



The Hundred Parishes

An introductory article about BENEFACTOR BOARDS

We are fortunate today that we have a benefit system to help vulnerable people. In the past, the less fortunate relied on parish relief or the generosity of the better-off. Some wealthy benefactors left money for the provision of almshouses. You can see an article on almshouses on the Hundred Parishes website at www.hundredparishes.org.uk.

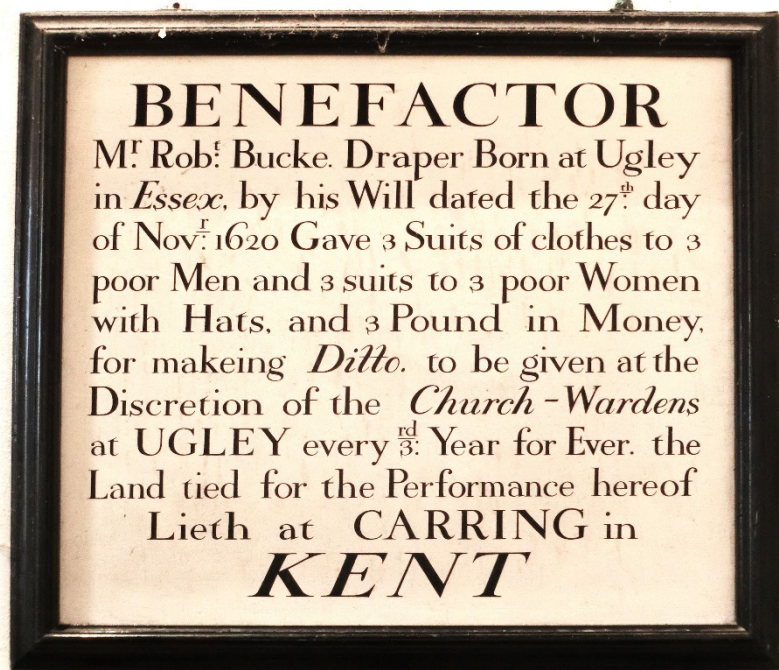
Other philanthropists have helped the poor by giving money in a variety of ways. Some churches record the benevolence of these people on giant “benefactor” boards. Many of these benefactor boards have been heavily varnished over the years, making them hard to read and difficult to photograph. This article includes images of a few that are relatively clear.

St. Peter’s, Ugley has exceptionally clear boards. The one shown here tells us that Robert Bucke, a draper, in his will of 27th November 1620 gave 3 suits of clothes to 3 poor men and 3 suits to 3 poor women, with hats to be given every third year “for ever.”

Just a few miles away in Manuden’s parish church, a board describes three

benefactors, one of whom is the same Robert Bucke. Here he gives the same number of suits to the poor of Manuden, here with additional hats, shoes and stockings.

Robert was a generous man because there is, in the vestry at St Mary’s church, Stansted Mountfitchet, a board which starts “Mr. Robert Buck, draper, by his will dated 27th November 1620 has bequeathed six . . .” - unfortunately the rest of the inscription is no longer readable.



It would appear that generosity ran in the family, for a second board in Ugley's church tells us that in 1558, John Buck, Gent of Ugley, bequeathed in trust for the poor of Ugley the profits arising from 2 acres of land and tenements in Rickling parish and from 4 acres in Ugley "to the intent of purchasing annually before the Nativity of Our Lord, clothing for poor men and women."

In Little Hadham, the church of St. Cecilia has a board recording that Miss Ann Scott in her will of 1865 left dividends to the rector and church wardens to distribute bread on Shrove Sunday each year "at their discretion" to the poor of the parish.

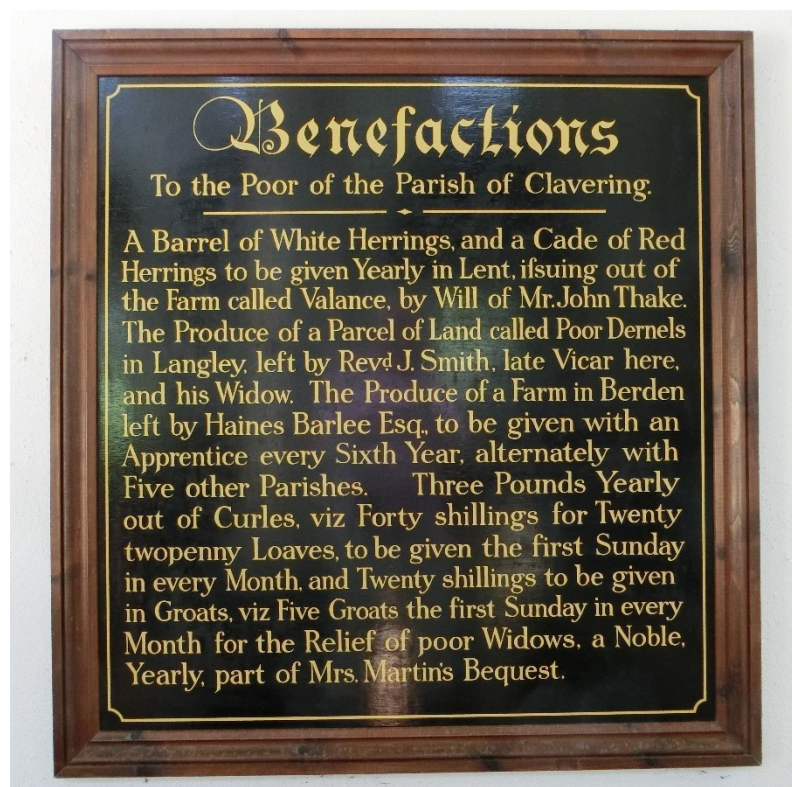
Another benefactor from Little Hadham was Thomas Mott who, in his will of 1822, left £4 per annum to be distributed "in bread or money or both amongst twelve of the poorest and most industrious families in the parish" and he adds "with particular desire that poor widows and fatherless children may be considered first objects."

In the Sampfords, Mrs. Catherine Riley who died in 1820 is recorded as leaving £200 "to the Ministers of Old and New Sampford to be distributed amongst the poor in such manner as they think best". The benefactor board goes on to tell us that the money was invested in 4% Bank Annuities, with half of the dividends being distributed amongst the poor of Old Sampford and half to the poor of New Sampford.

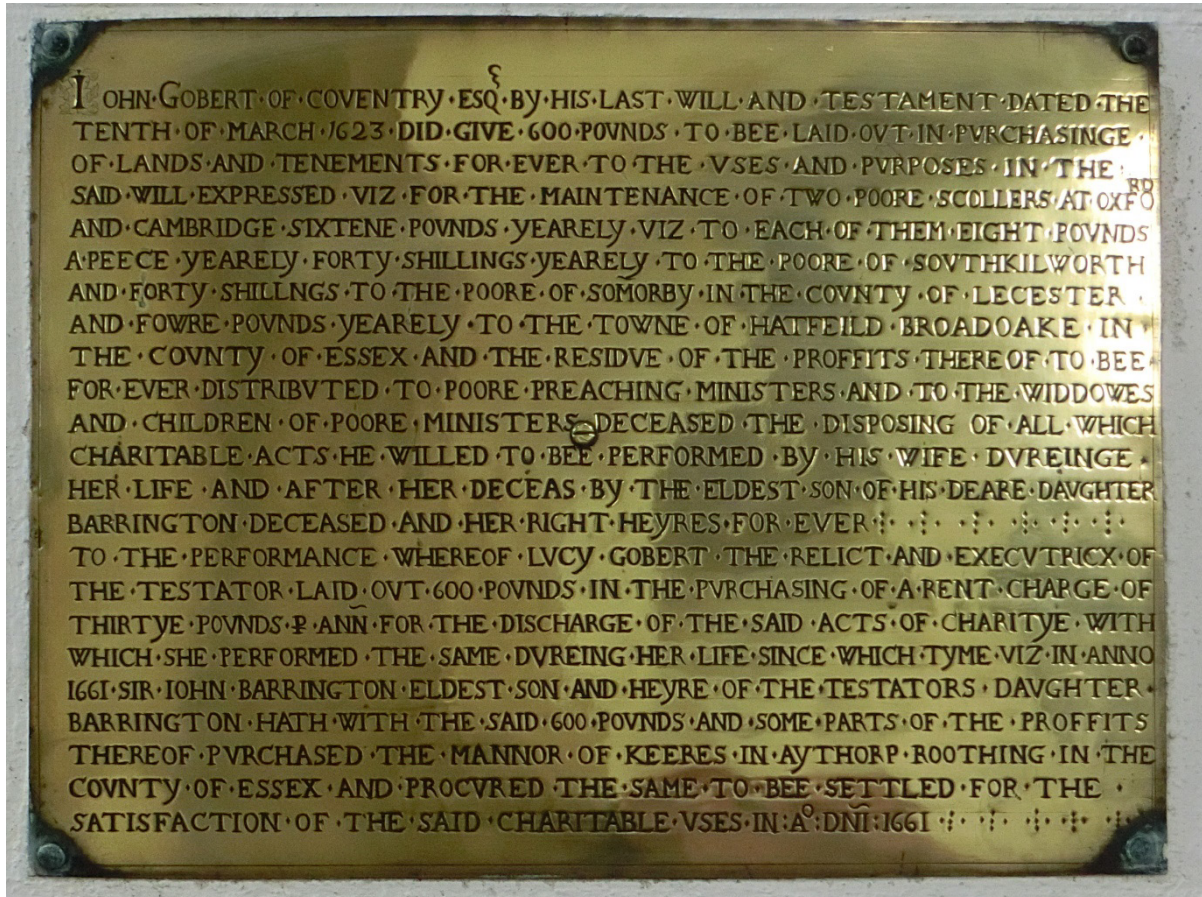
Elsenham's parish church has a board which is dated 1857 and records that in 1656 "John Wells, Fanwright, of this parish bequeathed the proceeds of four tenements and a parcel of ground in the same parish to be spent (after deducting the necessary expenses of repairs) in the distribution of woollen clothing to the poor of the Parish of Elsenham". A fanwright was a person making fans or baskets for winnowing grain (separating the chaff from the grain).

Clavering church has a board which records a number of benefactions to the poor of the parish. The first reads "A Barrel of White Herrings and a Cade of Red Herrings to be given yearly in Lent, issuing out of the Farm called Valance, by will of Mr. John Thake".

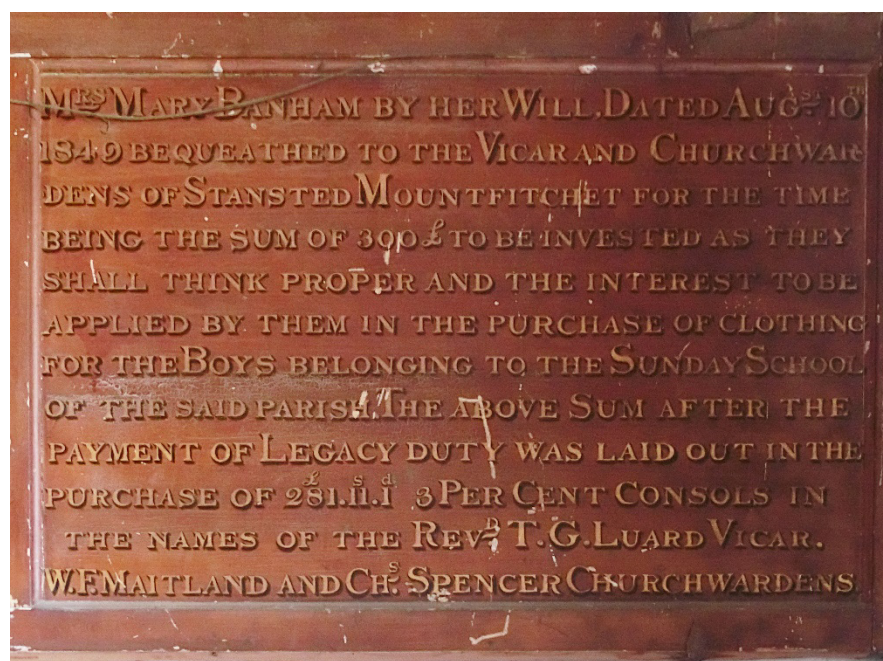
A cade was a cask or barrel for a specific number of fish. A cade of herrings contained 500 herrings.



Hatfield Broad Oak's Church of St. Mary the Virgin has a brass plaque which is pictured below. It describes the generosity of John Gobert. He left £600 in his will of 1623 for land to be purchased, the proceeds from which were to be distributed in a variety of ways, including £4 per annum to the town of Hatfield Broad Oak. His heir Sir John Barrington subsequently bought the manor of Keeres in Aythorpe Roothing to comply with the will.



A board in the vestry of St. Mary's, Stansted Mountfitchet, records that Mary Banham, in her will dated 1849, left £300 to be invested and the interest used to purchase clothing for boys belonging to the Sunday School.



In addition to personal bequests, we sometimes see evidence of charitable giving by organizations. The small Victorian church at Bush End in the parish of Hatfield Broad Oak has a board which declares “The Incorporated Society for Building & Churches granted £115 towards building this church upon condition that all the seats be reserved for the use of the poorer inhabitants of this parish.”



Over time, the capital value of monetary bequests is likely to have eroded, especially as interest was spent rather than being ploughed back into the fund. Benefactors rarely seem to have anticipated that the value of their bequest would reduce over time, expecting it to fund support for the poor for ever. Such expectation was especially evident on a benefactor board just outside The Hundred Parishes - the church in Hertingfordbury records the generosity of Grace Ellis who in 1613 bequeathed the yearly sum of Forty shillings to the poor – “so long as the World lasts”.

Grace Ellis had probably never heard of inflation which is a relatively modern phenomenon. Forty shillings, or £2, all those years ago was a considerable sum. 300 years later, in 1913, its value had halved to £1; then, inflation became part of life as we know it and over the last century that £1 became worth only 1 penny today. Another way of expressing this is that £2 in 1613 was the equivalent of £400 today.

We wonder how many of these generous bequests are still providing benefits for the poor, and in particular whether herrings are still handed out in Clavering.

You are encouraged to look out for further proclamations of generosity and unusual conditions. If you are able to take a decent photo, please email a copy to hundredparishes@btinternet.com.

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Any comments or suggestions for improvement may be submitted by using the Feedback form on the website. The website has many short articles on various aspects of The Hundred Parishes, as well as introductions to individual parishes and to a number of local celebrities. There is an extensive What's On section and more than a hundred walk route descriptions that can be freely downloaded, with each of the hundred parishes featuring in at least one walk.