

11. Quiet times and food parcels, 1933-1990

The changed standing of the “area of benefit” was the principal reason why a new scheme was felt to be needed for the Earley Poor’s Land Charity. The new scheme, which was sealed on 14 November 1933, made sense in terms of the distribution of benefit which we discussed in the previous chapter. For several decades, a charity which had been set up in the name of Earley had been mostly benefiting poorer residents of one particular part of east Reading. It was also the case that many of the prominent members of St Peter’s Church in the years before and after World War I were also residents of Reading, and the situation must have seemed to them too increasingly anomalous.

Above all, however, the 1933 scheme recognised where the inhabitants of the Liberty of Earley at that time were counted as residents. Until 1843 all the inhabitants of the Liberty were residents of Sonning; thereafter they resided in the parishes of Earley. Their rates were levied by the Wokingham Board of Guardians. From 1894, the whole of the Liberty was briefly in the new Wokingham Rural District. The boundary change of 1899, however, made a huge change to the distribution of population, and by 1933 over 80% of the population of the Liberty were residents of Reading.

The new scheme recognised this new administrative reality. It envisaged a body of six trustees, of whom two would be appointed by the Council of the Borough of Reading, two by the Parish Council of Earley, and two co-opted. Existing trustees, as was usual, were catered for in the 1933 scheme. The five existing trustees, appointed under the 1903 scheme (three by Earley Parish Council and two co-opted), who had made the application for the new scheme in February 1933, were confirmed in office in new roles. They were Mr B. S. Clark, biscuit manufacturer; Mr F. J. Rutter, school-master; Mr C. J. Howlett, estate agent; Mr A. W. Wickens, motor engineer; and Mr J. F. Penson, medical practitioner. Under the new scheme, Mr Wickens was made the first nominee of Reading Borough Council (even though he lived in Mays Lane, Earley), but only until August 1934; Mr Clark and Mr Howlett were made the first nominees of Earley Parish Council, until April 1936; and Mr Rutter and Mr Penson were made the first co-optative trustees, to serve until 1938.

The Schedule to the 1933 scheme confirms the assets of the Earley Poor’s Land Charity: one piece of land (measuring 12 acres 1 rod and 36 poles or thereabouts); £100 in consols held by the Official Trustees of Charitable Funds; and £35 in War Stock, similarly held.

It is not surprising, given this asset-base, that the activities of the charity between 1933 and 1987 (when the charity’s assets, as described in the *Trustees’ report and financial statement of the Earley Poor’s Land Charity, for the year ended 31st December, 1988*, were exactly the same as in 1933) matches very closely the activities that we have described for the period 1926-1933. The only difference, as that *Trustees’ report* describes, was a move to paying most or all of the grants at Christmas time:

The application of the small annual income (grazing rental and investment returns) was to the benefit of the Poor of the Liberty of Earley and to assist where applications were received [for] Apprenticing or aid to Widows. In practice, over the recent years the income permitted the issue of approximately £200 of groceries to known cases of need at the Christmas period.

Builders and developers had been expressing an interest in purchasing the poor's land since at least the early 1970s, when it appears that one developer offered £200,000 for the site.¹ (The Woodley and Sandford poor's land was sold for a similar sum at around this time.) By 1981 the Earley Poor's Land Trustees were clearly taking the possibility of disposal seriously; they engaged Messrs Simmons and Sons as their land agents at this time (and we note an extraordinary continuity from the land revaluation of 1853). In June 1982, they appointed Messrs Chilvers to be their agents working towards an eventual disposal of the site, notwithstanding the fact that Mr Douglas Chilvers was a senior trustee of the charity.

In March 1985, when the local press again picked up the story of the possible land-sale and a possible £2,750,000 receipt for the Poor's Land Charity, the then Secretary to the Trustees, Mrs Marilyn Qusklay, was quoted very appropriately as saying "It has been a sleepy little charity, but now it has all come to life".²

Mrs Qusklay's last meeting as Secretary to the Trustees was on 28 January 1987. From the next meeting one of the trustees, Mr Leslie Norton, who was also Town Clerk of Earley Town Council, took over the secretary's duties and he continued in this dual role until he became Clerk to the Trustees in May 1988.

During all this period of the mid-1980s, the main business of trustees' meetings was to do with the possible sale of the poor's land. One of the most striking features of the minutes of their meetings of this period is the way in which they sought and obtained the best possible local advice, whether about legal matters, accountancy issues, land valuation, architecture, or dealing most effectively with the Charity Commissioners. Most trustees' meetings of the period were attended by either lawyers or merchant bankers or accountants or estate agents or architects - all of whom were prepared to delay submitting their bills until the poor's land was sold.

1986 was the last year in which the three charities operated separately, and after the distribution of Christmas food gifts (which that year totalled 40) in December 1986, the balances to their accounts totalled just £163.38. Of this total, £100.19 was to the credit of the Earley Poor's Land Charity; £18.87 to the Englefield Charity (Widows) and £44.32 to the Englefield Charity (Apprentices).

At their meeting on 28 January 1987, the trustees present (Mrs H. Pontet and Messrs D. A. Chilvers, E. S. Cornell, C. A. Nichols, L. G. Norton and J. M. Oliver) agreed in the following terms to start the process of merging the three charities:

It was unanimously RESOLVED that the Secretary submits a formal application on behalf of the Trustees under Section 3 of the Charities Act 1985 for the Englefield Apprenticing Charity and the Englefield Widows Charity to be transferred and become part of Earley Poor's Land Charity.

It was unanimously RESOLVED that Earley Poor's Land Charity accepts the transfer of Englefield Apprenticing Charity and Englefield Widows Charity under Section 3 of the Charities Act 1985.

The Trustees' reasons for so resolving were stated as: -

1. The lack of beneficiaries over the recent years. It was noted that there were certain "Widow" beneficiaries but it was established that these applicants were also qualified for benefit under the terms of the Earley Poor's Land Charity.
2. The small amount of income received for Englefield Apprentices and Widows did not justify continuance as separate charities.
3. The area of benefit of Earley Poor's Land Charity was not far removed from that of the two transferring charities.

These resolutions were approved by the Charity Commission on 27 May 1987, and the trustees completed the forms to merge the bank accounts of the charities at their meeting on 22 July.

From time to time the local newspapers ran articles keeping warm the story of the imminent wealth of the charity. They also published interventions from a remarkable local character, a retired teacher turned local historian called Joseph Pettitt. Although Mr Pettitt was dismissed by the then chairman of the trustees, Douglas Chilvers, as a trouble-making communist (a description he would certainly have enjoyed), he briefly stimulated an interesting debate which re-opened the discussions of the 1850s about the direct rights of the poor over the poor's land. His letters to the local press argued that the poor's land belonged not to the trustees of the charity but collectively to the poor of Earley. Mr Pettitt's views might just possibly have had some force had they been raised in the 1850s (and it is entertaining to imagine him debating them with Robert Palmer). By the 1980s, however, they had been completely overtaken by the decisions of the Charity Commission in 1903 and 1933. (Although Mr Pettitt continued to write and to protest, few if any of his writings were published after 1987, and much of their force was subdued by the fact that he approved of many of the decisions that the trustees began to take from 1988 onwards.)

There was a considerable change-around of the charities' trustees and other personnel in 1987 and 1988. In addition to the retirement of Mrs Qusklay, the trustees had to come to terms with the sudden death of Mrs Pontet. Mrs Pontet was replaced as a co-opted trustee by Mr C. A. "Nick" Nichols, and his place as an Earley Town Council nominee was taken from March 1988 by Mr John Busby. In addition, Reading Borough Council (following recent political changes) decided in October 1987 to change its nominees, and Mr Oliver and Mr Cornell were replaced by Dr David Sutton and Dr Deborah Jenkins respectively.

On Mr Norton's becoming Clerk to the Trustees in May 1988, he was replaced as Earley Town Council nominee by Mrs Joy Santon.

Christmas of 1987 was to be the last occasion on which the trustees took out food parcels to families in the Liberty. The 40 recipients from 1986 were invited to re-apply and 38 of them did so. At their meeting on 10 November 1987, the trustees decided that £190 could be made available for this purpose, and the Secretary was asked to put together 37 parcels of food which would be appropriate for Christmas, together with one purchase of toiletries. When the manager of the Asda store in Lower Earley learned about the proposed purchase, he generously declined to accept payment - so the £190 remained in the charities' accounts.

The 38 beneficiaries were mostly long-standing clients of the charities, and it became clear as the food parcels were delivered in December 1987 that several of them had heard the news about the charities' likely future wealth. There was even an assumption in one or two cases that an appropriate share of this new wealth was going to come their way.

The geographical distribution of the beneficiaries within the Liberty of Earley in 1987 bore a strong resemblance to the spread which we saw emerging in the 1920s, with an unexplained clustering in Wykeham Road (13 of the 38 addresses) and in the nearby streets of Reading but no beneficiaries resident in Newtown. A comparison reveals, however, that none of the addresses of beneficiaries in 1987 matched any of the addresses of 1926.

On 26 February 1988, tenders were opened for the purchase of the Earley poor's land, in the presence of several of the trustees. It was found that the highest bid was of £6,082,632 (plus all fees and costs), the bidder being Limehill p.l.c. The second highest bid was £5,527,000 (plus fees and costs) by Heron Homes. On 25 March 1988, however, the Secretary wrote to all his fellow trustees to notify them that, while Limehill had indicated that they were unlikely to proceed, Heron Homes had agreed to increase their bid to £6,103,000. At the trustees' meeting on 13 April 1988, they were informed by their solicitor (Mr Peter Clark) that the Charity Commissioners had passed a resolution to seal the order for sale of the land to Heron Homes.

The draft contract of sale is a historic document for the Earley Charity, and it is appropriate to quote a large part of it:

AN AGREEMENT made the xxx day of xxx 1987

BETWEEN (1) THE OFFICIAL CUSTODIAN FOR CHARITIES (2) DAVID CHRISTOPHER SUTTON of 76 Donnington Road, Reading CECIL ALVAN NICHOLS of 52 Church Road, Earley, Reading DEBORAH GWENDOLINE JENKINS of 76 Donnington Road, Reading DOUGLAS ALAN CHILVERS of 10 Morgan Road, Reading and LESLIE GEORGE NORTON of 62 Meadow Lane, Earley, Reading ("the Vendors") and xxx of xxx ("the Purchaser")

WHEREBY IT IS AGREED as follows: -

1. The Vendors will sell and the Purchaser will buy the freehold land at Lower Earley, Reading, Berkshire ("the Property") which is for identification only shown edged red on the attached plan ("the Plan") at a price of xxx POUNDS.
2. A deposit of Ten per cent of the Price shall be paid to the Vendors Solicitors Messrs Clarks of 7 Cross Street, Reading, Berkshire (Reference 8) as stakeholders.
3. The Property forms part of the endowment of the charity known as The Poores Land in Earley Berkshire and the sale is made with the consent and under the authority of the Charity Commissioners for England and Wales.
4. The Vendors sell as Trustees of the Charity under the provisions of a scheme made by the said Commissioners on the 14th day of November 1933.
5. The property forms part of the land allotted to the Charity by an Enclosure Award dated 26th April 1820 which can be inspected at the office of the County Archive, Shinfield Park, Reading. The Purchaser shall assume as the Vendors believe to be the case that the Vendors have a good and marketable title to the property and shall raise no enquiry or requisition of the Vendors in respect thereof.
6. The Purchaser shall admit the validity of the appointment of the Vendors who have been appointed under the Scheme and shall accept as correct a list of the Trustees signed by their Secretary.
7. Under an Order made on 3rd July 1903 by the Charity Commissioners for England and Wales the legal estate in fee simple of the Property was vested in the Official Custodian for Charities in the name of and on behalf of whom the Vendors will execute the Transfer to the Purchaser which shall be in the form annexed ("the Transfer") and which shall exclude any express or implied covenant on the part of the said Official Custodian.
8. The Transfer shall be executed by some only of the Vendors under the provisions of the Charities Act 1960 Section 34.
9. Completion shall take place on the 28th day after the date of this agreement when the Vendor shall give vacant possession of the Property.

And so the major part of the Earley poor's land passed into the possession of Heron Homes in April 1988. A smaller portion was retained for the charity's own future use.

At their meeting on 11 May 1988, the trustees agreed that the increasing workload of the charity would require the creation of a paid post of Clerk to the Trustees and agreed (in his absence) to offer such a part-time post to Mr Leslie Norton. It was understood that the offer would entail Mr Norton's resignation both as a trustee of the charity and as Town Clerk to Earley Town Council. The offer was accepted on that basis.

The Charity Commissioners also asked the trustees to consider whether their number was sufficient. After an initial reluctance, the trustees agreed that they would increase their number from six to eight. At their meeting on 6 March 1989, the trustees considered a proposal which Earley Town Council had sent directly to the Charity Commissioners that there should be eight trustees of

whom four would be appointed by Earley Town Council. This proposal was unanimously rejected by the trustees, whose view was that “If future experience warrants a need for additional trustees then they should be nominated by local voluntary groups rather than local authorities”. In discussions at subsequent meetings, this view was refined to an agreement to try to co-opt new trustees whose particular expertise and experience would complement those of the existing trustees. At their meeting on 31 August 1989, the trustees noted a further letter from Earley Town Council urging them to co-opt new trustees from amongst the officers of Earley-based voluntary organisations. The concerns of Earley Town Council at this time were that the Earley Charity would work predominantly for the benefit of Reading rather than Earley. The trustees were confident that this would not be the case, and were not persuaded by the Town Council’s urgings. (After careful consideration of a number of candidates, they finally co-opted Mr Ray Hadfield, Headteacher of Bulmershe Secondary School, in July 1990 and Mr Ian Robertson, a local solicitor, in September 1990.)

From early 1989, the Earley Charity operated (on legal advice) in anticipation of its new scheme. It began to make grants to community organisations (the earliest being the Indian Community Association, Wokingham Action Group for Employment Advice and Readibus) and it began to plan for the building of a home for the elderly.

Through 1989 and into 1990 the trustees took every decision in the knowledge that they were setting precedents for when their new scheme became fully operational. In particular their decisions on personal and organisational grants and on the area of benefit were carefully considered and reviewed in this way.

The paying out of organisational and personal grants began before there was a full and clear set of policies established. The trustees resolved to review the types of applications received during 1989, and then to draw on that experience in formulating their grant-making policies. At the same time the trustees felt that they had quickly to demonstrate to the Charity Commissioners that there were sufficient cases of genuine need in the area of benefit to justify the very process of creating a major new grant-making charity.

It is fair to say that the two senior trustees had some doubts on this matter, even though the new scheme was being rewritten to move away from the concept of “the poor” as beneficiaries to the concept of “those in need”. The trustees had several discussions in 1988 and 1989 as to how many genuinely needy people there were in the area of benefit. Whilst there were never any doubts on this count amongst the four council-appointed trustees, it took some considerable time, as growing numbers of grant applications were received, for the doubts of the senior trustees to be removed.

These doubts formed a part of the reasoning which led to the decision that a large part of the new wealth of the charity (over a third of the total) should be invested in the creation of a new old people’s home. The home, to be built on part of the retained portion of the charity’s own land, was originally conceived

as an advanced form of sheltered housing for independent living, with each flat having its own kitchen. The concept increasingly moved towards more traditional residential care, although the separate kitchens were retained in the design.

Ways of managing the proposed home were extensively discussed by the trustees during 1988 and 1989. They came to the view that they should not seek to run the home directly but should enter into a management agreement or partnership with a well-established charity. After considerable research, the choice of partners was to be between Methodist Homes for the Aged and Help The Aged. The choice was complicated by the fact that the usual chairman of the trustees in 1989 preferred Methodist Homes, while the other five trustees preferred Help The Aged.

Until 1990 there were no formal positions of chair and vice-chair of the charity; a chair was chosen at the start of each meeting. For many years until 1988, Douglas Chilvers was the usual, indeed the automatic, choice. Following a disagreement at one particular meeting, Mr Chilvers thereafter refused all nominations to the chair and the usual chair became Nick Nichols, with David Sutton chairing in his absence. It was the antipathy of Nick Nichols to Help The Aged, never fully explained, which extended the decision over several months.

Eventually, however, Help The Aged were chosen to manage the future home on the trustees' behalf. Help The Aged had proposed a relationship which saw them as the managing agents, paid a substantial management fee, whereas Methodist Homes for the Aged had proposed that the whole property should be leased to them. Help The Aged appointed a senior liaison officer, Mr W. M. B. "Ben" Young, who attended many of the trustees' meetings during 1989 and 1990.

As the building of the home got under way, the trustees had to give consideration to its name. David Sutton formally proposed "Liberty House", but this was resisted by other trustees, especially Nick Nichols, who were mindful of the slang uses of the word (as in "it's a diabolical liberty!"). Eventually, Liberty of Earley House was agreed as a happy compromise, and as the building and its garden took shape it became clear that this was going to be a residential home of supreme quality.

On the definition of the area of benefit, there were some further disagreements amongst the trustees during 1989. At one stage, the trustees resolved to give priority strictly to people and organisations from within the historic boundaries of the Liberty of Earley. As it was made clear, however, that this decision would exclude a significant part of Lower Earley (including the part where the trustees were at that time meeting) and would give some ridiculous dividing lines in east Reading (where the boundary of the old Liberty of Earley survived as a mound and ditch in some of the gardens of Carnarvon Road), it was rescinded and replaced by the form of words which still applies: "the Liberty of Earley and the neighbourhood thereof".

It took some time for the definition of this phrase to be confirmed. In the latter part of 1989 and into 1990 it was being very widely interpreted. One grant was made (on the strong advocacy of a particular trustee) to a beneficiary living in Purley-on-Thames, and at a meeting on 26 October 1989 the trustees present (Mr C. A. Nichols in the chair, Mr D. A. Chilvers, Mrs V. J. Santon and Dr D. C. Sutton) had before them applications from Theale and from Sonning Common. Both were refused (the trustees noting, no doubt with relief, that the Theale applicant had received a grant of £1500 from the Tilehurst Poor's Land Charity), but the fact that they were considered at all is significant.

In due course it was agreed that "the Liberty of Earley and the neighbourhood thereof" should be understood to include east Reading and central Reading as far as the Reading West railway line; the Whitley area of south Reading; north Shinfield and lower Caversham; parts of Winnersh but not Wokingham town, and not the area of benefit of the Tilehurst Poor's Land Charity nor (much closer to home) that of the Woodley and Sandford Poor Land's Charity.

NOTES

¹ *Reading Chronicle*, 3 March 1985.

² *Ibid.*