Begging, Charity and Religion in Pre-Famine Ireland

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Introduction

In his 1737 tract on the need to badge ‘foreign beggars’ in Dublin city, Jonathan Swift betrayed a surprising ignorance of the role of Irish parishes in assisting the poor and curtailing mendicancy. Swift incorrectly asserted that in Ireland, as in England, ‘every Parish is [legally] bound to maintain its own Poor’.¹ His mistake lay in the fact that whereas in England Elizabethan Poor Laws had identified the parish as the institutional driving force for the implementation of the statutory Poor Law system, one in which the poor were conferred with an entitlement to support from their native parish, Irish parishes possessed no such significance. While a mid-seventeenth-century act bestowed powers on a Dublin parish to levy a rate to support a localised poor scheme, Irish parishes on a nationwide level were devoid of any critical legal standing in this respect. His inaccuracy notwithstanding, Swift’s intervention in the ongoing Poor Law debates of the 1720s and 1730s reflects the reality that the parish stood at the centre of corporate efforts to relieve ‘deserving’ distress and punish ‘undeserving’ idleness.

An assembly of male householders in a given parish, which met at least once a year – typically Easter Monday or Tuesday – to levy a local rate (cess) on parishioners to fund the provision of ecclesiastical and civil services within the parish, the vestry was, from the mid-seventeenth century, a unit of local government, overseeing road maintenance, fire-fighting, public lighting and street cleaning. The extent to which the vestry exerted those civil functions varied from place to place, with vestries in Ulster and in large urban centres being most active as it was in these locations that there was a greater concentration of members of the Established Church.² Many

¹ [Swift], Proposal for giving badges to the beggars, p. 6.
² The most comprehensive analysis of the evolving functions of Irish parishes remains Rowena Dudley, ‘Dublin parishes 1660–1729: the Church of Ireland parishes and their
corporate bodies had their roles to play in responding to beggary and poverty: municipal authorities, the central state, the charitable sector and the various churches and religious societies. Parish vestries constitute a particularly interesting case, not only given their relative historiographical neglect, at least regarding their nineteenth-century incarnations, but also because of the technical complexities inherent in the nature of their association. Parish vestries exerted ecclesiastical functions according to their status within the Established Church. But, they also carried out civil duties, such as suppressing street begging and relieving poverty, the operation of which were approved at meetings open to parishioners of all denominations. These initiatives, such as the badging of mendicants and the employment of parochial officers of health to remove ‘nuisances’ and filth-ridden beggars, may be seen, then, not as the institutional responses of the Church of Ireland to social questions such as poverty and beggary but as the responses of the wider civil community.

‘It Is a Temporal Matter’: Ecclesiastical and Civil Parish Vestries

At the 1838 Easter meeting of the St Paul’s select parish vestry in Dublin city, a Catholic parishioner, Mr Brenan, demanded to be allowed to speak on the matter of the election of churchwardens. Brenan acknowledged that, as a Roman Catholic, he was not entitled to vote at the select vestry, but wished, at the very least, for his suggestion – that a ‘liberal Protestant’ named Mr Atkinson be nominated – to be heard. Brenan, who served the parish as an officer of health, was criticised by Anglican parishioners, being told that they did not disturb proceedings at the Catholic chapel: ‘You are only allowed to attend here as a matter of courtesy, and you cannot interfere in the proceedings’. To this, Brenan replied: ‘You say you never interfered with us in our chapels. I say we never interfered with you in your churches. I think a vestry meeting is a different thing altogether. It is a temporal matter. We are in the majority of the ratepayers of the parish, and we have a right to interfere’. The newspaper report of this incident noted that upon the conclusion of this initial vestry meeting, a second meeting commenced, ‘which was open to all the inhabitants of the parish’.

This instance points to an important feature of the structure of parish vestries in nineteenth-century Ireland, arising from the complex coexistence role in the civic administration of the city’ (PhD thesis, 2 vols, University of Dublin, 1995). See also Donald Harman Akenson, *The Church of Ireland: ecclesiastical reform and revolution, 1800–1885* (New Haven, CT and London, 1971), pp. 52–5; Maighréad Ni Mhurchadha, ‘Introduction’ in Maighréad Ni Mhurchadha (ed.), *The vestry records of the united parishes of Finglas, St Margaret’s, Artane and the Ward, 1657–1758* (Dublin, 2007), pp. 18–21.

of ecclesiastical and civil parishes from the late medieval/early modern period. The above account from the St Paul's parish vestry demonstrates the existence of select and general vestries in nineteenth-century Irish parishes and the evolving role of these bodies within their own local communities. It also reveals how interdenominational tensions, particularly in areas where Protestants comprised a relatively large proportion of the population, such as in urban centres, remained close to the surface at this level of local government.4 The language used at the St Paul’s vestry by those quoted above draws on notions of communal allegiances and rivalries: Catholic and Protestant contributors used the group terms ‘you’ and ‘your’ (in the plural sense), as well as ‘we’, ‘us’ and ‘our’. This example, reflective of wider trends, supports Raymond Gillespie’s assertion that the ‘wider scope of its civil functions ensured that the parish formed one of the key building blocks of local community identity’.5

Under an act of 1726,6 reasserted by an 1826 statute,7 Roman Catholics were allowed to attend vestry meetings but could not vote on church-related matters, such as ‘providing Things necessary for the Celebration of Divine Service’, election of churchwardens, setting the salary of the parish clerk or sexton, or any expenses for the repair of the church building.8 An act of 1774 removed dissenters’ right to vote at vestry,9 which was the cause of great grievance and subsequent protest by Irish Presbyterians.10 Petitions were sent to parliament in late 1775, in the main by Ulster Presbyterians, and the act was subsequently repealed the following year.11 As these legal

4 John Crawford, The Church of Ireland in Victorian Dublin (Dublin, 2005), pp. 151–76. A similar instance was reported in Constitution; or Cork Advertiser, 13 Apr. 1830.
6 12 Geo. I, c. 9 [Ire.] (8 Mar. 1726).
7 7 Geo. IV, c. 72 (31 May 1826).
8 7 Geo. IV, c. 72, s. 2.
9 13 & 14 Geo. III, c. 10 [Ire.] (session 1773–74) (4 May 1774). It stipulated (s. 1) that at vestry meetings, ‘it shall and may be lawful for the Parishioners thus assembled, that are of the Communion of the Church of Ireland by Lawe established, or the major Part of them, to vote for, and assess on the Parishioners at large, of each Parish-Union and Chappelry respectively, such Sum and Sums of Money yearly, as to them shall seem necessary and proper for the Repairs and Preservation of the Church or Chappel respectively belonging to such Parish, Union, or Chappel’.
10 Clarke H. Irwin, A history of Presbyterianism in Dublin and the south and west of Ireland (London, 1890), p. 72. I am grateful to Prof. David Hayton for bringing this matter to my attention.
11 Transcripts of Dissenters’ petitions, 1775 (PRONI, Groves manuscripts, T808/15307), available at PRONI website https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/information-and-services/public-record-office-northern-ireland-proni/search-archives-online (accessed 1 June 2018); Extract from Dissenters’ petitions, Dunmurry parish, County Antrim 1775–6 (PRONI, Census return and testamentary documents, T715/9); The journals of the
provisions lent themselves to disorderly and contentious meetings, the usual protocol in many parishes was for the holding of two vestry meetings: the select vestry and the general vestry. First, the select vestry assembled for its annual Easter meeting, for the election of two churchwardens (the most important parochial offices and almost invariably confined to Anglicans) and the confirmation of parish rates to fund ecclesiastical services for the coming year; votes on these matters were confined to members of the Church of Ireland. Upon the conclusion of the select vestry meeting, a second, ‘general’ vestry commenced, at which parochial ratepayers of all denominations could attend and vote on secular matters affecting inhabitants of the parish.

The general vestry was oftentimes held immediately after the conclusion of the select meeting but was also known to have taken place a number of days or weeks after the first meeting. For example, the select vestry held in St Bride’s (Bridget’s) parish in Dublin in April 1830 was one at which there were ‘Roman Catholics present, but excluded from voting on this day’; the assessments on ratepaying parishioners on that day were limited to the celebration of Divine Service, and the maintenance and repair of the church building. More than two weeks later, the general vestry – ‘Roman Catholics present, and entitled to vote at this vestry’ – was held. In the Dublin parish of St Andrew’s, Catholics were entitled to vote on expenditure on ‘deserted children’, ‘medicines for the poor of the parish’ and ‘coffins for the poor’, but were restricted from voting for ‘Bread and wine for the Communion’ and a salary for the organist. Returns for parishes in Cork city reveal similar distinctions between the separate vestries for members of the Church of Ireland congregation, and those for the entire community. At Easter 1830, the ‘First or Protestant Vestry’ of St Nicholas’s parish made assessments on parishioners for items of expenditure such as salaries for the sexton and sextoness, ‘bread and wine’, ‘bell–ringing’, ‘church linen’ and ‘candles for lighting the church’. At the ‘Second or General Vestry’ the items of expenditure included the fire-engine keeper’s salary, ‘coffins for the poor who are unable to provide coffins’, ‘support of foundlings’ and a


12 Raymond Gillespie has suggested the existence of select vestries in Dublin parishes as early as the seventeenth century: Raymond Gillespie (ed.), The vestry records of the parish of St John the Evangelist, Dublin 1595–1658 (Dublin, 2002), p. 12.

13 Dublin vestries. Returns of the several sums of money assessed in the several parishes in the city of Dublin, by vestries holden during Easter week, in the year 1830 … p. 5, H.C. 1830 (523), xxxi, 303.

14 Ibid., p. 2.
‘parish nurse’. A fascinating feature of the St Nicholas’s return is that the clerk John Coyle received two separate salaries from the parish: a salary of £20 for his role as ‘parish clerk’ provided through the select vestry, and a salary of £15 as ‘vestry clerk’ as approved by the general vestry, suggesting a strict distinction in the ecclesiastical and civil functions of the clerk’s role. There were regional variations in the efficacy in how parish vestries carried out their civil functions, with the most active vestries being located in the north-east and east, especially in towns and cities; David Dickson has suggested that an Anglican community constituting a critical minimum of 15 per cent to 20 per cent of the local population was required for a parish to carry out its civil functions effectively, while Oliver MacDonagh portrayed Irish parishes as being largely unable to operate self-sufficiently, in contrast to English parishes, owing to a lack of manpower and resources. In the north-east, Presbyterians played a greater role in the management of (civil) parish life; it was observed in Bangor, County Down that the ‘Body of the Inhabitants of the Parish are Dissenters from the Established Church, and are mostly of the Church of Scotland, who form the great Majority at all Vestries’. The Presbyterian system of kirk sessions also operated alongside parish vestries, exerting ecclesiastical, social and philanthropic functions, and deploying similar nomenclature, with kirk sessions occasionally referred to in congregational records as vestries.

The operation of the parish at this level of local government was linked to the fact that from the early modern period the Anglican church building acted not only as an ecclesiastical space, for worship and prayer, but as a civil space, open to parishioners of all denominations. In some Church of Ireland churches since the sixteenth century, leases and contracts were drawn up in the porch. Control of the vestry, however, remained in the hands of

15 Cork vestries. Returns of the several sums of money assessed in the several parishes in the city of Cork, by the vestries holden during Easter week, in the year 1830 … p. 4, H.C. 1830 (525), xxxi, 296. See also, for St Peter’s parish, ibid., pp. 6–7 and for St Finbar’s (also Fin Barre’s) parish Easter vestry in Cork city, see Constitution; or Cork Advertiser, 15 Apr. 1830.
16 Cork vestries, 1830, p. 4.
18 Ireland. An account of all sums of money levied in the several parishes of Ireland, by authority of vestry… Part I (n.p., [c.1824]), p. 340, consulted at NLI (Ref. Ir274108i1).
19 Mary’s Abbey vestry (session) book (Abbe Presbyterian Church, Mary’s Abbey congregation records, books no. 9 and 14).
the Anglican members, mainly through the prohibition on Catholics and Dissenters to fill influential vestry offices, notably that of churchwarden. Vestry meetings served as civil forums, where parishioners – regardless of religion – could engage in discussion and debate; they were public assemblies, open to all parishioners (and to members of the press) and, in John Crawford’s words, ‘proved something of a forum for the expression of grievances’. Heightened tensions among parishioners, especially in 1830s and 1840s Dublin, occasionally resulted in riot and affray breaking out at Easter vestry meetings, requiring the intervention of the police. Of course, such incidents were the exception.

What is significant about these bodies and the manner in which they assembled is that when parish vestries in pre-Famine Ireland debated and voted on matters pertaining to the social conditions of the geographical parish (such as the support of foundlings, the provision of coffins for the poor and, most relevant to this study, the management of mendicancy), this was carried out in a cross-denominational forum. Protestants, Catholics and Dissenters could contribute to the discussion and all were entitled to vote on such measures. Furthermore, the funding of these initiatives was generated through the applotment of a parish cess on all ratepaying parishioners – Anglicans and non-Anglicans alike. (The assessment of non-Anglicans for expenditure singular to the Church of Ireland community bred much resentment before being prohibited under the 1833 Church Temporalities Act.) Therefore, the actions of parishes in responding to the threat posed by mendicancy – curtailing the movements of ‘strange’ beggars, badging local mendicants and employing officers tasked with warding off or detaining idlers – were not those of the Church of Ireland ecclesiastical congregation but, rather, the responses of a wider community (regardless of confessional allegiance) to fluctuations in the level of begging in the locality.

Social Functions

In addition to its ecclesiastical and wider civil functions, the parish vestry acted as a welfare body which distributed alms to the poor, most commonly
in the form of money, food, fuel and clothes. Some parishes established and maintained an alms house for those paupers entered on its poor list, while coffins were regularly provided for the local poor. Relief, however, was not distributed on an unqualified basis, and in adherence to the traditional distinctions between the meritorious and unworthy poor parishes limited relief to selected groups, usually the local and ‘deserving’ poor. Writing of eighteenth-century Ireland, Rowena Dudley has commented that relief was given to ‘strange’ beggars at times, ‘but with the intention of encouraging the beneficiary to leave the parish’. According to Toby Barnard, ‘there was a universal reluctance to take responsibility for strangers, unless to return them to their places of origin or – in extreme cases – to bury them at the public charge’. The welfare of the local poor was paramount. While a parish-based Poor Law had operated in England and Wales since 1601, Ireland remained without a statutory provision until the Poor Law Act of 1838. Therefore, when parish vestries undertook the relief of the poor in their locality, this was done without statutory authority and at the discretion of the parish officers. An exception to this was the inclusion of a clause in an act of 1665 empowering the churchwardens of St Andrew’s parish in Dublin to assess parishioners ‘for the relief of the poor’. In some instances, parishes co-operated with local urban corporations to oversee measures for suppressing mendicancy, such as systemised badging, the management of bequests, care of orphans and confinement of vagrants.

25 St Peter’s parish, Drogheda, vestry minute book, 28 Sept. 1772 (RCBL, St Peter’s parish, Drogheda, vestry minute books, P 854.5.1); St Paul’s parish, Cork, vestry minute book, 19 Oct. 1818 (RCBL, St Paul’s parish, Cork, vestry minute books, P 349.5.1); St Catherine’s parish, Dublin, vestry minute book, 27 Feb. 1805 (RCBL, St Catherine’s parish, Dublin, vestry minute books, P 117.5.5).
26 Lisburn parish, County Antrim, vestry minute book, 5 Apr. 1779 (PRONI, Lisburn parish, County Antrim, vestry minute books, MIC1/4, microfilm); St Paul’s parish, Cork, vestry minute book, 24 Mar. 1818; St Thomas’s parish, Dublin, vestry minute book, 8 Apr. 1825 (RCBL, St Thomas’s parish, Dublin, vestry minute books, P 80.5.2); Naas parish, County Kildare, vestry minute book, 24 Apr. 1832 (RCBL, Naas parish, County Kildare, vestry minute books, P 487.5.1).
31 For a discussion of this act (17 & 18 Chas. II, c. 7 [Ire.]), see Dudley, ‘The Dublin parishes and the poor’, pp. 81–4.
**Parish Vestries and the Badging of Beggars**

The need visibly to identify those deemed to be worthy of alms was always stressed and many parishes distributed begging badges to ‘deserving’ cases among their own poor. Badges were signs of authentication. As beggary was long associated with imposture and fraud, such legitimisation was a means to, first, discourage the fraudulent pleas of the sturdy beggar, secondly, protect the ‘honest’, ‘deserving’ and local mendicant in his pursuit of alms, and, thirdly, prevent the provider of charity from unknowingly misdirecting his benevolence. Badges were typically made from tin, copper and pewter, and were attached to the beggar’s garments in such a way as to be clearly visible to others. These licences to beg were issued by the local minister and the churchwardens. The practice of badging the local parochial poor dated back, in Ireland, at least to 1634, when the parish of St John the Evangelist in Dublin licensed its beggars. The enthusiasm for badging continued throughout the seventeenth century and into the eighteenth, with fluctuations in accordance with wider economic and social conditions. During the 1700s, there is evidence of parochially organised badging, for example, in Dublin city, Cork city, Kells, County Meath, Ardee, County Louth and across Ulster. A longer tradition of licensing the ‘deserving’ poor through badging had existed in many parts of Europe since the medieval period, although on the continent secular authorities largely exerted these powers. English parishes oversaw badging regimes, operating in some locations since at least the early sixteenth century, but becoming increasingly popular on foot of the 1697 act for badging the poor; these powers were repealed by

33 Gillespie, *The vestry records of the parish of St John the Evangelist, Dublin*, p. 94. See also ibid., p. 167.
36 Dudley, ‘The Dublin parish, 1660–1730’, p. 293; St Finbar’s parish, Cork, vestry minute book, 15 May 1773 (RCBL, St Finbar’s parish, Cork, vestry minute books, P 497.5.1).
38 Cavallo, *Charity and power*, pp. 25–6.
statue in 1810. Badging was complemented by the provision of blue gowns for parochial pensioners in Scottish parishes in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, with both forms of visual discrimination identifying the wearers as legitimate objects of charity.

**Badging in the Nineteenth Century**
The practice of badging beggars appears to have declined in Ireland in the late eighteenth century but was retained in some areas into the nineteenth. Badging was most prevalent at times of acute crisis, as represented in Seaby and Paterson’s listing of recordings of the badging of beggars by Ulster parishes, wherein badges were most commonly issued during famines and epidemics, such as the early 1740s, the early 1770s, 1799–1801, 1818–19 and the early 1820s. Steve Hindle’s extensive work with English parish records similarly concludes that badging was most stringently enforced when ratepayers felt most burdened, especially at times of high food prices. In pre-Famine Ireland, parochial revival of badging was most noticeable during the economic downturn which followed the end of the Napoleonic Wars. In Ballymoney, County Antrim in 1817, the sum of 10s. was spent by the vestry on ‘Printing Handbills relating to Beggars’, while the following year parochial expenditure included £1 for ‘printing Lists of badged and other Poor’. In the same county, in Dunluce parish, £1 6s. 8d. was expended on ‘Badges for the Poor of this Parish’ in 1817. The post-war upsurge in parochial badging was evident throughout Ireland. In 1818, the vestry of St Canice’s parish in Kilkenny city met to ascertain ‘the number of native poor to be Badged in the parish’, while two years later the sum of £2 5s. was apportioned for ‘Badges for the poor of the Town’ in St Nicholas’ parish in Galway city. Smaller town parishes also found it necessary to reinforce this

43 Ireland. *An account of all sums of money levied in the several parishes*, p. 354.
44 Ibid., p. 377.
45 St Canice’s parish, Kilkenny vestry minute book, 26 Oct. 1818 (RCBL, St Canice’s parish, Kilkenny vestry minute books, P 622.5.1); St Nicholas’s parish, Galway, vestry minute book, 2 May 1820 (RCBL, St Nicholas’s parish, Galway, vestry minute books, P 519.5.1). See also St Mary’s parish, Kilkenny vestry minute book, 26 Oct. 1818 (RCBL, St Mary’s parish, Kilkenny, vestry minute books, P 792.5.2). The provision of tin badges was approved by the Mayor of Galway in 1817 ‘for the use of the poor of
practice. In 1815, the Mullingar vestry resolved that the town was ‘infested with Sturdy Beggars from other parishes, Countys and even provinces, to the great annoyance of the publick and injury to the real objects of Charity in the parish’, so ‘in order to remove these inconveniences, the poor and meritorious objects of Charity belonging to the parish shall be badged and licensed to beg’.\textsuperscript{46}

An account of the licensing of the poor persisting in a rural area in the early nineteenth century is provided in the writings of physician Lombe Atthill (1827–1910), whose posthumously published autobiography presents a medical practitioner’s retrospective but first-hand insight into pre-Famine Ireland. Atthill recorded that his father, a Church of Ireland rector in Doncavey parish in north-western Fermanagh, ‘had to issue a kind of ticket, which he distributed to those who were supposed to reside inside the bounds of his parish. They were supposed not to be relieved at his house without producing this’. The purpose of this ticketing system was to police the ‘regular trade’ of mendicancy, at a time when beggars were ‘met on every road and seen at every door’.\textsuperscript{47} The vestry minute book for the parish supports Atthill’s account, with the vestry resolving in February 1801 ‘that the poor of the foresaid parish shall be forthwith badged, and that no person shall be allowed to receive a badge except such as shall produce two respectable parishioners to vouch for them upon oath’.\textsuperscript{48}

The issuing of parish badges in Dublin and Belfast had declined by the early nineteenth century, most probably due to the opening of large poorhouses in these two urban centres – the House of Industry in Dublin (opened 1773) and the Belfast Charitable Society’s Poor House (1774). These two institutions were independently established, yet they mirrored each other’s raison d’être and manner of operating: they were both designed for the reception of the mendicant poor and a crucial part of the localised system of dealing with mendicancy was the issuing of badges to local ‘deserving’ beggars. With these two large bodies providing begging badges, local parishes were relieved of the burden of overseeing their own systems of licensing the mendicant poor. Upon its opening, the Belfast

the town and county of the town alone … as strangers will be exempted’: \textit{FJ}, 29 Sept. 1817. Badges were also issued in Tuam in 1818: W.J.V. Comerford, ‘Some notes on the borough of Tuam and its records, 1817–1822’ in \textit{Journal of the Galway Archaeological and Historical Society}, xv, no. 3 (1931), p. 110.

\textsuperscript{46} Mullingar parish vestry minute book, 15 Nov. 1815 (RCBL, Mullingar parish vestry minute books, P 336.5.1).

\textsuperscript{47} Lombe Atthill, \textit{Recollections of an Irish doctor} (1911; repr. Whitegate, 2007), p. 22.

poor house issued ‘Badges and Licences to Beg for a limited time … to the Beggars with Children, and to the Infirm Husband or Wife’. The institution’s zeal for the provision of badges fluctuated according to wider economic and social conditions, and the appetite among the town’s citizenry for relieving mendicants, with the badging system being withdrawn and revived at various points in the poor house’s history. The governors of the Dublin House of Industry were empowered to issue begging badges and licences to designated mendicants, which served ‘to distinguish real Objects of Charity from Vagrants and sturdy Beggars’ and which were seen as the ‘legal Credentials of their [the beggars’] Poverty and Inability’. Upon its opening, the House of Industry issued 1,800 such badges to the city’s mendicants. A total of twelve Houses of Industry were established across Ireland under the 1772 act (excluding the Belfast Poor House, whose managing committee was incorporated by a separate statute) and the badging of beggars was carried out by these institutions in their respective localities. It is important to note, however, that responsibility for relieving or punishing mendicants was not completely removed from the parishes. Instead, Dublin vestries co-operated with the city’s House of Industry in apprehending unlicensed beggars and vagabonds, who were subsequently detained in the House of Industry. In July 1793, the vestry of St Andrew’s parish resolved that it would implore its parishioners to ‘discontinue giving alms to public Beggars’, before committing that:

we will Individually and collectively co-operate with the Corporation for the Relief of the Poor &c in the city of Dublin [i.e., the governors of the House of Industry] in their laudable endeavours to free the streets of this Metropolis from beggars – That we will for that purpose point out to their Beadles such Impostures and public Beggars as may come

51 An account of the proceedings and state of the fund of the Corporation instituted for the Relief of the Poor, and for Punishing Vagrants and Sturdy Beggars in the County of the City of Dublin, published by order of the corporation, March 22d, 1774 (Dublin, 1774), pp. 8–9.
52 Nineteenth annual report of the managing committee of the Association for the Suppression of Mendicity in Dublin. For the year 1836: with resolutions upon the subject of the Poor Laws (Dublin, 1837), p. 11.
53 Fleming and Logan, *Pauper Limerick*, pp. xii–xiii. For Kilkenny, see (Finn’s) *Leinster Journal*, 11–14 Oct. 1775. Interestingly, while the Kilkenny corporation for relieving the poor was founded soon after the passing of the 1772 act, it would be another four decades before the city’s House of Industry was to open: *Moderator*, 15 Jan., 2 Apr., 28 Apr. 1814; Fleming and Logan, *Pauper Limerick*, p. xii.
within our knowledge and That we will to the utmost of our power protect their officers from Violence in the execution of their duty.\textsuperscript{54}

Other Dublin parishes – St Catherine’s, St Werburgh’s and St Mary’s – passed similar resolutions in the same month, committing themselves to co-operating with the House of Industry in apprehending street beggars and protecting the latter institution’s officers in the exercise of their duties.\textsuperscript{55} This instance serves as an important indication of cross-institutional co-operation between various bodies with responsibility for the relief of the poor and suppression of mendicancy. The practice of badging beggars had all but disappeared by the middle of the nineteenth century, owing to the growth of voluntary charities and, more significantly, from the early 1840s, of the Poor Law union workhouses. A later instance of the brief revival of badging arose in Waterford city in 1851; of significance in this instance was the fact that it was not the parish vestry that reintroduced the practice but the Poor Law union Board of Guardians, who had succeeded parochial officials as the primary custodians of corporate relief measures in the locality.\textsuperscript{56}

\textit{Parish Vestries, Public Health and the Suppression of Beggary}  
Crucial to the maintenance of civil order at this time was the protection of the public from epidemic disease and parish vestries also exerted responsibility in this respect. In July 1819, at the tail-end of the devastating typhus fever epidemic of 1816–19, parliament passed the Fever Act, which empowered vestries to elect unpaid officers of health who had the authority to direct that tenements, lanes and streets be cleaned, and that nuisances be removed from the streets. These officers were also empowered to apprehend and dismiss from the parish ‘all idle poor Persons, Men, Women, or Children, and all Persons who may be found begging or seeking Relief’ in the interest of ‘preventing the Danger of Contagion and other Evils’.\textsuperscript{57} In some instances, parishioners who were qualified medical practitioners were elected to these positions, such as David Brereton MD, in St Michan’s in 1831.\textsuperscript{58} In St Thomas’s parish in 1828, the ten elected officers of health

\textsuperscript{54} St Andrew’s parish, Dublin, vestry minute book, 4 July 1793 (RCBL, St Andrew’s parish, Dublin, vestry minute books, P 59.5.1).  
\textsuperscript{55} St Catherine’s parish, Dublin, vestry minute book, 6 July 1791 (P 117.5.5); St Werburgh’s parish, Dublin, vestry minute book, 12 July 1791 (RCBL, St Werburgh’s parish, Dublin, vestry minute books, P 326.5.2); St Mary’s parish, Dublin, vestry minute book, 29 July 1791 (RCBL, St Mary’s parish, Dublin, vestry minute books, P 277.7.4).  
\textsuperscript{56} Waterford Chronicle, 24 May 1851.  
\textsuperscript{57} 59 Geo. III, c. 41 (14 June 1819).  
\textsuperscript{58} St Michan’s parish, Dublin, vestry minute book, 23 Nov. 1831 (RCBL, St Michan’s parish, Dublin, vestry minute books, P 276.5.5).
included three physicians and a surgeon. These positions were invariably filled by respectable parishioners, driven by a sense of civic duty and the social prominence attached to parochial service; such individuals typically also served as churchwardens, sidesmen and overseers. Toby Barnard has argued that ‘as in England, so in Protestant Ireland, a willingness regularly to assume the burdens of parochial office may have helped the middling sort to define and so distinguish themselves from the lower ranks’.

Throughout the 1820s, officers of health were not annual appointments in most vestries; instead, they were appointed in response to short-term crises. When the emergency abated these appointments were then rescinded. A letter-writer to the Cork Constitution in 1828 criticised the southern city’s parishes for failing to appoint officers of health, especially given the extensive array of powers available under the provisions of the 1819 act. Despite being of a ‘most salutary character’ and offering the opportunity concurrently to tackle a number of critical social problems, the act in Cork city was a ‘dead letter’, the writer asserted. On the eve of the Great Famine, the Hue and Cry, the gazette of the Irish Constabulary, published without comment an excerpt from the 1819 Fever act, singling out the provisions pertaining to the removal of street beggars and illustrating a perceived need to draw public attention towards these neglected powers.

At times of crisis, parishes were not always proactive in appointing officers of health. This procrastination was evident in the autumn of 1826, when Chief Secretary Henry Goulburn wrote to the Dublin vestries alerting them to the fact that ‘fever is now extending itself among the Poor of this City’ and reminding them of their powers under the 1819 act. The St Michan’s vestry promptly elected five Officers of Health. However, by this time, epidemic fever had been raging throughout the city for around

59 St Thomas’s parish, Dublin, vestry minute book, 7 Apr. 1828.
60 Among the officers of health in St Michan’s parish in the 1830s were Mark Flower of Old Church Street and merchant William Hill of 47 Pill Lane, who also served together as sidesmen and overseers of licensed houses: St Michan’s parish, Dublin, vestry minute book, 7 Apr., 23 Dec. 1828, 9 Apr. 1832, 20 Apr. 1835. Hill also served as churchwarden: ibid., 4 Apr. 1836.
61 Barnard, A new anatomy of Ireland, p. 242.
62 This assertion, evidenced by examination of numerous vestry minute books, is supported by Francis White, Report and observations on the state of the poor of Dublin (Dublin, 1833), p. 22.
63 Cork Constitution, 17 Apr. 1828.
64 Quoted in Londonderry Sentinel, 16 Aug. 1845.
65 St Michan’s parish, Dublin, vestry minute book, 5 Sept. 1826 (RCBL, St Michan’s parish, Dublin, vestry minute books, P 276.5.4); St Catherine’s parish, Dublin, vestry minute book, 29 Aug. 1826.
66 St Michan’s parish, Dublin, vestry minute book, 5 Sept. 1826.
four months. A public meeting of the parishioners of St George’s parish on 31 August 1826 heard that officers of health had not yet been appointed, despite the claims of one parishioner – a medical practitioner named Dr. Reddy – that fever was prevailing extensively in the parish. This epidemic waned in 1827 and it was not until late 1831 that officers of health once again became standard appointments at parish vestries, not just in Dublin but in urban centres across Ireland. The crisis that revived the appointment of parish officers of health was the onslaught of cholera, which eventually reached Ireland in early 1832. While typhus fever was endemic in Ireland, cholera was an unknown malady across western Europe. St Paul’s parish vestry in Cork city later referred to ‘the alarming period when that new and destructive Plague the cholera made its appearance in this City, and this Parish was first visited by its deadly Ravages’, further labelling the disease a ‘hitherto unknown Pestilence’. Wandering beggars were blamed as being among the most serious causes for the spread of cholera, with one authority referring to the ‘fertile source of contagion, originating in vagrancy and mendicity’. In Dublin, the Mendicity Society publicly drew the attention of parochial officers of health to lanes and houses where beggars were known to congregate, with particular emphasis being paid to the danger of the dissemination of disease. St George’s parish was active in utilising its powers under the 1819 Fever act to wash and clean the clothes and persons of beggars who had ‘an insuperable antipathy to cleanliness’; this procedure proved ‘so disagreeable to them that they avoided subjecting themselves to it a second time’. In Ballymena, parochial officers of health were active in keeping ‘wandering beggars and vagrants from infesting the town’; in one instance, an individual was prosecuted before the town’s magistrates for obstructing an officer ‘in the execution of his duty’, with the resulting fine of 7s. 6d. being allocated for the officer’s work. In April 1832, in Queen’s County, 19-year-old Mary Carrol was apprehended by a local officer of health and tried for ‘vagrancy’, serving a 24-hour sentence. It is important to note that the parish vestries were not the only corporate entity which had duties in responding to this epidemic. The state-run Central Board

67 FJ, 17 July 1826.
68 Reddy’s claims were challenged by others at this meeting, including a fellow medical practitioner: FJ, 1 Sept. 1826.
69 St Paul’s parish, Cork city, vestry minute book, 17 June 1833.
70 BNL, 17 Feb. 1832; Robins, The miasma, pp. 66, 76.
71 BNL, 8 Nov. 1831.
72 Saundér’s News-Lettér, 26 Apr. 1832.
73 Ibid., 8 May 1832.
of Health established following the 1816–19 fever epidemic and which had retreated into administrative hibernation during the 1820s, was revived in late 1831. The Board offered advice to local bodies on how to prevent contagion and how to respond when cholera cases were identified, and oversaw the establishment of local hospitals.

Some parishes continued to appoint officers of health throughout the 1830s and into the 1840s, but, mostly, parishes drew on their powers under the 1819 Fever Act only at times of crisis and epidemic. As late as 1851, however, the Lisburn vestry received a report from its officers of health whose sanitary activities included ‘keeping the town clear of strolling beggars’. At the following year’s Easter vestry in Belfast parish, the health officers’ employment of three constables specifically for taking up street beggars was criticised as being insufficient. This interestingly suggests a desire for a strengthened provision of parochial officers for suppressing street begging at a time when the northern town was served by numerous charitable organisations, not to mention a Poor Law-funded workhouse. The powers of parish vestries to appoint officers of health was repealed by the 1866 Sanitary Act, which extended earlier legislation for England to Ireland and was passed at the height of yet another cholera epidemic. In Dublin, the parishes’ responsibilities were subsequently transferred to a new Public Health Committee, which operated under the auspices of Dublin Corporation.

The Declining Role of Parish Constables and Beadles
From the early modern period right into the nineteenth century, one of the main duties of Irish parish vestries in towns and cities was the preservation of law and order within their jurisdiction. At a time before the establishment of a national police force, responsibility for maintaining the public peace in cities and towns lay with groups of paid night watchmen and beadles, supervised by unpaid constables who were appointed annually by the members of the vestry. This was typically the case in both Ireland and England. The positions of watchmen and beadles were paid ones, filled by men from the lower classes, and these officers were regularly open to accusations of corruption and inefficiency. Jonathan Swift condemned

76 BNL, 28 Apr. 1851.
77 BNL, 14 Apr. 1852. See also 3 May 1854.
78 29 & 30 Vict., c. 90, s. 69 (7 Aug. 1866).
79 Prunty, Dublin slums, pp. 70–1.
instances of ‘Foreign Beggars’ bribing parish beadles in Dublin (presumably so as to avoid detention), while the St Bride’s beadle was accused in the 1830s of keeping ‘an improper house’. Constables, on the other hand, were typically ‘respectable’ male householders from the parish whose voluntary service in this role spoke to their sense of civic duty and social prominence. Occasional examples blurred these lines of social demarcation: William Wilson of Old Church Street in Dublin received his beadle’s salary of £10 per annum from St Michan’s vestry while also serving voluntarily as a parish constable.

The duties of beadles, constables and watchmen centred around maintaining peace and order in the parish, particularly around the church at times of service; in St Bride’s, Dublin, the beadle was required not to permit the disruption of Divine Service ‘by allowing Idle or disorderly persons to assemble or make a noise about the Church or Church yard’. The beadle also served as the messenger of the parish vestry. The apprehension of beggars and vagrants was among their most common duties, as it was for their London counterparts. In the 1750s, a beadle was employed in Shankill parish in Belfast to prevent vagrants from entering the town, while in July 1791, the vestry of St Mary’s parish in Dublin appointed a parishioner ‘to assist the Beadle of this Parish’ in bringing about the apprehension and punishment of ‘idle vagrants so offending any where about the Church’. A mayoral proclamation of October 1769 urged all Dublin parishes to direct their beadles and constables to apprehend
and present before a Justice of the Peace ‘all such sturdy strolling Beggars and Vagrants’, for their committal to the Bridewell.\textsuperscript{90} In June 1785, twelve years after the opening of the city’s House of Industry, a public meeting, held for the purpose of tackling the mendicant problem, heard that Dublin remained plagued by a ‘great number of idle and disorderly vagabonds and sturdy beggars, who have for some time past infested the same, to the great annoyance of the inhabitants, and disgrace of the police of this city’.\textsuperscript{91} That such a meeting was held to discuss the sole issue of the policing of mendicants and vagrants suggests that the long-standing problem with the mendicant poor was still considered urgent, the prevailing night watch system was insufficient and the impact of the House of Industry in forcing beggars from the streets was questionable.

The emergence of centralised, usually state-funded, police forces from the late eighteenth century led to the gradual decline of the parish system of policing.\textsuperscript{92} References to beadles and constables being engaged in the warding off of mendicants are largely lacking in vestry records from the turn of the century onwards and this decline can be linked from the 1770s to the establishment of Houses of Industry and from 1809 onwards to mendicity societies, which employed their own beadles for the purposes of removing beggars from the streets. The pre-Famine decades witnessed a more general diminution in the role of parish beadles and constables. In the Dublin parish of St Thomas’s, the Easter vestry meeting in 1832 was the first at which no constables were appointed, while in St Andrew’s and St Werburgh’s parishes, the election of constables appears to have ceased in 1833 and 1835 respectively.\textsuperscript{93} This trend was by no means universal: St Michael’s parish was still electing parish constables in 1841, while constables remained among the parochial officers to be elected annually in the parishes of St Bride and St John into the post-Famine period.\textsuperscript{94} However, an 1841 newspaper report of a vestry meeting in St Bride’s parish suggests that the importance of the position had diminished almost to the point of uselessness. Upon the election of three men as constables for the succeeding year in St Bride’s, one parishioner enquired into the duties of the constables, to which another parishioner quipped, ‘If you get your coat torn, the parish constable will

\textsuperscript{90} FJ, 2–4 Nov. 1769.
\textsuperscript{91} FJ, 14–16 June 1785.
\textsuperscript{93} St Thomas’s parish, Dublin vestry minute book, 23 Apr. 1832; St Andrew’s parish, Dublin, vestry minute book, 8 Apr. 1833 (P 59.5.2); St Werburgh’s parish, Dublin vestry minute book, 21 Apr. 1835.
\textsuperscript{94} FJ, 14 Apr. 1841; St Bride’s parish, Dublin vestry minute book, 29 Mar. 1853 (P 327.3.3); FJ, 22 Apr. 1862.
replace it with a new one’, which was met with laughter.\textsuperscript{95} The increasing decline in regard for these parochial positions continued into the post-Famine period, with the positions of constable and beadle being dismissed by Dublin parishioners respectively as ‘[an] unnecessary functionary … [which] should at once be abolished’ and ‘a useless officer in a cocked hat’.\textsuperscript{96}

### Conclusion

The decades immediately before the Great Famine witnessed a significant shift in the civil role of the parish vestry in Ireland and a related transformation in how communities managed beggary in their locality. From the seventeenth century, parishes fulfilled various secular roles and were the most regular corporate providers of relief throughout Ireland, although, as demonstrated, regional factors dictated that parishes in the east and north-east were more active than their counterparts in poorer regions. While records allow us to identify trends in badging practices, gauging the efficacy of parochial badging is significantly more difficult. Did badging succeed in warding off ‘strange’ beggars and limiting parishioners’ benevolence and alms to the local, ‘deserving’ poor? Could mendicancy actually be controlled, or even mitigated, through this licensing system? David Dickson has expressed scepticism of the potential that parochial badging could offer, given the sheer volume of mendicants in this period, the unpopularity of the measure among the poorer classes and the ingrained vagrant nature of Irish mendicancy.\textsuperscript{97}

An influential report on Dublin’s charitable institutions concluded that the House of Industry’s system of badging was ‘useless and impracticable’ given ‘the number of applicants [and] the difficulty of discriminating between the meritorious poor and the impostor’, leading to the system’s discontinuance.\textsuperscript{98} However, this raises the question of whether parish-based systems, overseen by locally based residents, who were surely familiar with many of their local paupers, were better suited to implement such a system than the House of Industry, which may be regarded in its early decades as a national poorhouse with thousands of paupers (locals and ‘strangers’) on its books. It appears most likely that badging was not undertaken as a long-term solution to the mendicant problem but was commenced, terminated and reintroduced according to wider economic and social crises; the badging of beggars was seen as a useful, relatively inexpensive way to ‘manage’ fluctuating levels

\textsuperscript{95} *FJ*, 14 Apr. 1841.
\textsuperscript{96} *FJ*, 22 Mar. 1856, 22 Apr. 1862.
\textsuperscript{97} Dickon, ‘In search of the old Irish Poor Law’, p. 155.
\textsuperscript{98} *Report upon certain charitable establishments, Dublin*, p. 16.
of mendicancy at times of crisis. It may be suggested that badging worked best when the licensing of the local poor was complemented by vigilance in discouraging or preventing non-local mendicants from soliciting in the parish, through the employment of beadles and constables. Regrettably, the available sources do not provide explicit answers to this question.

This period also saw an overhaul in the role of the parish vestries in the life of their local communities. The civil duties of parishes, which had grown since the seventeenth century and had been defined and cemented through legislation, were gradually chipped away, as their powers (to control beggary, the police and to prevent the spread of contagious diseases in their parish) were devolved to other corporate bodies.\(^99\) This process commenced in the 1830s with the Church Temporalities Act, by which parishes could no longer levy a church-related cess on non-Anglican parishioners.\(^100\) This act was a landmark part of the evolution of the Irish parish from being both a religious and a civil entity to constituting solely an ecclesiastical unit, serving its congregants.\(^101\) This process became entrenched with the 1864 Cess Abolition Act,\(^102\) which, five years before the Disestablishment legislation, removed entirely the parishes’ power to levy a compulsory rate, thus ending the civil role of the Irish parish vestries.

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100 3 & 4 Will. IV, c. 37, s. 73 (14 Aug. 1833).
102 27 Vict., c. 17 (13 May 1864).