

‘Supporting self-help: charity, mutuality and reciprocity in nineteenth-century Britain’

Since at least 1697, when Daniel Defoe contrasted friendly societies and charitable institutions, friendly societies have been regarded as separate to charities. Many scholars have maintained the distinction. There is little on friendly societies in Roberts’ book on charities nor is there much material about charities in Hopkins’ work on working-class self-help.¹ Winter stressed that ‘mutual aid is not paternalism, neither is it charity nor is it philanthropy’ and O’Neill argued that ‘Friendly societies were not charities’.² Others too have not categorised friendly societies with charities, instead presenting them as linked to either trade unions or insurance companies.³ However, such a taxonomy, which obscures the overlapping range of activities, functions, members and structures of friendly societies and charities, has not always been adopted.⁴ Gorsky has shown how in eighteenth century Britain many charities were ‘coloured by mutualist sentiment’, and Prochaska argued that in the nineteenth century ‘the boundaries between religion, philanthropy and mutual aid were less marked than in the past’.⁵ Harris too has suggested a porous boundary in the nineteenth century, noting that because it was viewed with ambivalence by recipients, some charitable activity was presented in terms of mutual aid.⁶ In this chapter the importance of networks of obligation for both friendly societies and charities are highlighted in order to illuminate the circulation of power within and between these bodies.

In the *Common origins* section the importance of the guild traditions to both friendly societies and charities will be demonstrated by reference to the guilds, charities and friendly societies of Lynn, west Norfolk.⁷ This recognition of the historical precedents is followed by the employment, in *The gift relationship* section, of Marcel Mauss' conceptualisation of a cycle of giving, receiving and returning 'gifts'. The importance of building networks rather than engaging in single transactions was widely recognised. Reciprocity which was pervasive within working class communities. In the early 1870s a report on Poor Law administration commented on the practice of collections to help widows:

what amounts to interchange of charitable assistance among the poor in London is not uncommon... they assist each other to an extent which is little understood... It is scarcely possible to conceive a form of charity which combines so completely its highest reciprocal benefits with the absence of mischief so frequently incident to almsgiving.⁸

The implications of this widespread acceptance of reciprocation are assessed in *The familiarity of reciprocity* section. Over the course of the nineteenth century many of the symbiotic ties between the friendly society and charitable patrons on the one hand, and working class members and recipients on the other, remained. Overt control of friendly societies diminished but ties of trust with charities were created and renewed. Through reference to the work of Mark Granovetter, who has provided a useful framework for understanding such relationships with his categorisation of ties as being either 'weak' or 'strong', these shifts are explored in the *Independence and patronage* section. Through this emphasis on the significance of cycles of exchange and networks, the promotion by charities and friendly societies of self-help, independence, loyalty and a sense of

community can be understood as evidence of the extent to which these bodies bolstered and reflected widely-held values.

Common origins

In that they promoted collective self-help, Christian morality, elections, costumes, feasting, ceremonies and visits to the homes of the recipients of largesse, medieval and early modern religious and craft guilds can be seen as the parents of both friendly societies and charities. Guilds took a variety of forms but among their most frequently expressed aims were fellowship, charity, commerce, conviviality, and a commitment to endow members with trading privileges. For most the central function was to enable men to assemble in order to ensure the welfare of both members and others. Although not the only source for the tradition of such charitable feasting as fund-raising dinners and ‘charity ales’, the annual banquets of medieval parish guilds, which were held in honour of patron saints, involved sharing with paupers and ‘celebrated, in the view of guests, a spirit of solidarity, friendship, and peace’. As such they were a significant precedent for charities and friendly societies.⁹

In fourteenth century Lynn probably half the men of the town were members of guild which were organised to provide for members who were unable to work due to fire, theft or old age. There was also a long-standing tradition of these guilds honouring their dead and of members dressing in regalia on parades and providing for widows and orphans. Although assisting the needy was seen as a means of improving an individual’s prospects of reaching Heaven, Lynn’s guilds were discriminating. They favoured members over others and the deserving over the undeserving. Even after the Reformation, guilds played

an important role within the corporation, an élite body which held feasts and processions, had regalia and rituals and elected the mayor of what has been called a 'city state'.¹⁰ Lynn's Trinity Guild had ceremonial and civic activities, was wealthy, exclusive and its officers visited those in receipt of payments.¹¹ Guild traditions continued to resonate within popular memory throughout the nineteenth century. In 1880, to mark the annual conference of the Manchester Unity Oddfellows being held in Lynn, there was a reception of the Guildhall, a procession through the town, a fete, a gala and a banquet presided over by the mayor.¹² In 1906 a leading member of the Ancient Order of Foresters Friendly Society (AoF) Charles Ward, related the popularity of the AoF in Lynn to the large number of social and benevolent guilds, 31 in 1744, whose 'work appears to have been on very similar lines to the modern Friendly Society'.¹³ The term guild was employed elsewhere as well. In late nineteenth century Bristol there was a friendly society called the Guild of St Mary and St Joseph and Guilds of Help were formed to 'minister to the needs of the honest poor' and promote thrift and self-help in Bradford (1904) Wimbledon (1907) and a number of other towns.¹⁴

The late nineteenth century Registrar of Friendly Societies, Edward Brabrook, remarked that the small, simple village society resembled the benefit system of the guilds, Toulmin Smith referred to the guilds' spirit of 'mutual self-help' and 'manly independence' and Walford argued that the roots of modern insurance lay in the guilds.¹⁵ In the 1920s Clapham rhetorically argued that friendly societies' graveside duties and drinking were 'an old inheritance. Did not Anglo-Saxon gilds pay a subscription in malt'?¹⁶ More recently Walker has demonstrated that seventeenth century friendly societies had 'the

weight of guild heritage behind them' and Gorsky concluded that 'guild mutualism was to be the template for the practices of later benefit clubs'.¹⁷

Charities also drew on guild traditions seeking to help the poor and bind together recipients and donors. In eighteenth century Bristol the annual meetings of charities typically included a Christian service, a procession and a feast in one of the old guild halls. The founders of the late eighteenth century charity the Strangers Friend Society made visiting a regular part of its work with a system of checks similar to those developed by many friendly societies. Members subscribed money and placed suggestions as to suitable recipients in a box. A committee assessed the proposals and dispatched visitors to check on the recommended individuals. If appropriate, a second visitor would check again and then hand over the charity.¹⁸ Subscriber democracy spread to other charities. Funding was collected from the members who elected a committee of higher status members and constructed an elaborate hierarchy of grades of membership. 'Voting charities' drew up a list of candidates eligible for relief and provided subscribers with a number of votes proportionate to their subscriptions.

Like the guilds in the earlier period, many charities and friendly societies in the nineteenth century sought to promote solidarity by reinforcing the sense of mutual obligation among members. Relief was seen as meeting institutional as well as individual needs. For both guilds and friendly societies a member's inability to carry on his trade or profession was the principal criterion for deciding who deserved assistance. Members who met this criterion would have been classed with the deserving poor, a group that included orphans, widows, the aged, the sick, the maimed and otherwise self-supporting

men and women who had fallen on hard times due to events beyond their control.¹⁹ Like some of the guilds, friendly societies developed systems for paying ‘travelling brothers’, that is members who were supported in their search for work in towns other than their own.²⁰ Many developed secret rituals, partly to ensure that new arrivals were genuine ‘travelling brothers’. In a similar fashion the Society of Friends had a national, organized, charitable system to support travelling Friends, apprentices and paupers with medical and funeral costs while the organisers of the Anglican-run charitable mothers’ meetings ensured that recipients were deserving by sifting through their membership to reduce the number of ‘travellers’ who abused the system. Many guilds and friendly societies had explicit behavioural regulations, forbidding gambling for example. Some charities, and many friendly societies, had costumes and ceremonies, such as the Warwick Bread Dole or the buttons decorated with shears on the clothing provided by a tailor’s charity in Atherstone, Warwickshire.²¹ To ensure institutional survival members, whether of guilds or friendly societies, had to be bound together into a cohesive whole. This could be accomplished through the shared experiences of fraternal life and the mutual obligation to be respectful and to pray for members. Similarly, charities sought to develop a sense of obligation and commitment to the public good.

The gift relationship

Marcel Mauss’ theory about the gift relationship can be used to illuminate the similarities between friendly societies and charities. He argued that a cycle of giving, receiving and returning ‘*préstations*’ (gifts which could include religious offices, rank, possessions and labour) lay at ‘the heart of normal social life’. Attending funerals, comforting the bereaved, visiting the sick, holding office or deference could be manifestations of gift

giving as could supporting an MP who was indebted to his electorate and moral behavior which implied a need for a response. Linking charity and fair dealing Mauss suggested that alms were the ‘gift morality raised to the position of a principle of justice’ but that

Friendly societies are better than mere personal security guaranteed by the nobleman to his tenant, better than the mean life afforded by the daily wages handed out by the managements and better even than the uncertainty of capitalist savings.

By accepting a ‘gift’ the recipient also accepted the obligation to reciprocate. If gifts were a mixture of altruism and selfishness based on the principle of *do ut des* (I give so that you may return), then ‘generosity and self-interest are linked in giving’. People employed the tangible in a fashion which bound them through unspoken contracts:

sentiments and personas are mingled. This confusion of personalities and things is precisely the mark of exchange contracts.

Relationships within the cycle of exchange were not necessarily equal. A generous donor could maintain social divisions because, as there was no such thing as a free gift, a refusal to reciprocate was ‘a declaration of war’. Until the debt was requited, the recipient had to act deferentially towards that donor. Mauss pointed out that

The great acts of generosity are not free from self-interest... between vassals and chiefs, between vassals and their henchmen, the hierarchy is established by means of these gifts. To give is to show one’s superiority, to show that one is something more and higher... To accept without returning or repaying is to face subordination, to become a client... if one hoards it is only to spend later on, to put people under obligation and to win followers.²²

Even though the poor preferred mutual aid to overt charity and the friendly societies stressed their independence, in terms of the Maussian gift economy, friendly society membership was akin to being a recipient of or donor to, charity, in that it was a means by which strategic, financial and social gifts were exchanged for social or other capital. Both charities and friendly societies sought to increase trust between members, or clients and patrons, by placing upon them that which Mauss saw as the triple obligation to give, receive and return 'gifts'. In the 1860s considerable emphasis was placed on the importance of personal relationships between charitable donors and recipients as although 'ideally the gift was an organic relationship... in a large urban area where the rich and poor had been separated, the social powers supposedly inherent in the gift had disappeared'. The Charity Organisation Society (COS) was established in 1869 to force the malingering poor to 'relearn the virtues of thrift and self help' while encouraging the poor to help themselves. Such an approach was also a prominent feature of the settlements such as Toynbee Hall which was established in 1883.²³ Reciprocity was more than an economic survival strategy, it helped to create communities based on obligation.

The familiarity of reciprocity

Much of Mauss' focus was on what were termed 'primitive' non-European societies. He examined the cycle of exchange in the Trobriand Islands, and concluded that in a gift economy what mattered when objects, even those of great value, changed hands was the relations between people. He argued that gift exchange merged people and objects, interest and disinterest and that by the nineteenth century in Europe these had become disaggregated with the 'victory of rationalism and mercantilism'.²⁴ However, there is

evidence that, although often associated with the pre-modern marketplace (where exchanges were dependent on credit and typically were solidified only after hours of negotiation in a local tavern, over drinks and in front of witnesses), personal credit and attendant ideas of a moral economy persisted well into Victorian times.²⁵ For the middle class it continued to be safest to extend credit only to those of good character.²⁶ For working men and women there are examples of reciprocity being the basis of relationships in many areas of the United Kingdom. In the nineteenth century reciprocity and trust within economic relations were familiar and stabilizing notions. Employing the language of reciprocity made sense to many people.²⁷ It was argued that malingering or moral hazard would be reduced if friendly society members or charitable donors or recipients felt that they would be adversely affected if they lost the regard of others.

Engels was one of many observers who commented upon the extent of working-class mutual help.²⁸ According to the satirical magazine *Porcupine* in 1880 the poor ‘have a system of mutual assistance, a habit of helping each other, which prevents many of them ever becoming rich in anything but nobleness of character’.²⁹ Reports of the 1832 pay negotiations between the Durham and Northumberland-based Coal Miners’ Friendly Society and the employers indicate that ‘the language of fairness and reciprocity was central to this culture of bargaining and negotiation’.³⁰ On other coalfields friendly societies promoted co-operation between employers and workers.³¹ County court judges refused to enforce credit contracts which had not been mediated by personal contact between traders and poor consumers.³² By the mid nineteenth century high volume, low-mark-up, multiple shops were selling at single publicly-posted fixed prices for cash. However, small shops continued to offer items ‘on tick’ in return for loyalty. Customers

only settled their accounts and purchased goods elsewhere if the cycle of reciprocity broke down.

In London Lees described how ‘Irish neighbours contributed money for funeral expenses, if the dead person’s kin could not raise enough. Neighbours loaned money’.³³ In the east end ‘the bulk of women’s day-to-day sharing was exchange: in theory at least reciprocity was the rule’.³⁴ White provides examples of mutual aid amongst the poor of Islington including ‘pudding bowl collections for bereavements’...neighbourhood-based ‘diddlum’ clubs for savings and credit and...the Vernon Help-One-Another Society’, formed in 1899.³⁵ Walsworth vicar Arthur Jephson wrote of the Waterloo area of the 1880s that ‘as long as one person has anything to share, they are willing to share it....The starving can always secure help from neighbours in distress, for the poorest never know when their turn to starve may not come’.³⁶ In Preston it was ‘well-nigh essential to make every effort to keep in contact with, or enter into reciprocal assistance with, kinsmen, if life chances were not to be seriously imperilled’ and in the Potteries there is evidence of ‘reciprocity negotiated between family members’³⁷ Archie Cameron described the ‘mutual aid’ between the poor of the island of Rhum, which, between 1843 and 1957, was a privately owned estate.³⁸ In rural Perthshire *lovedargs* were both a system of neighbourly reciprocity and used by the wealthy to embed their social superiority.³⁹ In early nineteenth century Wales, community not conjugality was highlighted at weddings when the entire neighbourhood was invited to give presents. Each practical gift would be noted and an appropriate gift returned, if not to the individuals then to their descendants.⁴⁰ In Ireland farmers did not pay off their debts to suppliers in order to maintain a state of mutual indebtedness and neighbours engaging in reciprocal support.⁴¹ In rural England

one of the most popular forms of supported self-help, familiar from the 1840s and provided for one in three male agricultural labourers by 1873, were allotments. These were a means by which clerics and landowners provided assistance in order to improve morality, reduce the rates, local taxes, and increase social stability.⁴² Provided for the deserving and taken from rule-breakers, allotments were ‘about moral issues and moral improvements’ and often linked to other landlord-inspired improvements such as medical and clothing clubs.⁴³ They too can be seen as evidence of the continuing importance of a notion of reciprocity.

Perhaps because, as Mauss pointed out, ‘charity wounds him who receives, and our whole moral effort is directed towards suppressing the unconscious harmful patronage of the almoner’, some charities stressed the importance of reciprocity.⁴⁴ John Money has suggested that the freemasons conceived of charity in terms of mutual aid, that they saw charity primarily in terms of their own self-realisation. To ‘make’ a mason, archetypically formed and regularly tested to the ‘working’ of his lodge was itself the best form of charity because it conferred those attributes of ‘character’ without which charity was wasted on the recipient.⁴⁵

Durr argued that the freemasons had a concept of ‘fraternal charity’ that is ‘an ideology of interdependence, its practical manifestation being giving and receiving’.⁴⁶ Other bodies also blurred the distinctions between charitable and mutual aid activities. Ellen Ranyard, founded a Mission which sold Bibles. It also offered advice to poor women and created schemes to pay for clothing, coal food and furniture. In 1857, that is within a decade of the foundation of this Mission, £44,000 had been collected through its provident funds.⁴⁷ Despite its name, the Girls’ Friendly Society was not legally a friendly

society. However, this popular Anglican-dominated body, which had gained over 150,000 members within 25 years of its foundation in 1875, provided benefits for the virtuous and sought to create a sense of fictive kinship for young unmarried women away from home. Its object was ‘to create a bond of union between ladies and working girls... forming a Society, a kind of Freemasonry among women, of which the sign manual shall be Purity and the hand held out shall be Fellowship’.⁴⁸ In Scotland, with its different legal system to England and Wales, the poor had limited rights to poor relief which was distributed by Ministers and elders of the Kirk and landowners before the passage of the Scottish Poor Law of 1845. Relief was sometimes dependent on voluntary assessments from parish inhabitants because landowners, often absentee, evaded assessments for poor relief. It was also sometimes presented as mutual aid. An Edinburgh cabinet maker said that workmates raised seven pounds to pay for a colleagues’ funeral and enable his widow to be free, as they put it, from ‘charity’. Such acts were common and Winter argued that, ‘poor people would perceive this as mutual aid, not charity’. He called this ‘begging...disguised as a form of mutual aid’ which marginalizes that the two were sometimes indistinguishable, indeed as he concludes, ‘relief from friends could be thought of as a reciprocal arrangement’.⁴⁹ These charitable practices and formulations enabled people to retain their dignity and social standing because they were understood to be part of a cycle of reciprocity. Even after the 1845 legislation applicants for relief did not present themselves as victims but active agents and in both England and Scotland ‘the relationship between people and parish was one of negotiation’.⁵⁰ In rural England too advocates of allotments argued that although it was the wealthy who provide the land, it was important to ‘avoid any appearance of charity’.⁵¹

Some friendly societies provided charity. A number of lifeboats donated by friendly societies carried the name of the donors and when, in 1884 four men were rescued by the Cleethorpes-based *Manchester Unity* lifeboat, the story was publicized through the *Oddfellows' Magazine*.⁵² In 1800 in Manchester a Union of Friendly Societies collected donations and distributed food cheaply to the poor. In 1877 the Free Gardeners of Redcar provided a lifeboat house with reading room and accommodation for the coxswain and a lifeboat, named the *United Free Gardener*.⁵³ In 1906 the Henry Flowers Manchester Unity Odd Fellows lodge, Salthouse Norfolk, the treasurers of which had been vicars between 1894 and 1900, started a distress fund to which all members contributed and from which those in need of additional help received payments.⁵⁴ There was also charitable help for individuals. The Druids held a concert at which the opportunity was taken to present 'an injured brother a sum of £40 and on another occasion £25 was given to a disabled member.' The Crewe Co-operative Industrial and Friendly Society ran a dentist and sick benefit club for employees, donated to local people, famine relief in India, locked-out engineers in 1897 and the local hospital, to which it also recommended patients.⁵⁵ Members of the larger, affiliated, friendly societies, could appeal to their lodges for help beyond that which was expected, and then their region and finally the national organizers. For example, at its annual delegate meetings the Foresters decided on which members were worthy of additional, charitable, help from its funds.

Some donors to charity expected reciprocity. Being treated in many hospitals often required the support of a patron, that is a letter from a subscriber or governor.⁵⁶ These patrons included friendly societies. For example, between 1765 and 1814, 16 friendly societies donated to Northampton General Hospital and thus secured places for their

members.⁵⁷ The 1831 opening ceremony of Huddersfield Infirmary was attended by the Manchester Unity Odd Fellows, Royal Foresters, Ancient Order of Shepherds and various local societies. By the 1870s the annual Friendly Societies Demonstration made several hundred pounds each year for the hospital. The rules of the hospital made provision for the treatment of subscribing friendly societies. In its inaugural year six friendly societies paid an annual subscription, 24 years later it was 13 and by 1865, 16 societies. Many also made donations. In return the Infirmary provided for a number of patients. A similar system operated at Wakefield Infirmary.⁵⁸ In Crewe the friendly societies were generous donors to the Crewe and District Hospital Sunday Fund. They held a fête for the Fund and a fund-raising annual gala from 1865. Other friendly societies sought reciprocity in different forms. In 1846 members of the Birmingham Catholic Friendly Society subscribed to the Queen's Hospital, 'for the benefit of charity and also to convince our fellow townsmen that Catholics are at least as ready and willing to forward good works as any others'.⁵⁹ The Saturday Fund, founded in 1874, raised money for hospitals through 'monster demonstrations' and the collection of a penny-a-week from numerous people. It campaigned for more working class governors and the right to determine which patients were admitted to hospital. Although it may have been a contributory insurance scheme it was presented by hospital authorities as a form of self-help philanthropy.⁶⁰ In its aims 'it partly reflected the mutual aid societies by offering its supporters the possibility of a return on their contribution in time of sickness' and indeed it was criticised as being an attempt at working people's self-help.⁶¹

Some charities established friendly societies. In 1800 in Warrington, the Masonic Lodge of Lights had both a Masonic Benefit Society and links to the White Hart Benefit Society.

In Bristol the Colston collecting societies, named after a local philanthropist, combined mutuality, charity and guild traditions and the Temple Lodge Benefit Society was both a Masonic Lodge and a friendly society.⁶² In general ‘the friendly society values of Freemasonry are evident throughout in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries’. The Masonic Lodge of Friendship, Oldham, gave a grant to a Brother whose wife was ill, purchased a coffin for a deceased Brother and made payments to imprisoned Brothers. It started a Benevolent Society in 1828 and a Sick Fund in 1829. The local Unitarian Church, run in the 1860s by a freemason, had long been involved in welfare work and had its own sick and clothing clubs.⁶³ In the 1880s the Oxford COS was central to the creation and subsequent development of the Oxford Working Women’s Benefit Society.⁶⁴ The COS ‘argued that even the very poor could join friendly societies, sick clubs, or even keep savings accounts and therefore should not need poor relief’.⁶⁵ In 1908 freemason Lord Baden Powell established a charity, the Scout Association, and in 1914 became President of an associated fraternal body whose first trustees were all peers, the Scouts Friendly Society. Many nonconformist bodies, which were charities, including the Salvation Army and numerous Sunday Schools ran their own friendly societies.⁶⁶ The near ubiquitous philanthropic mothers’ meetings often had savings banks and friendly sick benefit clubs attached and ‘saturated the poor with a mix of benevolence and self-help’.⁶⁷ Operating within separate, but comparable, spheres, wives and husbands could support their families through single sex gatherings outside the home. The former sewing at charitable mothers meetings and the latter drinking in the friendly society lodge.

In his 1948 report on voluntary activity William Beveridge distinguished between the motives associated with mutual aid and those associated with charity.⁶⁸ However, many

of the motives assigned to those involved in friendly societies could be applied to charitable donors. Harrison has argued that there were shared values of decency, independence and animosity towards the undeserving poor.⁶⁹ Doran noted of the early friendly societies that ‘they intentionally organised themselves around notions of friendship, brotherly love, charity’.⁷⁰ Many friendly society rule books indicate the importance attached to helping members develop their self-control, moderation and manners. Some suggest that friendly societies could be used to build solidarity and fraternity across class lines or within a specific locality, to gain a sense of personal, Christian virtue or to ensure that the poor spent their money wisely. The original rules of the Independent Order of Rechabites Friendly Society, which was founded in 1835, indicate that its objectives were similar to those of many charities:

Our objects are to improve the morals of our brethren, and to promote brotherly love, to relieve the distressed, to administer to the wants and necessities of the afflicted and to smooth the dying pillow.⁷¹

The Manchester Unity Odd Fellows Lecture of the White Degree begins: ‘The first point which our Order ordains to admonish you is no less than that of the first friendly duty to mankind – Charity’.⁷² Whether supporting mutual aid or charities, employers may have sought to demonstrate their interest in their workforce. Other donors or patrons may have felt a sense of civic pride or an interest in improving national efficiency, a sense of humanitarian sympathy or religious obligation, possibly derived from relevant personal experiences, or guilt about how they acquired their money. Friendly societies sought to create a sense of brotherhood and promoted a sense of obligation and reward for acts of kindness towards kin, however broadly defined while for many, such as F. D. Mocatta, ‘charity took the place of a family’.⁷³

Cycles of exchange, whether balanced and asymmetrical, may have encouraged docility and deference in recipients while enhancing the status of donors, be they fellow friendly society members or wealthy patrons.⁷⁴ A widespread acceptance of a notion of reciprocity may have helped the élite retain differentiation from their social inferiors, so that people knew their place within the hierarchy, and also nurtured social interaction across that hierarchy.⁷⁵ Charities drew on such traditions when they sought to bring donors and recipients closer together in a continuing relationship.⁷⁶ For members of friendly societies the importance of familial and charitable networks was clear because, even at the time when the societies had millions of members, those members often had to rely on kinship ties during periods when the household income was reduced.⁷⁷

Independence and patronage

There are many examples of patronage within friendly societies in the early nineteenth century. The labourers of Ashdon invited their new vicar to contribute to their club in 1820. The vicar made a donation, enlisted seven honorary members and by 1824 had sufficient authority within the club to summon members to meetings and to produce plans to abolish the bi-annual feasts.⁷⁸ This was a period in which in South Lindsey friendly society lodges were named after the local gentry and contributions begged from local farmers.⁷⁹ Reverend Becher, who was active within the friendly society movement, argued that independence required support and that friendly society patrons could help ‘the industrious members of the community to attain a state of independence which is intimately connected with moral rectitude’.⁸⁰ It was common for local gentry to draft the

rules of village friendly societies and to attend their feasts while local clergy served as officers.⁸¹

The extent of this overt domination by middle class patrons diminished during the course of the century, as Cordery and Gorsky have demonstrated.⁸² This was in some measure due the association with the strengthening of trade unionism with which friendly societies were linked in, for example, the north east coalfields, Yorkshire and Lancashire.⁸³ There was also legislation in 1871 which enabled unions to secure legal recognition of their funds if the union registered under the Friendly Societies Act. The consensus is that, as Cordery put it: 'trade unions after 1850 looked and sounded like friendly societies'.⁸⁴ By the 1870s of the two million registered friendly society members in England and Wales fewer than 43,500 were in societies controlled by honorary members. In 1896 only two of the 3,551 English Ancient Order of Foresters' Courts (that is branches) had secretaries who were clergymen and only 15 had clerical treasurers. Garrard called British friendly societies the 'most democratically impressive' of working-class voluntary organisations which were 'likely to enhance the independence of their members', unlike charities which were 'instruments of class-formation', and Tholfsen concluded that the societies took 'a conscious and responsible decision not to surrender to middle-class values'.⁸⁵ Savage has also stressed the importance of independence. He characterised the collective efforts of Victorian artisans to protect against exploitation and uncertainty as 'mutualistic' and contrasted such activity with taxation-funded state welfare, controlled by the middle class.⁸⁶

Nevertheless, there were examples of gentry-financed friendly societies existing throughout the nineteenth century in Gloucestershire, Essex, Yorkshire and rural Shropshire.⁸⁷ In Frimley, Surrey, ‘Rectors and Curates were prominent amongst the Courts’s secretaries and treasurers... until well after the Second World War’.⁸⁸ There are also examples of employer-dominated friendly societies at many collieries and large firms such as Marshalls of Leeds, which owned several flax mills. Across the country by 1870 there were about 80 railway company-sponsored friendly societies.⁸⁹ Many female friendly societies were dominated by patrons. There are examples of such societies in York, Sheffield, Bishops Castle and Lydbury (Powys), Southill (Bedfordshire), Wakefield, Huddersfield, Leeds and elsewhere.⁹⁰ Within such societies there was reciprocity, but it was uneven and in many cases the structures were similar to those of charities. Some female friendly societies also shared another form of internal hierarchy with many charities. By the 1890s there were 20,000 paid female officials in philanthropic societies. These agents encouraged the establishment of branches, often with elaborate constitutional arrangements but also with sufficient autonomy to encourage local initiative. There were parallels with the structures of friendly societies which relied on the frequent collection of small sums from working people. Some paid commission to collectors and the Bristol-based Female Friendly Clothing Society employed visitors.⁹¹

Kidd, after comparing charities and friendly societies, concluded that it was only charities that were ‘fundamentally unequal’.⁹² However, even within the more independent friendly societies there was a often continuing leadership role for members of the highest social class in the locality. These leaders were often the clergy, the gentry or employers,

but in some cases it was members of the artisanate. Some friendly societies developed internal hierarchies which echoed those of charities. Gosden found that business-owners constituted a majority of over 100 principal leaders of the Manchester Unity, Independent Order of Odd Fellows and the Ancient Order of Foresters in the nineteenth century.⁹³ In Cambridge, ‘although the majority of ordinary friendly society members were from the working class, the leadership of the movement was dominated by members from the lower middle class’.⁹⁴ The Foresters’ Courts in Stokenchurch, Buckinghamshire and Tadley, Hampshire were probably initiated in 1874 and 1884 respectively, by Relieving Officers and gentry.⁹⁵ The Compton Pilgrims Benefit Society was founded by a Primitive Methodist in 1835. By 1888 the annual meeting was chaired by mayor of Newbury and in 1907 an Anglican cleric took the chair.⁹⁶ Between 1867 and 1915 there were 60 men who held the posts of Provincial Grand Master, Deputy Provincial Grand Master, Corresponding Secretary or Trustees in the King’s Lynn and West Norfolk District of the Independent Order of Oddfellows, Manchester Unity. The occupations of 29 of them in 1881 can be identified. These include a ship owner, a brewer, a timber merchant, a rector, a solicitor, several tradesmen and only one agricultural labourer. The Manchester Unity Oddfellow Provincial Grand Master in 1871, a butcher, owned land from which he derived an annual income of £6.10s. Only 12 of 106 of the secretaries and treasurers of the 95 Ancient Order of Foresters Courts in Norfolk in 1885 were agricultural labourers. The others identified themselves as craftsmen, tradesmen or farmers in the 1881 census. Other local studies have revealed that those who were the most literate and had fewer ties to local employers, tended to have positions of authority. One Norfolk friendly society noted: ‘We are a plain lot of uncultivated agricultural labourers [who need] 10 or 20 percent of middle class to keep [us] straight’.⁹⁷ In a farming hamlet in south west Norfolk

in the 1880s and 1890s the Manchester Unity Oddfellows were dominated by a local tailor, later coal merchant and chair of the Rural District Council.⁹⁸ Skilled workers were more likely to be society officials and in rural areas it was the village artisans who generally ran the lodges. It was a woollen weaver and employer who became the first secretary of a Philanthropic Order of True Ivorites Lodge in Glamorganshire, holding the post for 16 years until his death.⁹⁹ While the rhetoric of friendly societies emphasized brotherhood, there were still overt hierarchies, between officials and members, and covert ones as to who became officials. From 1856 the Foresters published the names of the nobility and MPs who became Honorary Members. Analysis indicates that following the extension of the franchise there was ‘an unseemly rush’ by MPs to become Foresters. In 1889 20 of the 60 diners at the Court Brownlow, Chesham annual dinner were honorary members.¹⁰⁰ Although a growth in membership brought greater financial independence, as friendly societies and charities grew, so they became more like vast companies. ‘Friendly societies have been praised as agencies of self-help...with the growing size of societies, their centralisation and increasing complication of their administrative machinery, the ideal of democratic control proved to be another fallacy’.¹⁰¹ While independence grew in importance for working men, the influence of patrons and employers continued throughout the century.¹⁰²

From the time of the first legislation aimed at them, the Statute of Charitable Uses (passed in the same year as the Poor Law, 1601, and for similar reasons) and the 1793 Act for the Encouragement and Relief of Friendly Societies (which aimed at ‘diminishing the Publick Burdens’), a desire to reduce the rates drove much of the regulation and quantification of the activities of charities and friendly societies. The poor, and

particularly the ill poor, were perceived as a burden on the rates and in the nineteenth century, the emphasis was on selective, coordinated, effective, efficient and educative relief. The 1819 legislation on friendly societies was influenced by parliamentary committee discussions on the Poor Law.¹⁰³ At that time ratepayers could receive rates-funded assistance with pensions or funeral expenses and friendly society arrears could be paid from the rates in order to stop people becoming more of a burden on the rates.¹⁰⁴ John Tidd Pratt, the Registrar of Friendly Societies for four decades from the post's creation in 1834, was one of those who drafted the 1834 Poor Law (Amendment) Act. It was in part based on the 1829 Friendly Societies Act and was in turn a model for the 1875 Friendly Societies Act.¹⁰⁵ Both friendly societies and poor law administrators were regulated in regions by district auditors and both sought to measure lives in similar ways.¹⁰⁶ The regulation of those in receipt of friendly society pensions and those in receipt of state pensions, former military, postal and naval personnel, reflected the similarities in the ways that these bodies rewarded those who were loyal and moral.¹⁰⁷ One commentator argued in 1867 that charitable hospitals were, as a means of reducing reliance on relief, 'an important agent against pauperism'.¹⁰⁸ There was an attempt to use a charity to support ratepayers in another way in the early twentieth century. In 1900 William Sutton left his fortune to provide housing for the poor. By 1913 the Local Government Board and several councils had become dominant trustees of the charity. They sought to use it to maintain the income of ratepaying local landlords.¹⁰⁹ Throughout the nineteenth century charities and friendly societies were part of a broad concern, expressed in part through the considerable growth in the collation of government data, with occupational ill-health, morbidity and morality which were conceptualized as the main causes of working-class poverty.¹¹⁰ Indeed, 'if there is a single thread running

through early English population statistics it is insurance'.¹¹¹ The widespread importance attached to 'self-help' and the discourse of the 'deserving poor', a discourse which was articulated through legislation, framed much charitable and friendly society activity.

Although, the role of working class men within the friendly societies movement grew in the later part of the nineteenth century, so too did the importance of the weak ties that societies had to charities. Within the friendly society lodge what Granovetter has called 'strong ties' could be developed.¹¹² These could lead to the creation of cliques which supported weaker members and helped establish a sense of security. At a time when the legal framework for contract enforcement (against embezzlement of friendly society funds for example) was weak, internal sanctions had to be strong and strong ties provided collective insurance against debt and an inability to work.¹¹³ However, weaker, more impersonal, bonds which connected, for example, friendly society lodges to one another or to a charity were also of value. Such weaker ties, in effect low-cost screening devices, required less time or contact to maintain but increased the number of possible transactions, facilitated the flow of information and reduced uncertainty. Through only a few brokers of loose ties, connections could be made that enabled members of a number of organizations to improve their decision-making in a variety of fields. Mark Sykes, Unionist MP and heir to the largest landed estate in East Riding, was not strongly tied to any one friendly society. However, when he accepted invitations to 22 friendly society feasts in 1909 and attended 17 of them, he linked friendly societies members to a cycle of exchange which stretched well beyond the individual clubs and lodges.¹¹⁴

The importance of weak ties can be gauged through analysis of their development in Norfolk. On the one hand there were a number of ties between Primitive Methodism, friendly societies and trade unions in the county. A union for agricultural labourers thrived between 1872 and 1896, was revived in 1906 and in 1911 under the National Health Insurance legislation was 'Approved' to act as a friendly society. From the 1870s and in parallel with the union, Farmers' Defence Associations, an echo of the earlier Hundred Associations of employers' who rewarded loyalty and service within the Hundreds, arose. These Defence Associations rewarded compliance and loyalty and sought to punish trade unionists. Some landowners and vicars sought to maintain loyalty to Anglicanism, through providing charity only to those who attended church. Perhaps in order to promote trust and ameliorate potential social division, there were other attempts to create weak ties between employers and working men. In the 1880s a number of squires attended the Aylsham Oddfellows' Lodge anniversary dinners and most of Lynn's Town Council joined the Oddfellows who also received support from the Prince of Wales who lived nearby in Sandringham. Lynn's only Masonic Lodge between 1851 and 1906, the Philanthropic Lodge No. 107 was dominated by the wealthy of the area, including the Prince of Wales. However, it initiated John Rust (later a Grand Master of the Manchester Unity Oddfellows), William Hyner (later an Ancient Order of Foresters High Chief Ranger, that is national president) and a number of other leading friendly society officials. Moreover, landowner and Freemason Hamon Le Strange initiated an Oddfellows Lodge in Hunstanton where he lived and in the 1890s Lord Winchelsea established the National Agricultural Union which stressed loyalty to the parish, estate and workplace and independence from outsiders. By the late nineteenth-century although friendly societies, unions and Freemasons all presented themselves as independent and

friendly societies ceased to have as many overt patrons, significant links, weak ties, continued to connect charitable and mutual aid bodies to one another.¹¹⁵

Conclusion

Charities and friendly societies were linked to one another by virtue of both enjoying rapid growth during a period of industrialisation and urbanisation when there was much interest in organisations which could increase social stability and reduce social divisions through the promotion of self-help, reciprocity and patronage. Many charities and friendly societies had similar internal structures and hierarchies. Those involved in both could hope to gain respect, self-confidence, self-discipline and new skills (notably book keeping, secretarial work, decision-making and publicity). Some of those involved in both charities and friendly societies may have sought affection or a desire to promote closer links between religious and social welfare. There are a number of examples of individuals who were simultaneously influential in both charities and friendly societies. Employing the notions of reciprocity and the strength of weak ties for analysis does not diminish the differences between many charities and friendly societies. Rather it recognizes that both forms were, through the interactions of gift exchange, capable of generating varying degrees of solidarity. It highlights their common roots in the guilds, their continuing common interest in institutionalizing benevolence through creating social relationships and mutual ties based on loyalty and their interest in transcending economic transfers between recipients and donors, or members, by extending them to involve emotional and social relationships.

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