

Parish typology and the operation of the Poor Laws in early nineteenth-century Oxfordshire*

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Abstract

This article investigates a number of parliamentary reports published during the first half of the nineteenth century to demonstrate that the distinction between open and close parishes was a crucial determinant of the ways in which the poor laws and the laws of settlement were implemented in English rural society. Focusing on Oxfordshire, it shows that three seemingly separate issues – whether parishes in different economic circumstances adopted different policies on poor relief, whether the parishes responding to *Rural Queries* of 1832 were representative of parishes in general, and whether the mid-nineteenth-century parliamentary returns properly reflected the real condition of the rural localities – are closely inter-related and that parish typology provides an important clue to understanding that inter-relationship.

Historians of nineteenth-century rural England have generally agreed that there were considerable, and often contrasting, differences between neighbouring villages in terms of their economic, social and demographic features. A great deal of scholarly energy has been devoted to establishing the nature and causes of the differences. As an effective analytical tool for such research, the notion of 'open' and 'close' (or 'closed') parishes has attracted considerable attention. For its economic livelihood, a close parish, where typically one or two elite individuals exercised tight control over the activities of parishioners, depended on the labour supply of the neighbouring open parish, where a diversified power structure prevented monopolistic or oligarchal control over parish affairs. The existence of a close parish is thus conditioned by the existence of a nearby open parish, the latter being closely interconnected with the former through labour mobility and the transfer of the maintenance costs for the labouring population.¹ A substantial body of research has explored various aspects of this distinction between open and close parishes, including demographic features, the timing of the introduction of agricultural machinery, and patterns of rural disturbances.² Of particular interest has been the question

* I would like to thank Leigh Shaw-Taylor and Ann Thompson for their comments on an early draft of this article.

¹ For the definition of open and close parishes, B. A. Holderness, "Open" and "close" parishes in England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries', *AgHR* 20 (1972), pp. 126–39; D. R. Mills, *Lord and peasant in nineteenth century Britain* (1980); Sarah Banks, 'Nineteenth-century scandal or twentieth-century model? A new look at "open" and "close" parishes', *EcHR* 41 (1988), pp. 51–73.

² To name a few of such works, John Broad, 'Parish economies of welfare, 1650–1834', *Historical J.* 42 (1999), pp. 985–1006; E. J. T. Collins, 'The rationality of "sur-

plus" agricultural labour: mechanization in English agriculture in the nineteenth century', *AgHR* 35 (1987), pp. 36–46; J. R. Walton, 'Aspects of agrarian change in Oxfordshire' (unpublished D.Phil thesis, University of Oxford, 1976), p. 406; Eric J. Hobsbawm, and George Rudé, *Captain Swing* (1968); Andrew Charlesworth, 'The development of the English rural proletariat and social protest, 1700–1850: a comment', in Mick Reed and Roger Wells (eds), *Class, conflict and protest in the English countryside, 1700–1880* (1990), pp. 54–64.

of whether and to what extent poor relief and settlement business was differently administered in parishes across the contrasting typology.³ Although some historians have expressed reservations on the utility of the open/close parish distinction, the typology has been so widely accepted as a meaningful conceptual framework that it now features in much research into the history of agriculture and the labour market.⁴

This is not to say, however, that the way the open/close parish distinction is used is uniform across the research. A large number of works employ the terms as a way of describing the socio-economic characteristics of the parishes which they discuss.⁵ They classify individual parishes in terms of openness and closeness principally to depict their basic nature, but they do not use the distinction to investigate the relationship which any one parish bears to neighbouring parishes or to parishes within a moderate distance. Other works employ the terms to evaluate, explicitly or implicitly, the degree of 'openness or closeness'. For example, some research has traced the evolution of certain parishes showing characteristically open or close features. By examining the economic and social changes experienced by individual parishes, and thereby explaining the changing process of parochial characteristics over time, this research has made an important contribution to the study of the social structure of early modern and modern rural England.⁶ However, this kind of work is possible only for those parishes which have ample surviving data on their social and economic conditions, and is therefore restricted to a small number of parishes, usually located at some distance from each other. It thus makes inter-parochial comparison almost impossible.⁷

Given that comparison between parishes of varying natures located within short distances of each other is essential if the open/close parish distinction is to be fruitfully employed, close attention should be paid to the spatial distribution of parishes of different types. Such efforts were already made by mid-nineteenth-century commentators of the open and close parishes, the first generation to discuss the distinctions between parishes. They were eager to count the numbers of open and close parishes in different regions in order to establish regional patterns.⁸

³ W. Apfel, and P. Dunkley, 'English rural society and the new poor law: Bedfordshire, 1834-47', *Social History* 10 (1985), pp. 37-68; Anne Digby, *Pauper palaces* (1978); B. K. Song, 'Landed interest, local government, and the labour market in England, 1750-1850', *ECHR* 51 (1998), pp. 465-88.

⁴ For example, J. V. Beckett, *The aristocracy in England, 1660-1914* (1986), p. 370; Alan Armstrong, *Farmworkers: a social and economic history, 1770-1980* (1988), pp. 61-87; G. E. Mingay (ed.), *The agrarian history of England and Wales*, VI, 1750-1850 (1989), pp. 769, 823; Ian D. Whyte, *Migration and society in Britain, 1550-1830* (2000), pp. 38-39. For the reservations, Banks, 'Nineteenth-century scandal'; James S. Taylor, *Poverty, migration, and settlement in the Industrial Revolution: sojourners' narratives* (1989), p. 175; Roger Wells, 'Social conflict and protest in the English countryside in the early nineteenth century: a rejoinder', in Reed and Wells (eds), *Class, conflict and protest*, pp. 65-81.

⁵ For example, D. H. Morgan, *Harvesters and*

harvesting, 1840-1900: a study of rural proletariat (1982).

⁶ A good example is the work on an Oxfordshire parish. Raphael Samuel, '"Quarry roughs": life and labour in Headington Quarry, 1860-1920', in Samuel (ed.), *Village life and labour* (1975), pp. 99, 139-264; E. Mason, 'Headington Quarry c. 1820-1860: a study of a nineteenth-century open village', *Oxoniensia* 54 (1989), pp. 363-78.

⁷ David Spencer's recent article emphasizes that for the proper understanding of the formation of parish distinction the focus should be shifted from structure (e.g. landownership) to power and interests. Spencer, 'Reformulating the "closed" parish thesis: associations, interests, and interaction', *J. Hist. Geography* 26 (2000), pp. 83-98. Although theoretically valuable, his approach is, in practice, applicable only to those parishes with particularly rich data.

⁸ BPP, 1850, XXVII, *Reports on settlement and removal of the poor*. For a similar effort by later historians, Holderness, '"Open" and "close" parishes'.

This approach is however not without a weakness. Some historians have stressed that the parish distinction should be viewed not in terms of a clear-cut dichotomy but in terms of a continuum on which parishes with different degrees of openness/closeness are located side by side.⁹ This implies that the emphasis should be on the *relative* differentials between parishes. For example, if an extremely close parish (a parish with a large labour deficit) is surrounded by parishes of various kinds, the former may well attract workforce not only from extremely open parishes (with a large labour surplus) but also from parishes of an intermediate nature (with only a limited or temporary labour surplus). From this viewpoint, counting the numbers of what contemporaries regarded as open and close parishes, which were likely to be parishes showing extreme degrees of openness and closeness, does not seem to be a productive approach. However, it is also true that the present lack of research based on the comparative approach calls for a fresh investigation in this area.

This article is an attempt to illustrate the merits of what the contemporary commentators tried to achieve. In other words, it will take a comparative approach to the composition of parishes in English rural areas for the purpose of establishing whether or not there were systematic differences in the administration of the poor laws and the laws of settlement. Using the quantitative data for the early 1830s, this article will employ the statistical technique of cluster analysis to measure the relative openness/closeness of the great majority of the parishes within a sizeable geographical boundary. The region under discussion is Oxfordshire, one of the counties for which there are abundant data, both in terms of contemporary comments about open and close parishes and in terms of relevant statistics on population, landownership, and poor relief. This article will demonstrate the validity of these measurements by comparing the results of the cluster analysis with contemporary observations on the open/close parish distinction. It will then use the results to provide answers to three issues raised by earlier debates about the poor laws. First, using the parish-level data derived from two early nineteenth-century parliamentary reports, this article will explore the ways in which parishes with different resources reacted to the economic and social conditions they faced. How much relief was given to how large a proportion of the population across parishes with different economic and demographic circumstances is undoubtedly an important but insufficiently explored question. An investigation of these under-explored sources will clarify the role that the inter-relationship between parishes of different characteristics played in determining the patterns of local labour migration (or commutation) and scales of poor relief expenditure. Secondly, this article will examine the representativeness or otherwise of one of the sources most widely utilized by poor law historians, the *Rural Queries* of 1832. Two possible causes of bias will be discussed. Thirdly, it will investigate the question of whether or not the mid-nineteenth-century parliamentary returns were tainted by political motives, as has often been argued.¹⁰ Focusing on the Parliamentary Reports of 1847 and 1850, it will examine the degree to which these reflect the real situation.

This article examines the three kinds of historical documents in a chronological order. It will show that a common link between the three seemingly unrelated issues raised by the debates about the poor laws can be found in the open/close parish distinction.

⁹ Song, 'Landed interest'.

¹⁰ Banks, 'Nineteenth-century scandal'; cf., M. Caplan,

'The new poor law and the struggle for union chargeability', *International Rev. of Social History* 23 (1978).

I

The terminology of the open and close parishes began to be widely adopted in the 1840s. A good example can be found in the 1843 Parliamentary Report, one of the earliest to use the terminology. According to the Report:

[an open parish is one which is] in the hands of a considerable number of proprietors, while the neighbouring parishes are each owned by one or two (or very few) proprietors. These last, partly in order to prevent an increase of ... settlement, and to keep down the rates ... while in the adjoining parishes there are not hands enough left to cultivate the soil, ... [an open parish] is overstocked with inhabitants that do not properly belong to it, and who are, generally speaking, the worst characters in the parishes from whence they come. The competition caused by these new comers raises the house-rent throughout the parish; and as they are at the mercy of those who have land ..., they are forced to pay exorbitant rents for very wretched dwellings.¹¹

This extract depicts several aspects of the situation: a stark contrast in the landholding pattern in the two different types of parish; separation of the place of work from that of residence; dismal living conditions and undeservedly high rents in open parishes; and the prevention of settlement in close parishes to keep down expenditure on poor relief. The terminology gained currency in the following decades as reform of the laws of settlement emerged as a key political issue. The aim of the reforming bills was twofold. One was to make irremovable those who had resided for more than a certain period in a parish where they had no settlement, and eventually to extend the unit of settlement from the parish to the poor law union. The other was to replace the parish with the poor law union for the purpose of raising money for poor relief. These aims were gradually accomplished by a series of acts from 1845 onwards and eventually completed by the Union Chargeability Act of 1865.¹² The main opposition to the reform bills came from the landed classes. One of the most prominent figures in the opposition camp was J. W. Henley, Member of Parliament for Oxfordshire. At every stage of the parliamentary debate, this 'very model of a country gentleman' indefatigably advocated the parochial rating and relieving system and warned that if the parliamentary bill currently under consideration were passed it would inevitably lead to the total destruction of the parochial system and thereby to the prevalence of carelessness and extravagance.¹³

Even before the 1840s, however, when the terms of open and close parishes first gained currency, a body of literature was already in existence which referred to the same phenomenon for earlier periods.¹⁴ A good example of this literature is *Rural Queries*, an extensive survey prepared for

¹¹ BPP, 1843, XII, *Reports on employment of women and children in agriculture*, p. 237.

¹² 28 & 29 Vict., c. 79. For the legislative history, M. E. Rose, 'Settlement, removal and the new poor law', in Derek Fraser (ed.), *The new poor law in the nineteenth century* (1976), pp. 25-44.

¹³ Caplan, 'Union chargeability', pp. 269, 278-79, 293. For his activities during the formation of the poor law unions in Oxfordshire, Song, 'Continuity and change in English rural society: the formation of poor law unions

in Oxfordshire', *English Historical Rev.* 114 (1999), pp. 333-34.

¹⁴ The legislation of the new poor law was unlikely to bring any notable change to the open/close parish structure, as the parish, not the union, remained a basic unit for rating and relieving until 1865. The lack of effective remedies even after 1865 allowed parish distinctions to continue virtually unchanged. BPP, 1868-9, XIII, *Second report on the employment of children, young persons and women in agriculture*, pp. 170-71.

the famous *Poor Law Report* of 1834. Question 16 of the *Queries* asked, 'What class of Persons are generally the Owners of Cottages?'.¹⁵ Responses from Oxfordshire are suggestive enough for this matter. From Duns Tew, W. Gorden, vicar and Justice of the Peace, responded: 'In places where property is more divided tradesmen often erect cottages, but they are generally let at a higher rate'. The response from Ipsden was that the owners of lands were 'Gentlemen, who let them at low rents, and petty Tradesmen, who exact high rents'. In Oddington cottages were reported to be owned by the 'principal landed proprietor', whereas 'In the adjoining parishes they are usually farmers and small tradesmen'. According to W. H. Ashhurst, chairman of Oxfordshire Quarter Sessions, owners were principally 'retired tradesmen and small builders in towns and large villages; in smaller villages, the owners of land'.¹⁶ Question 51 sought suggestions for an amendment of the laws of settlement. J. Jordan, curate of Handborough, expressed the opinion that 'Labour, not residence, should confer settlement, otherwise a man might reside upon but not benefit the soil which is afterwards to support him'. The vicar of Duns Tew said more explicitly that 'The bringing an aged and sickly person to his parish, whose youth and strength have been spent elsewhere' was one of the main 'evils' resulting from the laws of settlement.¹⁷ These statements testify that the respondents of the *Rural Queries* were well aware of the contrasting parish types. These, along with other works referring to similar parish differentials, suggest that the open/close parish approach can be applied to the pre-1840s period.¹⁸

II

Unlike most research on the open/close parish distinction, which focuses largely on the mid- and late-nineteenth century, the present discussion concentrates on the early 1830s. Employing the statistical method of cluster analysis, 262 parishes with relevant data out of a total of 272 Oxfordshire parishes were categorized in terms of their openness or closeness on the basis of four characteristic aspects: landownership structure, measured in terms of the percentage of land tax paid by the largest proprietor in each parish in 1831; average poor relief expenditure for 1830 and 1831, measured per pound of annual property value of each parish; parish differentials in economic activities, measured in terms of the percentage of families engaged in agriculture in 1831; and population pressure on the parish economy, measured in terms of population density.¹⁹ The results can be seen in Table 1. Based on the average figures for the

¹⁵ Some of the respondents understood the question as not being confined to their own parishes and thus offered a general observation based upon relatively large areas.

¹⁶ BPP, 1834, XXX, *Report from His Majesty's Commissioners for inquiring into the administration and practical operation of the Poor Laws*, Appendix (B)1, *Answers to Rural Queries* (hereafter *Rural Queries*), pp. 371b, 376b, 378b, 381b.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 371e, 374e.

¹⁸ For the earlier works, many of which come from the eighteenth century, BPP, 1850, XXVII, *Reports on settlement and removal*, pp. 408–09.

¹⁹ Land Tax Assessments, Oxfordshire RO, QSR

Series (for landownership); BPP, 1835, XLVII, *Reports on the poor*, pp. 337–41 (for poor relief expenditure); BPP, 1833, XXXVI, *Abstract returns of population*, pp. 490–501 (for proportion of agricultural families and population); BPP, 1883, LXXIX, *Abstract returns of population*, pp. 130–39 (for parish acreage). There are similarities between the variables that Banks selected for her cluster analysis of Norfolk parishes and my variables presented here. However, she reached a significantly different conclusion by denying that parish typology was intentionally constructed and maintained, although she admitted the co-existence of different types of parishes within short distances. Song, 'Landed interest', pp. 476–77, 485–86.

TABLE 1. Cluster analysis of Oxfordshire parishes, c. 1831

(1) <i>Cluster</i>	(2) <i>No. of cases</i>	(3) <i>Poor relief expenditure in £ (£)</i>	(4) <i>Largest landownership (%)</i>	(5) <i>Population density</i>	(6) <i>Agricultural family (%)</i>	(7) <i>Classification</i>
1	1	0.69	3	1661.5	4.0	strong open
2	1	0.53	6	4613.6	3.8	strong open
3	1	0.42	29	316.6	2.0	strong open
4	2	0.42	5	210.9	13.3	strong open
5	1	0.37	18	225.8	3.7	strong open
6	30	0.28	26	56.0	39.1	weak open
7	98	0.18	25	22.9	71.9	intermediate
8	63	0.15	54	22.5	69.9	weak close
9	65	0.11	88	14.0	85.4	strong close
<i>Oxon.</i>	262	0.18	47	59.1	69.5	

Source: Song, 'Landed interest', pp. 477-79.

four variables (columns (3) to (6)), the degree of openness/closeness for each parish is evaluated and classified into five categories (column (7)). The spatial distribution of parishes of different types is shown in Figure 1. Throughout Oxfordshire parishes in different clusters were rather evenly scattered, with strong open parishes functioning as local foci for parishes with closed characteristics.²⁰

The validity of the parish classification derived from the cluster analysis can be tested by setting the result against some contemporary observations. Censuses are undoubtedly the most important data source for population change. One advantage of the census records is that it can be assumed that they were reasonably independent of the political atmosphere of the time. The censuses from 1831 to 1851 occasionally included notes on unexpected changes in the population of parishes. The 1831 census noted that the decrease of population in Stoke Talmage was 'occasioned by the non-residence of pauper parishioners'. Middleton Stoney saw a population decrease caused by 'the want of cottages, which has compelled many families to resort to adjoining parishes'.²¹ The census delineated the situation of South Leigh at length:

The return of South Leigh states that 11 Families, consisting of 60 persons, belonging to and supported by that parish, are, for the want of houses, residing in adjoining parishes; on which it may be remarked, that in the year 1811, the houses being 48 in this parish, the population

²⁰ The relatively small numbers of strong open and weak open parishes may raise the question as to why contemporary commentators were so anxious about the 'evil' effect of open parishes. Though small in absolute numbers, open parishes had significantly greater population than close parishes. Their respective populations were: strong open parishes 15,381 (12%); weak open

parishes 32,454 (25%); intermediate parishes 45,168 (35%); weak close parishes 21,880 (17%); and strong close parishes 13,663 (11%). It should also be noted that the present analysis does not include parishes of City of Oxford, which were generally of open characteristic.

²¹ BPP, 1833, XXXVI, *Abstract returns of population*, pp. 498-99.

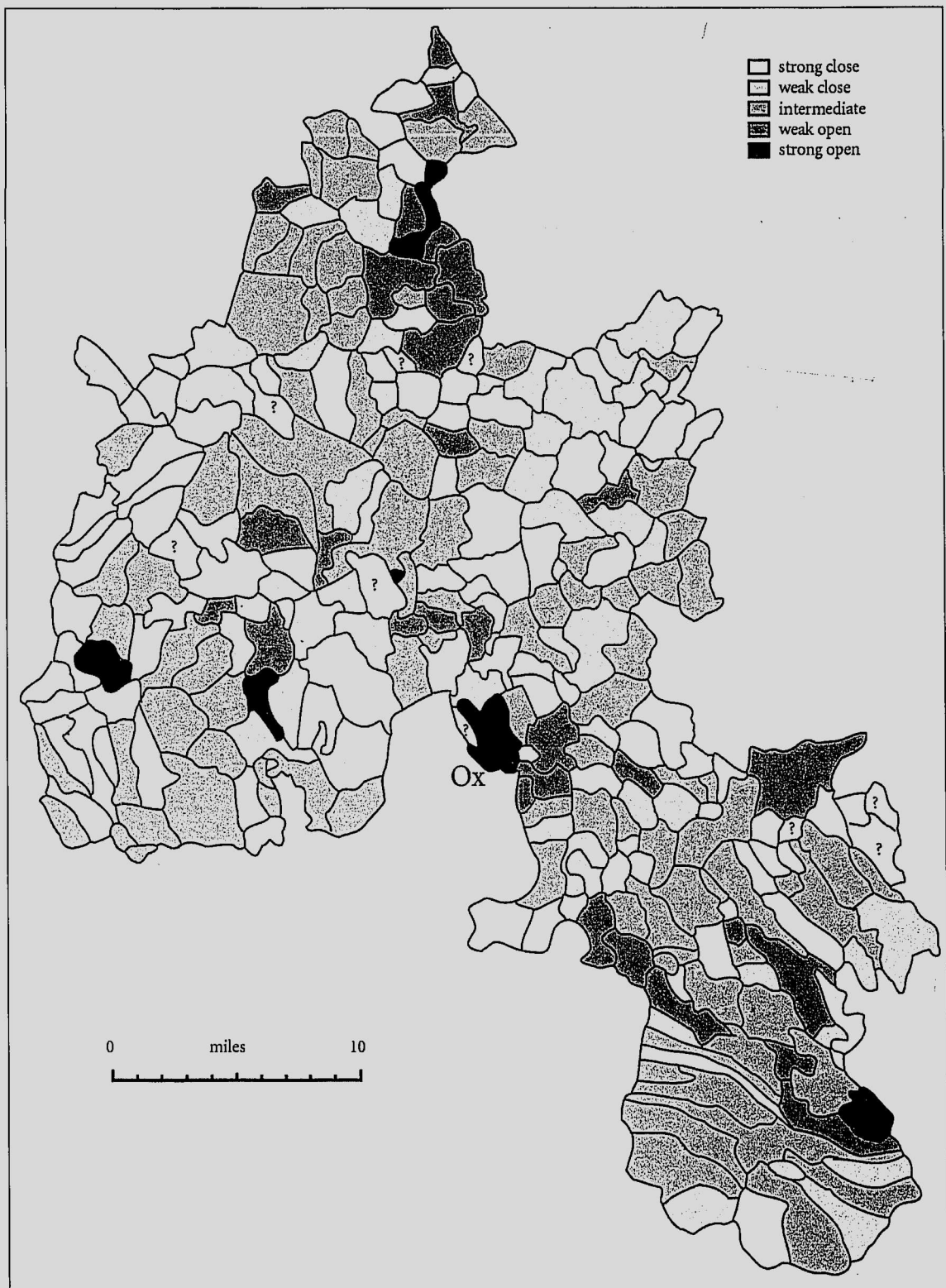


FIGURE 1. Geographical distribution of open and close parishes in Oxfordshire, c. 1831

was 248, or 5 persons to a house; in 1821, 6 persons to a house; and in 1831, nearly 7 persons to a house or cottage, while the entire Hundred of Wootton (subtracting South Leigh) still affords a cottage to 5 persons; among whom are the 60 persons thrust out of South Leigh, to the eventual detriment of adjoining parishes; *an irregularity attributed to the operation of the Poor Laws*.²²

Other comments noticed population growth. The return for Watlington in 1831, for example, stated: 'The increased population is attributed to the number of paupers in the parish'. In the town of Thame for 1821 and 1831, it was recorded that 'the increase of population consists chiefly of paupers'. The return for St. Clements attributed the population increase in 1831 to the building of 250 houses.²³

Interpreted in terms of open and close parishes, these census notes are summarized in Table 2. They turn out to correspond closely to the result of the cluster analysis. All three parishes for which the censuses noted features typical of close parishes are categorized as either strong close or weak close parishes in the cluster analysis. Similarly, all the parishes noted as showing the characteristics of open parishes fall into the strong open and weak open parishes. This correspondence confirms the validity of the cluster analysis results.

III

We can now use the result of the cluster analysis to analyze three sources: first, the Parliamentary Returns of 1803-4 and 1818 on the poor relief of most parishes (Section IV); second, *Rural Queries* of 1834, which refer to selected parishes but do not focus primarily on their openness or closeness (Section V); and third, the Parliamentary Returns of 1847 and 1850, which were produced in connection with settlement reform, and which by their very nature focused selectively on the extreme cases (Section VI). Given that the three documents were produced, respectively, in the early nineteenth century, on the eve of the new poor law, and in the mid-nineteenth century, and given that the cluster analysis is based on data from around 1831, all the documents are reasonably valid for the purpose of the current study.

It is noteworthy that, in spite of the existence of some exceptional parishes, the overall geographical structure of open/close parishes did not undergo significant changes during the first half of the nineteenth century. The distinctions between parishes were primarily formed in the eighteenth century (and possibly earlier): the nineteenth century only saw the consolidation of the system.²⁴ To illustrate this point, it is useful to look at the history of enclosure, which was arguably the single most important vehicle for the changes in rural economy and society. The spatial and temporal patterns of enclosure were closely related to the four variables that were used in the present study.

The first variable used in defining open and close parishes was the proportion of agricultural population. Other things being equal, solely agricultural parishes were more likely to be subjected to early and unopposed enclosure. Landowners' expectation of rent increases and,

²² Ibid., p. 501, my emphasis.

²³ BPP, 1852-3, LXXXV, *Abstract returns of population*, pp. 28-39.

²⁴ For a long-term development of the parish distinction,

B. Short, 'The evolution of contrasting communities within rural England', in Short (ed.), *The English rural community: image and analysis* (1992), pp. 21-28.

TABLE 2. Open and close parishes in Oxfordshire as documented in censuses, 1831-51

(1) <i>Parish</i>	(2) <i>Contemporary observation</i>	(3) <i>Classification</i>
Stoke Talmage	close	strong close
Middleton Stoney	close	weak close
South Leigh	close	strong close
Watlington	open	weak open
Thame	open	weak open
St. Clements	open	strong open

Sources: BPP, 1833, XXXVI, *Abstract returns of population*, pp. 498-99; BPP, 1852-3, LXXXV, *Abstract returns of population*, pp. 28-39.

perhaps to a lesser extent, productivity growth could have been a strong incentive for early enclosures. As J. M. Neeson found for Northamptonshire, parishes resisting enclosure were disproportionately of mixed agricultural and manufacturing character.²⁵ Enclosure, in turn, could affect the percentage of families engaged in agriculture. In Warwickshire, for example, enclosure is reported to have turned many small tradesmen and craftsmen into labourers by reducing their holdings and impoverishing their customers.²⁶ Secondly, consolidated landownership may well have facilitated early enclosure, whereas in parishes where landownership was more diffuse small owners and tradesmen could resist enclosure. This correlation, which is also reflected in the fact that large farms tended to be enclosed comparatively earlier, has been observed in many places.²⁷ In densely populated parishes, commoners were likely to be in a better position to resist attempts at enclosure which was regarded as reducing their common rights. In contrast, low population density could be associated with early and unopposed parliamentary enclosure.²⁸ Once enclosure was carried out, diminished mid- and long-term employment opportunities often led to out-migration of the labouring poor, and hence further reduced population density.²⁹ Finally, many economic historians have agreed that enclosure tended to increase poor relief expenditure.³⁰ The diminution of common rights and the reduction in women's employment may have rendered more people dependent on the parish fund. Further, the consolidation of farms at enclosure may have increased the potential for cost transfer from labour-hiring farmers to other ratepayers who employed fewer labourers and,

²⁵ J. M. Neeson, *Commoners: common right, enclosure and social change in England, 1700-1820* (1993), pp. 281-82.

²⁶ J. M. Martin, 'Village traders and the emergence of a proletariat in south Warwickshire', *AgHR* 32 (1984), pp. 179-88.

²⁷ M. E. Turner, 'Enclosures in Britain, 1750-1830' in L. A. Clarkson (ed.), *The industrial revolution: a compendium*; J. M. Martin, 'Parliamentary enclosure movement and rural society in Warwickshire', *AgHR* 15 (1967). For Oxfordshire, Walton, 'Aspects', p. 64; D. Eastwood, 'Communities, protest and police in early nineteenth-century Oxfordshire', *AgHR* 44 (1996).

²⁸ Neeson, *Commoners*, pp. 221-58.

²⁹ J. D. Chambers' revisionist view that enclosure increased employment opportunity may be valid to some extent in the immediate aftermath of enclosure. A longer-term view indicates the contrary. Chambers, 'Enclosure and labour supply in the Industrial Revolution', *EcHR* 5 (1935). Cf. N. F. R. Crafts, 'Enclosure and labour supply revisited', *Explorations in Economic History* 15 (1978); K. D. M. Snell, *Annals of the labouring poor* (1985), pp. 138-227.

³⁰ As a logical consequence, Chambers' conclusion suggests the opposite tendency.

therefore, may have resulted in heavy dependence on poor relief.³¹ The discussion so far thus suggests that, in spite of possible individual exceptions, there may have been a close relationship between parliamentary enclosure and the open and close parish system. Close parishes, with a high proportion of agricultural population, consolidated landownership, low population density, and a low poor relief burden, could achieve early and uninterrupted enclosure. Enclosure, in turn, could accentuate the features of close parishes. In contrast, enclosure was more prone to be delayed or even completely thwarted in open parishes. It is very likely that the basic geographical composition of parishes of different nature was already in existence at least in the late eighteenth century and the parish distinction became more acute during the first half of the nineteenth century as the progress of enclosure tended to accelerate the trend.

IV

The first sources to be discussed in the light of parish typology are the Parliamentary Returns of 1803–4 and 1818.³² These returns provide comprehensive data on poor relief expenditure and the composition of relief recipients at parish level and thus offer a unique opportunity to look closely at the ways in which the old poor law was implemented. There have been some studies utilizing the returns, but none have approached the data to ask questions of open and close parishes.³³

The returns of 1803–4 contain not only the financial data concerning poor relief but also the number of recipients under various headings. Table 3 gives the amount of money rated for and spent on poor relief as measured per pound of parochial property values. As the model of open and close parishes has predicted, open parishes, particularly strong open parishes, appear to have shouldered notably heavier poor rates than close parishes. Outdoor relief was by far the most popular way of relieving the poor and the level of outdoor relief expenditure appears to have increased with the openness of parishes. Strong open parishes were also more likely to give indoor relief, and to incur higher legal expenses. Total relief expenditure therefore tends to run parallel to poor rates. Some parishes had a policy of providing work for both indoor and outdoor relief recipients. Taking into account the expense of purchasing the raw materials and paying for the finished product, amended figures for total expenditure are given in the last column. It appears that strong open parishes, which tended to spend more on poor relief, and therefore had the greater need to economize, made the greatest use of the practice, although the amount of money they saved was not substantial.

Table 4 gives the composition of those relieved under various headings. It shows that the number of those permanently receiving outdoor relief as measured per 1,000 population was relatively higher in close and intermediate parishes. On the other hand, permanent recipients of indoor relief made up the greater proportion in open parishes. In total, the proportion of

³¹ J. Humphries, 'Enclosure, common rights, and women: the proletarianization of families in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries', *JEcH* 50 (1990); G. R. Boyer, *An economic history of the English poor law, 1750–1850* (1990), pp. 85–149.

³² BPP, 1803–4, XIII, *Abstract of the poor*; BPP, 1818,

XIX, *Abstract of the poor*.

³³ J. D. Marshall, *The old poor law, 1795–1834* (1968), pp. 30–37; Karel Williams, *From pauperism to poverty* (1981), pp. 35–43, 147–55; David Eastwood, *Governing rural England* (1994), pp. 142–46.

TABLE 3. Average poor relief expenditure in Oxfordshire parishes, 1803

(1) <i>Classification</i>	(2) <i>Poor rate</i>	(3) <i>Outdoor relief</i>	(4) <i>Indoor relief</i>	(5) <i>Legal expense</i>	(6) <i>Total expense</i>	(7) <i>Amended total expense</i>
strong open	7s. 11d.	4s. 4d.	2s. 8d.	0s. 3d.	7s. 1d.	6s. 9d.
weak open	3s. 8d.	2s. 10d.	0s. 3d.	0s. 2d.	3s. 3d.	3s. 2d.
intermediate	2s. 10d.	2s. 3d.	0s. 1d.	0s. 1d.	2s. 5d.	2s. 5d.
weak close	2s. 6d.	2s. 0d.	0s. 1d.	0s. 1d.	2s. 2d.	2s. 1d.
strong close	1s. 10d.	1s. 4d.	0s. 1d.	0s. 0d.	1s. 6d.	1s. 5d.
<i>Avg.</i>	2s. 9d.	2s. 2d.	0s. 2d.	0s. 1d.	2s. 4d.	2s. 4d.

Note: (6)=(3)+(4)+(5); (7)=(6) + (expense of purchasing goods for the poor's work) - (earning out of the poor's work).

Source: BPP, 1803-4, XIII, *Abstract of the Poor*, pp. 397-408.

TABLE 4. Number of recipients of poor relief expenditure per 1,000 population in Oxfordshire parishes, 1803

(1) <i>Classification</i>	(2) <i>Permanent outdoor</i>	(3) <i>Permanent indoor</i>	(4) <i>Sum</i>	(5) <i>Children</i>	(6) <i>Occasional</i>	(7) <i>Aged and ill</i>
Strong open	44.6	21.4	66.0	38.8	71.4	25.9
Weak open	53.3	7.5	60.8	71.9	53.2	23.1
Intermediate	73.5	3.4	76.8	97.9	71.2	31.0
Weak close	84.0	3.7	87.7	100.2	43.4	28.5
Strong close	75.7	1.0	76.7	80.3	78.5	42.1
<i>Avg.</i>	73.6	3.8	77.4	89.5	64.5	32.2

Note: (4)=(2)+(3).

Source: BPP, 1803-4, XIII, *Abstract of the Poor*, pp. 397-408.

permanent recipients were greater in close parishes than in open ones. The proportions of relieved children, aged fourteen and under, were also relatively higher in close parishes. The numbers of those occasionally relieved should be treated with care, because parishes may have returned either an average or a total of those so relieved. In the latter case, parishes may or may not have multiple-counted those relieved more than once in the year. The proportion of those relieved for reasons of old age or infirmity was also higher to some extent in close parishes.

The overall high percentage of recipients in close parishes sheds light on one of the controversies regarding the poor law system. The 1834 Royal Commissioners claimed that lax administration of poor laws took away labourers' incentive to work.³⁴ Against this claim, some historians have argued that small size of parishes allowed parish administrators to keep a close eye on individual parishioners, thus giving the poor only a slim chance of obtaining an

³⁴ BPP, 1834, XXVII, *Reports of the Royal Commissioners on the administration ... of the poor laws*, pp. 44-55.

undeservingly large amount of relief.³⁵ Following this line of argument, one would expect a higher level of poor relief expenditure per recipient in larger parishes. However, the model of open and close parishes presents a different, more complicated picture. On the one hand, the burden of poor relief was felt most heavily in open parishes hit by heavy economic pressure. Given the overpopulation and the shortage of employment opportunities in these parishes, one could expect greater poor relief expenditure per recipient. On the other hand, it was open parishes which commonly established select vestries in the last fifteen years of the old poor law administration. This suggests that these parishes felt more keenly the demand for economy, so it can be expected that parish officers in open parishes were parsimonious in poor relief. The actual level of poor relief spending in open parishes was determined where the two countervailing tendencies struck a balance. It is in this context that Mills and Short point out that 'it is likely that the few labourers who were in need of poor relief [in close villages] got more generous individual treatment than those in hard-pressed open villages'.³⁶

However, the present result that close parishes had more recipients than open parishes runs counter to the argument of Mills and Short. A clue for this puzzling outcome can be found in column (7). Other things being equal, the proportion of non-able-bodied can be assumed to have been constant across parishes. Among the potential factors which may upset this assumption, age structure is probably the most important. Parishes in different groups may have had marked differences in nuptiality, fertility and other determinants of natural population growth.³⁷ Perhaps more importantly, population mobility between parishes may have caused differences in age structure. What merits special attention is return migration by those who, after spending many years in parishes where work was available, were forced to move to their parishes of settlement when too old or infirm to work any more. It is therefore likely that the proportion of the non-able-bodied was higher in open parishes than in close ones. Column (7), however, shows the contrary: open parishes have a smaller proportion of the non-able-bodied. This suggests that the threshold of eligibility for relief was higher in open parishes than in their close counterparts. Hardship deemed deep enough to qualify for relief in close parishes may not have qualified for relief in open parishes. The proportion of relieved children corroborates the threshold differentials (column (5)). Although Mills and Short are right in emphasizing the differences in levels of generosity, they should perhaps not assume that such generosity was reflected only in the amount of poor relief. The chances are that close parishes provided relief to as large a proportion of their parishioners as open parishes did. Close parishes may even have had a greater proportion of parishioners subject to poor relief. An equal level of poor relief expenditure per head of parish population, an equal

³⁵ For example, J. S. Taylor, 'The mythology of the old poor law', *JEcH* 24 (1969), pp. 292-97; D. A. Baugh, 'The cost of poor relief in south-east England, 1790-1834', *ECHR* 28 (1975), pp. 50-68. Baugh estimated the mean population of parishes in England and Wales at 898 and median at 368. Figures only for countryside, excluding metropolitan parishes, were considerably smaller. M. Baugh, 'The poor law report re-examined', *JEcH* 24 (1964), pp. 243-45.

³⁶ D. R. Mills and B. M. Short, 'Social change and

social conflict in nineteenth-century England: the use of the open-close village model', in Reed and Wells (eds), *Class, conflict and protest*, p. 92.

³⁷ E. A. Wrigley and R. S. Schofield, *The population history of England, 1541-1871* (1989), p. 38; Broad, 'Parish economies of welfare'; cf. B. J. Taylor, 'The economic and demographic context of enclosure: a case study from Oxfordshire, c. 1550 to 1850' (unpublished D.Phil thesis, University of Oxford, 1988).

Table 5. Average poor relief expenditure in Oxfordshire parishes, 1813-5

(1) <i>Classification</i>	(2) <i>Poor rate</i>	(3) <i>Relief expenditure</i>	(4) <i>Legal expense</i>	(5) <i>Total expense</i>
strong open	10s. 10d.	9s. 1d.	0s. 5d.	9s. 6d.
weak open	5s. 9d.	4s. 8d.	0s. 2d.	4s. 10d.
intermediate	4s. 3d.	3s. 4d.	0s. 1d.	3s. 5d.
weak close	4s. 1d.	3s. 4d.	0s. 1d.	3s. 5d.
strong close	2s. 10d.	2s. 1d.	0s. 1d.	2s. 2d.
Avg.	4s. 2d.	3s. 4d.	0s. 1d.	3s. 5d.

Note: (5)=(3)+(4).

Source: BPP, 1818, XI, *Abstract of the Poor*, pp. 352-62.

proportion of recipients to parish population and, thus, an equal level of poor relief expenditure per recipient does not imply that parishes of various types had similar poor relief policies.

This point can be pursued further by looking at the expenditure on indoor and outdoor relief. The Parliamentary Returns reported that indoor relief for the total of 1,131 inmates cost £11,124, equivalent to £10 14s. 4¾d. per recipient, while outdoor relief for 20,394 persons cost £76,565, or £3 14s. 9¾d. per recipient, about three times less per recipient than indoor relief. This discrepancy may be attributed partly to the overhead costs of running workhouses. But the overhead costs were unlikely to be high, because otherwise the parishes would have abandoned indoor relief. In addition, there also may have been compensating factors resulting from the economies of scale in managing indoor relief.³⁸ These effects may have more or less offset each other. Much of the discrepancy can be explained by the fact that workhouse inmates were on average in need of greater relief than outdoor recipients. It follows that the large proportion of indoor recipients in open parishes indicates that the costly recipients were more numerous in open parishes than in close ones. What Table 4 suggests is not that close parishes assumed as heavy a poor relief burden as open parishes did, but that as we suggested earlier, open parishes tended to operate tougher guidelines for relief eligibility.

The 1818 Parliamentary Returns show that there had been a noticeable increase in the overall amount of relief expenditure during the preceding decade. However, the distribution of the amount across different groups had hardly changed. All the figures – poor rates, poor relief expenditure and legal expenses – correspond closely to the openness of the parishes (Table 5). The returns also show that the proportion of those receiving indoor relief on a permanent basis fell between 1803 and 1813-5. Again, the composition of paupers, shown in Table 6, also confirms that permanent outdoor and indoor relief continued to be predominant in close and open parishes respectively. The overall number of permanent recipients turns out to have been greater in close parishes, and so does the number of the occasionally relieved poor. Provided that the

³⁸ G. W. Oxley, *Poor relief in England and Wales 1601-1834* (1974), p. 90, points to the economy of using inmates for nursing the sick in the workhouse rather than in their own homes, of saving the cost of providing alternative housing for the solitaries and small families, and of having the inmates make a work contribution. Attempts were made in Oxfordshire to make the workhouse a self-supporting unit by teaching the inmates crafts and trades. VCH *Oxfordshire*, II, p. 204.

TABLE 6. Number of recipients of poor relief expenditure per 1,000 population in Oxfordshire parishes, 1813-5

(1) Classification	(2) Permanent outdoor	(3) Permanent indoor	(4) Permanent total	(5) Occasional
strong open	31.0	14.1	45.1	43.7
weak open	68.3	5.8	74.1	48.4
intermediate	66.0	1.5	67.5	72.8
weak close	70.8	0.7	71.5	53.5
strong close	93.1	1.2	94.3	88.2
Avg.	73.1	2.0	75.0	68.0

Notes: (4)=(2)+(3).

Source: BPP, 1818, XI, *Abstract of the Poor*, pp. 352-62.

higher proportion of indoor recipients indicates the higher number of those for whom a large amount of relief was required, the figures lead to the same conclusion: that close parishes implemented a significantly more generous poor relief policy.

V

The next document under discussion is *Rural Queries*.³⁹ As the most extensive survey ever undertaken of the old poor laws and related issues, *Rural Queries* has provided many historians with a huge amount of data to explore. Not all historians are agreed on the representativeness of the parishes responding to the questionnaire.⁴⁰ On the whole, insufficient attention has been paid to the possibility that the material is biased.⁴¹ Two works utilizing *Rural Queries* are particularly worth noting because their arguments bear very closely on the issue of open and close parishes. James Taylor assumes that the parishes are representative and advances the view that the high percentage of parish officers amongst the respondents may say something about the limited role of magistrates in the administration of poor relief. By contrast, Peter Dunkley finds that a large percentage of the responses reported magisterial control over poor relief administration and regards this as a significant indication of the subordination of parish officers to magistrates.⁴² This raises the question as to how these two works, which are based on the same data, can offer such opposed conclusions.

In order to find an answer to this question, it is necessary to consider two possible sources of bias in *Rural Queries*. The first possible source of bias involves the social and economic status

³⁹ BPP, 1834, XXXI, *Rural Queries*.

⁴⁰ Blaug, 'The poor law report re-examined', pp. 229, 231, 235; Williams, *From pauperism to poverty*, pp. 45-51; Marshall, *The old poor law*, p. 20; Boyer, *Economic history*, pp. 128-29, 143-44.

⁴¹ Snell rightly points out that '[o]ne needs to know whether replying parishes had higher than average per caput relief, how they were ranged in open/close terms, how their relief expenditure and demographic growth

compared with other parishes, whether they had been involved in recent disorder'. K. D. M. Snell, review of Boyer, *Economic History*, in *EcHR* 45 (1992) p. 192. His notion of open/close parishes here seems to focus on landholding patterns.

⁴² J. S. Taylor, 'The unreformed workhouse, 1776-1834', in E. W. Martin (ed.), *Comparative development in social welfare* (1972), pp. 66-67; P. Dunkley, *The crisis of the old poor law in England, 1795-1834: an interpretative essay* (1982).

of the respondents. In some parishes the respondents were parish officers, and in other parishes they were magistrates. It was not uncommon for parish officers and magistrates to have different interests in relation to poor law administration. Indeed, the power relation between the two classes before and after the 1834 poor law reform has been at the centre of the fierce debate among poor law historians.⁴³ It is reasonable to surmise that the two groups had good reasons to respond to the *Queries* in different ways. The second possible source of bias is that the attitudes of parishes towards poor law reform might vary according to their social and economic conditions. The open/close parish distinction can shed useful light on this possibility.

In Table 7, the responses to the *Queries* from 26 Oxfordshire parishes are analyzed according to a number of criteria. As many as 9 parishes out of the total of 26, or 35 per cent, appear to have had select vestries. Given that the main reason for establishing select vestries in southern England was to introduce economy and efficiency into poor law administration, it is reasonable to assume that parishes under heavy economic and demographic pressure were more likely to have been enthusiastic about adopting the measure. The total number of select vestries in Oxfordshire was reported to be 42 in 1832.⁴⁴ As approximately ten per cent of the parishes in the county responded to the *Queries*, the over-representation of the parishes with select vestries is unmistakable. This over-representation suggests the presence of the second source of bias, relating to the socio-economic condition of the responding parishes. The likelihood of this bias can be further illustrated by the result of the cluster analysis (column (3)). As summarized in Table 8, the number of responding parishes in each classification is compared with that of the total number of Oxfordshire parishes. In spite of the relatively small size of sample, it is clear that strong open and weak open parishes are over-represented and the rest, particularly strong close parishes, are under-represented in *Rural Queries*.

By collating the columns (2) and (4) in Table 7, it is possible to demonstrate that the overwhelming majority of the responses from the parishes with select vestries were made by parish officers. Not a single parish with a select vestry appears to have had its return made by a magistrate. Column (3) suggests that two out of three responding magistrates were from close parishes, whereas parish officers responded not only from open parishes but also from other parish types. There appears, therefore, to be some degree of correspondence between the status of the respondents and the socio-economic condition of their parishes. This correspondence implies that, as open parishes were over-represented in *Rural Queries*, so were parish officers.

Given this over-representation of open parishes and parish officers, Taylor's argument that the large proportion of parish officers among the respondents to the *Queries* can be attributed to the limited influence of magistrates on poor law administration perhaps needs to be reconsidered. Had the responses come evenly from a wider range of parishes, the proportion of parish officers could have been substantially smaller. Equally, Dunkley's interpretation of the large percentage of responses referring to tight control by magistrates as an indication of a high degree of intervention may also need to be reconsidered, since the high proportion reporting control

⁴³ Dunkley, *Crisis*; Anthony Brundage, *The making of the new poor law* (1978); Anthony Brundage, David Eastwood and Peter Mandler, 'Debate: the making of the new poor law *redivivus*', *Past and Present* 127 (1990), pp. 83-201; Boyer, *Economic history*, pp. 51-84; Song, 'Continuity and change'.

⁴⁴ BPP, 1833, XXXII, *Abstract returns of relief*, pp. 350-51.

TABLE 7. Responses to *Rural Queries* and open and close parishes in Oxfordshire

(1) <i>Parish</i>	(2) <i>Select vestry</i>	(3) <i>Classification</i>	(4) <i>Respondent</i>
1 Aston Steeple		weak open	Justice of the Peace
2 Baldwin Britwell		strong close	—
3 Banbury ^a	Yes	strong open	—
4 Chadlington	Yes	intermediate	Assistant overseer
5 Chinnor	Yes	—	Assistant overseer
6 Deddington		weak open	Solicitor & clerk to the magistrates
7 Ducklington		weak close	—
8 Duns Tew		weak close	Vicar & Justice of the Peace
9 Ensham	Yes	intermediate	Vicar
10 Enstone	Yes	intermediate	—
11 Epwell		intermediate	Churchwarden & overseer
12 Goring		intermediate	Churchwardens, overseer
13 Handborough		weak close	Curate
14 Harpsden		weak close	Principal rate-payer & minister
15 Headington	Yes	weak open	—
16 Holton		strong close	Churchwarden
17 Ipsden		intermediate	—
18 Kidlington		weak open	Curate
19 Great Milton	Yes	weak close	Vicar
20 Mollington		strong close	Occupier
21 Hook Norton		intermediate	—
22 Pyrton	Yes	intermediate	Overseer
23 Shutford West ^b		weak close	—
24 Waterstock		strong close	Justice of the Peace
25 Watlington	Yes	weak open	Schoolmaster & overseer
26 Wootton		intermediate	Rector

Notes: ^a For reasons of data availability, the hamlet of Neithrop, part of Banbury parish, is not included in the cluster analysis.

^b Data of Shutford East are added to the data of Shutford West.

Source: BPP, 1834, XXXII, *Rural Queries*, QQ. 32–34, pp. 367c–82c.

by magistrates may well be the result of the high proportion of parish officer respondents. Complaints about magisterial control were likely to be particularly high in open parishes and in the parishes with select vestries, from which disproportionately large number of parish officers responded to the *Rural Queries*.

TABLE 8. Representation of Oxfordshire parishes in *Rural Queries*

(1) <i>Classification</i>	(2) <i>No. of Oxon parishes</i>	(3) <i>No. of parishes in Rural Queries</i>	(4) <i>Representation rate (%)</i>
strong open	6	1	16.7
weak open	30	5	16.7
intermediate	98	9	9.2
weak close	63	6	9.5
strong close	65	4	6.2
<i>Total/avg.</i>	262	25	9.5

Source: Table 7 above.

VI

Finally, we consider the Parliamentary Reports of 1847 and 1850, published when the issue of open and close parishes had begun to be highly contentious. The 1847 returns provided a body of information gathered from various parts of the country, of which the most detailed was a memorial from the ratepayers of Wheatley, Oxfordshire.⁴⁵ The ratepayers of this open parish stated that a fifth of the people residing in the parish were out-parishioners obliged to seek accommodation outside their parishes of settlement. The memorial included a list of these out-parishioners, amounting to 212 persons or 48 families. Table 9 gives the list of parishes in which the non-parishioners were legally settled (column (1)), their family composition (columns (2) to (7)), parish classification (column (8)), and the distance from the parish of settlement to Wheatley (column (9)). The great majority of the non-parishioners residing in Wheatley were married with children. Given that they were likely to be more valuable as farm-workers than others, such as women-led families and single parents with children, their predominance suggests the possibility that the productive workforce tended to reside in the vicinity of their parishes of settlement.⁴⁶ Many of these parishes of settlement were categorized as strong close, weak close and intermediate parishes. The predominance of the close parishes is more apparent when the number of families is set against the parish classification. Of a total of 48 families, only two turn out to have belonged to either a weak open (Stokenchurch) or a strong open parish (Burford). Unlike the remaining parishes, these two parishes were 9 and 18 miles away from Wheatley respectively, distances which apparently made it out of the question for labourers to commute to work. Even more convincingly, the three parishes to which 32 families out of the total 48 belonged – Holton, Shotover and Waterperry – are all classified as strong close parishes and are all adjacent to Wheatley. The high level of consistency between the Wheatley memorial and the cluster analysis classification suggests that the document was largely untainted by the alleged political motive of making a scandal out of the existing settlement practices.

⁴⁵ BPP, 1847, XI, *Report on settlement and poor removal*, migration, Oxfordshire, 1750–1834' *Continuity and Change* 13 (1998), pp. 370–83.

⁴⁶ Song, 'Agrarian policies on pauper settlement and

TABLE 9. Families residing in Wheatley but belonging to other parishes, January 1847

(1) <i>Parish of Settlement</i>	(2) <i>MW</i>	(3) <i>MWCh</i>	(4) <i>MCh</i>	(5) <i>WCh</i>	(6) <i>MO</i>	(7) <i>Total</i>	(8) <i>Classification</i>	(9) <i>Distance (miles)</i>
Burford	—	1	—	—	—	1	strong open	18
Forest Hill	—	1	—	—	—	1	weak close	1
Garsington	1	—	—	—	—	1	intermediate	2
Great Milton	—	1	—	—	—	1	weak close	1
Holton	1	7	—	—	1	9	strong close	1
Islip	—	—	—	1	—	1	intermediate	3
Little Milton	—	—	—	—	1	1	intermediate	2
Shotover	1	11	1	3	—	16	strong close	1
Stanton St. John	—	1	—	—	—	1	intermediate	2
Stokenchurch	—	—	1	—	—	1	weak open	9
Sunninghill	—	—	1	—	—	1	—	15
Upper Heyford	—	1	—	—	—	1	intermediate	13
Waterperry	1	5	—	—	1	7	strong close	1
Newport (Bucks)	—	1	—	—	—	1	—	29
Oakley (Bucks)	—	2	—	—	1	3	—	3
Unknown	—	2	—	—	—	2	—	
<i>Total</i>	4	33	3	4	4	48		

Notes: MW: married couples without children; MWCh: married couples with children; MCh: adult males with children; WCh: adults females with children; MO: adult males only.

Source: BPP, 1847, XI, *Report on Settlement and Removal*, p. 72.

In the 1850 Parliamentary Report, G. A. à Becket wrote of the situation of Oxfordshire:

In almost every union where the course of my inquiry has taken me, I have found some one or more densely populated parishes in the neighbourhood of others thinly populated, all in some cases having scarcely any cottages at all. In the former the dwellings are, for the most part wretched, damp, unwholesome, inconvenient, excessively high rented, and crowded with inmates to such an extent as to render it impossible that health and comfort should be enjoyed.⁴⁷

Amongst the local data that the report collected were data from several poor law unions of Oxfordshire. Covering a considerably wider area than the 1843 Returns, this report derived data from the relieving officers of each union, supplementing it with the official returns to the Poor Law Office.⁴⁸ A total of 40 parishes were classified as either open or close parishes, as summarized in Table 10. For the purpose of comparison, we compare the contemporary observation (column (3)) against the result of the cluster analysis (column (4)). The final column measures the

⁴⁷ BPP, 1850, XXVII, *Reports of settlement and removal*, pp. xxvii.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 403.

TABLE 10. Parish Typology of Oxfordshire from the 1850 parliamentary report

(1) <i>Union</i>	(2) <i>Parish</i>	(3) <i>Contemporary observation</i>	(4) <i>Cluster analysis</i>	(5) <i>Distance (miles)</i>
Abingdon (Berks.)	Burcott	close	weak close	1
	Chislehampton	close	strong close	2
	Clifton	close	strong close	1
	Drayton	close	Intermediate	1
	Nuneham Courtenay	close	Intermediate	3
Bicester	Bletchington	open	weak close	1
	Fritwell	open	weak close	3
	Hardwick	close	strong close	0.5
	Hethe	open	weak close	1.5
	Islip	open	Intermediate	3
	Launton	open	Intermediate	2
	Lower Heyford	open	Intermediate	1
	Newton Purcell	close	strong close	1
	Souldern	open	Intermediate	3
	Stoke Lyne	open	weak close	3.5
	Weston on the Green	close	strong close	1
Headington	Beckley	close	weak close	1
	Cowley	open	weak open	0.25
	Cuddesden	close	weak close	1
	Headington	open	weak open	1
	Holton	close	strong close	1
	Iffley	open	weak open	1
	Marston	open	Intermediate	1
	St. Clement's	open	strong open	1
	Stanton St. John	open	Intermediate	1.5
	Wheatley	open	weak open	1.5
	Woodeaton	close	strong close	2
Thame	Albury	close	strong close	1
	Aston Rowant	open	Intermediate	1
	Charlgrave	close	Intermediate	1
	Chilworth	open	Intermediate	1
	Crowell	open	Intermediate	1
	Emmington	close	strong close	0.5
	Great Milton	open	weak close	2
	Lewknor	close	Intermediate	1

(1) Union	(2) Parish	(3) Contemporary observation	(4) Cluster analysis	(5) Distance (miles)
	Little Milton	open	Intermediate	1
	Shirburn	close	strong close	2
	Sydenham	close	strong close	1
	Tetsworth	open	weak open	1
	Thame	open	weak open	1

Sources: (1), (2), (3) and (5): BPP, 1850, XXVII, *Reports on Settlement and Removal*, pp. 403–22; (4): see text.

distance from the parish of residence to place of work, which shows that in all cases the dwelling places were located within a short distance, mostly two miles, of the workplaces.

The degree of correspondence between the contemporary observations and the cluster analysis appears to differ between the unions. In Abingdon Union, what were reported as close parishes are grouped in the range from intermediate to strong close parishes. In Bicester Union, by contrast, the so-called open parishes appear to correspond to what the cluster analysis classified as intermediate and even weak close parishes, while all the close parishes turn out to be classified as strong close ones in the analysis. In Headington Union, what were called open parishes appear to range from strong open to intermediate parishes in the cluster analysis, while close parishes are associated with strong and weak close ones in the analysis. Finally, in Thame Union, what the cluster analysis grouped as intermediate parishes appear to have been considered by contemporaries as either open or close parishes, and the rest tend to match well.

Figure 2 illustrates the relation between contemporary categorizations and the result of the cluster analysis. Different unions appear to have different dividing lines between open and close parishes. How can this diversity be explained? The first possibility relates the time gap between 1850, when the parliamentary return was made, and 1831, when the data on which the cluster analysis is based were produced. The demographic and economic situations of the unions may have changed in the two intervening decades, and regional variation in the degree of change may have resulted in these various lines of demarcation. A problem with this explanation is the lack of evidence that such a regional variation had developed between the two dates.⁴⁹ Another conjecture is that the relieving officers in individual unions may have had their own criteria of open and close parishes. What an officer in one union regarded as open parishes may not have been taken as such by another in a different union. Perhaps this was due to the ambiguity of the concept of open and close parishes; some officers may have paid attention to the labour surplus and deficit, whilst others laid emphasis on the dwelling conditions, or landholding patterns, or the level of poor relief spending.⁵⁰ Despite the various positions of the dividing lines, it is clear from Figure 2 that the result of the cluster analysis is consistent with

⁴⁹ The existing evidence, if anything, seems to point in the opposite way. For instance, the 1850 returns show virtually no difference in wage level across the unions discussed above, attesting to similar degrees of population pressure. BPP, 1850, XXVII, *Reports of settlement and*

removal, pp. 411–21.

⁵⁰ Or, the diverse criteria may be related to different attitudes on the part of the relieving officers towards the necessity for reform in the laws of settlement, although there is no strong evidence for this.

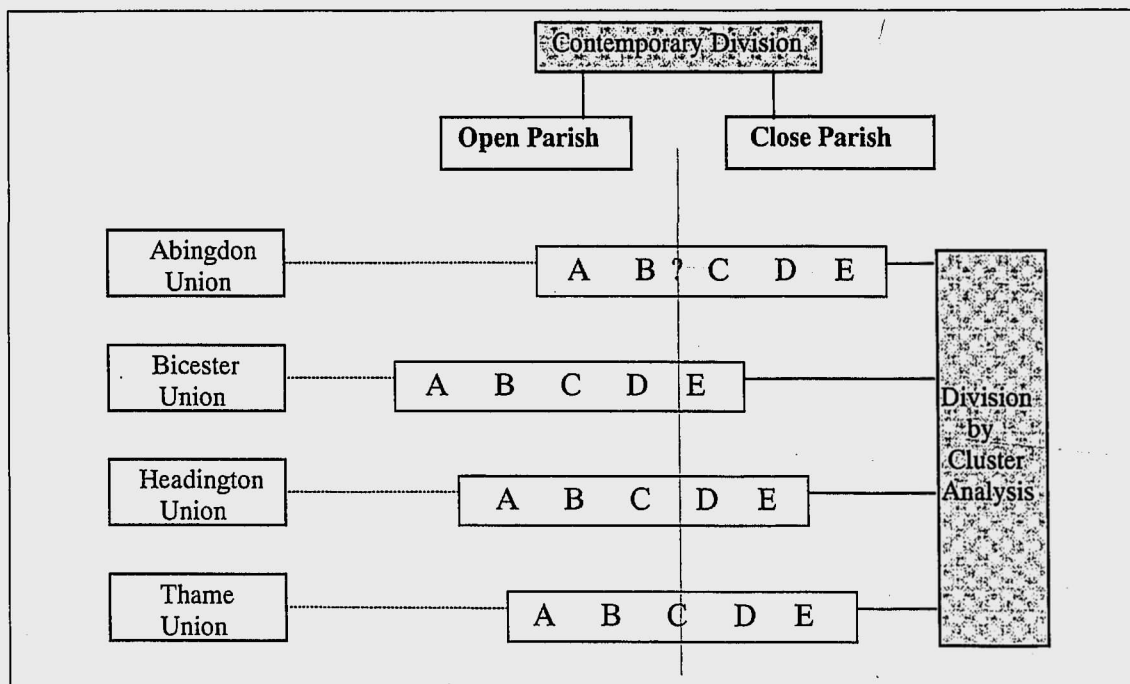


FIGURE 2. Classification of Oxfordshire parishes in 1850 and the result of cluster analysis.

Note: A: strong open; B: weak open; C: intermediate; D: weak close; E: strong close.

contemporary observations to the extent that the *relative* openness of the parishes in *each union* appears to conform to the analytical result. It may be right to say that the overall tone of the 1850 returns was strongly pro-reform, but it seems ill-founded to claim that local returns comprising the 1850 returns were unreliable materials, coloured by the political motive of scandalising the existing settlement system.

VII

The issue of open and close parishes has been touched on by a large number of historians, but in-depth research into the ways in which the system operated has been rare. In particular, little research has been undertaken into the comparative analysis of parishes with different typologies. This article has demonstrated that the open/close parish distinction was an important feature of rural England not only during the mid-nineteenth century, when the issue of open and close parishes was vehemently debated on the stage of national politics, but also during the early nineteenth century, when the terminology had yet to be widely employed. Applying cluster analysis to the data from the early 1830s has shown the real existence of parishes with different degrees of openness or closeness.

The results of the analysis have been used to explore the mode of operation of the open-close parish system. First, the two parish-level poor law returns for the early nineteenth century were investigated. Both have borne out the prediction of the open/close parish model, by showing that open parishes shouldered a substantially higher burden of poor relief in terms of money

rated and spent. The fact that the overall proportion of relief recipients was greater in close parishes than in open ones has been attributed to the significantly more generous poor relief policies of close parishes. This interpretation is supported by the high proportion of those classified as non-able-bodied poor in close parishes, together with the low proportion of recipients of indoor relief. Secondly, two possible sources of bias in *Rural Queries* – the status of the respondents and the socio-economic condition of the responding parishes – have been explored and shown to be significant. This finding suggests that research which neglects this bias may reach misleading conclusions. The focus of the analysis finally moved to the 1847 and 1850 Parliamentary Returns, whose data has been shown to be consistent with the cluster analysis result. This suggests that the claim that these returns were biased by the political discourse of the time is not tenable.

Three seemingly separate issues – whether parishes in different economic circumstances adopted different policies on poor relief in the early nineteenth century, whether the parishes responding to *Rural Queries* of 1832 were representative of parishes in general, and whether the mid-nineteenth-century parliamentary returns properly reflected the real condition of the rural localities – have a common thread: the answer to these questions can be found in the open/close parish distinction. The inter-relationship between parishes with different typologies was a crucial element for determining the ways in which the poor laws and the laws of settlement were implemented in the early nineteenth-century English rural society.