



VOLUNTARY ACTION HISTORY SEMINARS

VAHS seminar series at the Institute of Historical Research

SEMINAR ABSTRACT

21st May 2012

Professor Chris Woolgar, University of Southampton

Food alms for the poor in late medieval England

Feeding the poor was a Christian duty, yet it was one that was not accepted without qualification in late medieval England. If before the Black Death the provision of food alms was the regular practice of hospitals, monasteries and friaries, of great households and guilds, besides being the common duty of everyone, the demographic changes that came with the plague brought a recalibration. No longer was it common to feed the poor indiscriminately, or in large numbers; few households made regular provision. When the fourth Earl of Salisbury made his will in 1427, his insistence that his widow give by her own hand food alms to three paupers each day was exceptional; even the Earl suspected his widow might not do it, and therefore made provision for one of his executors to do it in her stead. Charity increasingly focused on friends and neighbours. This paper looks at the changes and their consequences, from the special diets offered to the poor, to the impact that this form of charity made on the margins of society.