

Rotha Mary Clay, The Medieval Hospitals of England. Methuen & Co. London, 1909.

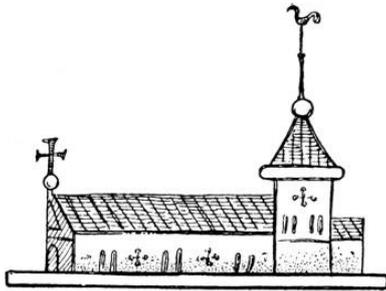
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## CHAPTER I

### HOSPITALS FOR WAYFARERS AND THE SICK

*“Founded for the maintenance of poor pilgrims and other infirm persons resorting thither to remain until they are healed of their infirmities.”*

*“For the poor, for persons going to Rome, for others coming to Canterbury and needed shelter, and for lying-in women.”* (St. Thomas’, Canterbury.)



I. ST. JOHN'S HOSPITAL, OXFORD

[Illustration: St. John's Hospital.]

The earliest charitable institutions of England were houses of hospitality. In sketching the development of these guest-houses we must bear in mind that the hospital (derived from *hospes*, a host or guest) was a wayside shelter for all comers.

#### First Period (*circa* 925 – 1170)

Travellers were exposed to peril by the rudeness of the times, but in those early days hospitality was regarded as a solemn obligations. To receive any stranger was a

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duty : to welcome the passing pilgrim was a sacred privilege. Although the private entertainment of guests was widely practised, some public institutions were required. Tradition tells of at least two “hospitals” or hospices founded in the tenth century (925 – 940). Both were in Yorkshire, <sup>1</sup> one being in the distant country parts, the other in the populous town. At Flixton in Holderness was a house of refuge “to preserve travelers from being devoured by the wolves and other voracious forest beasts.” <sup>2</sup> The city of York, on the other hand, was so great a place of thoroughfare that it was impossible to entertain all who came. Athelstan, recognizing that the Canons of the Minster were men of holy life, active in helping the needy who flocked to them, assisted them in their hospitality by the foundation of St. Peter’s hospital.

Two other early houses of charity are ascribed to the Saxon bishops Oswald and Wulstan of Worcester. In the eleventh century at least we emerge from tradition, for it seems clear that St. Wulstan founded that hospital near his cathedral city which afterwards bore his name. It will be remembered that bishops were especially bound by their vows at consecration to be given to hospitality. In pre-Norman days, the solemn question was in substance what is asked to-day : “Wilt thou shew mercy and kindness, for the name of the Lord, to the poor, the stranger, and all in want?” (*pauperibus et peregrinis omnibusque indigentibus*). To this the elected bishop re-

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plied, “I will.” This formula occurs in the Exeter Pontifical, compiled about nine hundred years ago, and is repeated in Osmund’s Sarum Use.

There were, of course, pilgrims among those who sojourned in early hostels. Englishmen have always loved travel. Not only did our Saxon forefathers journey to Rome (receiving shelter by the way in hospitals of English foundation), but they constantly visited their national shrines. Probably a fresh impetus was given to pilgrimage by the coming of the Normans. Monastic life was strengthened, and this was a guarantee of hospitality. “Guests are to be received as if they were Christ Himself,” said the rule of St. Benedict. In the century after the Conquest, as in those which preceded it, the chief works of mercy were done in the monastery. There was the *hospitulum* within the abbey-gate, as at St. Mary’s, York ; and the “Strangers’ Hall” at Winchester. Then followed the shelter outside the walls, as at Battle, referred to (*circa* 1076) as “the house of the pilgrims which is called the hospital.” During the twelfth century more independent foundations became common. All sorts and conditions of men were lodged—wayfarers, invalids, and even lepers.

About the year 1148, St. Bartholomew’s, Smithfield, was the resort of sick pilgrims, of whom “many and innumerable were schewid tokynnys of myracles.” The patients who flocked to the famous shrine and hospital were “langwissyng men greuyd with uariant sorys” ; one sought “remedie of his akyngge hede,” another suffered from “bleriednes of yen” (eyes), and yet another from “ryngyng of his erys.” Victims of the falling sickness

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(epilepsy), paralysis, dropsy, fevers, insanity, found relief ; deaf and dumb were healed ; a child born blind received sight from “the heuenly leche.”

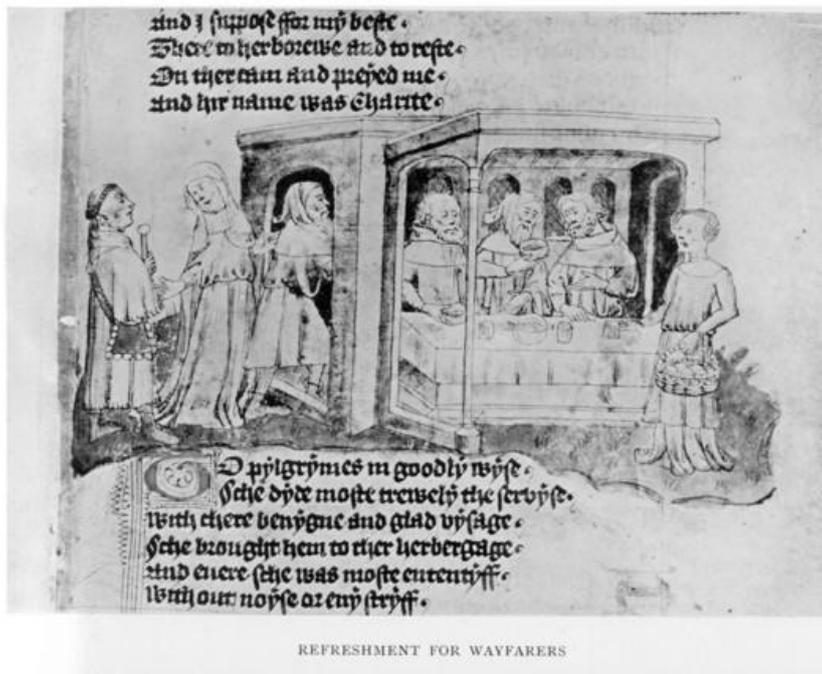
Theobald, Archbishop of Canterbury, about 1141, invited help for “the hospital house of Dover, which two brethren, Osbern and Godwin, are diligently building for the reception of the poor and strangers.” This hospital of St. Bartholomew (Buckland) was also used for lepers. The need of further provision for travellers was felt, and a benefactor made extensive grants on condition that a house was provided for the reception of needy people disembarking from ships ; before 1163 reference is made to the *hospitium* for strangers. It was doubtless frequented by voyagers returning from the Crusades ; but before long an event occurred which brought multitudes to Dover, and then the old hospital proving insufficient, became chiefly the resort of lepers, and a new Maison Dieu was built near the quay. (See Frontispiece.)

#### Second Period (circa 1170 – 1270)

The year 1170 marks an epoch, ushering in the great pilgrimage within and towards England. When the shrine of St. Thomas of Canterbury became the goal of pious wayfarers it was necessary to find accommodation for them. The hospitals of Canterbury and Southwark bearing the Martyr’s name were among the earliest. Within a few years such houses (often called *Domus Dei*) were founded in most of the southern ports and along the Pilgrim’s Way, as at Dover, Ospringe, and Maidstone. At Strood “the poor, weak, infirm and impotent, as well neighbouring inhabitants as travellers from distant

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[Illustration: Plate I Refreshment for wayfarers.]

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places,” cared for “until they die or depart healed.” Norfolk, like Kent, was studded with houses of charity, especially near the highway to Waslsingham. Thirteen pilgrims were lodged at Bec, near Billingford. At Thedford there was a hospital near the passage of the river. Among other early hospitals we may enumerate those of Newcastle, Hexham, Ripon, Stamford, Aynho, London (St. Mary’s), Bridgwater, and Ledbury.

The hospital was a guest-house and infirmary in one. That on (sic) the outskirts of Oxford was called in a charter (*circa* 1194) *Herebergeria Hospitalis S. Joh. Bapt.*; in 1233 this was refounded (Fig 1) “that therein infirm people and strangers might receive remedy of their health and necessity.” The inmates of St. Nicholas’, Salisbury, are described as passengers (*transeuntes*) and as sick and inform (*egroti et infirmi*). The same two-fold work of charity was carried on at Chichester, as shown by St. Mary’s statutes :—

“If anyone in infirm health and destitute of friends should seek admission for a term, until he shall recover, let him be gladly received and assigned a bed . . . . In regard to the poor people who are received late at night, and go forth early in the morning, let the warden take care that their feet are washed, and, as far as possible, their necessities attended to.”

There is a MS. in the British Museum entitled *The Pilgrim*. It is an allegorical poem in the manner of the “Pilgrim’s Progress,” and sets forth the adventures of the traveller. The illustration (Pl I) and descriptions were probably

taken from the experience of earthly pilgrimage. “Charity” is seen welcoming strangers,

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at which work she was always busy in medieval England :—

“And I suppose for my beste  
There to herborewe and to reste  
On ther cam and preyed me  
And her name was *Charite*  
To pylgrymes in goodly wyse  
Sche dyde moste trewely the seruyse  
With chere benygne and glad uysage  
She brought hem to ther herbergage.”<sup>3</sup>

Among shrines which the pious Englishman visited may be mentioned Bury St. Edmunds, Westminster, Durham, Beverley, St. Albans, Waltham.<sup>4</sup>

#### Third Period (1270 – 1470)

(a) *Pilgrimage and Vagrancy*.—The greatest century of pilgrimage was past, but vagrancy was an ever-increasing problem, and in as much as it affected the social life of England, it affected hospitals, directly or indirectly.



[Illustration: A pilgrim.]

In the Statute of Labourers, drawn up in 1350, an attempt had been made to restrain desultory wandering, idleness, mendicancy and indiscriminate almsgiving. This was followed by many ordinances, local and general. By a proclamation in 1359 the municipal authorities of London declared that such

unworthy beggars “do waste divers alms, which would otherwise be given to many poor folks, such as lepers, blind, halt,

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and persons oppressed with old age and divers other maladies.” In 1369 they issued a precept “for mendicants, vagrants and pilgrims to leave the city.” The Statutes of Westminster (1383) ordered inquiry concerning vagabonds “wandering from place to place, running in the country more abundantly than they were wont in times past.” The Act of 1388 declared that those who “go in pilgrimage as beggars” when fit for employment, should be dealt with according to the previous Statute. It will be observed that these measures were formed from an economic standpoint, not to check pilgrimage as such.

Although pilgrimage was declining, there were still many pilgrims. Some of these were professional palmers, and hirelings fulfilling vows by proxy ; for there are numerous bequests in the fourteenth century to persons undertaking journeys on the testator’s behalf to Canterbury, Walsingham, and Bury St. Edmunds, as well as to St. James of Compostella, Rome, or the Holy Land. The special “Jubilee” at Canterbury in 1420 was attended by 100,000 persons, and in 1434 thousands set sail for Compostella.

(b) *Provision for temporary relief.*—Existing houses of hospitality were kept up, but a growing tendency to discriminate amongst applicants may be noticed. In many cases more beds were reserved for chronic invalids than for casual comers. St. Thomas’ hospital, Canterbury, carried on its old work, but the renewed statutes of Archbishop Stratford (1342) direct “that poor pilgrims in good health shall be entertained only for one night . . . that greater regard shall be had for the sick than for the well pilgrims.” With some diplomacy it describes itself, in a petition to the Pope, as designed “for persons going

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to Rome (*Romipete*), for others coming to Canterbury and needing shelter,”<sup>5</sup> etc.

The chief building periods was over, as far as this particular kind of temporary provision is concerned, but one or two new foundations must be mentioned. St. John’s, Winchester, was built in 1275 “for the relief of sick and lame soldiers, poor pilgrims, and necessitous wayfaring men, to have diet and lodging thereto fit and convenient for one night or longer, as their abilities to travel gave leave.” In 1393, the Bishop of Ely offered an indulgence to persons contributing to the sustentation of a hospital at Brentford, which consisted of a chapel, newly constructed, “with two houses built there, furnished with beds and other necessaries for the entertainment of poor travelers.” The old hospital at Brackley was reconstituted for the same purpose (1425). It was, however suppressed sixty years later, because hospitality was being neglected.

One special form of temporary relief came to the front about this time. The assistance of women in childbirth was named in the Petition and Statute of 1414 as part of the recognized aim and scope of the hospital charity. The heading

to this chapter alludes to the work undertaken at St. Thomas', Canterbury, in 1363. The foundation deed of Holy Trinity, Salisbury, sets forth that "lying-in women are cared for until they are delivered, recovered and churched." The Spital near Blyth was newly constructed in 1446 for the lodging of strangers and distressed women.

It is recorded that the two London infirmaries of St. Mary without Bishopsgate and St. Bartholomew under-

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HOSPITAL OF ST. THOMAS, CANTERBURY  
FOR PILGRIMS

[Illustration: Plate II Hospital of St. Thomas, Canterbury.]

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took this work ; in both institutions the touching provision was made that if the mother died, her child would be brought up there until the age of seven. <sup>6</sup> In the year 1437 privileges were granted to the latter hospital "in consideration of their great charges in receiving the poor, feeble and infirm, keeping women in childbirth until their purification, and sometimes feeding their infants until weaned." William Gregory, a citizen of London, describing in his commonplace book various foundations, says of "Bartholomewe ys Spetylle" :—

"Hyt ys a place of grete comforte to pore men as for hyr loggyng, and yn specyalle unto yong wymmen that have mysse done that ben whythe chylde. There they ben delyueryde, and unto the tyme of

purifycacyon they have mete and drynke of the placys coste, and fulle honestly gydyd and kepte.”

General hospitals for the sick were thus in process of development. St. Bartholomew’s was steadily fulfilling its founder’s vow to provide a place for the “recreacion of poure men.” After three and a half centuries of usefulness, a roll of 1464 records with approbation “works done within the hospital in relief of poor pilgrims, soldiers, sailors and others of all nation.”

#### Fourth Period (*circa* 1470 – 1547)

(a) It is evident that pilgrimage was no longer an important factor in the social life of the country. The daily resort to shrines had practically ceased, but the special anniversaries were kept. Such pious travellers as there were, lodged chiefly in inns. At Glastonbury a Pilgrim’s Inn was built by Abbot John, about the year 1475, to accommodate those visiting the holy places of

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St. Joseph of Arimathæa and St. Dunstan. A later abbot, Richard Beere, writing to Archbishop Warham to defend the genuineness of St. Dunstan’s relics, stated that people had come from far and near to visit the new shine, especially upon St. Dunstan’s Day (1508).<sup>7</sup> Although the regular stream of pilgrims in Canterbury was no longer seen day by day, the great “Jubilee” celebrations were popular, the last one being kept in 1520. At that time the needs of visitors were met by special provision, a post being set up in the main street with “letters expressing the ordering of uitell and lodyng for pylgrymes.” Probably the bailiff and citizens made all arrangements for bed and board as they had done in 1420.

Vagrancy still constituted an increasingly grave problem. By “An Acte against vacabounds and beggers,” in 1495 (re-enacted 1503), previous legislation was amended and “every vagabound heremyte or pilgryme,” partially exempt hitherto, was henceforth compelled to fare like wandering soldier, shipman or university clerk. In a letter from Henry VIII to the Mayor of Grimsby it is observed that the relief of the impotent is much diminished by the importunate begging of the sturdy and idle, and it is required that measures be taken “that the weedes over growe not the come.”<sup>8</sup> [an interesting reference to the New Testament parable of the weeds and the grain, Matt 13:24-30, where Satan sows weeds (vagabonds) among God’s good grain (the infirm).] The Statutes became increasingly stern, and able-bodied beggars were scourged with the lash from town to town by the Act of 1530-1. But “the greatest severities hitherto enacted were mild in comparison with the severe provisions of the enactment: of the first year of Edward VI (1547). If the young king’s father had literally chastised beggars with whips, his own counselors desired that they should be chastised with scor-

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pions. They might be reduced to the condition of slaves : their owners might put a ring round their necks or limbs, and force them to work by beating and chains, whilst a runaway could be branded on the face with a hot iron. <sup>9</sup> This brutal law was repealed two yeas later.

(b) Where towns were few and far between, the need of shelter for strangers was especially felt. Extensive works of hospitality were done by religious houses, particularly in the northern counties. That fresh provision, although on a small scale, was still made for shelter, indicates its necessity. When an almshouse was built at Northallerton (1476), accommodation was made not only for thirteen pensioners, but for two destitute and distressed travelers, who should stay a night and no longer. A hostel solely for temporary shelter was founded at Durham (1493). One Cuthbert Billingham directed the provision of eight beds in a “massendeue or spittle,” where “all poor trauelyng people ther herbery or logyng asking for the loue of Gode shall be herbered and logide.” In Westmoreland, a little hospital, with two beds for passers-by, was built by John Brunskill at Brough-under-Stainmoor (1536) : it was situated on the pass into Yorkshire.

At seaports and in places of thoroughfare, shelter was still provided for travellers. God’s House, Southampton, expended 28 annually upon “daily hospitality to wayfarers and strangers from beyond the sea,” and similar charity was provided at Dover. Leland describes St. Thomas’, Canterbury, as “An Hospial within the Town on the Kinges Bridge for poore Pilgremes and way faring men.” At Sandwich there was a “Harbinge” attached to St. John’s almshouse. Provision was made for lodgers,

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and the buildings included the chambre of harbor for strange wemen, the gentilmen chambre and the long harbor chambre” (1489). The town authorities ordered “that no persons do harbour beggars, who are to resort to St. John’s Hospital.” (1524).

The existing provision for temporary relief was in fact wholly inadequate. In the metropolis, for example, there was a crying need. It was stated by Henry VII (sic) [This should read Henry VIII] in 1509 that :—

“There be fewe at noon such commune Hospitalls within this our Reame, and that for lack of them, infinite nombre of pouer nedie people miserably dailly die, no man putting hande of helpe or remedie.”

The king, recognizing the need, planned to convert the old Savoy Palace into a magnificent institution (Pl. XIV) in which “to lodge nightly one hundred poor folks.” If this charity corresponded with the recent Statute, it would relieve those vagrants would alone were exempt, namely, women in travail and persons in extreme sickness. The king contemplated building institutions similar to the Savoy in York and Coventry, but the design was not carried out.

The problems arising from true poverty and false mendicancy were, of course intimately connected with hospital life. A graphic picture of the difficulties which beset administrators of charity about the year 1536, is given by Robert Copland in *The hye way to the Spytell hous*. The author states that one wintry day, he took refuge from the snow-storm in the porch of a hospital, probably St. Bartholomew's. Here he got deep into conversation with the porter of the house. While they talked, there gathered at the gate people of very poor estate—lame, blind, bare-

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foot—and Copland, who does not despise the honest poor, only those who live in need and idleness, inquires whether they admit all who ask for lodging. The porter at first answers, “forsooth, yes,” and Copland goes on to protest against indiscriminate hospitality. :—

“Me think that therin ye do no ryght  
Nor all suche places of hospytalyte  
To confort people of suche iniquyte.  
But syr I pray you, of your goodness and fauour  
Tell me which ye leaue, and which ye do socour.”

The porter replies that the house is no supporter of sham beggars. There are some who counterfeit leprosy, and others who put soap in their mouth to make it foam, and fall down as if they had “Saynt Cornelys euyll.” He goes on to describe those who hang about the day and sleep at the night at St Bartholomew's church door—drunkards, spendthrifts, swearers and blasphemers, those who wear soldiers' clothing, but are vagabonds, and men who pretend to have been shipwrecked. Many of these live by open beggary, with bag, dish and staff :—

“And euer haunteth among such ryf raf  
One tyme to this spyttell, another to that.”

The porter intimates that an effort is made to discriminate among the daily harboured, but he confesses that they are obliged to receive many unsatisfactory men, and disreputable women so numerous that they are weary of them ; but they refuse stubborn knaves who are not ill, for they would have over many. Indeed, the aim of the hospital is to relieve those who cannot work and are friendless—the sick, aged, bedridden, diseased, wayfaring men, maimed soldiers, and honest folk fallen into poverty. (See p. xxiv.)

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It is clear, however, that during the sixteenth century there was much genuine distress besides unthrifty beggary and sham sickness. From various economic causes there was a considerable increase of destitution. Legislation

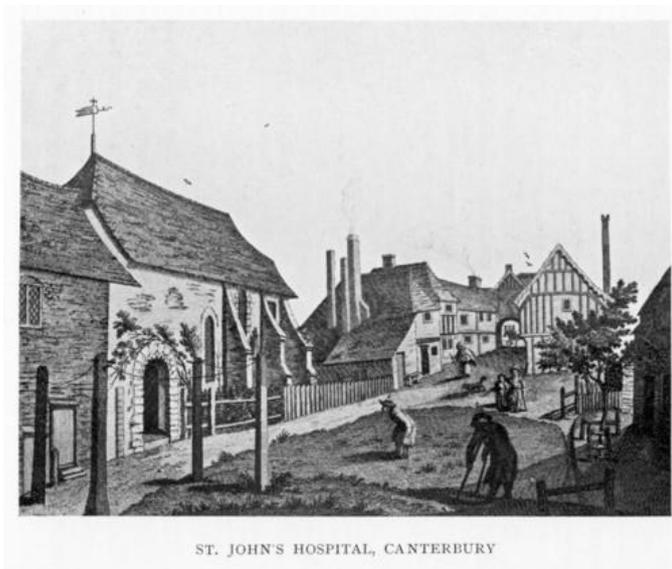
entirely failed to solve the problem of an ever-shifting population. The Statute of 1530-1 had recognized the value of charitable foundations by its clause :—  
“provided also, that it be lawful to all masters and governors of hospitals, to lodge and harbour any person or persons of charity and alms.” Although hospitals had been abused, the neglect of the sick and homeless which their reduction involved was a far worse evil. One writer after another breaks out into descriptions of the increased poverty and pain. Brinklow, in *The Lamentacyon of a Christian agaynst the Cytye of London* (1545), bewails the condition of the poor :—

“London, being one of the flowers of the worlde, as touchinge worldlye riches, hath so manye, yea innumerable of poor people forced to go from dore to dore, and to syt openly in the streets a beggyng, and many . . . lye in their howses in most greuous paynes, and dye for lacke of aide of the riche. I thinke in my judgement, under heaven is not so lytle prouision made for the pore as in London, of so riche a Cytie.”<sup>10</sup>

Again, referring to the old order and the new, *A Supplication of the Poore Commons* (1546) speaks of poor impotent creatures as “now in more penurye than euer they were.” Once they had scraps, now they have nothing. “Then had they hospitals, and almshouses to be lodged in, but nowe they lye and stouie in the stretes. Then was their number great, but nowe much greater.”

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ST. JOHN'S HOSPITAL, CANTERBURY

[Illustration: Plate III St. John's hospital, Canterbury.]

~Footnotes

1. There were probably other Saxon hospitals. Leland notes the tradition that St. Giles', Beverley, and St. Nicholas', Pontefract, were founded "afore the Conquest."
2. Dugdale, charter temp. Henry VI.
3. Cott. Tib. A., vii. f. 90.
4. See also J. C. Wall, *Shrines of British Saints* in this Series.
5. Cal. Pap. Letters, 4, p. 36.
6. Close Rolls 1344, 1353.
7. Chron. and Mem. 63, p. 434.
- 8.. Hist, MSS. 14th R. (8) 249.
9. C. J. Ripton-Turner, *Vagrants and Vagrancy*, 1887.
10. Early Eng. Text Soc. Extra Series 22, p. 90.

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