

Poverty and Pensions

Although my mother's grandparents seem an unremarkable old couple living in retirement, a significant event had happened at the end of their lives; they had survived into the Welfare State, and in January, 1909, they would have been amongst the first recipients of a nationally provided old age pension.

Many years later local people still talked of going along to the Post Office to collect their "Lloyd George" or their "Lord George". They often referred to him as the beneficent philanthropist who had brought some measure of independence and self-respect into the lives of people who were unable to work any longer. They would otherwise have been dependent on the charity of their families or the refuge of the workhouse; a fate almost worse than death itself. The workhouse was a dreaded building, which haunted their lives and whose forbidding memory has still not been obliterated.

In the early 19th century the movement of labour had been from the south to the north, where the wake of the Industrial Revolution had resulted in greater prosperity and higher wages. In the mid-19th century an agricultural labourer in the East Riding could earn 12/- a week, compared to 8/6d in Norfolk. My mother's grandparents had moved up to Yorkshire from Norfolk, a county depressed by poverty and one which a Norfolk local historian considers has been permanently weakened by the exodus of its more energetic inhabitants; not only to other parts of England but also through emigration.

The first pensions were of a very modest scale, 5/- to a single person, 7/6d to a couple, payable at the age of 70, but was large enough to be attacked in the House of Lords by an impassioned (and wealthy) opponent of the bill, the Earl of Wemyss, as a dangerous and evil social development. "If, from sentimental motives Parliament passes this Bill, I hold that you will establish a system of demoralisation amongst the working classes, that you will do away with thrift, that families will cease to regard it as an obligation to maintain those of their members whose working days are passed, and that self-reliance will be diminished." He spoke from a privileged position of ignorance about the realities of life for the majority of his fellow countrymen.

Many old age pensioners simply could not believe that they now had an assured weekly income. In Bridlington pensioners began queuing one hour before the opening of the Post Office, and the Post Master gathered the impression that the old folks could not credit that the Act was really enforced and, fearful of being victims of the proverbial slip twixt the cup and the lip, were determined to be participants in the silver stream should it prove to be true. Fifty percent of the pensioners were said to be illiterate, and the Post Office staff had to deal with a number of situations, which occurred in the indeterminate area between tragedy and comedy.

At Goole an old Irishman turned up, cap in hand, and asked innocently for his pension. "Where is your book?" he was asked. "Sure oi've no book," he replied. When told he would receive one in due course he was said by a reporter to have left with a puzzled look.

At Goole also two old veterans came together to identify each other. As neither of them could write it was found necessary to call a third person to witness the making of their marks.

In Drifffield Mr. James Carlin was reported as the "first of His Majesty's Lieges" to receive an old age pension. He was more fortunate than an illiterate old stranger who, when asked where he lived, replied, "Up yonder," and pointed to the Workhouse. As a recipient of Poor Law charity he was ineligible for a pension. Softly and tenderly did this kind officer of the Crown break the news to him that he was debarred. But the stranger was a philosophical soul and he said to the Postmaster, "Oh, all right. I thought that if I could have gotten this 'ere five shillings I could have come out of yonder."

There was one nice piece of reporting of an incident in Hull. An old lady had been unable to produce any evidence of her age, but a reporter wryly noted that it was so obvious she came within the Act, that the pension was allowed.

Advertisers were apparently well aware of the new potential market opened up to them and one rather nasty advertisement stated: "Old age pensioners - The first shilling should be spent in buying a bottle of Young's famous cough mixture - Sally come up! "

The air and shame of poverty and destitution overhung the lives of many; it was not some neurotic terror, which would never materialise,

but a very realistic apprehension of what could happen at any time to anyone who had never had the opportunity to acquire the most modest capital, to cushion themselves against the instant effects of unemployment.

At Bridlington in January, 1909, a soup kitchen in Quay Ward was patronised by hundreds of hungry people of a type one would not immediately associate with charity. None of the wan, starved looking, neglected outcasts, waifs and children that one sees at the soup kitchen of a big city. The women, too, were warmly clad and had obviously only been driven to seek the charity of the soup kitchen through the prolonged tide of adversity that had almost overwhelmed so many of their bread winners. The description of the soup certainly suggests that a very nourishing meal was provided for those in obvious need of it: 550 pints of soup were boiled in the copper and the contents included fresh vegetables and copious quantities of meat: shins of beef, sheep's heads, beasts' heads, necks of mutton, pig's cheeks and shanks of pork had all gone into the vast copper to produce it. Not all recipients possessed the appropriate dishes in which to collect their dole of soup; now and again it was to be observed that the bedroom chamber services had been drawn upon to provide something to fetch it in.'

Jennie Walker, mother of Bro John Walker.

OLD AGE PENSION

Not to be paid before

No. 1	1 Jan 1909
2	8
3	15
4	22
5	29
6	5 Feb
7	12
8	19
9	26
10	5 March
11	12
12	19
13	26

Pensioner's Name

Addresses

No

CAUTION

The Postal Orders in this book are of no value except to the Pensioner. Unless prevented by sickness the Pensioner himself must take the book, together with his Identity Certificate, to the Post Office. Sick certificates, for use in case of need, are included in the book.

The Pensioner must sign his name in the receipt space, but he must not tear out the order.

As each order is paid, it will be detached by the Postmaster who must at the same time stamp the Certificate of Identity in the next vacant space.

This book must be kept in a place of safety apart from the Identity Certificate.

Pension Book

THIS ORDER IS USELESS IF DETACHED FROM THE COVER AND IS OF NO VALUE TO ANY PERSON EXCEPT TO THE PENSIONER.

FF999676

NOT TRANSFERABLE

OLD AGE PENSION ORDER

To the Postmaster General

The Pensioner named on the cover of this Book is entitled to receive the sum of

5 POUNDS 5 SHILLINGS 5

at the Post Office named on the cover of this Book within Three Calendar Months from the due date on production of this Book by the said Pensioner.

Received the above-named sum

DUE ON

SIGNATURE OF PENSIONER

AND NOT PAYABLE BEFORE THAT DATE.

Pension Order