

TITLE

Book review: The Account Book of the Giles Geast Charity, Tewkesbury, 1558-1891, edited by Daniel C. Beaver. Gloucestershire Record Series Vol. 31. ISBN: 9780900197932

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Daniel C. Beaver (ed.), *The Account Book of the Giles Geast Charity, Tewkesbury, 1558-1891* Gloucestershire Record Series 31 (BGAS 2017). lv + 445pp. Hardback, £30.00 [ISBN: 9780900197932]. **Reviewed 11.2017**

At first glance, the account book of a charity which owned 22 houses and gardens in the centre of a medium-sized town, distributing less than £10 worth of income to the town's poor in the week running up to Christmas each year when it began in 1564, and only just over £100 a year in meal tickets, bedding and coal in the late 19th century when these records end, might not seem a promising volume for a record series. Such concerns might deepen when it is clear that the vast majority of the entries in this substantial volume follow a standard format, listing the rental for the 22 properties with the name of the tenancy but little other detail (except in the case of an encroaching garden in Walker's Lane), then the allowances for various costs (set down in the original will of 1557) to the receiver, plus notes of any overall costs of repairs or shortfalls in rent received (again usually with very little detail, except in 1783–5, where the bills for repairs are listed individually), so that perhaps 80% of the text in each entry is identical to that in the previous one, with only gradual changes of names, values or record. As for the charity distributed, in most years we learn nothing more than the total spent, with the exact date on which it was given out sometimes mentioned (usually around St Thomas Day, 21 December), but only for a few years is it clear how the money was distributed (the standard gift before 1800 was 6*d.* in money, with some getting 9*d.* or a shilling), and only for 1635–6 and 1802–3 do we have (partial) lists of the recipients. There are a few *lacunae* (one receiver, a surgeon called Arthur Wynde, disappeared from the town in 1763, and the book of accounts 'fell into the hands of his creditors', only being recovered in 1771) while from 1808 the detailed accounts were kept in another book, so only a summary account was entered in this one. From 1787, the rents of two other charities, donating bread to the poor, established by Margaret Hicke in 1562 and Anne Slaughter in 1620, were administered together with the Geast charity and from 1881 all three were administered by the Tewkesbury Consolidated Charities, but the entries continue until 1891 when the 333-folio book, purchased and begun in 1571 by the first receiver, John Bartley, was finally full, having slightly outlasted the 333 years which Bartley predicted it would contain, if each year's accounts used one folio (receipts on one side and payments/accounting on the other).

However, as Daniel Beaver's sophisticated introduction argues, much of the interest of this volume lies in precisely the way in which the volume itself, and the process of accounting which it records, evolved over more than three centuries, and the self-conscious way in which its successive scribes (whose identities Beaver seeks to establish through their handwriting) saw themselves perpetuating an institution and looked back over its evolution, especially noting, with pride (if little awareness of inflation), the rising income from the rentals they were able to spend on the charity. Central to this process was Geast's requirement that the four feoffees of the charity accounted annually, around 1st November, to Tewkesbury's bailiffs, so tying the charity to the government of the town. Gradually, over the next 200 years, this process of witnessing the accounts began to expand, along with the officialdom of the town, so that in addition to the two bailiffs (briefly a mayor during the charter that applied 1684–91, and without bailiffs during a period with no governing charter 1692–8), the

accounts came to be signed off by the constables and sergeants at mace from 1576 and then, from 1635, also by the churchwardens and the surveyors of the highways (or, as one scribe sarcastically noted in 1698, ‘alias neglectors of the ways’) and, from 1637, by the overseers of the poor, with the collectors of the land and window tax generally added from 1715 onwards and, from the 1740s, the gaoler, crier and beadle also being listed. Things changed drastically from 1761 when the list was cut back to the bailiffs and feoffees, plus some witnesses, and after the crisis caused by Wynde’s departure it became increasingly common for the bailiffs to be absent (though listed) with the accounts just signed off by witnesses. The receivers in this period were a series of Quaker tradesmen, who probably had little connection or sympathy with the parochial officials of the borough, but that had been the case, as Beaver notes, since the late 1680s, so the scaling back of civic oversight must have had some wider explanation, which is not given here.

The other link between the account book and the wider identity of Tewkesbury as a town lies in the comments on significant events of the year which are added to the end of the annual accounts on an occasional basis from 1588 (when the defeat of the Armada is celebrated) and with increased frequency during the Civil Wars, and then again in later periods of war or political crisis until 1795, which previous historians of Tewkesbury, such as Anthea Jones in her 1987 Phillimore study, have described as a ‘town chronicle’. These notes combined comments on national and international events (some very detailed notes on the end of the Interregnum and on the French Revolution), with records of threats to normal life in the town, including (in addition to political disputes) extremes of weather and associated peaks and troughs in corn and fruit harvests and prices, earthquakes, plague and fire (the latter two mostly in other towns, though plague-hit Tewkesbury in 1593–4 leading to a fall in rental income). Above all, one is made aware of the constant threat posed by rainfall, both directly damaging crops including those in the Severn Ham town fields, and contributing to flooding of the Severn, which regularly affected the town. Measures to improve the town’s river defences, and then the wider improvements in the town in the later 18th century, are also recorded, with one note questioning the paving of Church Street according to the plans of a London architect because it involved lowering the road’s height, which the scribe predicted would increase the impact of flooding. A rush of measures to improve the town, supported by parliamentary statute, in the 1780s caused a problem to the charity, as it had to spend significantly more than its income to repair properties affected by road widening and paving, meaning that for much of the 1790s the charity was in debt and had no money to give out to the poor annually at all, just at the time when poverty was most acute, but the new workhouse had opened in 1792. When payments resumed in 1800, the decision was taken (with no explanation) to shift from gifts of money to gifts of bedding (blankets and sheets), plus, from 1838, ‘tickets of 1s., 1s. 6d., and 2s. 6d. value’ for bread, meat, grocery, coal and clothing. Previous trustees had occasionally commented on problems with the orderly distribution of money, but only, during periods like 1648–9, to adopt the prior production of a book naming those to whom the money should be distributed, to prevent some people getting double payments and others missing out when the house to house distribution took place.

Although Beaver has much of interest to say about the volume and its context, he is surprisingly unwilling, both in the introduction and in his editorial annotations, to explain the broader context of Tewkesbury’s development as a town and how this book bears witness to

this. There is valuable information here on this, not least drawn from his own excellent work on Gloucestershire before 1690, but it is scattered throughout the introduction, while the notes, though often explaining some of the international references to battles or people, generally do not explain specific Tewkesbury items, for example, the crises in Tewkesbury's government caused by charter disputes, or its electoral politics (there are no references to the History of Parliament histories of the constituency or its MPs, and the footnote on p. 316 overestimates the size of the electorate in 1754 by forgetting that each voter had two votes, so an electorate of *c.*360 for a population around 3,000 is more likely than 709, as proposed). The year 1688–9 is recalled for two events; the invasion and coronation of William of Orange (highly favoured, like his Hanoverian successors, by the scribes of this account) and that 'this year a suit of law concerning the towles [tolls] of this borough was tried with the City of Bristol up at London, in which cause the Tewkesburyans carried the day. Bristol £553'. But the significance of this latter item is not explained to the reader at all. Similarly, although the identity of the scribes of each page is scrupulously noted, there are no biographical notes about the feoffees or officials named and only occasionally (mostly for the earliest people involved) do we get a sense of their occupations and other interests. Beaver argues that the 'Geast board ...offered a refuge from the battery of oaths and tests devised by successive regimes to exclude the politically suspect and dangerous from positions of authority', so creating 'a tradition of interdenominational coalitions on the board', but it would have been helpful to have this explored in more depth. Beaver repeatedly stresses the 'identification with sovereignty' involved in the references to monarchs, and ties this to the town authorities' sense of themselves as representatives of the Crown: while true, this leaves open the question of the more immediate politics of local government, as well as the (related) issue of what values each monarch was seen as embodying. Similarly, although we are given some guidance to the broader 'politics of charity', or welfare more generally, in Tewksbury, especially in the mid 16th century and then again in the decades around 1800, it would have helped to place the Geast bequest in broader context if we had been given a list of the other town charities and an account of how the charity was described during the repeated enquiries and reform proposals affecting charities from the 1770s onwards, leading to the amalgamation of such charities in 1881.

However, it would be churlish to conclude on a negative note. This is a thought-provoking edition of a very interesting text, and it is salutary to be able to consider the text in its entirety, and not merely in a calendared form which would lose the sense of 'agency' embodied in the volume, and in the trust which it documents. Although we sadly get almost no sense of the poor people of Tewkesbury that the charity was intended to relieve, and no sense at all of how they viewed the trust and its operators, Beaver's edition succeeds in documenting 'a kind of middling sort political agency', recording 'the culture of poor relief: the symbols, the signs and practices, the modes of communication whereby the distinctions between rich and poor were translated into the terms of civic culture and a single body politic'.

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