

## Social problems and the Poor Laws.

In 1553 the first Poor Law had made each parish responsible for local poor: there had to be an official who was responsible for collecting alms (gifts) so that begging would be reduced. This was intended to discourage vagrancy.

The problem of the travelling poor dates from the 13thC, but the dissolution of the monasteries meant that help was no longer available there. Among the destitute were discharged battle victims who were forced to wander from place to place begging as they went. There were, of course, those who lived by crime. But there were many who had fallen into poverty for a wide range of reasons not least of which was illness\*.

\* See Fenland Superstitions and Cures.

A common cause of poverty was uncertainty of employment. For example, fields were getting larger, particularly in sheep-farming areas like Suffolk as flocks got bigger and land began to be enclosed by the wealthy. The increase in the size of a flock actually reduced the number of shepherds necessary for day to day work.

Lakenheath was fortunate that fish and fowl from the Fen and rabbits from the Warren were available in large quantities. Perhaps life could be bearable so long as you weren't caught! The punishments for poaching could be very severe. Imprisonment, or worse could mean destitution for a family.

The bequests made by JOANNA STYWARD, wife of Simeon Styward to Lakenheath are important because they show a recognition of the responsibility of the wealthy towards the poor. They were the forerunners of later charities of times to come.



*Joanna's Memorial*

This old rhyme we learnt as children shows how widespread the problem was:

*"Hark, hark the dogs do bark  
The beggars are coming to town  
Some in rags and some with bags  
And one in a velvet gown."*

Later in 1601 a new law was introduced which listed categories of poverty which were:

**The Helpless Poor.**

The old, sick, disabled or children. Children were supposed to be apprenticed to a trade which would be of use in the Parish.

**The Able-bodied Poor.**

This group had to work for the benefit of the Parish, sometimes in an early workhouse.

**Rogues and Vagabonds. (Vagrants).**

This group generally lived by crime. Begging was made illegal and punishments could be very harsh and included hanging for persistent offenders.

*Trueman C N*

It's likely that the vagrancy problem led to the provision of village lock-ups. Stocks, already in use in most villages also provided a convenient punishment, enabling the villagers to add to the punishment by pelting the prisoner with anything handy.

The village constable or bailiff became associated with civil authority and so became an important village figure.

Stocks can still be seen on some village greens today. Lakenheath's stocks are said to have been near the site of the old village pond, now the site of the War Memorial.