



VOLUNTARY ACTION HISTORY SEMINARS

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SEMINAR ABSTRACT

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Late-medieval methods of poor relief

The received wisdom on the treatment of the poor in the period 1300-1600 was that before c. 1540 charity was organised by the church, through the institutions specialising in social welfare, such as hospitals and almshouses, and through the distribution of alms by monasteries, together with the clergy and parish officials at local level. After the reformation the state set up an efficient system of poor relief by making the civil parishes responsible for raising funds through rates, from the proceeds of which local overseers distributed money. This paper will show that the church did not make adequate or effective provision, and in view of the structural problems of low incomes and harvest failures, as well as the problems of life cycle poverty, if the poor depended on church charity they would have suffered greatly. They were assisted by the development of local machinery for collecting money and dispensing funds, which villagers organised for themselves independently of both the state and the church. When the state came to create a poor law, they found existing local institutions and practices which served as a model for their schemes. The new element was that the state was making compulsory arrangements with a voluntary origin.