

The Problem of the Vagrant

By

Enid Porter

The recent opening, by the Simon Community, of a shelter for vagrants in Newmarket Road, Cambridge has aroused great controversy in the city. Residents in the neighbourhood have complained that the shelter, though it accepts only those who are not drunkards, attracts to the area the alcoholics and the methylated spirits addicts. These men are often violent, they are unpleasant in their habits, they beg for food and money and become abusive if they are refused. They are, along with the non-alcoholics, unable for one reason or another to fit into society, and even in the welfare state there is no place for them except, perhaps, in the already over-crowded mental hospitals.

The Simon Community, a voluntary organisation, does its best to deal with what seems an insoluble problem. Yet it is a problem by no means peculiar to our time; Cambridge, in company with towns and villages throughout the country, has for centuries been faced with it. Most of the tramps, of course, who used to walk the roads with their bundles over their shoulders, were in search of work. Despair and starvation, however, often drove many of them to petty crime. But some were social mis-fits who begged and stole, were violent and abusive, and who caused as much concern to more conventional, law-abiding citizens as do their successors today.

The vagrancy problem became acute at the end of the Middle Ages when, with the development of pasture farming, many villagers were expelled from their holdings. Unable to find work, they drifted into the towns and became wanderers

or robbers. After the Hundred Years War and the Wars of the Roses the countryside was infested with beggars, and the old sources of charity—the gilds and the monasteries—were unable to deal with them.

The State, therefore, took on the task. It was assumed, at first, that all able-bodied beggars preferred idleness to work; so in the reign of Henry VIII it was ordered that they be punished by being whipped twice. They were then given a certificate stating that this punishment had been inflicted and were then allowed to make their way to their native town or village. Here they were expected to settle down to work.

Vagrancy Acts passed enforcing the whipping and branding of beggars

Branding with the letter V (for vagabond) was ordered by an Act of 1547 to be carried out on any person found wandering. The unfortunate man was then obliged to work for two years for the person who had found him. If, after this time, he returned to vagrancy, he was branded with an S (for slave) and put to forced labour for the rest of his life. If he tried to escape he was put to death. Fortunately this cruel Act was soon repealed and the earlier one, which inflicted whipping, was restored.

More Vagrancy Acts were passed, most of them enforcing the whipping and branding of beggars, until the Poor Law Act of 1601 came on to the statute books. This made each parish responsible for the maintenance of its poor. Those unfit to work were to be maintained; the able-

bodied were to be found work; the idle were to be sent to houses of correction. Thomas Hobson, for example, who founded his Spinning House in Cambridge in 1628 to provide a training for the workless, ordered that part of the building be set aside as a prison for "unruly and stubborn rogues."

After the Napoleonic Wars there was widespread economic distress. Food prices soared, unemployment rose and the roads were crowded with hopeless, despairing people drifting from place to place in search of work. Their only shelters were the workhouses which had been set up by an Act of 1722. The presence of wealthy under-graduates, who might be expected to answer appeals for help, drew large numbers of vagrants to Cambridge. They swarmed round the Backs of the Colleges, broke into houses and into College rooms and threateningly demanded money of all and sundry. Many of the beggars were suffering from infectious diseases, and the risk of these being spread about the town was considerable.

In May 1819, some of the leading inhabitants of Cambridge met with the Vice-Chancellor and members of the university to discuss the problem. It was decided that an Anti-Mendicity Society should be formed. This was to appoint an official whose duty would be to look out for vagrants who were begging in the street and, with the assistance of the constables, bring them to court. Those present at the meeting who were magistrates promised to deal with the utmost severity with all offenders brought before them.

How long the Society existed is not known; it had certainly lapsed before 1838. Its place was taken, in 1847, by another and more humane one whose aims were to assist people travelling in search of work by providing them with food and shelter for the night.

In 1848, the Old Manor House in Newmarket Road was opened for this purpose, and came to be known as Mendicity House. In charge of it was a resident Constable and a Matron, and for many years numerous vagrants found shelter there.

The new Society, which took the same name as the first, continued its work until 1871. Then it decided to re-form itself as the Cambridge Charity Organization Society to help not only tramps and beggars but "the really deserving poor."

Vagrants would continue to be lodged, but not in future in Mendicity House but in other lodging houses, while those deemed worthy of help would receive money from the Society's funds or be referred to other charitable organizations. The Society retained its name at a subtitle when, in 1915, it became the Central Aid Society.

In 1878 Mendicity House and other properties belonging to the owners—the Parker family—were put up for sale. They were purchased by the hastily-formed Cambridge Improved Industrial Dwelling Company. Dilapidated tenements were pulled down and rebuilt; new dwellings were erected on the corner of East Road and Crispin Street, while eleven cottages were built behind Mendicity House in a newly-made road named Leeke Street after a former Vicar of St. Matthew's parish. "Improved" these dwellings may have been by 19th century standards, but all of Leeke Street has now been condemned and has disappeared.

Much unemployment and many acts of pilfering

Three houses in East Road were converted to a coffee tavern and lodging house which was managed at first by the Barnwell Coffee House Association, and later by the British Women's Temperance Association who named it the White Ribbon. This later passed to the Salvation Army who still run it as a men's hostel, thus maintaining the tradition of helping the down and out.

Vagrancy, however, continued to be a problem. In 1887, for example, at a meeting of the Board of Guardians at the Union Workhouse, now Chesterton Hospital, it was reported that the closing of the coprolite works at Milton had led to much unemployment. The job-less loitered about the streets and there had been many acts of pilfering. But the only protection that Milton and Landbeach had was one police-officer stationed at Waterbeach, and he had a district of about 9 miles' radius to cover. One officer, it was said, was not enough to deal with the numbers of tramps who travelled daily from Ely to Cambridge.

Tramps seeking shelter in Chesterton Union were not allowed to enter the workhouse before a certain time each night. A public-spirited Cambridge woman, early in this century,



Mendicity House, Newmarket Road, Cambridge, as it appeared in 1962. The large windows above the shops are those of the former dormitories for vagrants.

took over two cottages which then stood at the corner of Union Lane and Chesterton High Street, and opened them as a Wayfarers' Rest. Here the tramps could spend a few hours and have a cup of tea and something to eat. Before leaving for the workhouse, however, their spiritual needs were attended to, for they were conducted upstairs to a room known as the chapel, where a portion of the Bible was read to them.

The Simon Community's work at the present time is, therefore, a continuance of what has been attempted before in Cambridge. The vagrants are fewer in number now, though, but they are more difficult to deal with than those of the past. They are, almost all of them, outcasts from the society which they have themselves rejected. The meths. drinkers, in particular, need skilled help—confinement in a prison cell when they became paralytically drunk is no real solution to the problem. The

police can, and do of course, arrest any of the vagrants who are seen openly begging in the streets, but here again, imprisonment does not turn the offender into a normal member of society.

The law which prohibits begging is, however, known. No longer is it necessary to place at the entrances of towns and villages warning signs announcing the penalties which can be incurred. One of these old vagrancy boards is to be seen in the Cambridge Folk Museum. It hung, until 30 years ago, on the wall of the first house in Rampton, on the Willingham side of the village. Painted on it, under the heading RAMPTON, which told the traveller at which village he had arrived, are the words:

All Vagrants who are seen Begging in this Town will be Apprehended and Punished as the Law directs.

How many, one wonders, of the weary, foot-sore vagrants who passed through Rampton could read?