

Somerset Archive and Record Service

Information Leaflet

POOR LAW UNION RECORDS



Introduction

Poor Law Unions were formed following the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. Prior to this date, paupers were relieved by the Overseers of the Poor in their parish of settlement. One of the first tasks of the elected Boards of Guardians was to build a Union Workhouse in which those unable to support themselves could be housed. The system lasted until the Public Assistance Act of 1929.

A Union consisted of a number of parishes, usually 16-20, and the Workhouse would usually be built in the main town of the area. There were various standard plans that could be used according to the likely number of paupers in the Union.

Somerset Unions

There were 16 Unions in Somerset:

Axbridge	D\G\AX	Langport	D\G\L
Bedminster & Long Ashton	D\G\BD	Shepton Mallet	D\G\SM
Bridgwater	D\G\BW	Taunton	D\G\TA
Chard	D\G\CH	Wellington	D\G\W
Clutton	D\G\CL	Wells	D\G\WE
Dulverton	D\G\D	Williton	D\G\WI
Frome	D\G\F	Wincanton	D\G\WN
Keynsham	D\G\K	Yeovil	D\G\Y

Bath workhouse records are held at Bath & North East Somerset Record Office, The Guildhall, Bath, BA1 5AW, tel. 01225 477421, archives@bathnes.gov.uk.

Records

Workhouse records can be divided into two series:

- information about individual paupers;
- records relating to the management of the workhouse itself .

The survival of workhouse records varies considerably from Union to Union so that the documents listed in this leaflet may not exist in every case.

Information about Individual Paupers

Admission and Discharge Registers

These registers (Ref. D\G\.../60) list all the paupers coming into the workhouse and those who left, arranged chronologically. The format of the registers changed in 1866 and the later ones give more information, i.e. there are columns for name of pauper, date of admission, calling (occupation), religious persuasion, place of birth, class of diet, and parish from which admitted. The pre-1866 registers do not give calling, religious persuasion or place of birth, although they do give reason for admission. Indexes for many of these registers are available in the searchroom.

Birth and Death Registers

The birth registers (Ref. D\G\.../67) have columns for date of birth, names of the parents (although as the great majority of the children were illegitimate this is often only the mother's name), parish to which the parents belonged, date of baptism and child's name.

The death registers (Ref. D\G\.../69) have columns for date of death, name and age of the pauper, parish to which they belonged and place of burial.

Creed registers

These registers have columns for name, date of admission, parish from which admitted, religious persuasion and whether the pauper was discharged or died in the workhouse. (Ref. D\G\.../78).

Offences and Punishment Registers

These give the name of the pauper, the offence committed and the punishment awarded. (Ref. D\G\.../87).

Other possible records that provide information about individual paupers include apprenticeship indentures (Ref. D\G\.../37), maintenance accounts for boarded out children (Ref. D\G\.../42), incoming and copy outgoing correspondence (Ref. D\G\.../57), and casuals admission and discharge registers (Ref. D\G\.../121).

Records Relating Workhouse Management

Minutes of the meetings of the Board of Guardians

There is usually a complete run of these volumes from 1836- 1929. (Ref. D\G\.../8a). They are administrative records containing information on the supply of food, clothing and furniture to the workhouse, the appointment of staff, decisions about the responsibility of the Union for a particular pauper, disciplinary matters, and other management decisions. Individual paupers may be mentioned, but this is rare.

Financial records

The most important of these are the ledgers (Ref. D\G\.../9a), but there are also accounts for daily, weekly and quarterly provisions, the Workhouse Master's receipt and account book, and the farming and clothing accounts.

Report books

These were kept by the Visiting Committee, the Master, Chaplain, the Porter, Medical Officer and Nurse and provide reports of their role within the workhouse. (Ref. D\G\.../93, 94, 95, 97, and 99a).

Central Correspondence

Correspondence between the central Poor Law Commission or Board and local poor law authorities for the period 1834-c.1900 is held at The National Archives, Ruskin Avenue, Kew, Richmond, TW9 4DU, tel. 020 8876 3444, enquiry@nationalarchives.gov.uk. (Ref. MH12). Later correspondence was destroyed during the Second World War.

Useful Sources

M A Crowther, *The workhouse system: the history of an English social institution*, (1981)

A Reid, *The Union Workhouse: a study guide for teachers and local historians*, (1994)

J Hurley, *Rattle his bones: a century of poor law, based on records of the workhouses at Dulverton and Williton*, (1974)

C A Buchanan, *The introduction of the new poor law of 1834 into the Unions of Bridgwater, Taunton, Wells and Williton*, (1977)

A useful website containing information about workhouses can be found at www.users.ox.ac.uk/~peter/workhouses.

Contact details

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