

The Workhouse - The New Poor Law

Before the dissolution of the monasteries under King Henry VIII, care for the poor often fell to the monks, friars and nuns. With the loss of these facilities, the support network for those in need broke down to a significant extent. Other factors also led to an increase in those unable to support themselves. This resulted in legislation in 1597, 1601 and 1662 – the Old Poor Law – which placed responsibility for support of the poor on the parish in which they had “settlement”. Funds were raised through the parish poor rate and the system was administered by the parish Overseers of the Poor.

Under the Old Poor Law support was usually in the form of out-relief: goods and money given to people in their own homes. Some parishes also had small workhouses to provide indoor relief.

The Old Poor Law remained in force for over 200 years, by which time changing circumstances meant that the cost was spiralling, and major reform was necessary. Following a Royal Commission in 1832, the Poor Law Amendment Act 1834 came into force. This act is commonly known as The New Poor Law.

Key features of the New Poor Law

- Responsibility for the poor passed from the parish to newly created Poor Law Unions. These were formed from groups of parishes.
- Each Poor Law Union was run by a Board of Guardians. Central control and harmonisation were provided by the Poor Law Commissioners and their successors.
- Each Poor Law Union was required to create a Union Workhouse.
- Relief was only available on admittance to the Workhouse: out-relief was prohibited, or at least, significantly restricted.
- Life in the Workhouse was designed to be as hard and unpleasant as possible, so that people would seek admittance only as a last resort.

The Workhouse

The feature of the New Poor Law which was long embedded in the national psyche was the Workhouse.

Life in this establishment was deliberately hard:

- Inmates were forced to wear uniforms.
- Men, women and children were separated.
- The daily routine was regimented.
- Diet was highly restricted and dependent on age, gender and work undertaken.
- Work was hard, repetitive and boring.

Entry into the workhouse was voluntary and people could leave whenever they wanted, however for many people there was no alternative. These frequently included the old, sick and infirm and pregnant women who had nowhere else to go.

Over time the role of the workhouse changed, becoming more of a hospital/maternity home/care home and the regime became more benign. However, they never lost their stigma and even into the 1970s and 1980s older people were reluctant to enter the former workhouses which were then NHS hospitals. Ironically, many of the surviving workhouse buildings have since been converted into highly desirable and expensive flats!

Workhouse Records

Unfortunately, many of our ancestors were forced to enter the workhouse at one-time or another and will therefore appear in workhouse records.

Workhouse records can be grouped into three categories:

- Records of the inmates, such as:
 - Admission and discharge registers
 - Creed registers. These include details of religion and other personal information
 - Lists of those in receipt of indoor and outdoor relief
 - Details of applications for relief and case books
 - Information on children – boarding out records, school records, apprenticeship records etc.
- Administrative records, for example:
 - Minutes of the Board of Guardians and other committees involved in the running of the workhouse
 - These can include details on individuals such as particularly problematic inmates or the apprenticeships of children
 - Staff records
- Central records, including:
 - Correspondence between the Union and the Board of Commissioners
 - Employment records
 - Reports on conditions in the workhouse

Of these, the first two categories are generally to be found in the local County or City Record Office and in local studies libraries and history centres. The third group are at The National Archives in Kew.

The Workhouse in other records

The people in the Workhouse also appear in the standard record sources for family history research such as the censuses.

Census

Finding the entry for a Workhouse can be tricky. A search for the keyword “workhouse” and the location may find the correct pages, however you may need to think laterally.

Check the details of each district covered within the parish where the Workhouse was located. Sometimes it may have constituted a district in its own right, in other cases reviewing the details of coverage for each district will tell you which one includes the Workhouse. For example, in the 1861 census, Lanchester Enumeration District 14 included Lanchester Workhouse¹. In this case, the details of people at the workhouse make up the last two pages of the enumeration district.

- The people listed at the Workhouse will include staff as well as residents. Typically, the master of the workhouse is the “head”.
- People in the Workhouse are often identified as “inmate” although other solutions were possible. For example, in the case of the Lanchester Workhouse in 1861 the “relationship to head” field is blank.

¹ www.ancestry.co.uk. 31/12/2019

- Ages, marital status, occupations and places of birth were included in the census returns for each inmate, however this information would have been completed by the master and so is more likely to have errors than other census information.
- Sometimes the names of the inmates were “masked”, for example, by use of initials rather than complete names.

Birth and death certificates

Often the Workhouse was the only place for mothers, particularly unmarried mothers, to go to have their babies. Similarly, it may have been the only refuge for the very old and sick who were unable to work and so could no longer support themselves. Thus, a large number of people were born and died in the Workhouse.

As you can imagine, having the Workhouse listed on your birth certificate was a source of shame to many, so from 1904 an alternative form of address was used. For example, Durham Workhouse would appear as “37, Crossgate, Durham”.

From ca. 1920 this practice was also followed for death certificates. For example, the death of my Great-Grandfather was registered as taking place at 12a Newbold Road, Chesterfield. This was Chesterfield Workhouse, later Scarsdale Hospital.

For a list of many of these alternative addresses see <http://www.workhouses.org.uk/addresses/index.shtml>

End of the New Poor Law

The New Poor Law was repealed in 1948 with the establishment of the Welfare State. Many of the surviving Workhouses become hospitals in the new National Health Service.

Children and the Workhouse

Many children were born and raised in the Workhouse and many had schools to provide for their education. However, alternatives were also available to provide for youngsters:

- The youngest children were often “boarded out” to families and other carers – a system similar to modern fostering.
- Cottage homes associated with the Workhouse provided a more home-like environment for children
- Industrial Schools and similar establishments provided training for older children.

Finding Workhouse records

The first step is to identify the Workhouse covering the area where your ancestors lived: there were 14 in County Durham and 12 for Northumberland. Some of these covered a wide area. The website <http://www.workhouses.org.uk/England/UnionsEngland.shtml> includes a list of the Workhouses in England by county.

Once you know which workhouse you are interested in, then there are two locations where you can find records:

- County Record Offices
 - Durham Record Office
 - <http://www.durhamrecordoffice.org.uk/media/16771/Poor-Law-Records/pdf/SubjectGuide11PoorLaw.pdf>
 - Northumberland Archives
 - Tyne & Wear Archives
 - <https://twarchives.org.uk/files/7083-paupers-records.pdf>
- The National Archives
 - Workhouse records are generally in Class MH (Ministry of Health)
 - Use search terms such as “poor law union” rather than “workhouse” to locate records

The survival of Workhouse records is patchy so an element of luck is required to locate what you are interested in. Also, some records are closed for 75 or 100 years and so may not be available to view.

The website <http://www.workhouses.org.uk/> is an excellent source for information on the Workhouse system in general and on individual Workhouses, including an overview of what records survive. The creator of this website, Peter Higginbotham, is a recognised expert in this area and has published many excellent books on the subject which are worth reading if you are interested in Workhouses.

Poor Law Union Records. 2. The Midlands and Northern England. Third Edition. By Jeremy Gibson and Colin Rogers. Published by The Family History Partnership. This small book includes details of surviving records for each Workhouse together with where they are located.

Workhouses of the North. By Peter Higginbotham. The History Press. Includes a brief description, many with photographs, of the Workhouses across the North of England, including those of Co. Durham and Northumberland.

Hint & Tips

- Many records from Workhouses no longer survive. Others may still be sealed.
- People in the Workhouse also appear in “normal” family history sources such as the census.
- The names of inmates may be masked, for example by use of only initials
- In the 20th Century masked addresses were used for the Workhouse on birth and death certificates.
- Not only inmates lived at the Workhouse, there were also staff employed there: The Master and Mistress and others, for example, school teachers.
- Records may not include a specific mention of your ancestors, but reports on the Workhouse may provide information on what their lives were like.

Disclaimer: This document is intended as a guide to get you started with researching your family history. It is not intended to be comprehensive and Cameo Family History does not accept responsibility for errors and omissions.