

## Makeshift economy

In common with other rural and urban low income and unstable economies Chinnor subscribed to the common device of the makeshift economy. The concept of makeshift economy has been recorded in both urban and rural communities operating on a subsistence level and was based on the premise that no state welfare provision for the poor was in place and the poor were thrown back on their own devices.

Resources for the makeshift economy might include, depending on the community, pawning items, prostitution, gleaning, poaching and other petty theft such as that of fire, wood or fruit and vegetables. Terms used to describe the activity have included: 'the economics of survival' 'ways of getting a living' 'household survival strategies'.<sup>1</sup> In reality, the economy of makeshifts was a complex web of family, community and personal strategies undertaken to augment the household economy. In Chinnor it embraced both legal and illegal activities as well as the disbursement of church charity funds. The relevance of the makeshift economy to maintaining health in Chinnor was to offset the effect of low agricultural wages, the seasonality of work and the ever-present threat of famine after a poor harvest. This could lead to destitution due to ill health necessitating the payment of doctors' fees. Key to the makeshift economy in Chinnor was lace making which, although an all year round occupation could still be prey to minor seasonal fluctuations and the vagaries of prevailing economics over which they had no control and were at the mercy of lace dealers.

According to the 1851 census, one third of Oxfordshire's 1,770 lace makers lived in the Thame area and the villages around Thame and that they would bring their completed work to the Nags Head in the town.<sup>2</sup> It is difficult to estimate the financial contribution of lace making to the domestic economy, reports varied from decade to decade and location.<sup>3</sup> For example, in *Chinnor in Camera* it was described as a thriving home industry in the mid nineteenth century whilst reported wages varied between 1s 6d. to 3s. per week in 1834. In her history of *How the Village Helped the Poor* Norah Neighbour noted that during the incumbency of the Rev. William Musgrave as Rector (1816-1875) there was 'great poverty in the village and many a family would have starved or gone to the workhouse if the women had not been able to make lace.'<sup>4</sup> In spite of its importance to the domestic economy lace making was not listed as an occupation in *Kelly's Directories* although chair turning, also a home industry was.

Sources of free food in Chinnor was recounted by Jim Rose who recalled that wildlife was an important source of food for the countryman. In spring moorhens' eggs and plovers' eggs made a change and the plovers' eggs would be sent to London.

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Rabbits were a plague and had to be kept down and they were a common source of meat for the residents.

However, the rural poor did have access to customary rights within their locality which provided material benefits to their standard of living and could, on occasion, make the difference between getting by and poverty. Key to these rights was gleaning and, in addition in Chinnor, the collection of wood. Peter King has tried to evaluate the contribution gleaning could make the household economy in a number of locations. However, his calculations did indicate that it could be as much a variation as 13% recorded in Cambridgeshire and as low as 3.8% in Hampshire.

However, engaging in the makeshift economy the inhabitants of Chinnor had rights of common in certain or perhaps all the woods on the hills surrounding Chinnor which were still in existence during the period under review. In a court of 1717 orders were laid down that 'no one was to cut down or take away our common wood or hillwork belonging to Chinnor' except to be for repairing the highways of Chinnor'. In 1777 the Rev Musgrove instructed his tenant to remember that 'the hillock is common to all and any person may cut wood therein but it is chiefly understood to belong to the poor'.<sup>5</sup> According to Mabel Howlett this privilege is still in force and has recently been exercised by her son in law. It is suggested that this statute may have gone some way to mitigate the threat of fuel poverty in Chinnor.

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