



## **VOLUNTARY ACTION HISTORY SEMINARS**

VAHS seminar series at the Institute of Historical Research

### **SEMINAR ABSTRACT**

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**'People of our condition have not any right to expect stability, or certainty of subsistence' –  
Middle-class men's experience of receiving charity in mid-nineteenth century England**

Neither the emotional lives of charity beneficiaries nor middle-class men's experience of poverty has been widely explored by historians of the nineteenth century. Perhaps this is not surprising. Generally there is a dearth of evidence for reactions to receiving charity, even amongst the educated, and the idea of middle-class poverty is an alien one despite general agreement that middle-class life was financially precarious. The historiography has concentrated mainly on the concept of men as the family's provider with little consideration of those who failed or struggled to achieve this goal.

This paper brings these neglected areas of men's existence into focus. It uses two case studies to address the question of what was the lived experience of receiving charity and/or patronage in the mid-nineteenth century; the diaries and letters of the ex-weaver, writer and journalist, Samuel Bamford, and a series of anonymous, published letters sent to the Clothing Society for the Benefit of Poor Pious Clergymen of the Established Church and their Families by clergymen and their wives. The writers' feelings about receiving donations and their need to present themselves within conventions of respectability and of the donor-recipient relationship are drawn out and analysed using the model of 'emotional communities' advocated by Barbara Rosenwein which enables common themes and divergences to be evaluated. Contemporary concepts of masculinity are borne in mind throughout.