This (very preliminary) working paper is part of larger project, entitled 'The Social Topography of a Rural Community', which is designed to reconstruct the pattern of spatial, social and economic relationships in one particular (but extraordinarily well-documented) village in late seventeenth century England. The first fruits of the project have already appeared as:


Methodologically, the project sits at the intersection (some would say in the interstices) between three sets of paradigms which have been used over the years by historians who have come to regard themselves less as students of villages than students in villages (cf. Sabean 1984 following Geertz 1973). That is, it has specific features in common with:-

a) the German tradition of alltagsgeschichte (the history of everyday life), often conducted through the painstaking analysis of the material evidence of economic transactions, paying particular attention to the incidental details disclosed by reading against the grain of the sources generated by the markets for land and labor;

b) the Italian tradition (often described as anthropological but in its original Ginzburgian formulation having more in common with detective fiction) of microistoria (micro-history) in which the scale of historical observation is narrowed to make visible not only the most intimate details of inter-personal relationships but also to allow the historian both to interrogate self-consciously the obvious strengths of (and the even more obvious gaps in) the historical record; and to tell stories about how stories are told; and

c) the Anglophone (and Anglophile) tradition of local history, not in the antiquarian and often elegiac mode of parish history but rather in the sense of the 'community study' (therorized by Macfarlane 1977), informed as it is by the kind of empirical sociology which uses intensive and often systematic nominal record-linkage and network analysis to trace in one particular (and particularized) context the patterns of human interaction across and between a wide range of archival sources.
There are, to be sure, tensions between these various approaches to the historical reconstruction of local communities; and (even if there were not) each of these paradigms has in any case inspired very significant historiographical controversies about their merits and defects—not the least of which concerns the relationship between the particular and the general. It is worth emphasis at the outset that one village cannot be made to stand for all England, and that it is not my intention to mistake the part for the whole. This study nonetheless implies what might be regarded as a minimalist claim for the typicality or representativeness of the particular community which happens to be under the lens of the historical microscope: it is merely, in the terms of the micro-historical paradox famously (notoriously?) formulated by Edward Grendi, a normal exception or an exceptional norm, i.e. it is exceptional only to the extent that it is so richly documented. It represents one variant of an experience which was widely shared across much of rural England.

The village in question here, Chilvers Coton (pronounced 'Coh-ton'), had a population of 780 individuals divided between 176 households in the 1680s, and was to that extent slightly more populous than most rural settlements in the midlands (that cognitive milieu that Jonathan Bate calls 'deep England'). It was part of the Newdigate estate at Arbury Hall near Nuneaton in north-east Warwickshire, an environment very well known to literary scholars because it was in 1819 the birthplace, and subsequently the setting for several of the novels of, George Eliot, whose *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1857) in particular is set in Shepperton, a thinly fictionalized version of Chilvers Coton itself.

The failed political ambitions of the landlord at Arbury, Sir Richard, second baron Newdigate (1644-1710), left him from the late 1670s onwards with (too much) time and energy on his hands, and in the following years he embarked on a relentless and systematic program of estate management, culminating in 1684 in a massive five-volume survey of his manors. In many respects, the survey was entirely traditional: it inventoried the perambulation of the manorial bounds; measured and evaluated landed, mineral and agricultural resources; listed the tenancies and their terms; rehearsed the customs and pains through which the common fields were regulated; and specified the origins of the landlord's title: so far, so conventional. Such sources have been widely used by economic historians to analyze the economic rationality of communal agriculture and in particular to make the case for the often very profitable 'uses of waste'. But in the final two interrogatories administered to his court of survey, Newdigate asked questions which render the Chilvers Coton manorial archive particularly valuable for the reconstruction of social and economic, and even spatial, relationships. First, he required the head of each household to give the names, ages and occupations of each resident (including servants and apprentices as well as kin); and second, he asked the churchwardens to identify the occupant of each pew in the parish church. The first of these alone is remarkable, since only two-dozen of the 9000-plus parishes in England have detailed seventeenth-century occupational data of the kind preserved in this 'census-type listing'. The second type of record, the pew plan, more commonly survives in the judicial archives of church or state but is nonetheless an invaluable supplement to the first. More remarkable still, there was a very significant cartographic element to Newdigate's survey: he instructed his surveyor, one Thomas Hewitt, to draw very detailed maps of the parish of Chilvers Coton and the manor of Arbury which lay at its heart; and even more astonishingly he required him to indicate
on the map the precise whereabouts of each of the households listed in the survey. Of the twenty or so early modern English villages for which census-type listings survive, Chilvers Coton is the only one with an accompanying map.

Uniquely, therefore, it is possible to identify not only who did what for a living in this village but also who lived next door to whom (and, indeed, who sat next to whom in the parish church). Insofar as the practice of neighborliness literally depended on residential propinquity (itself a moot point, of course), the potential of this combination of sources immediately becomes apparent. It is effectively possible to take a tour of Chilvers Coton, walking in the footsteps of Thomas Hewitt as he went from door to door of each of the 176 households in the village. And in some cases it is even possible to cross that threshold—the doorstep itself becoming not just liminal but permeable space. The enormously rich probate archive (which Chilvers Coton shares with so many other local communicants from this period) means that any individual dying with personal property worth more than £5 was likely to have their material goods inventoried. Most probate inventories itemize movables room by room, and describe material assets in sufficient detail to identify consumer goods and to distinguish them for working tools or farming stock. At least thirty of the households in Chilvers Coton generated extant probate inventories which survive from the period close enough to the date of the listing (1684) to be able to correlate the testator with a resident identified in the survey. So we can not only knock on the door of many of these households, but enter the domestic space itself, inspecting the bed-chambers, the parlors and the butteries; noticing whether cooking utensils were wooden or pewter; wondering about the origin of the silk which was being woven into ribbons on so many looms; speculating whether dairy goods were being produced merely for self-provisioning or for the local and regional markets for butter and cheese; and envying the feather pillows, looking glasses, curtains and clocks which distinguished the homes of the more affluent from their less prosperous neighbors.

As an aside, it should be added that the relevant (i.e. directly contemporaneous to the 1680s) archives for Chilvers Coton are even more extensive even than this exciting combination suggests, including a very significant body of testimonial material generated by witnesses who gave evidence in the courts of church and state; remarkably detailed wage books for both the Arbury agricultural estate and the coal mines in the southern part of the parish; voluminous account books for the Arbury Household itself; a reasonably good (but by no means perfect) run of parish registers of baptisms, marriages and burials; Sir Richard Newdigate’s own journal; and his library of some 270 items ranging from the earliest editions of the classic 3texts of humanistic discourse (including More’s *Utopia*) through the printed ephemera characteristic of a society increasingly obsessed with burgeoning news media (the entire collection purchased, in its entirety of course, by Henry E. Huntington in 1922—so it is now all downstairs from my office; where else would it be?). This rich array can be further supplemented because some (though by no means all) of these archival sources—especially the probate material and the parish registers—extend forwards and backwards from the centre-point of 1684, making it possible in some respects to construct a narrative of social, economic and cultural change through a *time-series* rather than merely reconstructing a *cross-section* of social, cultural and economic relationships in the village at one particular point in time.
This material obviously poses challenges for a researcher with only one lifetime to fulfil his or her scholarly ambitions: it would be easy (but perhaps not desirable) to imagine spending the rest of one's scholarly career working on (and therefore in) a village of less than 800 people. It is also, of course, difficult to keep so substantial a body of material under control, especially when so much of the analysis can be conducted only by linking backwards and forwards between various parts of the archive.

The most significant methodological challenge, however, lies in teasing out the nature and quality of social relationships from such an enormous but disparate archive. How might the spaces and places of Chilvers Coton be conceptualized, populated and animated without swamping the analysis in detail? In what follows, I offer a microcosm of the type of analysis which I hope will characterize the whole project. The focus here is on one specific set of social and economic relationships, that between the parish officers and the poor of the parish.

* * *

On 5 April 1690, the overseers of the poor of Chilvers Coton bound out Thomas, twelve-year-old son of widow Mary Beighton of Griff, as a parish apprentice. Beighton had lost his father at the age of nine in 1687, but since that time he and his younger brother Richard had been boarded with various families in the parish, including most recently that of the overseer himself at a cost of 8s. a month, reducing to 4s. a month when Richard was apprenticed to Edward Lathom in October 1689. Although they did not see fit to record the name of the master to whom Thomas Beighton himself was bound, the overseers were assiduous in accounting for their own expenditure in the business, especially in kitting him out for his departure: 1s.11d. for a new hat, 2s. for a pair of shoes, 19s.5d. for clothing and tailoring. Together with 1s.6d. for his indentures, a premium of £3, and 2s. spent, probably on drink to seal the deal as well as on transport, first when the overseers 'bargained' with his prospective master and subsequently when he was formally bound, the apprenticeship of Thomas Beighton cost the parishioners of Chilvers Coton well over £4. Transactions of this kind were entirely typical of a poor relief regime in which children were often seen as a burden rather than a blessing to their parents; and were potentially a very significant long-term drain on the resources and patience of the rate-payers. By the late seventeenth century, apprenticeship indentures like those of Thomas Beighton symbolised the growing intervention of the officers of the civil parish into the households of the poor.

Although the first (highly abbreviated) overseers' accounts survive from the mid 1650s, fragmentary evidence of the origin of social welfare provision in Chilvers Coton survives from the very first years of the seventeenth century. In making his will in 1605, for example, one testator's preference was for the minister and the overseers of the poor to administer his perpetual dole, but added the caveat that, 'for want of overseers', the charity was to be entrusted to two of 'the cheifest menn of the towne'. Justices' orders for relief and habitation nonetheless suggest that by the 1620s collection and housing were occasionally being provided by the parish officers; and that by the 1650s pensions of a shilling a week were not unknown. The creeping inflation of poor relief expenditure is evident from the summary accounts provided by the overseers from the early 1660s: the annual costs of relieving the poor increased from around £15 in the 1660s, to £25 in the 1670s and £45 in the early 1680s. In the late 1680s, expenditure...
peaked at over £61 before falling away, only to rise still higher to almost £74 in 1699, over £78 in 1707 and over £125 in 1717.

![Graph showing annual poor relief expenditure (£) in Chilvers Coton, c.1660-1725.](image)

Little wonder that the parishioners were, by the late seventeenth century going to extreme lengths to deflate welfare costs. Three manorial orders of 1684—stipulating the provision of indemnity bonds for those landlords who took inmates to ensure that their lodgers would not become chargeable to the parish; enforcing the 1589 act which regulated the construction of cottages to those properties which had at least four acres of land; and the creation of a sixty-acre allotment on the common of Coton Outwoods, the rents of which would be used to defray poor relief expenditure—were designed 'to prevent the encrease of poore and ease the charge'. In 1689, concerns that the inhabitants were 'very much burdened and charged with poor' provoked a campaign to force recalcitrant tenants living on the outskirts of the village into contributing to the parish relief fund; and by 1691 the inhabitants of Chilvers Coton were petitioning the county bench for permission to erect their own house of correction in the parish itself on the grounds of the 'great number of poor' in the town; and by 1708 they were following other Warwickshire ratepayers in investing tuppence a throw on parish badges with which to deter and stigmatise the poor.

The most effective means of limiting liability for the poor, especially in a community which was so vulnerable to in-migration, was to use the settlement laws to defend the parish boundary. Between 1633 and 1708, the parish officers of Chilvers Coton fought seventeen settlement cases at the county quarter sessions, thirteen of them in the years after 1671. They were successful in securing removal orders on at
least twelve of these occasions, their only permanent setbacks occurring in 1633 (over a deserted wife and her child), in 1650 (over a young single man), in 1691 (over a married couple and their child) and in 1699 (over a single young woman). The parish officers had to be particularly sure both of the law and of their jurisdictional geography, for the costs of settlement litigation could be crippling. In 1708-9, for instance, they fought a desperate and protracted battle to remove the Bunting family, first to Nuneaton and subsequently to Dadlington (Leicestershire), and their explicitly itemised costs, probably an underestimate of their actual expenditure on the case, amounted to almost £6, or roughly 6 per cent of the annual relief bill. The justices’ award of a mere 40s. costs in their favour must have seemed like an insult added to injury.

As we shall see, the number of poor people relieved through parish rates was a less significant issue than their aggregate costs, not least since the very young or the very elderly could be so very expensive. The rate-paying burden was, moreover, heavily concentrated on the shoulders of a very few inhabitants. In 1690-91, at a time when there were perhaps 190 households and almost eight-hundred inhabitants in the parish, as few as forty-eight individuals were liable for poor rates, a substantial proportion of them non-resident freeholders. The three principal landowners (Sir Richard Newdigate, Lord Coventry and Thomas Perkins) accounted for over 90 per cent of the total assessed, with Newdigate himself liable for well over half (59 per cent). With five more modest freeholders paying a further 7.2 per cent of the relief bill between them, the thirty-nine other ratepayers assessed at sums between four shillings and one penny contributed only 2 per cent of the total. The gradient of welfare liability was, therefore astonishingly steep, and it was doubtless Newdigate’s voice that was heard loudest in the chorus of complaint about rising expenditure.

There certainly was complaint about inequalities in the distribution of assessment, not least because of the tradition, probably in fact a recent innovation, that ratepayers should be assessed according to the rental value (rather than the acreage) of their property which, being fixed, did not always reflect the actual quality of the land. Those whose property lay on inferior soil naturally found it more difficult to raise the income needed to satisfy the overseers. The jurors of 1684 conceded that assessments were inequitable, but feared that they could not easily be remedied. ‘Good husbands’, they noted, ‘by improvement continually make their levys easier and ill husbands by impairing their lands make their levys harder’. ‘So it will be’, they somewhat philosophically added, ‘to the end of the world’. They eventually decided that the status quo should be maintained, with the Arbury demesne contributing one sixth of the assessment, the Woodland another sixth, and the rest of the parish (including Griff and all of Coton Town) the remaining two-thirds. The upshot was that Newdigate himself was over-assessed, and it was almost certainly Sir Richard himself who subscribed the poor rate assessment for 1695-96 with the words ‘whoever made and wrote this levy is a knave’.

The very high level of his own liability probably explains why Newdigate, unlike many landowners, was only too willing to get his hands dirty with parochial funds: on 29 September 1689, he personally opened the parish box and took out over £6 with which to pay the overseers, and only at that point surrendered the key, which he had ‘lately kept’, to the churchwarden. He fingers were, however, in the till again in October 1694, when having put 23s. in the Coton poor box, he took out over 50s. and gave it the
overseer of the highways ‘to set the poor on work to mend the roads’. This personal familiarity with parish funds did not, regrettably, ensure that he was up to date with his contributions. At the time of his death in 1710, he owed the overseers in the region of £200 (equivalent to twice the annual levy of the whole parish) in unpaid rates.

In all these respects—the gradual supplementation (perhaps even displacement) of testamentary charity by formal poor relief; the rapid inflation of welfare costs; the assiduous policing of settlement; the marking out of the poor as a separate and dependant class—the parish economy of welfare in Chilvers Coton sits very comfortable alongside those of other late seventeenth-century rural communities. Only in the very close personal interest taken in the charitable distribution of resources by its landlord does Chilvers Coton seem exceptional. But precisely because of Newdigate’s extraordinary attention to detail, it is possible in the case of this particular parish to map the social topography of poverty, and especially the identity of, and relationship between, its overseers and collectors. Indeed in the context of a historiography which has arguably been less interested in the concerns of overseers than of those whom they relieved, the Chilvers Coton listing and associated maps provide an unparalleled opportunity to reconstruct the perspective of the parish officers themselves. Overseers were, after all, caught on the horns of a particularly uncomfortable dilemma, confronted on the one hand with the desire of their fellow ratepayers to prevent the unnecessary inflation of welfare costs and on the other with genuine case of human misery and despair.

The earliest extant lists of detailed disbursements by the parish overseers survive for the accounting years 1689-90 and 1694-95, only six years and eleven years respectively after Newdigate’s survey had been concluded, though there is no continuous series until 1708. The two overseers in 1689-90 were Henry Clay and William Johnson, and together they worked in tandem: handling and accounting for monthly disbursements on an alternate basis over the course of the year with one of the two, in this case Clay, taking sole responsibility for recording casual payments. Aged forty-six and married with five children aged between sixteen and two by 1689, Henry Clay was the older and more experienced of the two men. He was the tenant of Cuttle Mill, the only windmill in the parish, which stood in Windmill Field in Coton Town, and was owned by William Wood of Pedimore in Sutton Coldfield. In the hearth taxes of the late 1660s and early 70s, when its tenant was Daniel Hinckley, Cuttle Mill had been assessed first on four and subsequently on five hearths, and was therefore among the more substantial and elaborate buildings in the parish: Thomas Hewitt’s sketch seems to indicate a three storey-building with at least two bays. Clay had served as one of Newdigate’s jurors in 1684, and was also town warden in 1689. In 1684, he had employed three co-resident servants, 21-year-old Sarah Garrett, 28-year-old John Waldron and 32-year-old Ann Barefoot; farmed, at an annual rent of over £32, more than forty-six acres (or over 7 per cent) of the land spread across the common fields; and sat with his wife Elizabeth in the pew reserved for the tenants of Cuttle Mill some six rows back from the pulpit.
Henry Clay was, however, a relative newcomer to the parish, having formerly lived in Minworth near Sutton Coldfield where he had almost certainly been a tenant of his current landlord William Wood and was assessed on three hearths in 1670. He probably took the lease of Cuttle Mill sometime between the assessment of the 1674 hearth tax (from which his name is absent) and the baptism of his second child Mary in December 1676. Millers, of course, had long enjoyed a terrible reputation for fraudulence and exploitation (both economic and sexual) and were very rarely popular members of farming communities. Clay was, however, very well-integrated into the webs of mutuality and obligation of which the community was woven, appraising the property and executing the wills of several of his deceased neighbours (at least one of whom, the widowed alehouse-keeper Frances Rason, regarded him as a 'loving friend'). Within twelve months of his arrival, moreover, he was serving as overseer of the poor, the appointment of a newcomer, and a miller to boot, to this office probably representing a waking nightmare for the relief claimants. The fact that a recent migrant could assume such a position of authority is eloquent testimony to the double-standard which lay at the heart of the settlement laws, from the provisions of which those who rented £10 worth of property or served in parish office, were automatically exempt. When he assumed control of parish relief funds in 1689, it was the second time he had held the office.

His colleague William Johnson, by contrast, was much younger, though he came from a much more well-established family of Chilvers Coton freeholders. Aged twenty-eight in 1689, Johnson had only very recently assumed full adult membership of the community when in January 1688 he had married Frances Painter, and it seems likely that she moved in to the family home with William and his widowed mother Mary who had headed the household since the death of her husband William sr in April 1680. In 1673 William sr had been regarded as an acceptable choice to serve as overseer, and by 1680 had prospered sufficiently to have left an inventory valued at £103, some £85 of which was accounted for by farming goods, though he owed over £38 (including £19 of unpaid rent). In 1684, William's widow Mary and her three children (of whom William jr was the eldest) were still renting from Lord Coventry, at a cost of over £38 a year, the
one-hearth house and farm in Griff in which they also accommodated two tenants, Richard and Ann Wordle, a 32-year-old shoemaker and his wife. By the time the poll tax was assessed in 1690, Johnson seems to have been living with his wife and three children, two of them probably his younger siblings. As tenants of a freehold estate, the Johnsons had no common rights and they were among those to whom no pew was allocated in 1684, but they were liable for poor-rates, being among the lesser ratepayers and contributing less than 0.2 per cent of the relief fund in 1690-91. The accounting year 1689-90 was William junior’s first tenure of an office he was to hold again in 1699.

Between them, Clay and Johnson spent some £44.5s.4d. on the relief of the poor in 1689-90, over 55 per cent of it on fifteen named collectioners, six of them children. The unprecedented detail in which the life-histories of the pensioners of Chilvers Coton can be reconstructed demonstrates just how complex their circumstances could be, and cautions against simplistic generalisation about the nature and scale of welfare ‘dependency’ in late seventeenth-century England. Regular relief was targeted at just thirteen (or 7 per cent) of the approximately 180 households in the parish, though taking children and other dependents into consideration significantly raises the proportion of inhabitants who were regularly beholden to the parish.

Two of the nine regular adult collectioners were male. Seventy-five-year-old Richard Johnson was a labourer who had been widowed only the previous year, the death of his younger wife Elizabeth leaving him living alone in a cottage (with a mere 13.25 perches of ‘garden place’) on the north side of the lane in the Heath End. The cottage, which he rented for two shillings a year from Sir Richard Newdigate, was not eligible for common right, and Johnson received 2s. a month from the overseers throughout 1689-90, rising to 4s. a month by 1694, although all payments ceased abruptly that summer. The collier Richard Robinson, who received 1s.6d. a month throughout the period 1689-95, was a sixty years old in 1689, though his family circumstances were different. He and his wife Mary had married in the parish in 1668 and by 1689 they had four surviving children. In 1684 they had, like Johnson, lived on the Bowed Lane in Heath End, renting part of a house (with their neighbour Alice Burges) from Newdigate at a cost of 2s. a year, of which Robinson probably met half. He had access to half of a 38-perch garden plot, though no lawful common rights. Although his children were old enough to be apprenticed by 1689, Robinson’s dependency is probably to be explained by illness or injury which prevented him from supporting himself entirely by his labour, and was probably still on the parish at the time of his death at the age of seventy in 1700. Both Johnson and Robinson had been exempted from the 1670 hearth tax though Robinson seems to have moved to Heath End from a slightly larger house and homestall which he had rented from William Wood in Paradise End.

The six widows who were relieved continuously throughout 1689-90 more obviously fit the stereotype of late-seventeenth-century collectioners. One of them, Widow Ann Sergeant, lived, like the two adult males on the parish, in the Heath End. Aged eighty-five in 1689, Ann was living with her forty-year-old collier son John and his wife and twelve-year-old daughter. John was an under-tenant to Bartholomew Sergeant who rented a small tenement with no common rights from Richard Newdigate. In April and May 1689, John was receiving 7-8s. a month from the overseers to help support his mother, though from June to November the monthly pension dropped back first to 4s.
and then disappeared altogether after Widow Ann Sergeant died on the parish in December 1689. Her burial which was not, curiously, recorded in the parish register, cost the parish officers the relatively modest sum of 9s.6d., somewhat less than the late-seventeenth-century norm for a pauper funeral. Aged eighty-three, Widow Elizabeth Shaw received 1s.6d. a month throughout 1689-90, although this sum had risen to 4s. by 1694-95, and was resident in the townhouse at a subsidised annual rent of 3s.4d., as she had been since at least 1684. Indeed, she had almost certainly been in collection continuously since then, and probably from as early as 1670 when her coalminer husband William had been exempted from the hearth tax. In 1684, she and William had lived with an eight-year-old boy, possibly their grandson. Widowed in 1685, Ann Shaw almost certainly remained on the parish until the time of her death aged eighty-nine in May 1695.

Two of the widowed collectioners lived in Coton Town. The older of them, aged sixty-three was Sarah Suffolk, widow of Thomas, a labourer who had died in 1688, though whether her twenty-five-year-old daughter who had still been at home in 1684 remained co-resident with her in 1689 is uncertain. Thomas had been a freeholder and owner-occupier of a house and homestall without common right, and had been exempted from the hearth tax of 1670. In 1684 he had with Thomas Paul rented the two Quarry Fields from Lord Coventry at an annual cost of £6.10s. Sarah received 2s monthly throughout 1689-90 and almost certainly died on the parish in 1693 aged sixty-seven. Alice Pain, by contrast, was much younger, aged forty-five in 1689. In 1684 she and her labourer husband Christopher had rented a house and croft in the Windmill Field from William Wood at an annual cost of 12s. Christopher seems to have earned his living as a farm servant to the carpenter Richard Sutton but at his death in 1686, had left her over-burdened with six children aged between sixteen and five. Despite being besieged by the demands of her offspring, Alice Pain's place in the relief rolls was assured only gradually. She received 6d. for the first time in December 1690 and 1s. monthly thereafter. Although it might be thought likely that her pension would have subsequently been progressively withdrawn as her children left home for service, apprenticeship or marriage, Alice Pain remained on the parish receiving 4s. a month throughout 1694-95. Mary Parnell, who lived in a house and croft at Nuneaton Townes End by Wash Lane, had (like Alice Pain) been widowed relatively young. Aged forty-five in 1689, she had lost her husband Richard at least five years previously for she was recorded in the 1684 survey as a widow living only with her four-year-old son Richard. She received 1s.6d. a month throughout 1689, though she was able to supplement that sum with income derived from the exercise of common rights associated with the house she rented for 10s. a year from absentee freeholders, first from Antichel Gray esq. and thereafter from Sir Willoughby Aston. She was still receiving 1s.6d a month throughout 1694-95.

By far the most generous pension in 1689-90 was paid to Widow Ann Slingsby, the fifty-nine-year-old widow of John, a mason, who had died at Christmas 1686. In 1684 Ann had lived with John, their own daughter Elizabeth and their widowed daughter-in-law and her two children aged two and six weeks, in a small farmhouse in the woodland, rented from Sir Richard Newdigate. Although Elizabeth married and probably left home in 1685, by 1689 the Slingsby household probably contained two widows and two children aged seven and five. Common rights (which the family may have exercised either in Coton or in neighbouring Stockingford) may well have gone
some way to alleviate the burden (and the Slingsbys certainly did, as we shall see, own livestock) but the overseers nonetheless felt it necessary to give Ann Slingsby 5s. a month throughout 1689-90 year, an investment which accounted for almost 8 per cent of their entire relief expenditure. A clearer sense of the Slingsby’s material circumstances is conveyed by the inventory of Ann’s goods taken at her death in November 1691. Her possessions were valued at almost £15, but over half this sum (£8.10s.) was accounted for by livestock (three cows, two heffers and a mare) and a further £3 by a rick of hay. Her household goods amounted only to a table, a frame and a cupboard, a bed and bedstead; a brass pan and six pewter dishes; and 19s. worth of ‘odd mplyments’. Her will suggest that she had bequeathed these meagre goods to her son Robert on the condition that he guaranteed her a life interest in them and subsequently sold them for the benefit of her two daughters and two grandsons. When Robert himself died in 1696 his inventory was worth only a very little more (£18).

The ninth adult collectioner of 1689-90 is both the most obscure and the most interesting, for she is the only one that cannot clearly be linked to a household in the 1684 listing. Ann Parnell had given birth to an illegitimate daughter Mary in January 1689 and was give regular monthly payments varying between 6d. and 12d. throughout the accounting year. She was still unmarried when she gave birth to twin bastard children in September 1691. In 1694-95, Anne remained on the parish receiving payments of 1s.6d., though one of her offspring was also receiving 4s. a month by that point.

Indeed, it was with children who the Chilvers Coton overseers were preoccupied and for whom they made the greatest financial commitment. Behind the names of the five other householders who received very significant weekly collection in 1689 lie six orphaned, boarded or illegitimate children. Edward and Elizabeth Goldby had lived alone in the Heath End in 1684 but by 1689 they were looking after six-year old Elizabeth Whitmore, whose mother had died along with her sister not long after childbirth in June 1684. Elizabeth’s father Thomas was a silk-weaver, as was Edward Goldby himself, which may explain the overseer’s choice of an appropriate householder with whom to lodge her. Goldby was aged sixty-five in 1689, and the four shillings a month he received to care for Elizabeth Whitmore doubtless helped him support his wife Isabel too. In 1689, therefore, the overseers were making regular visits to two adjacent houses in the Heath End: those of Richard Johnson and Edward Golby. By 1694-95, Elizabeth was receiving 4s. a month in her own right, and Edward himself had also fallen on the parish, receiving 4s. a month.

Robert and Mary Suffolk had three young children of their own in 1684 but by 1689 they were also looking after ten-year-old Elizabeth, the daughter of William and Elizabeth Holmes, at a cost to the overseers of 5s. a month. Elizabeth had, however, been rotated around the parish by previous overseers: her mother had died in 1680; her father had remarried in 1682 and by 1684 was living in a Newdigate cottage on the Arbory demesne, by which time Elizabeth herself had been boarded in the Heath End with the labourer William Mortimer his wife and child. Similar mobility was the experience of another youngster: Thomas Staples and his wife Susan had no children of their own but by 1689 were looking after Ann Lea, a thirteen year-old girl who had been boarded in with the Knight family in Heath End in 1684. Throughout 1689-90 Ann Lea was costing the overseers 4s. a month, though was approaching the age where the
overseers would have wanted to apprentice her. Ann Ireson was not so lucky. The illegitimate child of the widow Jane Ireson, Ann had been living with her mother in 1684 but by 1689 was living with John Sergeant, his family and his widowed mother (who was also on the parish). Payments of 6s. to 7s. a month to John Sergeant ended abruptly in the spring, however, for Ann, aged just eight years old, was buried on 21 April 1689. Much the most expensive arrangement, as we have seen, was that provided for the Beighton brothers, both of whom were first boarded, then apprenticed during the course of the accounting year. In regular payments alone, these six children cost the overseers of Chilvers Coton almost £13 (or 29 per cent) of their annual relief bill in 1689, and that proportion rises substantially if account is taken of casual payments for their clothing or one-off expenditure relating to their apprenticeship. Indeed apprenticeship made up the vast majority of casual relief: three premia of £3 or £4, together with related expenditure on bargaining with prospective masters and drafting indentures, amounted to 23.6 per cent of the relief bill. Apprenticeship almost certainly inflated the costs of clothing too, since providing clothes for the three boys bound apprentice in 1689-90 swallowed up over £4, almost two-thirds of the total expenditure on clothing, the remainder being spent on making coats and mending shoes for four other children, two of them residents of the townhouse. Nor does it seem that parish apprenticeships were unusually common in 1689-90; only the previous year, the overseers had apprenticed a further five children, and surrendered their indentures to the new overseers in September 1689. Very expensive as apprenticeship premia might be, they were an investment that provided much needed financial security to the ratepayers, at least in the median term.

Taken together then, the collectioners of Chilvers Coton might be characterized by the parish officers as a motley crew of widows, cripples, orphans and bastards. The complexities of their life histories, however, suggest a more sympathetic group portrait would do justice to the debilitating consequences of lifetimes of industry and child-rearing. Either way, their concentration in the Heath End and on Wash Lane confirms the jurors identification of the houses in that part of the parish as ‘mean tenements inhabited by indifferent persons of which 3 or 4 are very poor’. Those in the Heath End stood away from the village centre on what must have been small encroachments on former common land. On Thomas Hewitt’s map the majority of these houses are drawn uniformly, with two windows, a door and a central chimney. They almost certainly represent typical Warwickshire one-hearth houses, which usually had two ground-floor rooms, entered either directly into one room or through a lobby.

Some of these collectioners’ predecessors had evidently had to plead with, perhaps even harass, the parish officers of Chilvers Coton before they were admitted to pensions, two of them even having to secure relief orders from the county bench to coerce reluctant overseers. The disabled labourers, William Oldham (from 1649 to 1657) and Edmund Lane (throughout 1661), had fought protracted battles with the parish officers before they received regular collection, and even then it is far from clear whether the pensions awarded were as generous as those stipulated by county magistrates. Although none of the collectioners of 1689-90 had been forced to secure relief orders, it is instructive that Widow Alice Pain, the one new pensioner admitted to the relief rolls during the course of that year, received regular payments in the immediate aftermath of the death and burial of a long-standing and expensive collectioner Ann Sergeant, which strongly suggests that she received a pension only
when funds became available. There was doubtless a penumbra of poor people who were not on relief: while some of ‘the Poore Women out of the Heath End and Wash Lane’ to whom a pew was allocated in 1684 were probably among those on relief in 1689, the constituency of ‘the poor people of Griff’ who were seated alongside them was almost certainly larger than the overseers’ accounts suggest. There are, moreover, numerous suggestive references to the unrelieved poor: over the course of fifteen months between 1 October 1704 and 1 January 1706, for example, the vicar John Viall baptised thirty-three children in All Saints Church and noted in passing that fourteen (42 per cent) of them were born into ‘poor’ families. Despite this sense that poverty was an inherited, perhaps even a congenital condition, only two of these households appear receiving collection when the first continuous run of overseers’ accounts begins in 1708-9, even though the number of collectioners had increased considerably from fourteen in 1689 to twenty-six. Among them was Widow Elizabeth Garrett, receiving 3s a month who had been described as ‘not fit to receive collection’ as recently as May 1705.

As we have seen, rising levels of expenditure across the first two decades of the eighteenth century had resulted in parochial relief costs seven or eight times the level of the early 1660s, an increase all the more remarkable given that prices were static or falling throughout this period. The assessment averaged almost 28d. in the pound (almost 12 per cent) in the 1710s, and rose as high as 30d. (12.5 per cent) in 1714-15. The overseers repeatedly had to make allowances to ratepayers who could not pay their levy: in 1722-23, for instance, there were four such beneficiaries who enjoyed rebates varying between 18.d and 28d. The ratepayers evidently decided that drastic action was necessary and on 18 July 1722, a year before Knatchbull’s act provided the statutory framework for the ‘workhouse test’, they agreed that a parish workhouse should be created. In doing so, they were precocious by Warwickshire standards, anticipating subsequent foundations in Coventry (1724), Bedworth (1725), King’s Norton (1729), and Birmingham (1733). As such, the Chilvers Coton foundation was a part of the very earliest phase of the workhouse movement which spread outwards from north Bedfordshire and had penetrated a swathe of parishes in southern and central England, from Essex and Hertfordshire north to Bedfordshire, Northamptonshire and Leicestershire, even before the passing of the relevant legislation.

The Chilvers Coton vestrymen decided to convert two houses owned by Robert Towe and Thomas Clark into a parish workhouse. They began by evicting Towe’s tenant, compensating him with a pay-off of 15s., and by August 1722 they were actively enquiring after an appropriate master. Work on the conversion of the building proceeded apace and by late summer the parish officers were claiming expenses for hanging the furnace, for pointing the oven. The miscellaneous fittings—pots, tubs, pails, platters, tongs, nails, shelves, locks and candles—soon followed. And then came the poor themselves, many of whom had to be helped into the building by the parish officers who claimed expenses for their efforts: 2s.6d. for Thomas Knight and Widow Parnell; a further 2s.6d. for William Suffolk; 1s.6d. for ‘the women’; and 3s. for carrying in the poor’s beds. Whether all seventeen paupers—including four men, nine women (seven of them widows) and three children—who received outdoor relief for the last time in August 1722 actually entered the workhouse the following month is uncertain. The workhouse may already have had a deterrent effect: the number of collectioners
had already dropped, from twenty-two in 1721 to seventeen by summer 1722, and nobody in the parish received out-relief thereafter.

From September 1722 onwards, the overseers’ accounts provide weekly totals of sums spent on provisions for the workhouse. An indicative list includes bread (3s.6d.); soap, sugar and butter (10s.5d.); salt and oatmeal (7s.4d.); cabbages and turnips (3d.) half a strike of malt (1s.9d.); a horse-load of coal (1s.7d.); a breast of mutton (8d.); a strike of corn (3s.4d.); cheese (2s.); and tobacco (3d.). Access to this diet came at the price of subscription to a set of rules and regulations which dictated the rhythms of commensality, of sleep, and above all of labour; and stipulated appropriate standards of hygiene, morality and inter-personal conduct. The inmates were to rise at 5am and retire at 9pm; to work from 6am, having half-an-hour for breakfast from 9am and an hour for dinner from 1pm, until taking supper at 7pm. Those who had not performed their allotted tasks at the end of this eleven-and-a-half-hour working day were required to labour even longer after supper. Those who refused to work or misbehaved themselves by ‘fighting’ or ‘making a disturbance’ were to have their dietary allowance halved or to be fed only bread and water for two or three days. If they consistently refused work, or brought in children to share their rations, or begged or cadged food from their fellow inmates, they were to be sent to bridewell. Anybody caught embezzling or stealing wood, coal, cloth, lace or any other workhouse property was to be prosecuted at law and punished with the utmost severity. The master had a duty of care to see that all provisions were ‘cleanly and well done’ and to ensure that all candles were extinguished before the inmates retired, but he himself would be up long into the night, keeping an account of the numbers of residents accommodated, the care they required, the work they performed and the earnings they received. At the end of each week he was required to itemise all the disorders committed in the workhouse in order that the overseers and principal inhabitants could examine and punish the offenders. Peace and order was to be maintained by the constant admonition and restraint of ‘rudeness, wickedness and dishonesty’; by attendance at church services; by the religious observance of the sabbath without idling or wandering; and by the instruction ‘morning and evening in their prayers of the younger people by the older’. These orders were intended to ensure that the Chilvers Coton workhouse remained a house of ‘piety, industry and regularity’ to the ‘comfort’ not (at least not explicitly) of the residents themselves but ‘of the parish officers and principal benefactors’.

Thus it was that Widows Burges, Cooper, Newton, Parnell, Rason, Smith and Suffolk, together with Ann Darby, Sarah King, Mary Suffolk, Thomas Gilbert, Richard Holmes, Thomas Knight William White, and the Warmidge and Morton children became the real forbears of ‘Old Maxum’, Mr Fitchett, ‘Silly Jim’, Mrs Brick, and Mary Higgins and her refractory child, the inmates whom George Eliot imagined being simultaneously bored, patronised and terrified by the sermons preached by the reverend Amos Barton in the early nineteenth-century Shepperton workhouse. ‘A huge square stone building standing on the best apology for an elevation of ground that could be seen for about ten miles around’ the village, the Shepperton workhouse (like all the architecture described in Scenes of Clerical Life) is evidently closely modelled on the Chilvers Coton ‘house of industry’. Whether John Viall, the clergyman of Chilvers Coton in the early 1720s, ever preached in the ‘dreary stone-floored dining room’ of the workhouse, struggling like Barton to find some ‘edifying matter’ which ‘might find its way into the pauper mind and conscience’, is unknown, though the vestrymen of Georgian Chilvers Coton
evidently expected the same kind of 'hardy defiance' which was endemic among the inmates described in such remarkable detail by Eliot.

What they did not expect was that the workhouse would fail to reduce expenditure as much as they had hoped. In the short-term, indeed, expenditure on the workhouse drove costs almost as high as they had ever been, with the overseers accounting for over £118 of disbursements in 1722-23. In the median term, the investment produced the expected return, with expenditure in the following two years (only £83 in 1723-24, a little more at £87 in 1724-25) dropping to levels unknown since the first years of the eighteenth century. Ratepayers used to contributing around 12 per cent of their rental value suddenly found that they were being asked to contribute less than 8 per cent. The last year for which accounts are available, however, suggests that the benefit was short-lived, for the overseers spent almost £109 in 1725-26. By June 1727 they were noting that the 'expenses of the workhouse have weekly increased', an inflation which they ascribed to 'want of daily inspection' into its management, a failing which had been caused by the tyranny of sheer distance, the overseers usually living too far away to make the trip with any regularity. As an interim measure they had accordingly contracted with Edward Buswell, a near inhabitant of the workhouse, to oversee its management and provide 'all things necessary for the support of the poor'. Since this arrangement had driven down costs once more, they made the arrangement permanent, contracting with Buswell as their deputy to furnish the inmates with 'meat, drink, clothes, washing &c' at the rate of £4.16s. a year. This was almost certainly the type of arrangement which prevailed in the Chilvers Coton workhouse into the nineteenth century, by which time it had become euphemistically known to the inhabitants, including George Eliot, as the 'College'. The institutionalisation of relief in this house of industry had radically transformed the social topography of poverty in the parish of Chilvers Coton: no longer were paupers scattered in cottages along Wash Lane or huddled in hovels in the Heath End. They were incarcerated in an institution designed to signal an end to outdoor relief, and to inculcate piety, industry and regularity among those who could no longer keep body and soul together through their own efforts. In May 1723, the vestrymen of Chilvers Coton paid 2s.6d. for the engrossing of the workhouse orders on parchment. There is a certain symmetry in the fact that the man they commissioned to do the job was Henry Beighton, who doubtless undertook it with the kind of flair and precision expressed in the 'involuted elegance of capitals and final flourishes' that captured the imagination of George Eliot when she saw them almost a century after he had painted the names of the parish benefactors on the charity boards in All Saints church. That the same hand traced the evolution of the spatial dynamics of inequality in Chilvers Coton—from doles of bread distributed indiscriminately among the hungry in their own homes to the incarceration and discipline of the indigent and idle in a house of industry—testifies to how much the life chances of the poor had deteriorated over the course of a single generation.