

Poverty, deservingness and popular politics:  
the contested relief of Agnes Braithwaite, 1701-06\*

*Jonathan Healey*

Arguing for a redefinition of what is meant by political history, Keith Wrightson has called for a more sophisticated understanding of the 'politics' of early modern society.<sup>1</sup> In his view, studies of 'popular politics' should incorporate the generalised working-out of power relationships in a community, rather than necessarily involving the 'state' or the 'public sector'. However, as Wrightson was well aware, the realisation that social behaviour was and is inherently political should not blind us to the role which institutions could play in the life of ordinary people, or *vice versa*. It has been shown that there was a multi-layered and intensely *political* engagement with the machinery of state on a number of levels by English people of every social standing in ways which might to us seem rather mundane, but which to contemporaries were certainly anything but. Thus, the intersection between the wider politics of interpersonal relationships and the workings of the various organs of state has been a recurrent theme in much recent work on early modern social history.<sup>2</sup> There

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<sup>1</sup> K. Wrightson, 'The politics of the parish in early modern England', in P. Griffiths, A. Fox and S. Hindle, eds, *The experience of authority in early modern England* (London, 1996), pp. 10-46.

<sup>2</sup> See M. J. Ingram, *Church courts, sex and marriage in England, 1570-1640* (Cambridge, 1987); C. B. Herrup, *The common peace: participation and the criminal law in seventeenth-century England* (Cambridge, 1987); R. W. Hoyle, 'Tenure and the land market in early modern England: or, a late

is, however, a sense in which the detail of peoples' actual experience of the various forms of politics can get lost in the urge to generalise. In particular, there is much scope for a greater number of detailed micro-studies of the processes of early modern popular politics in action.<sup>3</sup> This article thus has two purposes. Firstly, it will recount and analyse one specific instance of contested politics within the local 'public sector'. Secondly, it aims to demonstrate the potential richness of the micro-study as an approach to the study of popular politics.

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contribution to the Brenner debate', *Economic History Review*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ser. 43 (1990), pp. 1-20; Griffiths, Fox and Hindle, eds, *Experience of authority*; L. Gowing, *Domestic dangers: women, words and sex in early modern London* (Oxford, 1996); A. Wood, *The politics of social conflict: the Peak Country, 1520-1770* (Cambridge, 1999); M. Braddick and J. Walter, eds, *Negotiating power in early modern society: order, hierarchy and subordination in Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge, 2001); T. Harris, ed., *The politics of the excluded, 1500-1850* (London, 2001); B. Capp, *When gossips meet: women, family and neighbourhood in early modern England* (Oxford, 2003). Mark Goldie has made the useful point that it was through local office-holding rather than engagement with national politics that most ordinary people in early modern England came into contact with the reins of institutional power: M. Goldie, 'The unacknowledged republic: officeholding in early modern England', in Harris, ed., *Politics of the excluded*, pp. 153-94. Recent work on more traditional areas of popular politics, but which is nonetheless informed by such newer ideas, includes J. Walter, *Understanding popular violence in the English revolution: the Colchester plunderers* (Cambridge, 1999); R. W. Hoyle, *The pilgrimage of grace and the politics of the 1530s* (Oxford, 2001); A. Wood, *Riot, rebellion and popular politics in early modern England* (Basingstoke, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Some micro-studies do exist, including (unusually) many case-studies from the North West: S. Hindle, 'The shaming of Margaret Knowsley: gossip, gender and the experience of authority in early modern England', *Continuity and Change*, 9:3 (1994); M. Gaskill, 'Witchcraft and power in early modern England: the case of Margaret Moore', in J. I. Kermodé and G. Walker, eds, *Women, crime and the courts in early modern England* (London, 1994), pp. 125-45; S. Hindle, *On the parish? The micro-politics of poor relief in rural England, c.1550-1750* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 421-22; R. W. Hoyle and C. J. Spencer, 'The Slaidburn poor pasture: changing configurations of popular politics in the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century village', *Social History*, 31:2 (2006), pp. 182-205; S. Hindle, "'Without the cry of any neighbours": a Cumbrian family and the poor law authorities, c.1690-1730', in H. Berry and E. Foyster, eds, *The family in early modern England: locality and power: essays in honour of Anthony Fletcher* (forthcoming: Cambridge, 2007).

The recent work of Steve Hindle, whose doctoral thesis Wrightson supervised, has done much to illuminate what he terms the 'micro-politics of poor relief' in early modern rural England.<sup>4</sup> Qualifying the interpretative framework that would have poverty relief dictated from above, by parochial officers on passive recipients, Hindle has argued that the process was one of negotiation rather than imposition.<sup>5</sup> The poor, he notes, were possessed of their own 'agency', which they were able to mobilize to influence local decision-making. Moreover, Hindle's analysis also serves to refine the apparent bipolarity of such power relationships, showing that recourse could be had to third parties, notably regional courts of either 'petty' or quarter sessions, which might mediate between potential givers and receivers of parish doles.<sup>6</sup> Such law courts could thus become an arena in which the popular politics of social welfare was played out, and where discourses of need, virtue, deservingness and deference, as well as vice, unworthiness, discordance and defiance, could be aired.

Thus, the management of poor relief was often fraught with controversy manifested across a complicated political framework. Indeed, as relief expenditures rose across the early modern period, it must have become an increasingly key component in the political life of the parish, both in the latter's sense as an administrative institution and in its broader meaning as a community.<sup>7</sup> As such, the study of the contested workings-

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<sup>4</sup> Especially Hindle, *On the parish?*, pp. 361-449. This builds upon earlier work on 'negotiation', notably the essays in T. Hitchcock, P. King and P. Sharpe, eds, *Chronicling poverty: the voices and strategies of the English poor, 1640-1840* (Basingstoke, 1997); also, J. Kent and S. King, 'Changing patterns of poor relief in some English rural parishes circa 1650-1750', *Rural History*, 14:2 (2003), pp. 145-49.

<sup>5</sup> S. Hindle, 'Exhortation and entitlement: negotiating inequality in English rural communities, 1550-1650', in Braddick and Walter, *Negotiating power*, pp. 102-22; Hindle, *On the parish?*, pp. 361-449.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 405-32.

<sup>7</sup> On rising relief costs: P. Slack, *Poverty and policy in Tudor and Stuart England* (London, 1988), pp. 162-87; S. Hindle, *The birthpangs of welfare: poor relief and parish governance in seventeenth-century Warwickshire*, Dugdale Society, XL (2000), p. 36; Kent and King, 'Changing patterns of poor relief', pp. 123-29; L. A. Botelho, *Old age and the English poor law, 1500-1700* (Woodbridge, 2004), pp. 18-73.

out of local poor relief strategies is not only critical to our understanding of popular politics in the wider sense, but also of the relationship between ordinary people and the many layers of early modern governance. Indeed, the process by which scarce rateable resources were allocated in the face of widespread need also provides a window through which we can peer onto early modern cultural mentalities and positive and negative conceptions of behaviour and personality. This article will aim to complement the broad-brush approach of historians of 'micro-politics' through a detailed analysis of one case-study from north Lancashire at the very beginning of the eighteenth century. In this instance, an aged and apparently poor widow launched what appears to have been a one-woman campaign to gain and then increase her relief allowance. In the process, she managed to secure fairly regular cash support, but in doing so faced the hostility of a large section of her community, who were begrudging in their efforts to relieve her but forthright in their challenges to her position and reputation in the courts. I propose first to attempt a detailed account of the case from the surviving records, particularly the petitions made to the court of quarter sessions for Lonsdale hundred held at Lancaster Castle, before proceeding to offer an analysis of its wider implications. The micro-study remains a relatively under-exploited approach to the popular politics of social welfare. It is hoped that this article might highlight some of the potential rewards to be gained from the detailed trawling of local archives for such case studies.

## I

The parish of Hawkshead was the northern-most in the historic county of Lancashire. By 1700, it comprised the chapelry of Satterthwaite, and the townships or divisions of Monk Coniston with Skelwith, Claife and Hawkshead.<sup>8</sup> It is the latter of these,

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<sup>8</sup> Early modern Hawkshead has attracted the attention of a number of historians, some more antiquarian in approach than others: H. S. Cowper, ed., *The oldest register book of the parish of Hawkshead in Lancashire, 1568-1704* (London, 1897); H. S. Cowper, *Hawkshead (the northernmost parish of Lancashire): its history, archaeology, industries, folklore, dialect etc* (London, 1899); K. Leonard and G. O. G. Leonard, eds, *The second register book of the parish of Hawkshead, 1705-97* (Hawkshead, 1968); R. Schofield,

containing the principal nucleated area of settlement, with which we are concerned here. Occupying undulating ground between Lakes Windermere and Coniston, Hawkshead township and village formed one of the most important rural settlements in that north-western corner of England we now know of as Cumbria. The local economy was largely agrarian, based upon a similar combination of several and communal fields to that found across the northern uplands.<sup>9</sup> There was, however, some industrial activity in the parish, notably copper mining in the north-west and charcoal burning in the south, and the parish had a relatively vibrant commercial life for the upland Lake District.<sup>10</sup> In particular, the importance of the wool trade, in addition to some local clothworking, had led to the central settlement being granted a market charter in the reign of James I, and by the eighteenth century Hawkshead had developed a sufficiently diversified commercial economy to set it apart from most of the neighbouring communities.<sup>11</sup> It is hard to be certain of the population of the township, but the surviving hearth tax assessment of 1664 records the presence of 115 households, including 35 exempted, with only seven recorded as having more

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'Perinatal mortality in Hawkshead, Lancashire, 1581-1710', *Local Population Studies*, 4 (1970), pp. 11-16; K. Oosterveen, 'Deaths by suicide, drowning and misadventure in Hawkshead, 1620-1700', *Local Population Studies*, 4 (1970), pp. 17-20; T. W. Thompson, *Wordsworth's Hawkshead* (Oxford, 1970); K. Oosterveen, 'Hawkshead (Lancs.) mobility (geographical and occupational) as shown by the reconstitution of the parish from the registers, 1585-1840', *Local Population Studies*, 12 (1974), pp. 38-41; J. D. Marshall, 'Agrarian wealth and social structure in pre-industrial Cumbria', *Economic History Review*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ser. 33:4 (1980), pp. 503-21.

<sup>9</sup> A. J. L. Winchester, *The harvest of the hills: rural life in northern England and the Scottish borders, 1400-1700* (Edinburgh, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> J. D. Marshall, *Furness in the Industrial Revolution: an economic history of Furness, 1711-1900* (Barrow-in-Furness, 1958), map on p. xxi.

<sup>11</sup> The urban structure of the region is discussed in R. Millward, 'The Cumbrian town between 1600 and 1800', in C. W. Chalkin and M. A. Havinden, eds, *Rural change and urban growth, 1500-1800: essays in English regional history in honour of W. G. Hoskins* (London, 1974), esp. pp. 210-14; see also J. C. Stobart, *The first industrial region: north-west England, c.1700-60* (Manchester, 2004).



than one hearth.<sup>12</sup> Using this as a base, we can thus estimate a population of between around 500 and 550 souls.<sup>13</sup>

It is hard to pinpoint exactly when Hawkshead began operating a system of poor relief along the lines of that stipulated in the Elizabethan Poor Laws. The churchwardens' accounts from 1612-13 refer to constables and supervisors of the highways but not to overseers of the poor, arguably suggesting a lack of existing relief structures.<sup>14</sup> In August 1636, Hawkshead parish was one of a number in North Lonsdale which was using a system of billeting, by which paupers were lodged with host families 'by the consent of the parties'.<sup>15</sup> At the time, there were eleven individuals so relieved. By the following September, the parish was using a combination of billeting and taxation, with 13 paupers relieved by the former method and 'all the rest of the poore' by rates.<sup>16</sup> In August 1638, returns made to the Privy Council by the justices of Lonsdale hundred contained no reference to billeting in Hawkshead or elsewhere. According to this report, the parish of Hawkshead was relieving five 'poore Impotent people', three women and two men, with doles of either four or six pence per week.<sup>17</sup> By this date, then, rate-funded poor relief was established in Hawkshead. However, it was clearly not yet providing what we would think of as anything like comprehensive welfare payments to its poor. A petition to Lancaster quarter sessions, dated to 1659, highlights the limitations of the parish's early relief

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<sup>12</sup> National Archives, exchequer, E 179/250/11 part one, North Lonsdale hearth tax returns, 1664.

<sup>13</sup> A multiplier of 4.3 gives a total of 495 residents, while a multiplier of 4.75 would suggest 546: T. Arkell, 'Multiplying factors for estimating population totals from the hearth tax', *Local Population Studies*, 28 (1982), pp. 51-57.

<sup>14</sup> Cumbria Record Office, Kendal Branch, WPR/83/7/16. It is worth noting that while the Bolton-le-Moors parish vestry minutes contain no mentions of overseers of the poor, we know from other sources that they were appointed in the parish from as far back as 1647, see J. Healey, 'Marginality and misfortune: poverty and welfare in Lancashire, c.1630-1760' (unpublished DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 2008), chapter 2.

<sup>15</sup> National Archives, state papers, SP 16/330/99, report of the justices of North Lonsdale, 9 Aug. 1636.

<sup>16</sup> National Archives, SP 16/382/10, report of the justices of North Lonsdale, 13 Feb. 1638.

<sup>17</sup> National Archives, SP 16/397/69, report of the justices of Lonsdale hundred, 20 Aug. 1638.

infrastructure.<sup>18</sup> The applicant for relief was one Charles Rigge, a 'very poore man' of Outgate. According to the petition, Rigge was in 'greate paine' as a result of a long-running sore knee 'for which hee can gett noe cure'. He now – so he claimed – lay 'in a poore Cottage in greate miserie where hee is like to bee famished to death for lacke of maintenance'. There is little that is unusual about the language being deployed by Rigge; however, the document also gives us a brief insight into the lengths paupers were expected to go to before they claimed parochial support.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the petition states that poor Charles's knee was so extremely painful 'that hee is not able of himselfe to goe any longer from doore to doore amongst his neighbours for to seeke reliefe'. Door-to-door begging for the kindness of neighbours was seen in this case as an earlier port of call for the indigent than official poor relief.<sup>20</sup>

It is not until the 1690s that we start to get regular accounts for the three northern townships of the parish, and we can see from these the operation of a fully-blown system of poor relief.<sup>21</sup> Thus, in the year running twelve months from Easter 1690, we see William Rigge getting a pension of 4d per week, which was then increased to 6d after twelve weeks. William Mackereth's wife of Field Head, meanwhile, was paid one shilling 'being sike', while Magdalen Holme received a total of £2 7s 5d, including a weekly allowance, attendance at a time of sickness, a smock, 'necessaries' and the cost of burial. As was the general practice in the North West, enshrined in law in 1662, the Poor

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<sup>18</sup> Lancashire Record Office, QSP/177/6.

<sup>19</sup> See the essays in Hitchcock, King and Sharpe, *Chronicling poverty*; Hindle, *On the parish?*, pp. 409-17.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 410-11; Healey, 'Marginality and misfortune', chapter 5.

<sup>21</sup> Cumbria Record Office, Kendal, WPR/83/7/3, overseers of the poor accounts, Hawkshead quarter, 1691-1750; comparable published examples include A. Sparke, ed., *The township book of Halliwell*, Chetham Society, new ser. 69 (1910), esp. pp. 105-40; F. G. Emmison, 'The relief of the poor at Eaton Socon, 1706-1834', *Publications of the Bedfordshire historical record society*, 15 (1933), pp. 1-98.

Laws were implemented at the level of the township or hamlet rather than the parish.<sup>22</sup>

It is hard to judge whether Hawkshead's system of relief was 'harsh' or 'generous'; indeed, such terms are in any case of limited use.<sup>23</sup> The average pension award between 1690 and 1710 lay at around 10½d per week, which was perhaps slightly on the high side for the North West, but nationally relatively low.<sup>24</sup> However, such statistics only form part of the story, and the townships were also paying for the usual assortment of house rents, clothes, shoes, fuel and medical treatments.<sup>25</sup> The process by which poor relief was allocated as usual remains obscure. It seems that paupers had to apply, presumably in person, to the township officers to get relief. Such a process is hinted at by the reference to Elizabeth Knipe receiving a dole in 1752 'upon complaint of poverty'.<sup>26</sup> The decision as to relieve or not to relieve was presumably firstly that of the overseers of the poor, but it is clear that churchwardens, local justices and especially the parish vestry or 'Four and Twenty' were also involved.<sup>27</sup> Relief was clearly tied to perceived need, with pensions and doles fluctuating as circumstances changed: John Braithwaite, for example, received a pension of 8d per week throughout 1736, but as his health deteriorated rapidly the following year his allowance was increased first to a shilling per week, then to two shillings. After he died, the household's needs were clearly perceived as less pressing, for his widow was subsequently awarded just 6d per week. Indeed, officers were quite prepared to work to reduce pensions when they felt their necessity had receded: having paid 'Old Roger's daughter' a dole of 1s 6d per week for over a year, the overseers

<sup>22</sup> Lancashire Record Office, DDKe/2/6/6; G. W. Oxley, 'The old poor law in West Derby hundred, 1601-1837' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Liverpool, 1966), pp. 18-38; Healey, 'Marginality and misfortune', chapter 4.

<sup>23</sup> They are used frequently in S. King, *Poverty and welfare in England, 1700-1850: a regional perspective* (Manchester, 2000).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 150-54, 191-96.

<sup>25</sup> Healey, 'Marginality and misfortune', chapter 4.

<sup>26</sup> Cumbria Record Office, Kendal, WPR/83/7/4, overseers of the poor accounts, Hawkshead quarter, 1750-98.

<sup>27</sup> See also the constables' papers for the township of Easington (West Riding of Yorkshire) for the year 1777-78: Lancashire Record Office, PR/2995/2/9, notices of township meetings, 1777-78.



of Hawkshead then laid out two shillings 'for going to get her pension reduced', a mission that proved successful, for the girl thenceforth had to make do with 6d a week. On the other hand, before the foundation of a poorhouse in 1762, the only clear evidence we have of attempts to deter potential applicants for relief is the reference in 1734 to 9d laid out 'for cloth and badges'.<sup>28</sup>

## II

Agnes Braithwaite would have witnessed firsthand much of the seventeenth-century development of Hawkshead's system of poor relief.<sup>29</sup> Born in the 1620s, probably marrying sometime in the 1650s, she gave birth to six children during the 16 years in which she was with her husband, four of whom were alive at the time of his death.<sup>30</sup> Unfortunately, her commonplace name and the coincidence of her birth and marriage with periods of inadequate parochial registration render it exceptionally hard to know anything very much about her earlier life, aside from what was revealed during the dispute over her poor relief. It would seem likely, however, that her husband died at the very latest before she attained the age of 45, probably in the 1660s or very early in the 1670s.<sup>31</sup> She thus had to endure a long widowhood, undoubtedly with some young children to bring up at first. This said, however, she does not appear on the lists of those receiving poor relief in the 1690s, by which decade she would have been around 70 years old. Around this time, it seems that Agnes decided to apply for poor relief to ease the burdens of what must have been a difficult existence. According to a later petition, some time before 15 July

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<sup>28</sup> There was another building, at Gallowbarrow, in use from 1730, which was obviously referred to as a 'poorhouse' but this was a charitable foundation for the benefit of orphans rather than a 'workhouse' in the usual sense, Cowper, *Hawkshead*, p. 36.

<sup>29</sup> The increase in costs in her lifetime would not have been unlike that described by Richard Gough of Myddle (Shropshire), who recalled in 1702 that his father had said 'that the first year that hee was marryed, (which was about the year 1633) hee payd onely four pence to the poore, and now [i.e. 1702] I pay almost twenty shillings per annum', R. Gough, *The History of Myddle*, ed. D. Hey (Harmondsworth, 1981), p. 146.

<sup>30</sup> Lancashire Record Office, QSP/882/27.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

1701 she obtained an order from John Hodgson and Thomas Sherson, both Lancaster justices of the peace, to the effect that she was to be paid 8d per week from the coffers of Hawkshead township.<sup>32</sup> The significance of this lies in the fact that she had been forced to go to quarter sessions to obtain relief; she had thus probably been denied alms by Hawkshead's overseers, or at best relieved to a level she felt was unacceptable. Unfortunately, no record has survived of this original appeal for support, although the order book of Lancashire quarter sessions records a different appeal, this time for a habitation, which had succeeded at midsummer 1699.<sup>33</sup> What followed was a sustained and bitter dispute, fought between July 1701 and January 1706, between Braithwaite and the officers of her home township. This has been recorded for posterity in a series of petitions that survive in the papers of the county's courts of quarter sessions.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, we can follow many of the overseers' payments to Braithwaite in a series of surviving poor accounts, covering the years (Easter to Easter) 1700/01 and 1702/03, and then in a continuous run from 1704/05 to 1710/11.<sup>35</sup>

The first such petition, dated 15 July 1701 and read at the midsummer sessions that year, appears innocuous enough.<sup>36</sup> Written in a well-formed hand and couched in the formal and deferential legal language of the best-composed petitions of the age, it asks for an increase in poor relief for 'Agnes Braithwaite of Hawkeshead widdowe'. 'Your petitioner', it states, 'is a very poore Impotent person aged very neare eighty yeares not able to doe anything towards her relief & maintenance'. Her allowance of 8d per week was not sufficient, 'shee being obliged to find her selfe Fire which takes away a great part of her allowance'. So the

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<sup>32</sup> Lancashire Record Office, QSP/866/4. Braithwaite was paid 8d per week plus house rent in poor relief in 1700/01, suggesting that the original order was given before Easter 1700.

<sup>33</sup> Lancashire Record Office, QSO/2/68.

<sup>34</sup> The petitions are Lancashire Record Office, QSP/862/1, QSP/866/4, QSP/882/27, QSP/886/21, QSP/914/3, QSP/914/15, QSP/926/9, QSP/930/1, QSP/934/12.

<sup>35</sup> Cumbria Record Office, Kendal, WPR/83/7/3, overseers of the poor accounts, Hawkshead quarter, 1691-1750.

<sup>36</sup> Lancashire Record Office, QSP/862/1.

petition asked for a raise of 4d a week, plus an extra dole for house repairs, and the document is endorsed with a laconic note in the hand of the clerk of the court, ordering a future weekly allowance of 12d. This decision was also recorded in the court order book, which noted that Braithwaite was a 'poore impotent decrepit widow'.<sup>37</sup> Yet it seems that this was not paid for long, for the overseers accounts for the year 1701/02 note a pension given to Braithwaite of 1s 2d per week, but as her total dole only came to 4s this seems to have been withdrawn fairly swiftly.<sup>38</sup> This was followed by a petition to the Michaelmas quarter sessions, signed by 'the Inhabitants within the parish of Hauxhead', alleging that Braithwaite had obtained her increased pension 'through her wrong Information for that shee the said Agnes Braithwaite is a person very able to releve her Selfe without any allowance'.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, she was 'growne an Idle abusive drunken woman by this allowance', and so the petitioners asked the justices to cancel it, claiming that 'wee pay above £50 a Year to the Nessitus poore soe wee desire not to bee Charged where there is Neither Nessity nor Charity'. The petition was footed by a formidable list of 31 'inhabitants', including the overseers of the poor, churchwardens, the master of the grammar school and the minister. On this occasion, the justices at Lancaster felt the matter was best resolved through the wisdom of local knowledge, with the clerk's annotation stating that the allowance should be reduced 'as Mr Sandys thinke fitt', thus referring the case to the jurisdiction of Hawkshead's most proximate sizeable gentry household, the Sandys of Graythwaite Hall.

Here we enter uncertain territory. According to a later petition, the officers recalled Mr Sandys awarding a 6d per week pension that was then dutifully paid.<sup>40</sup> Yet while Agnes's next petition does not specifically state that she received nothing (she had, rather, been 'hindered in her said Allowance'), there is no record at all of *anything* being paid to her by the overseers of Hawkshead in the year 1702/03. In any case, it was not long

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<sup>37</sup> Lancashire Record Office, QSO/2/70.

<sup>38</sup> This would suggest the pension was withdrawn after three weeks and three days.

<sup>39</sup> Lancashire Record Office, QSP/866/4.

<sup>40</sup> Lancashire Record Office, QSP/886/21.

before Braithwaite was back fighting her case at Lancaster sessions. Her second petition, again in a legalistic prose but this time in a different though equally well-formed hand, is more detailed than her first, and is well worth quoting at length.<sup>41</sup> It was read at Lancaster Castle at the Michaelmas quarter sessions, 1702. It states that Braithwaite was ‘Aged Seventy Four Years or thereabouts’, and had been

borne at Field head near Hawkshead in Furness Fells and was Married there and after lived Sixteen Years with her Husband and had Six Children by him, fower whereof was liveing when her Husband dyed, and one other of them is dead since. And these Three Children that are liveing your Peticioner did by her Industry and paines takeing bring up and maintaine without being Chargeable to the said Parish of Hawkshead and sent them away to London; And now your Peticioner being Aged is not able to Woorke, neither hath anything to maintaine herselfe with And your Peticioner at some former Sessions Applied herselfe by her Peticion to your good Worships who was pleased to grant her first Eight pence per Weeke and after that was pleased to grant her Four pence more addicionally per weeke for fyreing, Shee being soe old and not able to provide her selfe Fyer; And when your Peticioner had soe obtained your said order and shewed it to the then Overseer of the poore there, one John Braithwaite<sup>42</sup> who paid your Peticioner Twelve pence per weeke accordingly for about Tenn Weekes, And then desired a sight of the said order whereupon your Peticioner shewed it him, and he putt the same up in his pocket and would never redeliver the same againe to your Peticioner. Since which your Peticioner has been hindered of her said Allowance, and kept from her subsistance soe allowed by your good Worshipps.

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<sup>41</sup> Lancashire Record Office, QSP/882/27.

<sup>42</sup> There is no evidence that John Braithwaite was a relative of Agnes. Their surname was the most common in the parish between 1568 and 1704, Cowper, *Oldest register book*, pp. xciii-iv.

And so Braithwaite asked that her former 12d per week be restored, and for her arrears to be paid off. In fact, Lancaster's justices went one step further and ordered a warrant to be issued against the overseer 'for such contempt'.

The poor accounts from this year do not survive, so we cannot prove that the overseers carried the order out; however, they were quick to take up the cudgels in quarter sessions, for another counter-petition was read on their behalf at the next meeting at Epiphany 1703.<sup>43</sup> In the name of the 'four & twenty and other Inhabitants' and with 41 signatories, the petition is again worth quoting in detail. It stated that

Agnes Braithwait widdow is a very contentious, ill woman and by Petitions certified by noe Inhabitants of this parish, formerly gott an order for Twelve pence in the week. The Inhabitants of this parish the next Sessions after moved this honourable bench for an abatement. And they were then pleased to refferr the same to Mr Sandys (he knowing the party very well) to order her what she should have, who Accordingly ordered her sixpence in the week which was constantly paid her till the last sessions here holden, att which time by some counterfeat Certificat as formerly, she gott A new order for one shilling per week again which wee Judge a wrong to the necessitus poore and A great charge and trouble to the officers of the said parrish.

Such a situation could not be allowed to go on and so the petitioners argued that her pension should forthwith be reduced to 6d a week, 'which wee know to be A sufficient allowance for her, she being a very drunken ill woman and one that might very well subsist without any weekly allowance at all'. Thus, the justices obligingly reduced old Agnes's weekly allowance back down to sixpence.

Over the next three years, the cycle of petition and counter-petition continued, with Braithwaite's allowance oscillating throughout. Shortly after her pension had been reduced at the 1703 Epiphany sessions, she gained an order from John

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<sup>43</sup> Lancashire Record Office, QSP/886/21.



Hodgson and Thomas Sherson for a dole of 8d per week.<sup>44</sup> The following August, she managed to get an order from the same justices for 12d, on account of her not being able

to hire Men to get Turfe or fewell whereby to relieve her selfe in the Winter Season & to maintaine her selfe with other necessaries whereby to relieve her present want out of the said Eight pence a Weeke which is likely to Tend to her great impoverishment.<sup>45</sup>

This latter increase, it seems, prompted Hawkshead's officers to launch yet another counter-offensive. By Michaelmas they were at Lancaster Castle once more, this time armed with a petition to which 30 signatures were appended.<sup>46</sup> Braithwaite, it claimed, had got herself an order for 6d a week

Though she be a woman fitt, and able to maintain herselfe; and not deserving any such allowance, Because she's a drunken, troublesome and vexatious woman putting the parish to extraordinary great trouble, expence, and charges; as is not unknown to some of this Honorable Bench.

'Not being contented with the said Six pence weekly allowance', she had 'without any cause or reason' got orders first for 8d then 12d per week. This was unacceptable, but the inhabitants wearily offered to compromise in a phrase that speaks volumes:

May it therefore please this Honorable Bench to Reduce her Allowance to Sixpence Weekly, and noe more; which the said Parishioners will be willing to pay, not because of her Indigence, but to prevent cost, trouble, & long Journeys...

And well they might worry about such costs. The undated poor accounts in the township papers, which can only refer to 1704/05, state that the cost of going to Lancaster to promote this petition

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<sup>44</sup> Lancashire Record Office, QSP/914/3, QSP/914/15.

<sup>45</sup> Lancashire Record Office, QSP/914/3.

<sup>46</sup> Lancashire Record Office, QSP/914/15.

came to £1 8s 6d, just short of what was needed to keep a pensioner on 8d per week for the whole year.<sup>47</sup> Their call for a reduction to 6d a week was met by what seems to have been an attempt at compromise, for the justices ordered all arrears to be paid, and for Braithwaite to receive 8d henceforth. Thus, for the remainder of that accounting year, the overseers paid her 6d a week, with the difference apparently made up by some proportion of the 12s paid towards her house rent.

The following year (1705/06) there are no records of any payments to Braithwaite, and it seems that this was the issue that finally forced the case to come to resolution. The next we hear of the matter is a petition from Christopher Swainson, one of the overseers of the poor for Hawkshead, dated 30 June 1705 and read at the midsummer sessions.<sup>48</sup> Swainson was worried that old Agnes was on her way down to Lancaster to complain against him for some impropriety the previous year and was at pains to demonstrate his generosity towards her. Thus, on top of the 8d a week he claimed to have paid her, he had provided 12s for house rent, plus 'thirty lode of torfe in the yeare led to her dore without pay'. Indeed, as Swainson notes, she was obviously not *so* pathetic, as the justices could see that 'she Can travel to do mishcheef and put the towne to trouble and Coste'.

There is no evidence, aside from this pre-emptive petition, that Braithwaite ever did launch a complaint against Christopher Swainson. Her final petition, in the same hand as that of Michaelmas 1702 and read at Lancaster at the 1705 Michaelmas sessions, simply claims that her pension was not being paid, a charge borne out by the overseers' own accounts.<sup>49</sup> As a result, she had 'become very poor and needful, and Indebted to Severall persons for things bought necessary for... [her] maintenance in the summe of thirty shillings and upwards'. Her financial credit, furthermore, had dried up, and she now needed ready cash to buy life's necessities and, as she was 'very aged and having nothing to

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<sup>47</sup> The only year with no surviving dated accounts in which the overseers travelled to Lancaster to fight the Braithwaite case is 1704/05. It must be presumed that Agnes Braithwaite was able to travel to Lancaster at more modest cost.

<sup>48</sup> Lancashire Record Office, QSP/926/9.

<sup>49</sup> Lancashire Record Office, QSP/930/1.

maintain her selfe withal', she 'will be in a very miserable Condicion and a great Object of Charity'. On its own, this would be a rather archetypal pauper petition; however, in this case it was merely the latest in a series of appeals that represented over half a decade of costs in time, effort, money and bitter resentment. At last the justices had had enough: the matter was referred to Mr John Taylor of London, presumably a legal professional, who was to investigate and to report back. According to his account, given at Lancaster's Epiphany sessions in January 1706, Taylor called a meeting in Hawkshead between Agnes and the overseers of the poor.<sup>50</sup> At this, the final showdown between the two parties, he 'wished her to acquaint me before them what she charged them with as due to her, but she did not charge them with any thing but pretended she had forgotten her Orders & would goe fetch them & be presently with us againe'. Taylor and the overseers waited together 'severall hours' but she never came back. The final part of his report, it seems, settled the matter:

Since I'm told the Overseers perused their accompts & doe finde they have payed all that due according to the severall Orders granted for her weekely allowance to this present & doe now weekely pay her Eightpence, of all which I doe certifie...

Lancaster's justices were apparently never again confronted by old Agnes, and it appears she lived out the remainder of her life in relative harmony with Hawkshead's officers. She was paid 6d per week, with occasional additional doles, through 1706/7 and 1707/08. In 1708/09 she received a total of £3 4s, making her the joint most favoured pauper, and the following year (1709/10) her total dole lay at £3 12s 1d, the highest given to anyone that year. There is no mention of her the following year and, indeed, it is a mystery as to how she maintained herself. She died at Sand Ground towards the end of 1710, and is recorded as being buried on 1 January 1711.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Lancashire Record Office, QSP/934/12.

<sup>51</sup> New style. Leonard and Leonard, *Second register book*, p. 10, 'Agnes Braithwaite widow dy'd at Sandground'.

## III

There is little that seems black and white in this case, only shades of grey. Old Agnes was undoubtedly something of a troublemaker, and the accusations of drunkenness presumably had some basis, but then the township clearly on occasions refused to pay her the doles that had been specifically ordered by justices. They also seem to have exploited their social capital to their advantage; thus, Christopher Swainson petitioned that he had given her 8d per week in 1704/05 when the township accounts clearly state that she was given sixpence. Meanwhile Agnes's final humiliation may have come about in part as a result of her lacking the officers' grasp of the importance of the written word, or indeed their trustworthy reputation. Thus, we have Mr John Taylor's credulous acceptance of the overseers' demonstrably false claim to have perused their own accounts and found everything in order. On the other hand, the fact she had kept the order made in July 1701 that was subsequently (and wrongfully) confiscated by the overseer John Braithwaite argues the other way.

Unfortunately, history *wie es eigentlich gewesen* can never truly be reconstructed from such cases in which the extant source material is so often dishonest, and thus we can readily empathise with the uncertainty of the justices involved in this tricky case. Rather, what we can learn from such records relates more to the implications of the *process* and its working out. The remainder of this article will tackle two key facets of the Braithwaite case. Firstly, it will consider the institutional politics involved, and what the implications are for the study of the popular uses of the machinery of government for the politics of poor relief. Secondly, it will look at the politics of community, reputation and language exemplified by the case, drawing out some of the social and cultural ideologies brought into the political forum by the principal players.

The dispute shows clearly the multilayered institutional framework within which the politics of poor relief took place. Agnes Braithwaite, who had been refused relief in the first instance by local officers, was able to appeal over the heads of those officers, and to petition successfully to the justices at quarter sessions for a cash dole. There is no evidence that she was literate,

but Braithwaite was able to use two different scribes on the three occasions for which petitions survive to put her case into written form, using the right legal and linguistic buzzwords.<sup>52</sup> She was also, at the age of over 70, able to make the journey from Hawkshead to Lancaster, either a 50 mile round trip across the potentially treacherous sands of Morecambe Bay, or 80 on dry land. We can imagine that the practice of political agency in such circumstances was difficult, but it was not impossible, and despite formidable social and geographical barriers, old Agnes was able to exert some influence over her own treatment. The evidence also suggests that petitioning to quarter sessions in this way was worth its while. The simple fact is that justices, in this case operating at some distance, could not know the facts of all the poor relief cases set before them, and in late seventeenth-century Lancashire they often erred on the side of the petitioner.<sup>53</sup> In this case, they did so on several occasions without, it seems, even allowing both parties to be heard. As, in the majority of non-settlement cases, the petitioner was an aggrieved pauper, this meant that quarter sessions could be a powerful tool in the political armoury of the poor.

We should not, however, get carried away with the importance of quarter sessions. Hawkshead has left us an exceptionally small number of petitions to that court across the seventeenth century. From 1624 to 1730, between which dates a sizeable volume of appeals for poor relief survive in the Lancashire quarter sessions records, the township of Hawkshead provides just eleven petitions, nine of which relate to the Braithwaite case.<sup>54</sup> The simple fact seems to have been that Hawkshead's paupers were not using quarter sessions to appeal against unfavourable decisions. This *must* have meant that there was an active local justice or set of justices, acting in 'petty' or

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<sup>52</sup> For examples of literate neighbours writing petitions for paupers, see R. Lowe, *The diary of Roger Lowe of Ashton-in-Makerfield, Lancashire, 1663-74*, ed. W. L. Sachse (London, 1938), pp. 24, 28, 42-43, 46, 48, 51, 53, 62-63; T. Turner, *The diary of Thomas Turner, 1754-1765*, ed. D. Vaisey (Oxford, 1984), pp. 79, 122, 123-24, 145, 193, 197; Hindle, *On the parish?*, p. 413.

<sup>53</sup> Healey, 'Marginality and misfortune', chapter 2.

<sup>54</sup> The others date from 1659 and 1699, Lancashire Record Office, QSP/177/6, QSP/825/15.



'privy' sessions, who were able to arbitrate in such disputes.<sup>55</sup> In the case of Hawkshead, it is clear from the dispute outline above that the Sandys family of Graythwaite Hall, a few miles to the south, fulfilled at least part of this role. At the same time, there is clear and regular evidence for the existence of operational privy sessions at Ulverston throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, though it is not apparent whether Braithwaite made any appeals here.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, her unwillingness to keep her case local was actually brought up against our petitioner. The political topography of north Lancashire was such that even by definition, an appeal to quarter sessions suggested a certain degree of independence that could be used against the petitioner. Meanwhile, a further geographical factor is introduced by the use of metropolitan legal expertise in the form of Mr John Taylor eventually to resolve the issue. Thus, even Hawkshead, a township and parish which seems to have maintained a striking independence from interference by quarter sessions in matters of poor relief, was subject to occasional incursions not just from that jurisdiction, but also from representatives of a more 'national' culture. Indeed, though Steve King in particular has highlighted apparent 'regionality' in poor relief practices, we can see Hawkshead's experience as evidence of cross-fertilisation between locality, region and nation.<sup>57</sup> The importance of the educated gentry, who shared at least in some measure in a 'national political

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<sup>55</sup> Poor relief disputes were certainly being settled at petty sessions in the seventeenth century, and the total dearth of petitions for poor relief in the papers of Lancashire quarter sessions after the first quarter of the eighteenth century must be evidence that this had become this had become generalized. See, for example, Lancashire Record Office, DDKe/2/6/5, private sessions orders for relief, 1682.

<sup>56</sup> Healey, 'Marginality and misfortune', chapter 4.

<sup>57</sup> S. A. King, 'Poor relief and English economic development reappraised', *Economic History Review*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ser. 50 (1997), pp. 360-68; King, 'Reconstructing lives: the poor, the poor law and welfare in Calverley, 1650-1820', *Social History*, 22 (1997), pp. 318-38; King, *Poverty and welfare*; King, 'Making the most of opportunity: the economy of makeshifts in the early modern north', in S. A. King and A. Tomkins, eds, *The poor in England, 1700-1850: an economy of makeshifts* (Manchester, 2003), pp. 228-57; see also Hindle, *On the parish?*, pp. 282-95; M. A. Lyle, 'Regionality in the late old poor law: the treatment of chargeable bastards from rural queries', *Agricultural History Review*, 53:2 (2005), pp. 141-57.

culture', in the formulation of Lancashire's poor relief system must in itself have brought in more national ideas to local policies.<sup>58</sup> The response to national Poor Law legislation in 1598 was surprisingly quick in some Lancashire parishes.<sup>59</sup> Meanwhile, in 1720, justices investigated a precedent from Dorchester (Dorset) to settle a rating dispute in Lancashire.<sup>60</sup> If there was a 'regional' 'culture' of welfare at play here, it was one that was well informed about developments elsewhere; indeed, the fact that Braithwaite's fate came to be decided by a Londoner exemplifies this. Yet the basic point also remains that external institutions (regional or otherwise) found it hard to force the policies of local jurisdictions, and for large periods of time Hawkshead township registered its discontent through simple non-compliance with top-down interference.

Arguably, it is not the institutional politics, but the political use of language, which is most interesting in this case. As the dispute proceeded, both sides attempted to portray the main protagonist in a particular fashion in order to further their political ends. Braithwaite highlighted her neediness, miserable existence and life of painful hard labour. At the same time, the officers of Hawkshead depicted themselves as representative of a community, the weight of whose collective opinion was set against Braithwaite. The final part of this article will consider her projection of her own character and poverty, the officers' attempt to tarnish her personal reputation, and finally their own self-projection.

In the course of her three surviving petitions, Agnes Braithwaite attempted to portray herself in the mould of the classic deserving pauper. The most frequent claims she made were that she was a 'widow' or a 'poor widow', and that she was aged. Thus, in 1701 she described herself as 'very neare eighty yeares',

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<sup>58</sup> This is implicit in, for example, C. Holmes, 'The county community in Stuart historiography', *Journal of British Studies*, 19 (1980), pp. 54-73.

<sup>59</sup> John Harland, ed., *The Shuttleworth accounts* (4 vols, Manchester, 1856), I, 114-15; National Archives, SP 16/265/86, report of the justices of Bolton division, 18 Apr. 1634; National Archives, SP 16/395/46, report of the justices of Bury parish, 12 July 1638. Healey, 'Marginality and misfortune', chapter 4.

<sup>60</sup> Lancashire Record Office, DDKe/2/6/11, legal notes concerning the levying of poor rates in Dorchester, 1720.

by 1702 she was 'Aged Seventy Four Years or thereabouts', while in 1705 she claimed to be a 'poor widow aged eighty one years'. The point was that she was very old, and that her age was preventing her from working; in 1701, she was 'not able to doe any thing towards her relief & maintenance', while in 1702, 'being Aged', she was 'not able to Woorke'. We can make two observations. Firstly, her precise age seemed to be fluid, and she was almost certainly prepared to round it up to aid her case, although it is worth noting that the officers did not challenge her on this matter. Secondly, her claim was not based on age alone, but on the fact that it prevented her from working to provide for her maintenance. She made no claim that her age in itself qualified her for relief; retirement was involuntary, a result of deteriorating health rather than as a right.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, her age did not simply prevent her from working, but also from making use of the wider 'economy of makeshifts' that would have allowed her to use communal natural resources to aid her income. It is commonly recognized that the poor could take income or resources from a wide variety of sources, including work, neighbourly and kin support, local credit, charity and common land, as well as official parish relief.<sup>62</sup> However, when the use of such avenues of income was predicated on the expense of physical effort, they might be of little use to the old and weak. That was, of course, unless younger and stronger individuals could be persuaded to perform the labour, and it was her inability to 'hire Men to get Turfe or fewell whereby to relieve her selfe in the Winter Season' that lay behind Braithwaite's frequent attempts to get money for 'fyre'. Her weakness meant that her use of one previously non-monetary avenue of income had to become monetised, and when she could not afford the costs, she needed poor relief. Or, to put it another way, her physical weakness had the effect of increasing her dependence on the purchase of key welfare goods at the same

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<sup>61</sup> S. King, 'Locating and characterizing pauper households in late-seventeenth century Bolton: sources and interpretations', *Local Population Studies*, 68:1 (2002), pp. 42-62; Botelho, *Old age and the English poor law*.

<sup>62</sup> The phrase was introduced in O. Hufton, *The poor in eighteenth-century France, 1750-1789* (Oxford, 1974). Work on the 'economy of makeshifts' in England is summarized in King and Tomkins, 'Introduction', in King and Tomkins, *Poor in England*, pp. 1-38.

time that it reduced her capacity to earn. She was also, by 1705, suffering from damaged credit. Her final petition, which – perhaps surprisingly – shows she was still able to make purchases on credit until quite late, tells us that this had now dried up; she had no money to pay creditors, so further loans were not forthcoming. Indeed, as Hindle points out, paupers lacking the certainty of a regular pension would have found the securing of future loans especially challenging.<sup>63</sup> Whether or not we trust old Agnes, the fact that she highlighted her failure both to make use of communal resources and to procure neighbourly credit as a cause of her poverty suggests that these were the kinds of factor which was likely to be seen as an acceptable cause of need. Finally, it is crucial to note that Braithwaite did not simply claim that her age was preventing her from drawing an acceptable income, but that she had previously led a life of diligent hard work; thus her story about her success in raising a household and setting up three of her children in the capital and, in particular, her ‘Industry and paines takeing’ which had allowed her to live ‘without being Chargeable’. Her previous history of independence from poor relief was thought to help qualify her for it now.

If Braithwaite attempted to project herself in terms of her age, widowhood and previous history of ‘paines takeing’, the officers of Hawkshead tried to undermine her position from two angles. On the one hand, they attempted to attack her self-projection on its own terms by presenting her as not genuinely needful, while on the other they attempted to change the focus of the debate, trying to highlight her alleged negative personality traits. Let us tackle the latter of these first. The sustained assault on the reputation of Agnes Braithwaite tended to focus on her alleged drunkenness and her bad neighbourliness. Hence, she was described as ‘abusive’, ‘very contentious and ill’, a ‘troublesome and vexatious woman’ and a ‘troublesome person’, while two of the four petitions refer to her as ‘drunken’. Her troublesome nature did not, of course, officially make her unworthy of relief, but this was not the point. Her claim to qualify for relief depended on her ability to convince justices of her need. Hawkshead’s officers were trying to put a stain on her public character that

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<sup>63</sup> Hindle, “Without the cry of any neighbours”.

would have made her seem more untrustworthy and less like a credible object of charity to those hearing her case. On the other hand, Braithwaite's alleged predilection for spending her dole on drink was an especially pregnant attack, as this could be seen both as a personal moral failing and as a wasteful misuse of income. Yet, as officers were in a generally weaker position when trying to portray an aged widow as not being truly poor, they needed another angle of attack. Thus, aside from her alleged wasting of her dole on drink, they were able to highlight Braithwaite's evident ability to make the journey to Lancaster on a number of occasions. As an exasperated Christopher Swinson noted, justices could 'see she Can travel to do mishcheef'. However, as Hindle shows, aged and often infirm individuals were a not completely unknown sight at meetings of quarter sessions, so even this kind of plea may have cut relatively little ice.<sup>64</sup> Thus, the officers were reduced to simply repeating the claim that Braithwaite could very well look after herself. In 1701, they claimed she was 'a person very able to releve her Selfe without any allowance', in 1703 that she had gained her dole through a 'counterfeat Certificat', and in 1704 that she was 'a woman fitt, and able to maintain herself'. Such claims were then bolstered by the willingness of the officers and 'inhabitants' to co-opt the 'deserving poor' into their campaign against Braithwaite, noting the group's potential financial loss from any over-indulgence of non-deserving paupers. However, the 'deserving poor' do not seem to have had their own voice in this case, and it was left to the more established members of the community to speak for them. This may be a trick of the historical record, but it is worth noting that it is not unknown for groups identifying themselves as 'poor' to fight against perceived injustice on relief practices. Hoyle and Spencer's work on Slaidburn shows how a group of 'labouring poor' (that is, poor but normally self-sufficient) challenged attempts to use a charitable bequest to the township in a manner prejudicial to their financial interests.<sup>65</sup> There is also the intriguing list of those residents of Eccleston parish refusing in 1626 to pay towards the

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<sup>64</sup> Hindle, *On the parish?*, p. 418.

<sup>65</sup> Hoyle and Spencer, 'Slaidburn poor pasture'.



maintenance of John Leighe of Parbold. Leighe had become indigent as a result of an accident in a marl pit, but when a rate came to be levied for his relief, it was noted by the collectors that ‘All the Cottingers in the Towne beinge poore doe answere they had as much need as hee’, and thus were not prepared to contribute.<sup>66</sup> Clearly, there were occasions when groups within the poor spoke out to defend their own interests; there is no evidence on this occasion of the ‘Nessitus poore’ of Hawkshead doing so.

All in all, we are left with the impression of the officers having great difficulty in painting old Agnes as anything other than poor. They did, however, have one further – potentially decisive – weapon in their armoury: their ability to control the language of community and respectability. They thus adopted the tactic of projecting themselves as representative not just of the administrative unit of Hawkshead parish, but also of the parish as a social entity. Their petitions repeatedly claimed to represent the ‘inhabitants’ of the parish, and were endorsed by long lists of signatures, not just of individuals residing in Hawkshead township, but also of men such as Myles Sandys, esquire of Satterthwaite or George Banke, a substantial yeoman-farmer of Skelwith.<sup>67</sup> There are no rates, tax returns or rentals for Hawkshead from the first decade of the eighteenth century, but it appears the lists are similar in composition to the rosters of members of the four and twenty in 1702 and 1704, but with some additions. Many of these additional names can then be linked to those who paid towards the maintenance of the poor in 1693.<sup>68</sup> Bearing in mind what was said about the officers’ superior control of the written word, it is also worth noting that the signatories to the petitions were overwhelmingly able to sign their own names. Of 31 names listed in 1701, five could only make a mark; the following year’s petition contained 40 signatures and one mark; while in 1704, the 30 individuals whose names were appended

<sup>66</sup> Lancashire Record Office, QSB/1/6/46-48; see also QSP/215/19.

<sup>67</sup> Lancashire Record Office, WRW, will and inventory of George Banke of Bank Ground, 1725.

<sup>68</sup> Cowper, *Oldest register book*, pp. lvi-ix; Lancashire Record Office, DDSa/36/5, poor relief assessment, bailiwick of Hawkshead, 1693; the link is not satisfactorily quantifiable due to the heavy name-clustering found in the parish. On these matters see Healey, ‘Marginality and misfortune’, chapter 6.

were able to sign their names in full. The 'inhabitants' of Hawkshead, who were able to mobilize themselves politically to fight Braithwaite at Lancaster sessions, were thus not necessarily representative of the totality of rural society; rather, they represented what we might term the 'ratepaying interest'. On the other hand, one would not want to exaggerate the 'class' distinctions at play. Hawkshead's social structure, though becoming more differentiated, was still relatively egalitarian.<sup>69</sup> At least two signatories, meanwhile, had received poor relief: George Borwick of Borwick Ground is recorded as getting a one-off dole of 7s 6d in 1691/92, the year his father died, while Christopher Swainson, overseer in 1704/05 and petitioner on his own account in 1705, had his house rent paid in 1700/01. His personal brush with poor relief was temporary, but after his death in 1722 his widow received regular charitable doles before claiming township poor relief in the 1730s. Generally, however, those who claimed to be the 'inhabitants' came from the higher echelons of Hawkshead's socio-economic and cultural world. They were thus able to play upon their superior reputation as local worthies to further their political ends. As well they might: when John Taylor was called in to settle the case, it was enough that the overseers 'told' him that they had perused their accounts for him to believe that they owed Braithwaite nothing.

#### IV

The case of Agnes Braithwaite is atypical in the level of source material it has left, but it must also have been unusual (though by no means unknown) for such a dispute to continue so long in the courts, or for the quarter sessions justices to have felt the need to investigate the circumstances on their own account. Yet the case does provide a fascinating example of popular politics in action. As old Agnes fought for the pension she felt she deserved, she was engaging in an intense and often bitter form of political activity. Even if one does not want to swallow Wrightson's redefinition of the political to include *all* power relations, public

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<sup>69</sup> This is evident from the hearth tax return of 1664, National Archives, E 179/250/11 part one, North Lonsdale hearth tax returns, 1664; also Marshall, 'Agrarian wealth and social structure'.

sector or otherwise, it can at least be acknowledged that Braithwaite was actively involved as a negotiator in the process of *government*. In a society in which so much power was devolved to local institutions, the political forum could be widely accessible to those impacted upon by it, even those not partaking in the ‘unacknowledged republic’ through the holding of offices.<sup>70</sup> Yet Braithwaite’s experience of public-sector politics had nothing to do with her views on the supposed ‘big political issues’ of the day. She was not voicing an opinion on the policies of monarch or parliament. Rather, she was engaging in politics on a level that must have appeared far more urgent and vital, for the politics of poor relief could also be the politics of survival.

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<sup>70</sup> Goldie, “Unacknowledged republic”.