

The Watermen's Chest of Putney

Dorian Gerhold writes about a benevolent initiative dating back to the seventeenth century which continued to exert an influence into the 1950s.

One of Putney's most unusual charities was originally funded by a Sunday ferry for foot passengers across the Thames between Putney and Fulham and was at first run by the watermen themselves. It began in 1654 or 1655, as was explained many years later:

On about the year of our Lord 1655 a wherry boate was permitted to worke and ply at the ferry place in Putney every Sunday so as the profitts and advantage gotten thereby might be employed towards the releife of poore watermen and their widdows and other poore people of the said parish of Putney and that the money soe collected and received hath been usually putt and kept in a chest in order to bee distributed as aforesaid.¹

It was also stated that in 1654 the watermen 'did agree amongst themselves that they would out of charity worke in their turnes every Lords day and every day of humiliation' to raise money for the poor, 'after 5s 6d deducted for their owne laboures'.² There must have been some agreement with the Fulham watermen, who ran a similar scheme.

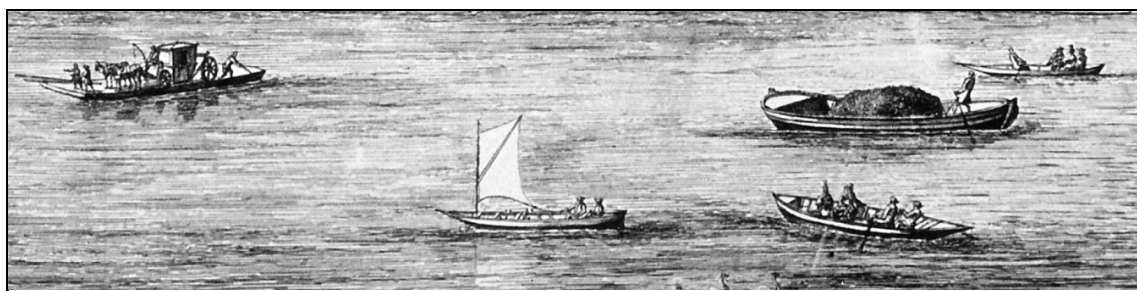
The 1650s, with their especially strong puritan emphasis on preventing work on Sundays, seem at first sight an odd time to establish a Sunday ferry. However, Putney's ferry was an important one, and probably there were always travellers wishing to cross on Sundays regardless of religious strictures and watermen who conveyed them across the river regardless of any prohibitions. This presumably gave someone the idea that Sunday travel, being inevitable, should be turned to the benefit of the poor instead of benefiting individual watermen. The scheme would also make it easier to prosecute watermen working on their own account on Sundays, such as Thomas Seares of Putney in 1664.³ The initiative perhaps came not from the watermen but from some of the gentlemen and merchants who dominated the parish.

The detailed arrangement was that

the mony thereby gotten after 18d deducted by the watermen soe working each day for his labour hath been formerly putt into a chest and distributed by three watermen of the parish of Putney who were appoynted stewardest for expending the said money to and amongst poore watermen their widdowes and children ... according to their necessities.⁴

The 18d was probably per waterman, and seems more likely than the 5s 6d referred to above.

The most remarkable aspect of the new charity was that it involved Putney's watermen organising at least part of their own poor relief, rather than this being determined by Putney's parish vestry. Although some watermen worked on a regular basis for individual gentlemen and merchants, they were generally the Putney inhabitants least beholden to the well-to-do, and running part of their own poor relief must have strengthened their independence. In the



Typical Thames craft, taken from a view of Lambeth Palace in 1697. In the top left corner is a ferry carrying a coach and horses, similar to the one which operated between Putney and Fulham from Monday to Saturday. The boats used for the Sunday ferry, which carried foot-passengers only, were probably similar to the one towards the bottom right in this view.

In the 1660s the watermen accounted for about 40% of the householders earning their livings in Putney, conveying passengers and goods up and down the river as well as across it, though some may in practice have been labourers who carried out whatever heavy work was available on water or land. Thirteen of Putney's fifty-three poorest householders were watermen and seven were watermen's widows, but not all watermen were poor, and some prospered; there were even a few who acquired small landholdings. The key difference among watermen was probably whether they had enough capital to obtain their own boat.⁵ One of the hazards of being a waterman was the press gang, and a remarkable document of 1672 lists 'the poor watermen, of Putney, whose wives by reason their husbands are gon to sea, and others that are prst, to goe at an howers warning, are not able to pay his Majestys duty of chimney money, nor to subsist of themselves without the help of others'. Fourteen had been pressed, four of them with their servants, and so had the servants of two widows of watermen; another four watermen had also gone to sea.⁶

By 1683 the three watermen in charge of the chest were John Carpenter, Samuel Dawes and Ezekiel Rigden. Dawes and Rigden had arrived in Putney after 1665, but Carpenter was a long-established resident, living in Thundering Alley (near the bottom of the High Street on the site of Weimar Place). He paid for his own seat in the parish church and held several parish or manor offices (aleconner in 1661, headborough in 1664 and constable in 1683), though he was an unsuccessful candidate for overseer of the poor in 1681, 1683 and 1685. He was twice press-ganged in the 1650s. Rigden was an unsuccessful candidate for overseer of the poor in 1681 and for sidesman or deputy churchwarden in 1682.⁷

Putney and Fulham may have set the pattern for London itself. In 1700 a similar Sunday ferry for the benefit of the poor was established in London. The Act which provided for it stated that 'great numbers of idle and loose watermen and boyes doe worke on the Lords Day commonly called Sunday and exact large prices from passengers whose necessary occasions oblige them to passe and repasse the River of Thames and generally spend such their gaines in drunkennesse and prophanenesse the succeeding weeke'. Instead the proceeds of Sunday working were to assist 'aged and maimed watermen and lightermen their widows and children whose circumstances want assistance'. Up to forty watermen were to work the cross-river ferries between Vauxhall and Limehouse, each passenger was to pay one penny and the scheme was to be administered by the Watermen's Company of London. The Act

was not to affect an existing Sunday ferry operated by watermen of the parish of St Margaret's, Westminster between Westminster and Lambeth, 'as they have lately accustomed and used to doe'.⁸ This somewhat obscure wording suggests that the Westminster scheme was a recent one, and therefore that the Putney and Fulham scheme was the first.

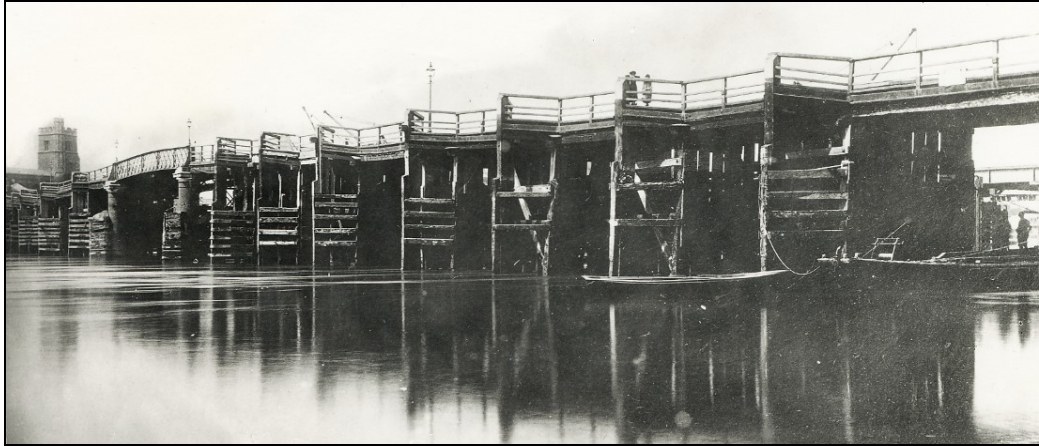
Problems

In 1683 'severall inhabitants of the parish of Putney' complained to Surrey's justices of the peace that the three stewards of the chest 'have of late times misemployed the moneys collected for the charity aforesaid, and that there is now about £55 in the said chest, which they refuse to distribute amongst the poore of the said parish as they ought to doe'. Another version of the complaint dated the problems to 1674, when 'Severall of the most substantiall watermen by combinacon amongst themselves shared the said money amongst them and other persons nott qualified to have any of the said charity'.⁹ This wording suggests that what took place was not a simple misappropriation of the money but something similar to what seems to have happened in Fulham – a shift to distribution among all watermen whether rich or poor. Evidently nothing had been written down about the Sunday ferry, making it easy to change its purpose.

The parish objected to this because poor watermen and their widows not relieved from the watermen's chest had to be relieved from parish funds instead, increasing the burden on ratepayers. A document of about 1682 among the parish records is headed 'An accompt of the moneyes that has bin paid by severall overseers of the parrish of Putney ... to the watermen & their wives that did belong to the watermens chest of ye said parish & others'. It lists payments made by the parish overseers to watermen and their families from 1662 to 1682, totalling £93.¹⁰ Evidently the existence of the watermen's chest had not barred watermen from parish relief, and in 1676 a pension for John Brian waterman was specifically justified on the basis of 'an account given that he is not releevd by the chest belonging to ye watermen sufficient to mantane him'.¹¹ Some tendentious additions to the 1682 list suggest the vestry's increasing exasperation; they include watermen being let off the parish rate 'upon their pretence of beinge poore' and payments to two watermen who had each been given the post of warder 'because he pretended much poverty'.

The justices accepted the parish's case. They ordered that Putney's churchwardens should be stewards alongside three watermen, and that the money should be distributed 'with the consent of the churchwardens of Putney'. The watermen's chest was to have two locks, one key being held by a churchwarden and one by one of the three watermen. Any disputes were to be resolved by a justice of the peace, and the accounts were to be examined annually by a justice. Meanwhile the £55 was to be distributed.¹²

One result was that for two years from 1683 to 1685 the detailed accounts for the Sunday ferry were entered in the churchwardens' own accounts, which have survived.¹³ Usually only one Putney waterman worked, except on four occasions, three of them in December 1684-January 1685 when 'Two persons were forced to worke by reason of the ice'. At first



The first Putney Bridge, a massive wooden structure of 1729, seen from the Fulham shore. It was demolished in 1886, after the present bridge was completed. On the left is St Mary's Church, Putney.

Alexander Howell worked almost exclusively, but later four or five did so in rotation. Things did not always run smoothly. On 18 May 1684:

Moses Hickline was appointed to worke this day by warrant from his Majestis justice of ye peace but the said Hickline was disabled in ye morning by being made drunke at Fulham by combination of the watermen and nothing gained that day.

Presumably while Hickline slept it off the other watermen carried passengers themselves and kept the proceeds. On 12 October 1684 'Henry Franckham worked but run away with ye money he gained that daye'. Eight months later 2s 6d was received from Franckham through the hands of another waterman, 'tho its supposed he gained more money'. A note records that between 30 December 1683 and 17 February 1684 'there was nothing gained the Thames being frozen over'.

The sums earned varied considerably. Adding back in the probable 18d kept by each waterman working, the busiest months were May to July (with averages per Sunday from 92 to 111d) and the quietest were November to March (31 to 34d in 1683-84, 43 to 71d in 1684-85). How much each passenger paid is not recorded, but if it was 1d each, as in London, these figures would translate directly into numbers of passengers.

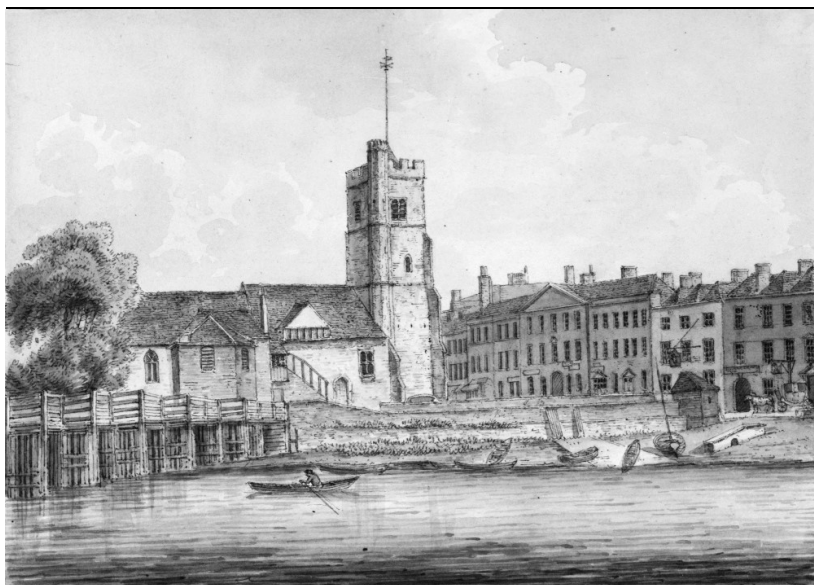
Funds were distributed by the Minister, a churchwarden and one of the watermen (Samuel Dawes). In January 1684 the vestry ordered a distribution 'this hard & frosty season', and thirty-three watermen or their widows or wives benefited from sums ranging from 1s 6d to 5s. In March 1684 there were thirty-three beneficiaries, receiving from 1s 6d to 3s each, evidently to help them cope with the effects of a harsh winter and the river having been frozen. Other payments were more regular ones: to William Fisher, 'being aged and sick'; to Thomas Miller's wife, 'he being in the Kings service she being sick and three small children'; to Nathaniel Fawdry's wife and four children, 'he being in prison' (following which the whole family was sick with 'ye spotted fever' for two months); and to several others for

temporary sickness.¹⁴ By 1685 the problems with the charity had apparently been resolved, and the churchwardens' accounts ceased to deal with it.

The bridge

In 1721 a bridge between Putney and Fulham was proposed and in 1729 it was built. It has often been said that the local watermen were compensated for their loss of work by an annual payment of £62, but it was no part of eighteenth-century philosophy or practice to compensate people for loss of work. Anyway the cross-river trade had provided only a small part of the employment on the river. The watermen would in fact have received nothing if they had not been able to argue that they had a form of property, the Sunday ferry, that would be interfered with by the bridge. In 1726 the watermen of Putney and Fulham, 'being about one hundred, who have a right to the Sunday's foot-ferry between Fulham and Putney', petitioned the House of Commons opposing the Bill for the bridge 'unless satisfaction be made to the petitioners for the said foot-ferry', 'which is their freehold'. They stated that the income amounted to over £100 a year, presumably including what was received both at Putney and Fulham and also the payments to the watermen who worked the boats; later they claimed that the income was £120 after all charges.¹⁵

A Commons Committee referred the petition to the Fulham Bridge Commissioners.¹⁶ The Commissioners took evidence on the matter, but only in respect of Fulham, perhaps because the status of the Sunday ferry was unclear on the Fulham side. A Fulham waterman, aged 84, and the Fulham parish clerk, aged 76, were questioned. They made clear that in Fulham the proceeds from the Sunday ferry were no longer going to the poor:



Putney Parish Church in 1809, a few years before its demolition (apart from the tower) in 1836, showing the bridge toll house on the left in front of the church. By the foreshore on the right is a brick hut which the watermen were allowed to build for shelter in 1656.

(Mike Bull Collection)

That in all the time of their memories (the 1st of which was for above 60 years and the other 59) the watermen of the said parishes always claim'd and had the said Sunday foot ferry to which they all claim'd equal right. That the ancient usage was to take their turns in ye work to pay half a crown for the days worke and put the rest of the money into a chest which money they distributed for relief of

the sick & poor of their own calling but upon a disagreement among themselves about 40 years since they broke up the chest and divided the money and since that time every one took what he could get on ye Fulham side.

The waterman added that 'it was generally thought to be an ancient constitution before his time and that a waterman's widdow having a servant had a right in the said Sunday foot ferry'.¹⁷ Evidently, with nothing written down and there being no resistance from the parish vestry (unlike in Putney), it had been possible to convert the Sunday ferry on the Fulham side into a joint property of all watermen, or even a complete free-for-all. Even so, it was accepted in 1726 that this was a form of property for which compensation was payable.

Determination of the amount was referred to a jury, which concluded that the bridge company should pay an annuity of £31 to each parish. If the Sunday ferry was valued in the same way as the main ferry, at twenty-four years' purchase, that would place the capital value of the Sunday ferry at just under £1500.¹⁸ The deeds providing for the annuity clearly stated that the beneficiaries were to be poor watermen, poor widows of watermen and poor children of watermen. The annuities were now firmly in parish hands, and the funds were to be distributed as the vestries of the two parishes thought fit.¹⁹

Later history

When the Putney vestry made its first decision on the distribution of the annuity in 1730, the sum was equally divided between thirty-five watermen and fifteen widows of watermen.²⁰ The vestry's attitude probably continued to ensure that the annuity was used largely for its stated purpose, though a practice seems to have grown up of selling the right to benefit from it. In 1743 one of the Putney watermen asked the bridge company to pay the annuity, suggesting that the company was slow in doing so, and 'acknowledged that he thought it wrong in selling the poor watermens interest, but apprehended that not above 3 or 4 were in that case'.²¹ In 1820 £2 a year was being paid to each of ten watermen legally settled in the parish (including two members of the Cobb family), £1 to each of three watermen not legally settled, and £2 a year to each of four widows of watermen.²²

In Fulham, on the other hand, commissioners enquiring into charities in 1823 found that the £31 'has been for some years past, distributed indiscriminately among all the inhabitants of the parish, whether rich or poor, who carried on the business of watermen'. They objected, and the Fulham vestry agreed that it would make payments only to poor watermen and poor widows and children of watermen, as provided for in 1728-29. However, Fulham vestry in fact continued the old arrangement until 1866, when it agreed to confine payments to those 'in needy circumstances'. In 1880 the Charity Commissioners allowed it to combine the bridge charity with other parochial charities, as part of the Pensions Branch of the United Charities, and the link with watermen was broken. Existing pensions were protected, but by 1899 only one remained, to the widow of a waterman.²³

In 1880, when the bridge tolls were abolished, the annuities were bought out for capital sums. Putney's payment, when invested in interest-bearing 'Consols', yielded £28 8s 4d a year. This sum was then used to pay pensions of around £4 a year to nine poor watermen who were freemen of the Watermen's Company or to watermen's widows (the figures suggesting that the churchwardens were adding some parish funds).²⁴ The recipients in 1898 included three members of the Phelps and Green families.

In the twentieth century inflation eventually made the fixed sum almost worthless, and the number of watermen also dwindled, but payments were still being made in 1950. It was said then that 'The charity makes small payments – approximately £1 17s twice a year – to each of 7 selected pensioners, who should be poor watermen of the Parish of Putney (freemen of the Watermen's Company), who are unable to work, or their widows or children.' The recipients then included three members of the Green family and one of the Clasper family. The last two applicants seem to have been Frederick James Cobb in November 1952, born in Putney, aged 70 and existing on a state pension of £2 14s 0d (presumably per week), and Mrs Mary Johnson of 5 Charlwood Terrace in November 1953, aged 63 and a Putney resident forty-two years, subsisting on income of £1 12s 6d (again presumably per week) and casual earnings.²⁵ They were the unwitting beneficiaries of seventeenth-century sabbatarianism.

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References

- ¹ Surrey History Centre (hereafter: SHC), QS 2/1/5, p. 159.
- ² *Ibid.*, p. 183.
- ³ Surrey County Council, *Surrey Quarter Sessions records*, vol. 8 (1938), p. 192.
- ⁴ SHC, QS 2/1/5, p. 265.
- ⁵ For this paragraph, see Dorian Gerhold, *Putney and Roehampton in 1665: a street directory and guide* (Wandsworth Paper 16, 2007), pp. 25, 27-29, 36-38.
- ⁶ The National Archives (hereafter TNA), E 179/346.
- ⁷ Gerhold, *Putney and Roehampton in 1665*, pp. 30, 72; British Library, Add 18,986, f. 180; London Metropolitan Archives (hereafter LMA), P95/MRY1/413.
- ⁸ 11 William III c. 21, s. 13, 16.
- ⁹ SHC, QS 2/1/5, pp. 159, 183.
- ¹⁰ Wandsworth Heritage Service (hereafter WHerS).
- ¹¹ LMA, P95/MRY1/413, f. 458.
- ¹² SHC, QS 2/1/5, p. 185.
- ¹³ LMA, P95/MRY1/413, ff. 508-10, 513-16.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, ff. 504, 509-10, 515.
- ¹⁵ *House of Commons Journals*, 1722-27, 15 Apr 1726; TNA, PRO 30/26/12, pp. 4-5.
- ¹⁶ *House of Commons Journals*, 1722-27, 28 April 1726.
- ¹⁷ TNA, PRO 30/26/12, pp. 17-18.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 17, 44.
- ¹⁹ Parliamentary Papers (hereafter PP), *Further report of the Commissioners for inquiring concerning charities*, 1823 (13), pp. 418-19; PP, *Endowed charities (County of London)*, 1901 (133), p. 750.
- ²⁰ WHerS, PP1/1/2, Putney vestry minutes 1726-45, f. 74.
- ²¹ LMA, BC/F/1, Fulham Bridge Company minutes 1738-70, f. 91.
- ²² WHerS, PP1/1/7, Putney vestry minutes 1789-1820, f. 477.
- ²³ PP 1823 (13), p. 419; PP 1901 (133), pp. 308-09, 316, 320.
- ²⁴ PP 1901 (133), p. 750.
- ²⁵ LMA, P95/MRY1/504/16/6, 18, 20.