It is the purpose of this paper to explore the complex variety of relationships in which alehouses existed to the labouring poor of one early modern urban community: the port town of Southampton. Scholarly assessments of the intersections between alehouses and the poor have tended to view them positively; historians of poverty and the mechanisms for its amelioration have identified the granting of alehouse licenses as a supplementary form of poor relief, while scholars of public drinking have identified them as circulating loci of aid and succour (most famously encapsulated in Peter Clark’s verdict that they were run ‘by the poor, for the poor’). Partaking of and extending this reassessment, this paper offers some fresh evidence from a more richly realised local setting. The structure is as follows. [SCREEN 2] Section One sketches some local background, while Section Two rehearses the ways in which town leaders perceived alehouses as antithetical to the prospects of the poor. Section Three argues, by contrast, that they generally operated in the interests of the indigent. Rather than recapitulating the diverse ways in which poor people utilised alehouses, it sites them in relation to the ‘micropolitics of relief’ in the town and demonstrates that, despite their pronouncements, the corporation worked them extensively into their strategies of quasi-formal care.

I

Early modern Southampton furnishes an ideal context for the investigation of these issues. [SCREEN 3] Southampton was, and remains, a port town situated on the south coast of England on the south-western portion of the peninsula created by the confluence of the Test and Itchen Rivers. With a population in 1596 of 4,200 persons, it was incorporated in 1445 and received county status two years later, and a council drawn annually from fifty burgesses and headed by the Mayor governed the town through the instruments of the Town Assembly, the Town Court, the Court Leet and the Quarter Sessions. It was also in decay; the removal of its Mediterranean trade to London with navigation improvements on the Thames had, in the words of one 1582 commentator, ‘reduced artificers to beggars’. Although the town maintained links with France, Spain and the Channel Islands, a lively coastal trade, and played host to the New Draperies introduced by Walloon refugees in 1587, its inhabitants, most of whom were engaged in the cloth industry or ship-building and relied wholly on their wages to purchase necessities, remained dangerously exposed to the economic dislocations of the seventeenth-century; harvest crises, declining real wages, cyclical depressions within the cloth industry and the devastating effects of war and plague. The number of inhabitants receiving regular pensions doubled

---

3 Based on an adjusted census. SC3/1/1.
between 1572 and 1630 despite a declining population, and town records make it poignantly clear that poverty was a near-constant visitor within its gates; we encounter tenants living in makeshift hovels in the castle grounds and lodged in the perimeter towers of the town walls. The narrative can be condensed into an architectural metonym. In the fifteenth-century this plot was *The Lion*, a flourishing inn thronged by merchants from trading fleets; by 1620 it was ruinous tenements.

Alehouses, however, mushroomed in this stony soil; in 1601 we encounter the first complaint from court leet jurors about the ‘excessive numbers of alehouse-keepers… within every ward of this town as well allowed as not allowed’ which was to be reiterated at regular intervals. Alehouses represented the broad base of early modern England’s victualling hierarchy. Individuals generally operated them as a by-employment out of their dwelling houses, which were often unmodified beyond the provision of additional furniture and a sign. Unlike other sorts of publican, from 1552 alehouse-keepers had to be licensed by justices to whom they and two guarantors were required to provided sureties, although many traded illicitly without this. A licence devolved onto the keeper the right to sell by retail varieties of ale and beer (although not wine), and to provide cold food as well as short-term lodgings for travellers by foot (although not horses). Of around fifty alehouses trading in Southampton in 1620, both licensed and unlicensed (roughly one to every ninety inhabitants), rate rolls have enabled me to pin-point twenty-six of them [Screen 4]; these are indicated by the red circles on the map to which I’ll be referring back periodically (the blue circles are inns). How do they map on to the problem of poverty?

II

At various moments town leaders discursively fashioned these sites as ‘engines of impoverishment’ that inescapably compounded poverty and its satellite problems in the town. Most obviously, they were held to destabilise wage-dependant household economies that were already highly precarious by operating as homing devices for poor townsmen only too willing (mis)spend time and earnings in drink and associated forms of sociability. In 1579 the court leet complained that craftsmen ‘haunt taverns and alehouses not only by day but also by night so that many of them spend more than they get’ and introduced five shilling fines for any alehouse-keeper who suffered poor men to drink in their houses. This squandering of temporal and monetary resources by those who could ill afford to do so was exacerbated by the perceived willingness of Southampton’s alehouse-keepers not only to serve the poor but to tempt them with pawning, payments in kind and other ‘drinks promotions’; in 1609 Thomas Williams, a ‘very poor man’, pawned his cloak at John James’s tippling house and spent the 18d he received for it on beer. James received the fine. In 1574, Nicholas Borey at the King’s Orchard was presented for selling poor men double beer by the wine quart for a penny. As well as drinking, alehouse haunting raised the additional spectre of expensive and potentially ruinous games. In 1579 the incessant bowling and carding associated with a cluster of premises on the town orchards was described as ‘to the great hinderance and impoverishment of divers artificers of this town and other

---

4 CL II, p. 354.
5 CL II, p. 182.
6 AB II, p. 46.
7 CL I, p. 134, 163.
householders’, while in 1666 Jenkin Hues was presented for keeping ninepins on his premises ‘being the occasion of poor men neglecting their callings and families’.

Alehouse-keepers were also held to compromise the town’s poor by voraciously stripping the weekly market of essential items before eleven o’clock, about which the magistrates repeatedly complained during the subsistence crises of the late-sixteenth century. In 1571 one of the complaints against unlicensed tippler Richard Rich was that ‘his wife doth misuse the market of eggs’, the same year in which John Elliot of The Antelope was fined for engrossing butter. In 1589 there was a general complaint that the ‘inkeepers, taverns and alehouses contrary to ancient order do buy faggot wood, coal, butter, cheese and all other victuals coming to market before eleven of the clock in the forenoon’, repeated more forcefully in 1594. In particular, town brewers and the alehouse-keepers who purchased from them were accused of depleting the market of barley during grain shortages, the principle bread corn of the poor, especially if for use in intoxicatory double beer that not only consumed twice the amount of malt as small or half varieties but was also ‘not to use, but for drunkenness and excess’. Some parasitical ‘tipplers of Holyrood’, the wealthiest parish of the town, were warned collectively in this respect in 1608.

Alehouses were also increasingly regarded with trepidation as lodging sites for mobile labour and other varieties of subsistence migrant who descended on towns, and whose presence within the walls presaged additional burdens on the poor rates at the expense of indigent townspeople. Statutory provision attempted to foreclose such unwanted patronage; national orders, communicated to the Southampton’s alehouse-keepers in body during annual licensing sessions at the audit house, prohibited newly-minted licensees both from lodging ‘vagabonds’ and, more significantly, any individuals ‘above one day and night but such whose true name… he shall deliver to the constables or… unless they be such person or persons as he or she very well knoweth and will answer for’. Nonetheless, in both perception and reality alehouses offered beacons for newcomers, predominantly from the rural hinterland and other parts of southern Hampshire. In 1634 Abigail Bellinger was found being ‘entertained at [ale-seller] Stephen Langmier’s house’; she was ordered to depart the town by a fortnight and ‘the said Langmier to rid her out of his house by that time at his peril’. Entire families were often received in this way. In 1608 the town sergeant discovered newcomers Peter Allen with his wife and two children at Widow Janverin’s alehouse, while in 1671 unlicensed tippler William Davis was called before the assembly ‘for entertaining of the Widow Goffe and her children at his house and for frequent entertaining of beggars and vagabonds which may bring charge to the town’. In 1682, the same body were warned by an anxious ratepayer ‘that there is come into this town of late a foreigner woman person with four children entertained and harbourd by Goody Okey of St John’s parish’, an unlicensed tippler.

8 CL II, p. 179, 251.
9 SC6/1/62 Fo. 13r.
10 CL I, p. 65.
11 CL I, p. 72-3.
12 CL II, p. 266, 300.
13 AB II, pp. 6-7.
14 SC9/2/1 Fo. 57 (loose).
15 SC2/1/6 Fo. 274r
16 AB I, p. 71.
17 SC9/1/14 Fo. 6.
18 SC9/1/26 Fo. 1. A Widow Okey is presented for unlicensed aleselling at Fo. 3.
Alehouses also enclosed the sorts of casual work that appealed to newcomers and enabled them to extend their residence in Southampton, often in exchange for free or reduced lodgings at the venue where they found employment. In 1608, George Giles, a shoemaker from Stockbridge with a wife and child, was reported to ‘draweth beer above the bar at the Widow Armstrong’s’; he was directed to put in sureties to discharge the town or leave within a fortnight.  

Similar cases abound: John Powell from Marchwood (Hants) found work ‘drawing beer at the house of Michael Edmonds in St Michael’s parish’; in 1635 an unnamed newcomer ‘who draweth beer at the Widow Fryer’s’ was warned to depart the town; the year later Richard White ‘a newcomer who draweth beer at Mr Barlow’s’ was similarly expelled.  

Although males seem to have comprised the bulk of tapsters and drawers, female newcomers might pick up casual employment as maids, especially in larger establishments and inns; in 1633 Mary Tabott, a maid out of service and living at her own hand, found a ‘living as a charwoman at The Bear’. She was summoned to the audit house and instructed ‘to get her into service by Lady Day next or else to depart the town’. Even more so than in cases of simple harbouring, responsibility for the removal of these temporary ‘staff’ descended in large part to the shoulders of alehouse-keepers. In 1648 James Fiford was found working as a tapster in John Blake’s house. Blake was instructed to remove Fiford and his goods within a week ‘or else he is to bring in his licence which is to be taken from him and his sign to be pulled down’.  

III

Clearly, many of these complaints could be interpretatively reconstituted as examples of how alehouses functioned as a nexus of services for the poor; these dimensions are fairly well-known for other contexts, so will only be briefly summarised here. For the resident indigent they offered escape from bitter livings in cramped tenements and rooming quarters, psychotropic and competitive distractions, and nutrients in the form of bread and small beer, closely regulated by assize, and that could be obtained in kind or on credit; in 1571 the town’s alehouse-keepers were instructed to offer ‘halfpenny loaves’ to their customers, while in 1594 all ‘inkeepers and tipplers’ were commanded to ‘provide small beer for the poor’ at cheap rates, both in their houses and ‘out of doors’. Alehouses also offered news of jobs and an informal economic arena for the acquisition and sale of second-hand goods, especially clothes; in 1624, for example, Elizabeth Fashin went to Anna Lile’s The Grave Maurice to ‘offer stockings for sale’. For newcomers, ale and tippling houses offered literal ‘doors of entry’ for would-be urban settlers who found their not only diet and lodgings but also kinship and contacts within their amorphous sociability. However, the rest of the paper outlines what was arguably a more distinctive and important
aspect of the affinity between alehouses and the poor in the early modern Southampton: their relationship to relief.

Formalised relief of the indigent in Southampton took three forms: charitable provision in the form of bequests, gifts and rents from wealthy donors (which also funded five almshouses and the workhouse for special cases); periodic payments from a general town fund; and from 1572 formal poor collections from each of its five parishes. The corporation controlled all three mechanisms, disbursing money from the charities and the common chest as well as keeping the accounts of poor relief as collected and distributed by parish officers. Providing for the poor placed a serious strain on all civic purses, but notwithstanding these provisions in seventeenth-century Southampton the number of those requiring support in combination with the low ebb of corporation finances rendered the problem particularly acute; in 1619, when the king sought £300 from the town to combat piracy in North Africa, the Mayor responded that there were too few merchants resident in the town, too many poor, and that they could not afford it. As the seventeenth century developed, it became apparent that existing devices were nowhere near adequate to meet the growing scale of the problem, especially at certain moments. In 1652, after the harvest crisis of the 1640s, the corporation admitted that the ‘rates imposed and assessed on the several parishes of this town by the said churchwardens of the same towards the maintenance of the poor are not, by much, sufficient for the same’. In 1665, in the aftermath of domestic and foreign wars and the plague epidemic of that year, the mayor wrote to the king to complain that they ‘do find their poverty so great and the poor so numerous and daily increasing… that it is impossible for them to contribute sufficient allowance towards the necessities under which they groan’. Indeed, ‘many of those who lately contributed towards the relief of others are now reduced to that necessity as to need relief themselves’.

It was out of these desperate circumstances that the corporation, in dialogue with townspeople, fashioned alternative relief strategies in which alehouses were to feature centrally and systematically. Indeed, despite the concerns articulated above, I would argue that in Southampton they were accommodated more extensively as a species of care than in any provincial town thus studied. How?

The most striking initiative was introduced in 1659 when, as in Dorchester and Salisbury some years previously, the corporation intervened in the brewing industry. In that year, in regard to the ‘daily an increase of poor people within this town and county and therefore a further increase of maintenance for their relief’, the town assembly decreed that alehouses should thereafter take their ale only from ‘one or more’ licensed brewers, with the ‘benefit and profit’ generated by the licensees being ‘dispensed and converted to the relief of the poor’. Three days later a candidate had been named, alderman Richard Walker, and the terms of the arrangement slightly altered; rather than donating his inflated profits, Walker would pay for a three-year monopoly at the rate of eighty pounds annually in quarterly instalments. Fifty pounds of this would go to the workhouse, with the remainder to be distributed ‘to other poor people according to the discretion of the mayor and justices of this corporation’. A new brewhouse was constructed for Walker Above Bar, and two months later all alehouse-keepers were instructed ‘from this day forward’ to ‘take and buy their beer and ale only of Mr Richard Walker’, an injunction that was built into their licensing agreements. However, somewhat predictably, the scheme proved controversial; in

29 SC2/1/8 Fo. 90r.
30 SC2/1/8 Fo. 214r.
early 1660 the assembly books contain a tantalising reference to a ‘debate of the difference between Mr Walker and Mr Knight concerning the brewhouse’. William Knight was an alderman and brewer, and was clearly representing the combined interests of his trade. The ‘debate’ was evidently resolved in Knight’s favour, as the same day it was ‘judged convenient’ that JPs should licence alehouses ‘according to the usual course, and former order made to the contrary… notwithstanding’. Indeed, the margin next to the original entry contains a somewhat rueful ‘order suspended’.  

Notwithstanding the failure of this ambitious stand-alone scheme, there were many more quotidian ways in which alehouses helped meet the charges of poverty in the town. Flirting with tautology, fines from alehouse-related statutory offences that came before Southampton’s courts both swelled the general town fund and, in a predictable manoeuvre, were more likely than those for other offences to be explicitly redistributed back to the poor. One third of the five shillings levied on alehouse-keepers who entertained poor men went to the indigent, while in 1621 a tippler as well as a customer found brawling and fighting in his house ‘at unseasonable hours contrary to the statute’ was ordered to pay ten shillings each ‘for the use of the poor’. Fines for public inebriation, likely (although not necessarily) to be associated with alehouses, were also disposed of in this way; when George Brading confessed to drunkenness in 1625 he was ordered to pay five shillings ‘to the churchwardens of St. John’s parish [a poor residential district] to the use of the poor’.  

More importantly, conferring a licence to sell ale on indigent individuals, which required little or no capital investment, prevented them from falling on the poor rates and thus served as a variety of out-relief. A social profile of forty-two people licensed to sell ale between the years 1618-1624, for which detailed recognizances have descended to us, confirms this impression. There is a profusion of labourers and lesser craftsmen, many involved in the declining textile industry (then entering a significant depression), who would almost certainly have become chargeable were it not for ale-selling; moreover, eighteen of them (or 43% of the sample) are widows. This feature of alehouse licensing is also inscribed in space [NEW CORNER; RESIDENTIAL]. Would-be licensees invariably invoked this aspect of the ‘calculus of eligibility’ in their petitions to justices. In 1622 Richard Harvey, a seventy-two year old mariner, claimed that ‘a most desperate and dangerous wound’ received at sea rendered him unable to work and, having ‘no other means to support his wife and children’, had compelled him to ‘sell and utter beer and ale not being licensed’; he was admitted to sell, and he set out the sign of The Ship within view of the West Gate. Likewise in 1653, on the basis of a petition from Anne Fillater, Judith Burnett was granted a licence for the good of her ‘and her children’.  

As well as successive annual licenses awarded to the structural or life-cyclical indigent the corporation were willing to grant provisional licenses to those who, for reasons of illness or lameness, were temporarily unable to support themselves through their labour; relieving these individuals via an interim alehouse licence was a particularly attractive option for the corporation as short-term claimants of this sort

31 SC2/1/8 Ref.  
32 CL II, p. 182.  
33 SC2/1/6 Fo. 200r.  
34 SC9/2/1 Fo. 110v.  
36 SC9/1/1 Fo. 34.  
37 SC2/1/8 Fo. 198r.
were generally relieved from the town’s fund rather than charity or the rates. One such beneficiary of this form of disability benefits was Alexander Ockleford, the town carpenter during the 1640s who sustained a work-related injury while enlarging the wicket door of the Bargate in 1647 [Screen 5]. The assembly ordered that he ‘be licensed to sell beer until April next and no longer in consideration of his lameness, and when he recovers to desist without any further order’.

In cases where poor individuals were not formally licensed, perhaps because they did not conform to the stipulations of honesty or respectability that were additional requirements of the trade, the corporation were often willing to turn a blind eye to their unlicensed tippling. These cases were invariably framed within the pragmatic language of toleration. In 1609 John Mortimer, ‘a very poor man’, was ‘tolerated towards his relief to draw beer without paying the fine’;\(^{38}\) likewise, in 1615, widow Elizabeth Reston and John Tull ‘in respect of their poverties shall be tolerated to keep alehouses in their houses wherein they now dwell for and during the space of one year next’.\(^{39}\) Even if toleration was not extended, at the very least such individuals might evade punishment and a fine. In 1619 Widow Furby was called to the audit house to answer for ‘keeping of an unlicensed tippling house’; she ‘promised to do so no more and in respect of her poverty her [offence] was forgiven’.\(^{40}\) This contrasts markedly with the corporation’s handling of unlicensed tipplers from the more lofty keys of the social scale; in a telling example from 1619, baker Thomas Malzard had his unlicensed alehouse suppressed and was additionally compelled to pay fifteen shillings ‘which was received to the use of the poor alehouse-keepers’.

Town brew-houses, the granting of alehouse licenses to the indigent as a pension in kind, or the toleration/pardoning of those who sold without formal licence if they happened to be poor, are fairly well-known aspects of the ‘ecology of relief’ in early modern England as it has been reconstructed for other urban and rural contexts. However, what is extraordinary for the Southampton case are the additional ways in which the corporation worked alehouses into its strategy for relieving as many of the indigent as possible while minimising charges to both ratepayers and themselves. From the 1640s, when civil war had both disrupted trade in the town and maxed out corporation coffers on billeting and defensive improvements, one innovation was to compel licencees to devote a small percentage of their profits each week to the use of the poor. This might take the form of a general payment; in 1648 Alexander Ockleford, the injured carpenter who was originally granted a provisional alehouse licence, was allowed to extend it only on the basis that he agreed to ‘pay weekly eighteen pence towards the relief of the poor i[n] the said town’.\(^{41}\) The year later John Blake, in consideration of his alehouse license, was ‘appointed by Mr Mayor to pay towards the keeping of the poor in body’.\(^{42}\) Other allocations were more specific; in 1647, widow Joanna Daniel was licensed to ‘brew and sell ale by retail… upon condition she pay twelve pence a week unto Goodwife Langley’.\(^{43}\) In the troubled 1660s the details of such arrangements were routinely entered into the margins of lists of recognizances: [Screen 6]. The enshrining of such bargains in documents of record, and the fact that the corporation controlled both alehouse licensing as well as the collecting and disbursing of the agreed sums, meant that any alehouse-keepers that

\(^{38}\) AB II, p. 61.
\(^{39}\) AB IV, p. 1.
\(^{40}\) SC2/1/6 Fo. 186r.
\(^{41}\) SC2/1/8 Fo. 44r.
\(^{42}\) SC2/1/8 Fo. 45v.
\(^{43}\) SC2/1/8 Fo. 31r.
failed to make good on their commitments were likely to be suppressed. In 1652
Christopher Kirton, who had agreed to pay a poor townsman eight pence per week,
found himself fifteen weeks in arrears; the town sergeant instructed the brewers not to
serve him with any more beer and his licence was declared ‘null and void’.44

Extraordinarily, Southampton alehouse-keepers might also be compelled to
keep and receive orphans or the children of paupers until they were of an age to be
bound out apprentice; indeed, the disposal of the children as a means of relieving poor
parents is increasingly gaining recognition as a defining feature of seventeenth-
century social welfare.45 For sure, such children in Southampton were sometimes
passed onto other trades; however, in such cases householders expected payments
towards the child’s maintenance from the town fund. In 1675, for example, Jane
Brown was paid six pounds ‘in full for keeping Brock’s child’.46 The allocation of
poor children to alehouse-keepers whose operating profits could support them enabled
both parents to be relieved and the child to be maintained at no cost to corporation or
ratepayer. The idea found its first expression in 1609, in an ingenious licensing
petition. A Goodwife Kent from Baddesley (Hants) appeared before the town
assembly and ‘lamentably craveth relief’ for a ‘sucking child… put unto her by the
father’, a Southampton resident. The wife of Thomas Sannon, a beer brewer Above
Bar, presented herself at the audit house the following day and ‘offered to keep this
child and to put in surety to discharge the town thereof forever, so that her husband
might be allowed to sell beer as a tippler’. Her request was granted, and thereafter
such deals became a characteristic feature of the landscape of relief in the town.47 It is
not entirely clear whether alehouse-keepers ‘kept’ town children in a spatial or strictly
financial sense; however, prevailing practice and the fact that no sums are mentioned
in connection with the deals (as is the case regarding payments to poor adults)
strongly suggests such arrangements entailed the physical relocation of the child.

In many cases, as in the above, townspeople desirous of selling ale offered to
take in poor children, or referenced an existing arrangement, to amplify the appeal of
their licensing applications. In 1610 William Evans ‘in regard he keeps one Francis
Woodcock’s child’ was ‘tolerated to keep an alehouse’.48 In 1616 the Widow Grundy
was allowed to keep an alehouse as she ‘promised to take Henry Hudson one of the
children of John Hudson the late crier of this town and to keep him until he be of age
to be bound apprentice to her son-in-law being a smith’.49 In 1671 Henry Fullford was
awarded a license to draw beer ‘upon keeping of a deaf child’.50 However, in other
cases the calculus was inverted and existing alehouse-keepers had poor children
forced upon them. In 1629 Francis Barter was ‘ordered to be received by John
South… in regard of his licence to sell beer’ until his father’s arrival in the town, at
which point South was to ‘take another poor town child in his place’.51 Again, these
more coercive arrangements were especially common in the 1660s. In 1664, in
consideration of the fact that he drew beer in Robert Neale’s house, William Knight
was instructed to maintain John Govin’s son or ‘pay for drawing beer… according to
the statute’.52 Surviving alehouse recognizances from this decade [Screen 6], where

44 SC2/1/8 Fo. 91r.
45 Hindle
46 SC2/1/8 Fo. 317r.
47 AB II, p. 65.
48 AB II, p. 100.
49 AB IV, p. 41.
50 SC2/1/8 Fo. 268v.
51 SC2/1/6 Fo. 236r.
52 SC2/1/8 Fo. 208r.
the gender of children received by alehouse-keepers are in two cases inscribed in the margin, are also suggestive of coercion; the marginalia, while in the same hand, was clearly added in different ink after the original recognizances had been entered into. Once again, the corporation subjected these arrangements to close scrutiny and were swift to respond to altered circumstances; in 1642 Avery Mayor, licensed ‘for keeping a town-born child’, had his licence swiftly revoked after it was discovered that the child in question had died.53

IV

In conclusion, and as ever with these diverse institutions, the relationship between alehouses and the poor is ambiguous and complex. However, a broad trend can be delineated for the Southampton case. While corporation concerns about alehouses as receptacles of newcomers remained constant and even increased throughout the 1600s, late sixteenth-century complaints about alehouse-haunting and engrossing gave way in response to the economic fluctuations of the seventeenth-century to a pragmatic appreciation of the manifold ways in which alehouses could be co-opted as versatile instruments of relief that came at little charge to the town. This questions a recent judgement that the corporation was ‘not an innovator in poor relief schemes’ compared to Salisbury, Norwich or Dorchester; although the brewery experiment was neither original nor successful, the harnessing of alehouses, and especially the novel burdens that were placed on their keepers, seem flexible and imaginative solutions that I’ve certainly not encountered elsewhere. These, however, emerged not from the audit house chamber but out of a complex process of negotiation with the poor themselves, as potential alehouse-keepers both originated many of the relief schemes and strategically positioned themselves in relation to them in order to establish themselves in the trade.

53 SC2/1/6 Fo. 328r.