

From Cradle to the Grave: living, working and dying in late medieval Dover

Care in the Community



For medieval Christians, the Seven Works of Mercy, such as ‘feeding the hungry’, were viewed as vital acts of charity for the benefit of their souls and for the wellbeing of their community. Yet measuring such charity is difficult because generally historians have to rely on wills. In late medieval Dover, a small but increasing number of testators aided the poor, through a set amount, either as cash or food.



Thomas Toky (1484) wanted a total of six quarters of wheat as bread to be distributed to poor people at his funeral and on the anniversary of his death. Others, rather than specifically helping the poor, looked to support their community more broadly. Thomas Curtyer (1528) wished his executors at each of his funeral days (funeral, month's mind, and anniversary) to provide four dozen breads and a vessel of beer for ‘the company rich and poor’.

Some selected specific groups within the poor. Richard Fydeaux (1518) remembered poor children as well as adults at his funeral services. As well as targeting a certain group, Henry Fravell valued the occasion, because he stipulated that twenty poor young single women should receive 6s 8d on the day of their marriage. They were to marry in church and be given the money at “the gospel time of the mass or masses at the time of their marriage.”

Such provision at a time before central government aid was vital, and although charity could not cover all of those in need, on occasion it may have been the difference between life and death.

Author: Dr Sheila Sweetinburgh. Image credits: (top) illumination *The Translation of the Bodies of Aimo and Vermondo* attributed to Anovelo da Imbonate, Milan, c. 1400, in Malibu, Getty, Ms. 26 (87.MN.33), fol. 5v.; (centre left) Fourteenth-century wallpainting in Wickhampton parish church photographed by Imogen Corrigan; (centre right) Marriage ceremony from *The Decretals of Gregory IX*, London, British Library, Royal MS 10 D vii, fol. 233.