

Poor and the Poor Laws

Domestic Records Information 103

1. The Elizabethan Poor Laws

Paupers have attracted the active interest of the state since the Elizabethan Poor Laws of 1601. However, most records will be found locally, as paupers were a charge on their parish of settlement, and local taxes were raised for their support. The parish of settlement was generally the parish of birth, or of the husband's birth. For a brief and lucid guide to the poor relief system, the various poor laws, and the idea of settlement, see Herber, *Ancestral Trails*, pp 285-305.

There is little in The National Archives about the operation of the Elizabethan Poor Law and its system of outdoor relief for the deserving poor, and Houses of Correction for the undeserving poor. Try the relevant county record office instead, as the records produced in the course of proving settlement can be very informative for family history. See Cole, *An Introduction to Poor Law Documents before 1834*.

2. The New Poor Law (1834) and the Workhouse System

Workhouses (to supply indoor relief) were designed in as repulsive a way as possible, in order to put people off from applying for help. They were set up by unions of six or so parishes, under the New Poor Law of 1834. The Poor Law Unions continued until 1930.

To find out in which union a particular parish was, see Gibson and Youngs, *Poor Law Union Records: 4 Gazetteer of England and Wales*. The three previous pamphlets in this excellent series give advice on the range of records to be found, and references to documents in local record offices and in The National Archives.

The records of the Poor Law Commission and the Poor Law Board are in The National Archives, in the MH department code. They are not particularly easy to use, as the lists are very uninformative, so any search is likely to be lengthy, but it could be very rewarding.

[MH 12](#), the main series of correspondence, is known to contain the names of thousands of individuals. It is listed only by poor law union and covering dates of correspondence, with no indication as to subject. The correspondence is indexed by specialised administrative subjects in [MH 15](#). Many of the records are also in a poor condition.

Local records are easier to use, particularly with Gibson and Youngs to hand.

3. Poor Law Union Staff

For registers of staff of the workhouses, 1837-1921, see [MH 9](#). The registers give dates of appointment and salary: date of death is sometimes noted. Personal details of people appointed may be found in forms among the mass of papers in [MH 12](#), although virtually all papers after 1900 were destroyed by fire in the 1940s. The forms give full name, age, address, details of previous jobs and reasons for appointment to the present post, and salary. Names of wives and number of children are sometimes given, as are details of religion and qualifications. [MH 12](#) can also contain references for applicants, and correspondence on dismissal.

You may find it worth checking the *Index to Parliamentary Papers* on CD-ROM in The National Archives Library, to check on returns of poor law union officials were made to Parliament: these can give personal details.

4. The Poor: Bibliography

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- M Herber, *Ancestral Trails* (2nd edition, Sutton Publishing, February 2004)
- Index to Parliamentary Papers
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- S Pearl, 'Charities: the forgotten poor relief', *Family Tree Magazine*, May 1991
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- T Wood, 'Workhouse Ancestors', *Family Tree Magazine*, October and November 1995

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