

## The Provision Trade Charity since 1835

### ‘Providing for the providers’

A visit to the London Metropolitan Archives to examine the Minutes of the Provision Trade Benevolent Institution is an unexpectedly moving experience. The contents of the weighty leather-bound volumes offer insight into the social history of London from 1835 onwards. They tell a story of the charity’s philanthropic founding fathers, the supporters and benefactors throughout the centuries, the sufferings of the poor and destitute and the ways in which funds were raised to keep the charity’s finances in good shape.

It all started in the first week of October 1835. 'Handbills were circulated throughout the metropolis calling upon cheesemongers, pork butchers and poulterers to establish a benevolent institution for the relief of their unfortunate brethren and which invited all persons favourable to attend a public meeting at Anderton's Coffee House, Fleet Street, London on 29<sup>th</sup> instant to discuss the subject'.

However, as it soon became clear that cheesemongers were averse to pork butchers and poulterers joining the initiative, the charity became known as the Cheesemongers' Benevolent Institution. It was founded upon the principle of 'pensionary relief' and had the 'special object of relief of indigent or incapacitated Master Cheesemakers and their widows'. But it was not long before the cheesemongers were joined by 'Provision Merchants, Agents or Brokers, Butter and Egg Salesmen, Cheese Factors, Bacon Dryers and Lard Refiners.'

All subscribers were asked to pay one guinea or a life subscription of ten guineas. The number of pensioners admitted was dependent on the charity's means: each male was to receive £24 per annum while each female £10 in monthly payments. All had to live within 12 miles of St Paul's Cathedral.

#### **Annuitants and Scrutineers**

As remains the case today, each applicant was vetted by the committee to establish whether they were 'proper objects for the bounty of the institution'. Some were found wanting, as was the case in 1838 when one of the 'scrutineers' (as the applicant assessors were then called) reported that a certain female's grant should be suspended because she was carrying on a business as a Court dressmaker.

A large proportion of the applicants whose lives had been 'suddenly overtaken by calamities' were, however, successful after thorough investigation. One Daniel Porter who lived in a small back room on the 1<sup>st</sup> floor, serving as a dwelling and bedroom, had 'the wolf of want kept from the door by the bounty of the institution'. By 1870, the charity's funds totalled eleven thousand, two hundred and thirteen pounds, two shillings and tuppence and had distributed funds to 160 elected pensioners. Some twenty years later, the charity held a special banquet to celebrate Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. The menu included such delicacies as lark puddings, black game, codfish and oyster sauce, fried smelts and cutlets of sweetbread. As patron of the charity, the Queen donated £50 and the previously eight unsuccessful candidates for funding were elected as "annuitants" by special resolution of the Annual General Meeting to celebrate the '60<sup>th</sup> year of the reign of her most Gracious Majesty Queen Victoria.'

### **Change of name**

Appeals for funds from members of the provision trades raised substantial sums, which led one council member to remark in 1893: "while there are by far too many wealthy men who live only for themselves, there is still a goodly number who take a great interest in the welfare of their less fortunate brethren and are ready to extend to them the hand of generosity".

A certain John B. Sainsbury was elected to the council in 1911. In 1914, it was recorded that "it has some time been felt that the appellation of Cheesemonger, though of ancient origin and respectable in itself, hardly suits the condition of the Trade as at present carried on, and therefore it has been suggested that the name of the Institution be changed to 'The Provision Trade Benevolent Institution' which is thought will now be more appropriate." The objects of the Society remained unaltered.

The change of name coincided with the outbreak of the First World War in July 1914, but it was business as usual for the charity. Greetings were sent to members of the committee on active service, including Mr E.K. Shaw and Mr N.F. Thompson, who were serving the country on the front. The retirement of a Mr J.W. Wheeler-Bennett prompted a donation from him of 1,000 guineas "as a thank-offering for a successful business career". The money was invested in 4½ per cent war stock, which was subsequently converted into a 5 per cent war loan.

### **Spirit of giving continues**

Seven decades on, on 29<sup>th</sup> October 1985, the PTBI under the Chairmanship of Eric Coombs organised a charity ball at Harrods to commemorate the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the PTBI and to raise more funds. The event – thanks to the many sponsors – raised the princely sum of £50,000.

"One of the main reasons for raising funds was for the PTBI to have its own social worker to look after our beneficiaries in their own homes and I'm pleased to say this

still continues,” recalls Eric Coombes, who was also instrumental in buying the premises for the Provision Trades Federation in Clerkenwell Green.

In the 25<sup>th</sup> Annual Report in 1850, the Committee noted that “philanthropists must observe feelings of satisfaction that while wealth and commerce are pursuing their course with rapid strides that the spirit of benevolence is also making corresponding progress.” That same spirit of benevolence still endures within the PTBI to this day thanks to the donations and efforts of companies still engaged in the provisions trade.