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# Philanthropy, economy and society in north east England: The Early Modern Era, 1501 – 1750

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# Philanthropy, economy and society in north east England: The Early Modern Era, 1501 – 1750

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## Abstract

This paper surveys the history of philanthropy in the North East of England during The Early Modern Era (1501 – 1750) - an era in which the modern British state, conceived as an organized form of collective social power, began to take shape. Our purpose is to understand philanthropy in the context of the economics, politics, beliefs, values and social practices of the time. Our findings show that education and support for the poor and vulnerable were the two most important objects of philanthropy in the North East during the early modern period, as in the rest of England. In both cases, philanthropists came from aristocratic, clerical, landed gentry and entrepreneurial backgrounds, although it is fair to say that while all types of wealth supported philanthropic causes, the entrepreneurial class, relative to means, was disproportionately active.

## Keywords

Philanthropy, Economy, Society, North East England, Early modern history, Education, Subscription Philanthropy

## Introduction

The consequences of the devastation wrought to the population by the Black Death of 1348 and later visitations of plague were complex and set in train profound economic and social changes in England. The loss of so many people meant that the country went from being overpopulated relative to its productive capacity to one that was underpopulated. As a result, many townships were depleted or deserted and the price of agricultural labour increased due to the greater bargaining power of those that survived. By the last quarter of the fourteenth century, agricultural prices were falling in consequence of surplus production while wages were rising, bringing about a marked shift in power relations in the countryside (Hinde, 2003: 47-50). Although not an even process, the general pattern was for labour services to be commuted to money rents, and for bondsmen to become members of the free peasantry. Landlords meanwhile abandoned production on their own account and leased out the entirety of their holdings. Even then, rental incomes continued to decline as land became cheaper and labour dearer. In the North East, the abandonment of villages, in the region of 18% by the mid-fifteenth century, led to an increase in the grazing of sheep and cattle, as part of the process of adjustment. Another response was to progressively consolidate strips within fields into larger holdings, heralding the arrival of the more modern pattern of landholding of enclosed fields belonging to individual farms spread about the countryside (Lomas, 1992: 160-62). This process, however, took

a long time to complete. More immediately, the peasantry became more heavily committed to the cash economy as buyers and sellers of goods (Biddick, 1985).

In the towns, population decline brought parallel consequences. Whereas previously the towns had been a magnet for surplus labour from the countryside, they now had to compete for labour with agricultural employers. Property owners found it more difficult to find tenants for houses and shops, with the consequence that rents fell, and many properties remained unoccupied. Burgesses complained ever more loudly that their towns could not afford to meet the “subsidies” (taxes) demanded by the King to meet the costs of warfare and central administration. There was no doubt proper cause for pleas and petitions for relief, and often these were heeded by the King, but equally, there was a degree of exaggeration and opportunistic special pleading (Bridbury, 1981). Indeed, some researchers propose that on the whole town dwellers as well as country folk continued to live quite well once the immediate devastation of the plague had passed. This is because the fall in production was more than matched by the fall in population, so that per capita incomes actually increased more rapidly than when the population was rising (Broadberry et al., 2015: 320-21). In the North East, it seems likely that the lesser boroughs were harder hit by declining populations than Newcastle, which consolidated its grip on the regional economy, maintaining “its status as one of England’s principal towns” (Purdue, 2011: 48).

It was not until the early decades of the sixteenth century that a recovery in England’s population and general economic health definitively began. From an estimated 2.35 million in the early 1520s, the population of England had reached 2.83 million in 1541. Plague continued to afflict the country during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but less damagingly than previously, and the population grew rapidly during the later sixteenth and first half of the seventeenth centuries in response to rising real wages, reaching 4.27 million in 1600 and 5.31 million in 1650 (Broadberry et al., 2015: 3-45). In the North East, where the decline in population in the fourteenth century had been particularly acute because of the exacerbating factor of border warfare, the population recovered from an estimated 54,976 in 1377 to 149,406 in 1600, of whom 76,483 resided in County Durham and 72,923 in Northumberland. In fact, the population of both counties grew more rapidly between 1377 and 1600 than the national annual average rate of 0.22%, with growth rates of 0.51% and 0.39% in Durham and Northumberland respectively (Broadberry et al., 2015: 22-27). This marked a bounce-back in economic fortunes that was to persist during the remainder of the early modern era.

## Politics, economics, religion and society

The timing and extent of the changes that mark the end of one historical era and the beginning of another are invariably a matter of on-going, inconclusive debates, stemming from lacunae in evidence and subjectivity in judgements. Broadly speaking, however, the main differences that distinguish early modern Britain from the medieval era can be divided into the realms of the political, economic, religious and social, each of which had a bearing on philanthropy in early modern England.

In the realm of high politics, the period is readily identified with the Tudor (1485-1603), Stuart (1603-1714) and early Hanoverian (1714-1760) monarchs, the union of the crowns (1603), the English Civil War (1642-1651), the Commonwealth (1649-1660), the Glorious Revolution (1688), and the union of England and Scotland (1707). From a processual standpoint, however, this was an era in which the

modern British state, conceived as an organized form of collective social power, began to take shape. There was no headlong rush to centralize power, but rather a progressive increase in cooperation between local elites and national government. Central government, in fact, relied heavily on unpaid local officials to raise money, provide local services and deliver justice. There was often local resistance to central authority, particularly with respect to taxation and the funding of wars and public projects (Dean, 2011), but the general tendency was towards local officials accommodating decisions made at Westminster. Braddick (2000), in particular, makes the case that seventeenth-century England saw the emergence of a partnership between crown and gentry that led to the state becoming increasingly powerful. He points out that, between the 1590s and the 1670s, central tax revenues multiplied sixteen fold, which earlier would not have been possible. Government, notwithstanding the brutal clashes of civil war and the exiling of James II, was effective because local elites took responsibility for local affairs, thus explaining the paradox that state power was increasing at a time when the country gentry still resisted central interference in local affairs.

In the economic realm, the early modern era can be differentiated from the medieval mainly because of its greater productive capacity, more numerous sources of growth, and higher levels of trade, domestic and international. According to Wrightson (2002: 331), England was transformed by “a process of commercialisation” that saw “a patchwork of loosely articulated... regional economies... transformed into an integrated economic system in which market relationships were the mainspring of economic life.” Between 1490 and 1650 the economy grew sufficiently to sustain a steady growth in population from 2.14 million to 5.31 million, whence population growth was arrested. In 1700, the population was 5.20 million, then growth resumed, albeit slowly, to reach 5.74 million in 1750 (Hinde, 2003: 180). Agriculture, industry and services grew consistently throughout, with industry and services outstripping agriculture before 1700 when all three sectors expanded at a broadly similar rate down to 1750. Most of the growth in output before 1650 was consumed by the rising population, so living standards barely increased, but during the following century, when population pressures eased, there was a sustained rise in living standards (Broadberry et al., 2015: 203-15). The upshot was that early modern England experienced substantial economic growth with beneficial consequences for living standards, as agricultural improvements increased productivity, and as towns, mining, manufacturing, services and trade all prospered (Coleman, 1977).

In the North East, it is in the advance of the coal industry and the growth of Newcastle as the regional economic hub that these changes were most in evidence. Coal had been mined in shallow pits with exposed seams both north and south of the river Tyne since the later thirteenth century, and by the fourteenth century, Newcastle was already exporting significant quantities of coal by sea to London and other ports along the east coast and to continental Europe. However, it was in the early modern period that the industry really took off with the trade under the control of the Newcastle Hostmen whose monopolistic privileges were entrenched by a charter issued by Elizabeth I in 1600. Members of the company inevitably were drawn into production as well as buying and selling and in the process accumulated great wealth (McCord & Thompson, 1998: 130-35). Pollard estimates that in 1681-90, the North East was responsible for producing 1,225,000 tons of coal, 42% of national output, of which the greater part left the region by sea, mainly from Newcastle (Pollard, 1980: 216). Added to coal were exports of wool and lead and, by return, Newcastle imported timber, foodstuffs and a range of other commodities. A wide variety of trades flourished under the control of guilds, sparking a long-lived

building boom that began in the sixteenth century. On the basis of taxation data, Newcastle ranked as England's fifth largest city in 1662, ranking behind only London, Norwich, York and Bristol (Hoskins, 1984).

In the realm of religion, the early modern period was marked above all else by English reformation, inspired by Henry VIII, which saw the English church break from the Catholic Church in Rome and Henry declared supreme head of the church in England in 1534. The break from Rome opened the door to Lutheran Protestantism, which held, in opposition to Catholicism, that faith alone, not penitence and the allied practices of confessionals, indulgences and chantries to limit time in purgatory, was the only way to secure the grace of God and enter Heaven (Burgess, 1987). Under the direction of the King's minister Thomas Cromwell the Church of England through the issue of its *Ten Articles* in 1536 and the *Bishop's Book* in 1537 officially established a semi-Lutheran doctrine for the church based on justification by faith but tempered by a continued emphasis on good works as a means of finding favour with God. Intensely symbolic Catholic practices like the veneration of images were suppressed. Religious houses like monasteries and nunneries that embraced the doctrine of purgatory and owed primary allegiance to the universal church were dissolved between 1536 and 1540 on the grounds of incompatibility with the new religious order (Dickens, 1989: 167-91). The fact that the monasteries were wealthy, land-owning institutions, whose assets could be confiscated and sold was a major bonus for the Crown. It is estimated that 4,700 monks and canons, 1,500 nuns and 1,800 friars were displaced (Gray, 1905: 11).

Opposition to such profound change began almost immediately with the so-called Pilgrimage of Grace of 1536-37, the 30,000-strong revolt that led to the execution of Sir Thomas Percy, younger brother of the sixth Earl of Northumberland (Lomas, 1996: 173-76). The revolt was easily quashed, but it heralded the long period of religious contestation and proliferation of faiths that became one of the hallmarks of early modern Britain (Marshall, 2018), with severe dynastic consequences, including the execution of Charles I in 1649, the overthrow of James II in 1688 and his replacement by King William III and Queen Mary II, and the issue of the Bill of Rights in 1689, when parliament finally gained ascendancy over the monarchy in the governance of the nation.

In the social realm, arguably the most profound transition of the early modern period, and intimately bound up with the political, economic and religious changes already described, was the changing structure of society, away from the landed, hierarchical feudal order presided over by lords spiritual and secular, toward a more variegated but no less stratified society based on wealth and position within social and political networks. Between 1522 and 1759, the percentage of the population employed in agriculture fell from 55.6% to 36.8%, while those employed in industry and services rose from 23.5% to 33.9% and 20.9% to 29.3% respectively. Moreover, since productivity was lower in agriculture, the proportion of national income derived from the sector fell from 39.7% to 29.7%, while the non-agricultural sectors rose from 60.3% to 70.3% (Broadberry et al., 2015: 344).

Plainly, the balance of population was shifting from rural to urban and the balance of power in society from landlords to merchants, mine owners, manufacturers and professionals. Men like Sir Ambrose Crowley (1658-1713), whose ironworks at Winlaton and Swalwell were amongst the largest and most sophisticated in Europe, virtually cornering the market in the iron and steel ware needed by the navy, emerged as political power brokers, both regionally and nationally (Coleman, 1975: 34; Lomas, 2009:

120-21). In both rural and urban settings, however, the distribution of income between rich and poor tended to widen, and the percentage of households living at or below the poverty line is estimated to have risen from 22.1% in 1381 to 24.2% in 1688, before falling sharply to 13.2% in 1759. Labourers and others toward the bottom of the social order were hit particularly badly by inflation during the sixteenth century when wages failed to keep pace with the rising costs of goods (Broadberry et al., 2015: 307-39). This explains the mounting concern during the Tudor period with problems of poverty and vagrancy, culminating in the passing of the Poor Relief Act of 1601, which codified the rules for the granting of assistance to the poor. Under what came to be called the Old Poor Law, parishes were empowered to raise funds for the poor in line with property values, and to provide relief for the sick, aged and those seeking work, the worthy poor, in their own homes (outdoor relief) or in poor houses (indoor relief). The unworthy poor, those who could work but preferred to live by begging, continued to be treated more harshly and subject variously to flogging, the stocks and consignment to houses of correction. In the North East, much depended locally on how town and parish worthies interpreted their duties and implemented solutions, often “with no regard for relevant legislation” (McCord & Thompson, 1998: 170-72), ranging from building a workhouse, as at Darlington in 1707, to putting paupers to work as street cleaners, as at Hexham in the late seventeenth century, and issuing licenses to beg, as at Eglington in the 1650s. Whichever solution was chosen, the poor were left in no doubt that they were a drain on others, tolerated but generally despised, and never treated well-enough to encourage indolence.

## Philanthropy in England

It is in the context of endemic poverty and the Old Poor Law that W.K. Jordan set his landmark book *Philanthropy in England 1480-1660* based on data detailing “every gift and bequest made to charities... during the period 1480-1660... [in] a representative group of ten English counties” (Jordan, 1959: 15). Jordan considers wills to be an especially telling historical source because their thoughts and intentions are “quite perfectly mirrored in their benefactions” (p. 16). In patterns revealed through his data analysis, he observes a “truly revolutionary” shift from the tokenism of medieval almsgiving, which “was at once casual and ineffective”, inspired more by the needs of the donor not the beneficiary, to a systematic attack on poverty led by the aristocratic and merchant elites “to eradicate its causes by a great variety of undertakings” (p. 17). It was they, through private endowments, not ratepayers, who provided most of the funds for poor relief, thereby assuming:

“... an enormous measure of responsibility for the public welfare while rapidly and most effectively translating their ideals of society into a new philosophy of the state which we denominate liberalism. The whole realm stirred as men began to discover that they could create institutions of social change and reformation with their own wealth and charity... It is not too much to say that the gentry and the merchants assumed a very large measure of social responsibility in England early in the Tudor period, which during the Elizabethan era was so expanded that it became dominant. Older classes of men, and most particularly the nobility and the clergy, were quietly withdrawing from the tasks of responsibility, while these new and intensely competitive classes were moving in to fill the vacuum” (pp.18-19).

In short, Jordan claims to have located the origin of modern philanthropy, driven primarily by secular ambitions, in stark contrast to the philanthropy of the medieval era, driven primarily by personal religious goals.

This is a compelling thesis that with reservations and qualifications continues to gather adherents (Ben-Amos, 2008: 113-142). The fact that the Poor Relief Act of 1601 was coupled with the 1601 Statute on Charitable Uses is instructive. The Statute was intended to prevent abuse and mismanagement of charitable foundations as a means of encouraging people of wealth to take up the fight against poverty, relieving taxpayers of the burden while providing protection against misappropriation of philanthropic gifts (Davis, 2015: 23-26). A list of charitable purposes is provided in the preamble to the statutes that omits support for religion other than for the repair of churches, which Jordan took as evidence of the secular intent of the legislation, which proved efficacious, with 10,000 trusts “established in the form of self-perpetuating groups and individuals, parish or municipal officers, guilds, universities and hospitals” by 1660 (Ben-Amos, 2008: 116). In all, Jordan counted 34,963 private donors within the 10 counties he studied between 1480 and 1660 who collectively gave to charitable causes “the enormous sum of £3,102,696” (1959: 241), of which the merchant-financier dominated City of London accounted for 60.88% of the total. Approximately two-thirds of the total came from bequests and the remainder from living gifts. Jordan further computes that the sum endowed would have generated an annual income of £127,600 in support of charitable causes. Looked at over time, he finds that donations ran at £8,760 per annum between 1481-1560, £11,962 per annum between 1541 and 1600, peaking at £35,937 per annum between 1601 and 1640, before declining to £23,345 per annum between 1641 and 1660 when the long years of civil war took a toll. Taking the period as a whole, relieving poverty was the first cause with 36.40% of the total value of donations; education second with 26.86%; religion third with 21.26%; miscellaneous fourth with 10.30%; and municipal infrastructure fifth with 5.18%.

Over recent decades, the Jordan thesis has been scrutinized and severely criticised because when his annual giving figures are deflated to take account of inflation and population growth, the observed boom in philanthropy during the early decades of the seventeenth century disappears, rendering hyperbolic his claims of a “revolution in philanthropy” and “incredible generosity” (Coleman, 1978). Likewise, his suggestion of a revolutionary break in charitable practices between the medieval and early modern worlds has been “shown to be erroneous” (Ben-Amos, 2008: 114). However, as Ben-Amos points out, “Jordan’s assessment of a growth in charitable giving in the period following the Reformation remains sound” (p. 114). Her conclusion is drawn following an exhaustive survey of the records of London parishes, livery companies and hospitals, a rich variety of printed primary sources, newspaper reports, diaries and autobiographies. Her purview is wider than that of Jordan, who fixated on wills as a source of charitable data, and she is able to demonstrate the importance, qualitatively if not quantitatively, of smaller donors, informal support systems, voluntary church collections, and more casual and associational forms of giving overlooked by Jordan. In her view, the philanthropic impulse ran broad and deep across English society, helping to explain the “increased scale of endowments and bequests that were channelled via numerous guilds and parishes into hundreds of institutions such as almshouses, hospitals and schools, as well as varied relief programs” (p.379).

## Philanthropy in the North East

How, then, do these findings compare with what we know about philanthropy in the North East during the early modern period? The first point to make, contrary to Jordan and consistent with Ben-Amos, is that there is no evidence to support the claim that “the nobility and the clergy, were quietly

withdrawing” from philanthropy (Jordan, 1959: 19). Successive Bishops of Durham continued in the same vein as their medieval predecessors Hugh de Puiset and Thomas Langley. Most notable was [Nathaniel Crewe \(1633-1721\)](#) who, despite his association with Charles II and James II as King’s Chaplain, held onto his bishopric from 1674 until his death in 1721. By his will, he left his northern estates, including Bamburgh Castle and Blanchland, in trust to what has since been known as [Lord Crewe’s Charity](#). The trustees were charged with using the income to support specified charitable causes in perpetuity. The trust became, in the second half of the eighteenth century, one of the prime movers in the provision of free village schools, supporting more than 40 to make a big contribution to literacy in the region (Cannon, 2016: vol.2, 184). Much of the credit for the work of the trust goes to father and son [Thomas \(1693-1758\)](#) and [John \(1722-1792\)](#) Sharp, who in succession to one another were Archdeacons of Durham and trustees of Lord Crewe’s Charity. The Sharps promoted the cause of education and committed themselves to the restoration and improvement of Blanchland (the market square and bridge over the Derwent) and Bamburgh (castle restoration, library, schools for boys and girls, almshouse for aged sailors, ‘cheap shop’ selling subsidized food, and surgery). To these endeavours they committed their own resources, imagination and particular brand of social activism, culminating in 1789 with the opening of the world’s first lifeboat station, complete with the specially commissioned and patented ‘unsinkable’ Lukin boat.

Education and support for the poor and vulnerable were the two most important objects of philanthropy in the North East during the early modern period, as in the rest of England. In both cases, philanthropists came from aristocratic, clerical, landed gentry and entrepreneurial backgrounds, although it is fair to say that while all types of wealth supported philanthropic causes, the entrepreneurial class, relative to means, was disproportionately active.

## Education and Philanthropy

In education, we can observe two distinct waves: first, the formation of free grammar schools offering a classical education; second, the formation of elementary schools intended for a broader constituency offering a non-classical education. The eight grammar schools in County Durham active in the period – Durham School (re-founded in 1551 under Henry VIII); Queen Elizabeth Grammar, Darlington (1563); Kepier Grammar, Houghton-le-Spring (1574); Heighington Grammar (1601); Bishop Auckland Grammar (1604); Wolsingham Grammar (1612); Norton Grammar (1650); The Anchorage School, Gateshead (1701) – typically stemmed from some combination of religious initiative and secular support. Schoolmasters were university graduates in holy orders licensed by the Bishop. Suitable premises were found and the school endowed with land and other property to provide sufficient rental income to pay the master’s salary. Initial endowments came from clerical sources for the schools at Durham, Darlington, Norton and Gateshead, and from secular sources for those at Houghton-le-Spring (businessman John Heath), Bishop Auckland (Widow Anne Swyfte), Heighington (Widow Elizabeth Jennison), and Wolsingham (London Merchant Taylor guild member, William Grimwell). Almost invariably, initial endowments proved insufficient to cover costs, and the shortfall had to be covered by further endowment gifts or occasionally by asking parents to pay small fees (Eisel, 1941: 187-218). Durham School and Kepier Grammar were pre-eminent. Durham sent at least 231 boys to Cambridge between 1660 and 1800, mainly to Peterhouse, St John’s and Trinity. Kepier sent a further 70 boys (Cannon 2016, vol. 2: 58-61).

As in County Durham, the grammar schools of Northumberland prospered in towns large enough to sustain them, while others faded away after a few decades or, alternatively, abandoned the classical curriculum to become elementary charity schools. In Newcastle, the grammar school was endowed in 1545 by the bequest of merchant [Thomas Horsley \(1462-1545\)](#), but as was so often the case, the endowment alone was insufficient to maintain the school. Here, however, the school had the support of a tightly-knit economic and political elite committed to its continuation. On its founding and relocation in 1599, when it gained its Royal Charter, it took possession of the chapel of the well-endowed hospital of St Mary the Virgin in Westgate Street. The school was the jewel in the crown of Northumberland grammar schools, sending at least 177 boys to Cambridge and Oxford between 1660 and 1800 (Cannon, 2016: vol. 2, 182-85), assisted by generous scholarships bequeathed by Bishop of Durham, Nathaniel Crewe, Dr Hartwell and Michael Smith, Rector of Freckenham in Suffolk (Mackenzie, 1827: 424-25). Of the other nine grammar schools, only Morpeth and Hexham achieved anywhere near the same educational prestige as Newcastle, sending small numbers only to Cambridge and Oxford. In terms of founders, Northumberland did not have the same degree of church support as County Durham: of its 10 grammar schools, three were endowed by aristocrats (Alnwick 1448, Morpeth 1552, Wooler 1723), one by churchmen (Hexham 1587), and the remainder by wealthy gentry families (Newcastle 1545, Berwick 1632, Stamfordham 1663, Rothbury 1673, Haydon Bridge 1685, Allendale 1693). Typical was Sir Robert Jackson of Berwick (1584-1646), a merchant who occupied high office locally and also served as Member of Parliament (Hunneyball, 2010). Most generous was the [Reverend John Shaftoe \(d. 1685\)](#) who left the entirety of fortune to support a school and almshouses for the benefit of the people of Haydon Bridge.

The second wave of educational foundations came in the late seventeenth and first half of the eighteenth century, when the thrust across the North East, as elsewhere in England, was toward the provision of free, non-classical elementary schooling for poor children. This is often associated with the Anglican charity school movement led by the London based Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK), founded in 1698 by the Reverend Thomas Bray, which had the twin goals of raising standards of literacy and bringing children securely into the Christian fold to bring about revolution in morals among the poor; “bringing into unity of a single purpose the religious and charitable ideals of the age” (Gray, 1905: 91). In effect, the SPCK urged parish churches to found schools and assisted them in doing so by providing guidance on how to organize a school, appoint teachers and devise a fitting curriculum (Owen, 1965: 17-35). No doubt the SPCK was an ambitious and influential organization, but the philanthropic movement to combat illiteracy in England was not simply a matter of zealous Anglian priests taking the lead and others falling into line. Numerous schools were founded before the SPCK came along, making the organization a champion of a movement that had already begun, not the initiator. Moreover, many founders, prizing their independence, refused to correspond with the SPCK, and there were simply too many schools set up, by different kinds of people, to accept the thesis that the SPCK was the motor force. It is evident, moreover, that while many founders were committed Christians, there was a force more fundamental at work. Economics is the most promising explanation because as the economy became more sophisticated, the demand for employees who could read, write and work with numbers increased dramatically. Equally, there was a powerful incentive for the children of the poor to gain an education, however rudimentary, because education self-evidently was crucial to career advancement. This explanation underscores the argument made

by John Cannon that between 1660 and 1800 there was “a noiseless revolution” whereby England went from being a predominantly illiterate country to being a substantially literate one (Cannon, 2016, vol.1: 1-4 and 98-99).

Philanthropists in the North East were active agents in this process of transformation, which stands as one of the finest achievements of English philanthropy of all time. Across the North East, a total of 136 free-of-charge elementary schools were founded before 1750, of which 54 were in County Durham and 82 in Northumberland (Cannon, 2016, vol.2: 61-63 and 186-88). The vast majority, 87.5%, was founded after 1700 when the charity school movement really took off. As with grammar schools, the role played by churchmen in founding schools was greater in County Durham (at least 8 schools) than in Northumberland (at least 4 schools), likely due to the greater wealth of rectors in Durham. A case in point is the Reverend Sir George Wheeler (1651-1724), appointed rector of Houghton-le-Spring in 1709, a widely published author with extensive connections across Europe, who endowed a local girls’ school from his estate when he died in 1724.

However, in both County Durham and Northumberland, it was the entrepreneurial class of merchants, mine owners and manufacturers, many of whom had already acquired landed estates and country houses, who took the lead while living or at death by endowing charity schools. In County Durham, the Crowley family or ironmasters, for example, founded schools nearby their works at Winlaton (1707), Winlaton Mill (1715) and Swalwell (1715). In Northumberland, [Sir William Blackett \(1657-1705\)](#), member of the Newcastle Hostmen company with extensive interests in lead and coal mining, founded a free school at Allendale in 1703 and Coalcleugh in 1704, and by his will, which left money to several philanthropic causes, he endowed the charity school of St Andrew’s Church for 30 boys. Newcastle was particularly well served at this time, “conspicuous for the number and quality of [its] charity schools” (Owen, 1965: 27). Blackett’s close friend and business associate, the lawyer and mining agent John Ord (1651-1724), endowed a school at St John’s Church in 1705 for 40 boys. In the same year, [Dame Eleanor Allan \(d. 1708\)](#), widow of tobacco merchant John Allan, endowed twin schools for 40 boys and 20 girls at St Nicholas’s Church. Meanwhile, at All Saints church, the parishioners urged on by Mayor George Whinfield, banded together to create a voluntary association funded by subscriptions to open in 1709 a school for 41 boys and 17 girls (Brand, 1789). Elsewhere in more remote parts of Northumberland, the aristocracy and the gentry joined the movement, creating schools in less populous towns and villages, as at Lesbury on the river Aln when in 1718 Henry Strother, member of a well-known local family, gave land for a local school that the Duke of Northumberland built, equipped and endowed.

These efforts, diverse, localized and imperfect as they may have been (Gray, 1905: 116-18), nonetheless helped lay the foundations for universal education in England. It is telling that when the first survey of schooling in England took place in 1819, it was found County Durham stood second and Northumberland fifth in the national league table of 42 counties based on the percentage of children in school. The numbers were still low, at 9.77% for Durham and 9.16% for Northumberland, but a solid start had been made in educating the people. In this, philanthropy had played an important part, not just in founding schools but in keeping them going. The charity schools of Newcastle, for example, we know to have benefited from additional donations and legacies, building on the generous acts of their

founders, and that the Corporation played its part at times in keeping things on track (Brand, 1789; Mackenzie, 1827).

It is important, however, to keep things in perspective, in this, as in so many issues relating to philanthropy. If it was charity schools that set the ball rolling, it was the private sector that took up the baton before the state finally assumed responsibility for education. Ordinary commercial forces, of supply and demand, eventually led teachers and their backers to enter the market to provide education at a modest cost. It was in these privately owned schools, according to Cannon, that “most of the teaching took place”, noting that parents with children at them could insist on high standards whereas those with children at charity schools could not (Cannon, 2016: 3). Few private schools of the eighteenth and nineteenth century have left any trace. An exception is the famous Percy Street Academy in Newcastle, opened by Dr John Bruce (1775-1834) in 1802 as a commercial school to prepare boys for careers in trade and business. Described as a “mini-university”, it earned the reputation of being the best secondary school in Newcastle (Sitelines, 2018), and was attended by many redoubtable figures, including railway engineer [Robert Stephenson \(1803-1859\)](#) and iron and steel magnate [Sir Isaac Lowthian Bell \(1816-1904\)](#).

## Poverty and Philanthropy

Support for the poor and vulnerable was the second great cause of philanthropy in the North East during the early modern period before and after the dissolution of the monasteries in the years between 1536 and 1540. This took two main forms. The first was the provision of almshouses to accommodate poor, elderly people who otherwise would have been condemned to vagrancy. Jordan saw the proliferation of almshouse building in the period as an expression of an increasingly secular, humanitarian concern for the wellbeing of the deserving poor, for those who could do nothing more to help themselves, as opposed to the undeserving poor, so-called sturdy beggars, whose fate rightly should be in their own hands. His argument essentially is that secular concerns came to the fore after the English Reformation when the more mystical aspects of the Catholic faith were side-lined in favour of the Protestant doctrine of redemption by faith alone (Jordan, 1959: 143-239); so it was that “men’s concerns became increasingly secular ... deeply rooted in the Protestant ethic” (p. 151). This argument finds little favour today because the love of fellow man, allied to Christian belief in giving succour to the poor, was well in evidence before the Reformation and continued to gain ground thereafter. In other words, Christian duty and Christian belief continued to loom large throughout the early modern period as a primary motivator, both with respect to almshouse building and the granting of outdoor relief at parochial level, the second main way of relieving the suffering of the deserving poor (Owen, 1965: 17-35).

The numbers of almshouses built across the North East between 1501 and 1750 or the numbers of people cared for therein are hard to quantify due to the fragmentary nature of the surviving evidence. Ben-Amos (2011: 115-120) ventures a national figure of 133 new almshouses during the second half of the sixteenth century, and at least 100 new foundations in London alone during the seventeenth century. The old term ‘hospital’ continued in common use as a place built to house the elderly poor, where men and women might spend their last years in peace and comfort. Some, like Duck’s Hospital at Great Lumley, County Durham, founded in 1686 by colliery owner Sir John Duck (1632-1691), who served as Mayor of Durham in 1680, were generously endowed and the beneficiaries well provided

for, receiving, in addition to accommodation, a living allowance and fuel for heating. Duck's was built on the favoured three-sided square pattern where, "12 poor and impotent widows", looked inward on a garden courtyard with clock tower, lending a sense of tranquillity and security. The Duck inmates had the further convenience of a small chapel for daily prayers (Christ Church Lumley, 2018). The other favoured almshouse design was a row of terraced cottages, as built by the surgeon Thomas Cooper for the benefit of deserving old people in Sedgfield and by the [Reverend John Shaftoe](#) at Haydon Bridge.

As in London, many almshouse charities were established by guilds or other corporate bodies, typically to serve a particular constituency. In Newcastle, for example, the Trinity Almshouses, founded in 1584, catered for 26 aged seamen and their widows; the Freeman's Hospital, also known as the [Holy Jesus Hospital](#), catered for 38 Freeman and their widows who had fallen on hard times; and, the Keelmen's Hospital for 54 aged and infirmed keelmen and their widows. The Keelmen's hospital is interesting because the keelmen, labourers who loaded coal from barges onto seagoing vessels, initiated the charity and maintained it through subscription in collaboration with their employers, the well-off Hostmen. Built on the three-sided square pattern, the Keelmen's Hospital offered a standard of living most beneficiaries would not have enjoyed during their working lives (MacKenzie, 1827: 528-531).

The numerous almshouse charities founded in the early modern period were, it seems from the surviving evidence, compassionate institutions, notwithstanding that those admitted were expected to show due gratitude and behave according to strict house rules on pain of eviction. This description of the Trinity Almshouses, although from outside the period, neatly captures something of the spirit and intent of the almshouse movement:

"The fraternity at present support, within their house, twelve men and thirteen widow pensioners, each having an allowance of 28 shillings [£1.40] per month, a coat and hat to the men, and a gown and petticoat to the women, once in two years. They are provided with coals and have the gratuitous advice of the surgeon of the establishment when necessary. When sick, they are allowed wine... and on all occasions they are treated with attention and kindness" (MacKenzie, 1827: 587).

Yet, however numerous almshouses were, as Seal (2013) points out, they dealt in small numbers and, even when taken together, could only have made a modest contribution to the relief of poverty relative to the scale of need. This can be demonstrated by taking the estimates for the number of English families living below the poverty line in England in 1688 and 1759 made by Broadberry et al. (2015: 323-24) and translating these to the North East. In 1688 the figure was 336,672 or 24.2% of all households, which by 1759 had declined to 210,310 or 13.2% of all households. Over this period, the share of the English population resident in the North East increased from an estimated 3.95% to 4.14% (Wrigley, 2007: 54-56), suggesting that 13,300 North East families in 1688 and 8,700 in 1759 were living below the poverty line, of which 926 and 560 respectively were vagrants. Two conclusions flow from these calculations. First, a substantial number of families in the North East had to struggle hard for survival during the seventeenth century because poverty was widespread. Second, the position eased very considerably during the first half of the eighteenth century as economic growth and rising living standards brought a much larger proportion of the population to enjoy the fruits of relative affluence.

The acute poverty suffered by such a large part of the population during the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries spurred people of wealth into philanthropic action beyond the provision of almshouses. Ben-Amos (2008: 89) provides illuminating evidence for two London parishes showing that the money spent on poor relief came from three main sources: informal parochial collections, legacies and the poor rate. In 1640, for example, voluntary sources (collections and legacies) accounted for 47.6% and taxation (poor rate) 52.4% of parochial spending in the two parishes studied. The tendency was for the proportion covered by rates to increase over time but with persistent year-on-year variations. It seems likely that in larger towns in the North East, especially Newcastle, a similar situation prevailed. Brand (1789) and MacKenzie (1827) make no mention of income from collections, but do record the legacies left for the poor of the Newcastle parishes of St Nicholas, St John, St Andrew, and All Saints. The data are imperfect, making it impossible to compute what proportion of parochial relief came from philanthropic income at different times. Yet, even so, interesting details and patterns emerge from analysis. First, donors left an array of income-yielding assets in trust, from tenement houses and shops to land and cash. In St Nicholas, for example, Nicholas Ridley left £1.50 per annum “to be paid out of ground in Heaton”, Matthew White left £1.50 per annum “to be paid out of a house in Pilgrim Street”, and Anthony Proctor and Mrs Jane Brookbank together left £4.00 per annum, “each the sum of £50, at 4 per cent.” (MacKenzie, 1827: 532). Second, managing legacies seems to have been divided between nominated churchwardens and the Corporation, which paid interest of 4 per cent on “legacies paid at the Town Chamber” (MacKenzie, 1827: 535). Third, endowing a fund for the benefit of the poor was a relatively common practice amongst the better off members of Newcastle society, with 97 permanent endowment funds established between 1601 and 1750 at the rate of two every three years (Brand, 1789: 111-13; 186-88; 270-74; 371-73). Fourteen of the 97 were established by women and 83 by men. The average value of the capital donated was £70.28, yielding £2.81 per annum for distribution to the poor, and a cumulative total for all 97 endowments of £272.70. This was a goodly sum and, at an average of £68.18 per parish, comparable to the London parishes studied by Ben Amos (2008: 89). This said, by 1784, the poor rate for all four Newcastle parishes brought in £3,307.65, making it evident that caring for the poor had become predominantly the collective responsibility of taxpayers (MacKenzie, 1827: 540).

The incorporated companies of Newcastle, or guilds, which as in London were transformed in the early modern period from regulators of their trade to fraternal organizations offering mutual support (Ben-Amos, 2008: 95-105), provided additional support for the poor and needy. Typically they gave priority to supporting members who had fallen on hard times. The Masters and Mariners of Newcastle, known as Trinity House, for example, provided pensions of £7 per annum for 60 Master Mariners and a further 40 of £5 per annum for mariners below that rank. The Fellowship of Merchant Adventurers of Newcastle upon Tyne, as it was known from its charter of 1546, was a magnet for bequests such as that by the will of Henry Warmouth of 1654 giving £100 to relieve “ancient decayed merchants.” Many used the income from endowed rental properties to maintain meeting houses and pay for social events, as well as supporting members in distress and subscribing to local good causes. The Taylors, for example, enjoyed an income of £600 per annum by the end of the early nineteenth century, and “besides relieving their sick and indigent brethren, £8 are paid on the death of a brother or brother’s wife, and widows receive 2s 6d per week [£0.125]” (MacKenzie, 1827: 672).

## Conclusion

What emerges also from scrutiny of the litany of bequests made in Newcastle and reported by Brand and MacKenzie is that philanthropy was far from being confined to schools, almshouses and the relief of poverty. Religion, in its own right, as an objective of giving, remained high on the agenda of many people. Collections and individual gift giving for the repair of ancient churches remained common practice, as did making gifts of stained glass communion tables, altar cloths, and communion silver (Brand, 1769: 110). [Sir William Blackett \(1657-1705\)](#) went much further, leaving a handsome legacy in his will of £1,000 to St Andrew's church in Newcastle "to purchase an estate for the use of the parish for ever" (Brand, 1789: 181), which continues to deliver £200,000 per annum (Charity Commission, 2018b). Toward the end of the period, the phenomenon of subscription list or associational philanthropy, whereby many people join forces to support a philanthropic cause, comes plainly into view. This, for example, is how the parishioners of St John's in Newcastle funded their new church organ in 1734. More radically, subscription philanthropy enabled the various dissenting sects to establish their own places of worship following issue of the Act of Toleration in 1689 in the wake of the Glorious Revolution. The popular Unitarian Chapel in Hanover Square, Newcastle, opened in 1727, was built by voluntary subscription, as were many later chapels and meeting houses for Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists and Quakers. The advent of subscription philanthropy, in effect, ushered in a new age of philanthropy in which the charitable society, funded by the many, not the few, led in the modern era to a great "outpouring of voluntary labour and money" (Owen, 1965: 5).

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