

BEFORE THE WORKHOUSE

When you go into the north quire aisle look up above the sound system control box and look at the really interesting board there. This panel gives us a lovely glimpse into seventeenth and eighteenth century social history. This small town was obviously home to a number of poor families, and also to better off people who were willing to help them. The charity board lists those who gave money, how much they gave and for what purpose it was given. It makes fascinating reading. Let me whet your appetite

Sometimes the donor gave money for distribution as when Dame Frances Pierpont in 1621 gave an annuity of £10 to "be distributed equally at Michaelmas amongst ten of the most indigent and aged persons". In 1677 Henry Nicholson Esq gave "one moiety of his lands and tenements in Elston" so that the rents could be shared half yearly between as many people as the money would run to at the rate of ten shillings each, but, "the same person is not to have this charity two half years successively".

Bread and coals were frequent doles, but the gifts were also for a wider variety of needs. In 1714 William Thornton Esq gave £3 12s which would be payable at Martinmas out of the rents of "a messuage in Southwell" and this was to "purchase coats to be given to six poor persons, the same person is not to have a coat oftener than once in three years". Margaret Crofts gave £1 in 1719 to buy flax which would be given at about Candlemas to "four poor women that have no yearly collection". The children were not forgotten. For example, Thomas Brailsford, in 1744, gave a house in Easthorpe, with its appurtenances and ten cowgates and 3 feet in Easthorpe pasture; this was "for the instruction of ten poor children in reading, sewing and knitting". It was all very practical and down to earth

At the bottom of the board these details are signed by the parish vicar and churchwardens and others, and there is a note which says, "N.B. A more particular account of these charities is to be found in the overseers book". The Dean tells me that the overseer's book has been mislaid, so this board is the only record of all this early generosity and care for the less fortunate. Sadly the board is not in an excellent state of repair and is in need of restoration. Let us hope that it can be done soon.

There is another, shorter, charity board In the south transept which dates from the early nineteenth century, and that makes it clear how the monies were invested, and how much tax was paid. Although all of these charities have now been amalgamated, there is still a regular distribution of funds.

N.B. A moiety is a half, or one of two parts of something.

A messuage is a dwelling house with its outbuildings, curtilage and its adjacent land).

A cowgate is a pasture for a cow, often in a common field.

Liberty is the right or privilege of access to a particular place.

(Article by Mary Skinner, published in "Leaves" March 2006)