cent Annuities' in March 1826, for example, yielded an annual dividend of £3

6s. 0d., which in turn was 'employed in paying for the instruction of three more girls.' The goal of such investments was to increase the number of girls instructed as funds accumulated.¹⁰

In the Buckinghamshire charity, the labour of young girls was equally important for, as Holt observes, 'almost every article [was] spun, woven, and made up at the schools for poor children, which have been of late set up at Stowe, Wotton, and Gosfield.' This, therefore, had the dual benefit of further promoting the 'industry of the labouring poor' as well as keeping the costs of the charity down.¹¹

Midwifery assistance in Aldenham

A second type of maternity charity was instigated by Reverend Dolling, the vicar of the Hertfordshire parish of Aldenham, in 1783.¹² As there was 'no midwife living in the village', Dolling 'selected a poor widow, who had three children supported by the parish, and sent her up for instruction, to the Lying-in Hospital, in Store-Street, near Tottenham-Court Road.' Here, under the tutelage of Dr Osborn, she trained for three months in the art of midwifery, 'at a very small expence'. This expense, Dolling notes, 'was collected in the parish by subscription; part of which paid for her board in the hospital; and the rest of the money was applied for her journey and incidental expenses.' After her training, Dolling explained, she 'attends all the day-labourers' wives, at the stipulated sum of half-a-crown,' and as such 'has been the cause of a considerable saving in the medical bills of the parish, besides being a very great comfort and relief to the poor.' Indeed, both her aptitude and ability appear unimpeachable, for 'Tho without any preparatory education, she returned so well instructed, as to exercise her calling in the parish ever since, without a single accident, or ever having occasion to call in medical assistance.' Furthermore, this activity allowed her to 'support herself and her children comfortably...in the enjoyment of the confidence due to her skill.' The observer at the Society for Bettering the Condition of the Poor was clearly impressed by this model:

The expence and trouble of the above was trifling; its benefit, both to the poor and the parish, considerable: whenever therefore a parish is distant from medical aid, and unprovided with a midwife of its own, the above may be recommended to its consideration.¹³

A midwifery *and* child-bed linen charity in Ware

Perhaps the most significant organisation was founded in the Hertfordshire town of Ware in September 1795.¹⁴ This charity is particularly noteworthy as it combined the functions of *both* the provision of child-bed linen *and* the assistance of midwifery. Analysis of the organisation also helps us better to understand the motivations and politics involved in giving to such maternity charities at this time.

Table 1 Pregnancies assisted by the Ware lying-in charity, 1796–1802

Year ending August	Pregnancies assisted by the Ware charity
1796	50
1797	51
1798	75
1799	79
1800	97
1801	98
1802	112

Source: W. Allen, 'Extract from an account.'

Unlike the relief provided in Abbots Langley and Buckinghamshire, the Ware charity was funded almost exclusively by local subscription. Each subscriber, upon payment of 26s. per year, was entitled to recommend up to three women for relief. Such a recommended patient could be either a 'lying-in woman' or a 'distressed sick woman.' Upon recommendation, the lying-in woman was allowed 'besides the use of a set of linen for her month, seven shillings towards defraying the expence of a midwife, nurse, &c.; and, to be laid out in flannel for the child, one shilling; or, in the case of twins, two. The charity further stipulated that the linen 'must be returned clean, and right in number' and that 'women, offending wilfully against the regulations, should be excluded in future from the benefits of the charity.'¹⁵

The success of the charity can be clearly measured by its significant growth in the years 1795 to 1803, as demonstrated in Table 1. In terms of resources, as Allen observes, the charity 'began with three bags or sets of linen, for the mother and child; but by the surplus of subscriptions, however small, and by some donations, they have been enabled to purchase twenty sets of linen, and to keep them in good repair.'¹⁶ Perhaps most significant, however, is the coverage of the charity, and the obvious impact this had on maternal provision in Ware. Interestingly, there are more instances of pregnant women who 'received the benefit of the charity' in any given year between 1796 and 1802 than there are baptisms recorded in Ware. As these data refer to baptisms rather than births, it is, of course, very difficult to ascertain with any accuracy the precise proportion of pregnancies in Ware in which the charity played a part, or to gauge the immediate effect that the Charity might have had on infant or maternal mortality in the town.

One possible cause of the surplus of the number of pregnancies assisted over recorded baptisms is that the Ware charity differed in one main respect to many other contemporary lying-in at home charities: it did not specify parochial residence as a stipulation of relief. Rather, as the charity 'continued to increase', it 'extend[ed] its advantages to the adjacent villages for some miles around.'¹⁷ This feature, therefore, suggests that some of the births occurring in the parishes contiguous to Ware—such as Thundridge, Much

Hadham, Widford, Hunsdon, Stanstead Abbots, Great Amwell, Hertford All Saints and Bengoe—were aided by the charity, and would thus explain the surplus of assisted pregnancies over the number of baptisms recorded in Ware alone. This should not, however, overshadow the fact that the charity clearly played a role in the maternal experience of a very significant number of mothers in Ware and the Upper Lea Valley.

Apart from the important role it played in assisting mothers in Ware, the charity is also very useful in revealing attitudes towards maternity care. As noted above, there were a number of tensions present in the varying arguments as to how best to care for women in labour—more particularly, *who* should assist them and *where* that assistance should be given.¹⁸ 'The most material object of hospitals for the reception of lying-in women', the charity observed, was 'the affording of superior medical aid in cases of difficulty.'¹⁹ These institutions, of course, had the advantage that, in the case of complications, a surgeon or man-midwife could be quickly on hand to help with the delivery. The Ware Charity, however, based *its* provision of emergency medical care on the method employed by the Manchester Infirmary. Here, 'upon notice from a regular midwife of a difficult case of delivery, the surgeon of the district, or in his absence the one next in rotation, immediately attends *gratis*, and assists the woman at home.' The importance of such a back-up plan was, however, emphasised by the charity, noting that while 'The cases, in which surgeons have been so called in, were very few;...most, if not all, of them would have been attended with great danger, without such medical assistance.'

As the physician, in such an emergency, assisted *gratis*, only the cost of medicine would need to be met by the charity. All these provisions are essentially linked to the one major concern of the charity: how to achieve maximum efficiency of care provision. Expense, they note, 'always ought to be a subject of attention, in the administration of every charity', and that 'Waste in charities exhausts and annihilates those funds, for a share in which the necessities and the sufferings of man will ever produce and demands, beyond the power of satisfaction.' Within this context, it is then observed that,

If we compare the relative bearings of expense and effect, we shall find that the expense of *one woman* delivered in a lying-in hospital...will be nearly as much as, applied according to the regulations of the charity at Ware, would afford *twelve women* more unexceptionable, and perhaps more useful, relief, during this period of suffering and danger.²⁰

The charity was also concerned with the effects that in-patient care would have upon the household economy. In particular, they were concerned that lying-in hospital care 'injures the domestic and prudential habits of the objects of the charity; and returns them to their families, with an indisposition to practise *those minute details of economy* which are essential to the well-being of the poor.' Furthermore, they complained that '...tho in a few days after the

birth they would be capable, if at home, of managing and directing in their own families, yet, if delivered in a lying-in hospital, they do not return under a month. This absence, the charity believed, could even take a more sinister turn, as 'in the mean time their [the 'absent' mothers] must be supplied by some female attendant; often with very pernicious family consequences.'²¹

Conclusion

This short note has attempted to demonstrate the various methods by which poor women in Hertfordshire and Buckinghamshire were able to gain assistance in both the delivery, and early care, of their children. The broader context of maternity charities is the subject of ongoing investigation. It is already clear, however, that these charities reflect much wider concerns regarding how best maternity care might be provisioned, both medically and morally, and reveal particular concern with what might be called 'efficiency of philanthropy.'

Acknowledgements

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NOTES

1. For an excellent overview of developments within maternal care at this time, see L.F. Cody, *Birthing the nation: sex, science and the conception of eighteenth-century Britons* (Oxford, 2005).
2. See, for example, L.F. Cody, 'Living and dying in Georgian London's lying-in hospitals', *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 78 (2004), 309-48; D. Andrew, 'Two medical charities in eighteenth-century London: the lock hospital and the lying-in charity for married women', in J. Barry and C. Jones, *Medicine and charity before the welfare state*, (London, 1991), 82-97; A. Levene, 'Health and survival chances at the London Foundling Hospital and the Spedale Degli Innocenti of Florence, 1741-99' (Unpublished University of Cambridge PhD thesis, 2002). For a rather dated, highly politicised account, see M. C. Versluysen, 'Midwives, medical men and 'poor women labouring of child': lying-in hospitals in eighteenth-century London', in H. Roberts ed., *Women, health and reproduction* (London, 1998).
3. For an interpretation of the national picture, see S. Basten, 'Provincial lying-in at home charities and the politics of giving in eighteenth-century England', Paper presented at Economic History Society Graduate Conference, Manchester 2006 (available either from the author or in Hertfordshire Record Office Library) and J.E. Burton, 'Out-door versus in-door maternity charities', *Medical Press and Circular*, ii (1882), 150-2, 172-4. For London, see S. A. Seligman, 'The Royal Maternity Charity: the first hundred years', *Medical History*, 24 (1980), 403-18. For Bristol see M.E. Fissell, *Patients, power, and the poor in eighteenth-century Bristol* (Cambridge, 1991), 91-3, 123-5. For Newcastle, see S. Basten, 'Infant and maternal health in late-Georgian northern England' (forthcoming PhD Thesis, University of Cambridge, 2007) and E.M. Halcrow, 'The Charity for the Relief of Poor Women Lying-In at Their Own Homes', *Archaeologica Aeliana*, XXXIV (1956) 110-29. Halcrow's article is a very useful introduction to the activities of the Newcastle Charity. However, aspects relating to motives and morals—as well as any comparison with other areas—are largely ignored.
4. See Basten, 'Provincial lying-in at home charities,' 6-10.
5. For a full discussion of these charities from a national perspective, see Basten, 'Infant and

- maternal health' and Basten, 'Provincial lying-in at home charities.'
6. *Reports of the commissioners appointed in pursuance of Acts of Parliament...to inquire concerning charities and education of the poor in England and Wales; arranged in counties, with Indexes : Hertford 1815 to 1839* (Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies, H50 824 0046/361.763), printed page 252/ handwritten page 82.
 7. R. Holt, 'Extract from an account of a charity, for assisting the female poor, at the period of their lying-in. By the Rev. Robert Holt', in *Society for bettering the condition and increasing the comforts of the poor. The reports of the Society for bettering the condition and increasing the comforts of the poor, I* (London, 1798), 163-4.
 8. Holt, 'Extract', 163.
 9. Holt, 'Extract', 165.
 10. *Reports of the commissioners*, printed page 253/ handwritten page 83.
 11. Holt, 'Extract', 120.
 12. Rev. Dolling, 'Extract from an account of the mode of supplying a country parish with a midwife. By the Rev. Mr. Dolling, late Vicar of Aldenham, Herts.', in *Society for bettering the condition...of the poor. The reports of the Society* (see note 7).
 13. Dolling, 'Extract', 126-7.
 14. W. Allen, 'Extract from an account of a charity for lying-in women at Ware. By Mr. William Allen,' in *society for bettering the condition and increasing the comforts of the poor. The reports of the society for bettering the condition and increasing the comforts of the poor. ... 4* (London, 1804).
 15. Allen, 'Extract', 50-1.
 16. Allen, 'Extract', 51.
 17. Allen, 'Extract', 51.
 18. See, for example, Cody, *Birthing the nation*; Basten, 'Provincial lying-in at home charities,' 6-10 and Basten, 'Infant and maternal health'.
 19. Allen, 'Extract', 51.
 20. Allen, 'Extract', 52-3.
 21. Allen, 'Extract', 52.