



## **VOLUNTARY ACTION HISTORY SEMINARS**

VAHS seminar series at the Institute of Historical Research

### **SEMINAR ABSTRACT**

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*The Historical Geography of Philanthropy in England and Wales*

The Reports of the Charity Commissioners compiled between 1819 and 1837 (the Brougham Commission reports) are well-known historical sources. Widely used by local historians, there is to date no comprehensive quantitative analysis of the information they contain. This is probably because they are far from systematic – indeed, even disorganised - and thus are difficult to use. Less well known are the Digests of Endowed Charities, also produced by the Charity Commissioners, between 1867-8 and 1912-13, though heavily concentrated on evidence drawn from the years between 1861 and 1875. These are far more systematic, more comprehensive than the Brougham Commission reports, and give breakdowns of the amount of endowed charity dedicated to different uses. Hence it is possible to determine, for every locality in England and Wales (usually the parish or township, sometimes a chapelry, hamlet or other locale), the total gross income of all endowed charities, the former income as determined by the Brougham Commission, and the amount devoted to each of the following uses: education; apprenticeship and advancement; endowments of clergy, lecturers and for sermons; church purposes; maintenance of dissenting places of worship and their ministers; education of dissenters; public uses; support of almshouses, their inmates and pensioners; distribution of articles in kind; distribution of money; and general uses of the poor. Occasionally the income of medical charities is listed too. Even though by the early Victorian period endowed charity may have been giving way to 'associational' or 'subscription' charity, the sums involved remained significant, and also reflect the historical development of charitable giving over several centuries. Martin Gorksy, in his study of voluntarism in nineteenth-century Bristol, notes that 'endowed charity has been largely ignored in the historiography of philanthropy' (*Patterns of Philanthropy*, Woodbridge, 1999, p. 39). While W.K. Jordan might take issue with this assertion for the period 1480-1660 – given his monumental study of endowment for ten counties across these years (*Philanthropy in England 1480-1660*, New York, 1959) – it is quite true that very little systematic analysis has been conducted.

This paper will begin to put that right by offering a preliminary analysis of these data for England and Wales. *Inter alia*, it will highlight the considerable geographical disparity that existed from county to county, using proximate census data to calculate the amount of endowed charity available per capita, both in general and for selected charitable uses. In particular it will highlight the poverty of philanthropy over much of northern England, as well as in Wales and the county of Cornwall. While a full explanation of these results is as yet unattainable, this paper will also begin to consider what factors might have been responsible. In particular, the geographical distribution of charitable giving by endowment found here will be compared with regional variations in payments under the Old Poor Law, as far as these are known.