This study looks at the Old Poor Law in rural society from 1700 to its reform in 1834, focusing on its relationship to enclosure and social change. Leicestershire and Rutland form an excellent region for this topic, since they were heavily rural during this period and so were significantly affected by enclosure and other changes in rural society, particularly the expansion of framework knitting. Moreover, enclosure in this region was accompanied by the conversion of land from arable to pastoral agriculture. This resulted in a fall in the demand for labour, so that enclosure could lead to poverty and out-ward migration, as surplus labourers moved to towns and to those villages where industry was expanding as an alternative occupation to agriculture.

The village of Rothley exemplifies the findings of my research. It was enclosed in 1781, at which point there was a significant rise in poor relief. This occurred despite the presence of framework knitting, which should have been able to absorb the surplus labourers. This highlights the importance of enclosure in the history of poverty and welfare, contributing to increases in poor relief that resulted in the reform of the Old Poor Law in 1834.

This study will contribute to our understanding of a diverse range of topics. In particular, it will enhance our knowledge of socio-economic change on the eve of the industrial revolution, as it will cover agricultural development, migration, and the expansion of industry. In addition, it will look at the effects of enclosure on the position of women, which is currently a much under-studied topic. Finally, it will have implications for our knowledge of the physical landscape of villages, this being significantly affected by enclosure.

With thanks to my supervisors, Professors Keith Snell and Roey Sweet.