
Old & New Poor Law Records

Introduction

The records of the Poor Law go back over 400 years. This means that the poor, rather than being a nameless mass, often left more traces than their better-off contemporaries. Until the present century, the poor were the majority, and people of almost any rank in society could fall into poverty. Records of the Poor Law are an essential source for many family and local historians.

As early as 1388 a labourer could not leave his parish of origin unless he had a testimonial issued by the Justices of the Peace. Vagrants who were able to work were treated as criminals and those who were unable to work through illness or old age were sent back to their birthplace.

The **Statute of Mortmain** in 1391 stipulated that parishes with Great or Rectorial Tithes held by ecclesiastical bodies should give a proportion of their income to the poor. More than 100 years later in 1494 vagrants who were able to work and failed to do so could be whipped, lose their ears or even be hung. From 1530/1 vagrants who could not work had to apply for a begging licence.

During the mediaeval period, religious institutions did much of the work of looking after the poor. It can be seen that such laws as there were dealt with vagrancy rather than poverty itself. 1535-1540 saw the **Dissolution of the Monasteries**, and in 1535/6 parishes became responsible for the care of the poor, sick and elderly. At the same time the local incumbent was allowed to request donations on Sundays to help the poor, although private donations were made an offence. The 1494 penalties for vagrancy were re-enforced.

In 1547 branding of vagrants with a 'V' was introduced for those who refused to work and they were classed as a slave for two years afterwards. If during this period they ran away then they were branded with 'S', signifying that they were slaves for life. In 1563 two people from each parish were required to collect alms from the parishioners - they had certain limited powers to persuade the reluctant to donate. 1572 saw the election of Overseers of the Poor and in 1597/8 parishes were allowed to levy a poor rate - sometimes this money was used to build the first poorhouses. Paupers were set to work and their children were found apprenticeships

The Old Poor Law

The basis of the '**Old Poor Law**' was the **1601 Poor Law Act**, supplemented by laws on **Settlement** passed in the later 17th century, and by the **Workhouse Acts** of 1723 and 1782. Several laws were enacted in the 16th century, but it was the 1601 Act which became the basis of the Poor Law for over 200 years. The system was administered mainly at parish level. Parishes could build 'Houses of Industry' (though only a minority did). The motive for this was usually convenience or economy. Several small parishes could form a union to run a house cooperatively.

Records of the Old Poor Law

The 'Old Poor Law' was administered mainly by the parish, and most of the surviving records are found in the parish collections. The Overseers of the Poor ran the system on behalf of the parish vestry. In the Suffolk Record Office parish catalogues, Poor Law records are mainly in Section G at Ipswich and Lowestoft, and Section 7 at Bury. Some records may be found in Sections A or E at

Ipswich and Lowestoft, and Sections 1 or 5 at Bury, because under the 1601 Act, the Churchwardens were *ex officio* Overseers. The **Justices of the Peace** had a supervisory role, conducting examinations and signing orders.

The records in the parish collections deal with the following: Overseers' accounts, collection of rates, disbursement of relief, settlement, bastardy and apprenticeships.

Overseers' accounts were compiled annually. These contain information on their expenses (legal fees, travel etc) as well as on the relief they paid out.

Parish rate books list those people who were able to pay the poor rate.

Relief could be 'Outdoor relief' (payments to people living in their own homes) or 'Indoor relief' (maintaining people in a House of Industry). Outdoor relief is itemised in the Overseers' accounts. Recipients' names may be given, and the reason for each payment. You may find that someone was in want of fuel or clothing, or was sick or in childbed. You may also find the name of a tailor, nurse, doctor etc who provided goods or services. Indoor relief will be found in the poorhouse records.

Settlement: everyone had a place of settlement where he or she was entitled to claim poor relief. Complications arose when someone left their place of settlement, which many did to find work. The parish to which they moved would require them to bring a **Settlement Certificate** from the parish of settlement. This guaranteed to provide for the person if they became unable to support themselves. If someone became a burden on the parish to which they had moved, the JPs either there or in the parish of settlement (or both) would conduct a **Settlement Examination** to try and establish which parish was responsible for paying the relief. These can contain a lot of biographical information. If it was found that a destitute person was legally settled in another parish, the JPs would issue a **Removal Order**, and the person would be sent back (sometimes in conditions of great hardship).

Bastardy: an illegitimate child was likely to need parish support, so the Overseers tried to find out who the father was, and get him to pay. The Overseers would question the mother, and produce a **Bastardy Examination**. The father would be issued with a **Maintenance Order**, and have to sign a **Bastardy Bond**. There may be other records as well if the father or mother was subjected to court proceedings.

Apprenticeships: getting poor children apprenticed was the main way in which the Overseers could stop them being a charge on the parish. **Apprenticeship Indentures** appear in many parish collections. (The apprenticeship system was not itself part of the Poor Law.)

Emigration: parishes sometimes sponsored the migration of the unemployed poor to other parts of the country, or to Canada, Australia etc.

Indexes to individual documents (settlement certificates, removal orders etc) are included in the archive name index at Lowestoft and Bury record offices. At Ipswich they are in a separate set of index drawers in the microform room. However, the names which appear in volumes (e.g. in Overseers' accounts etc) are not indexed, so researchers may need to search these books.

Poor Law Unions: some parishes joined together to form unions before the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 created the New Poor Law. Where this happened, there may be records of the Old Poor Law among the records of what became the Poor Law Unions.

At **Bury** there are records of seven Poor Law Unions - Bury St Edmunds, Cosford, Mildenhall, Newmarket, Risbridge, Sudbury and Thingoe and three pre-date 1834. **Bury St Edmunds Incorporation** was created in 1747 and has minutes from 1748. **Cosford Incorporation**, created in 1779 has miscellaneous papers regarding the workhouse. **Sudbury (Borough) Court of Guardians** was incorporated in 1702 and has minutes from 1771.

At **Ipswich** there are records of eleven Poor Law Unions - Blything, Bosmere and Claydon, Carlford and Colneis, Hartismere, Hoxne, Ipswich, Loes and Wilford, Plomesgate, Samford, Stow and Woodbridge: six of these pre-date 1834. **Blything Incorporation** was created in 1764 and has minutes from that date. **Bosmere and Claydon Incorporation** was created in 1765 and has minutes from 1821. **Carlford and Colneis Incorporation** was created in 1756 and has minutes from that date. **Loes and Wilford Incorporation**, created in 1765 has minutes from that date. **Samford incorporation** dates from 1764 and again, has minutes from that date. **Stow Incorporation** was created in and has minutes from 1778.

At **Lowestoft** there are records of two Poor Law Unions (Mutford and Lothingland and Wangford), both of which pre-date 1834, and some stray items, also pre-1834, from Blything. **Mutford and Lothingland Incorporation** was created in 1763, and its House of Industry was built at Oulton in 1765. Little survives from before 1834 in this collection. **Wangford Incorporation** was created in 1764, and built its House at Shipmeadow in 1765. There are minutes from 1764. There are some **Blything Incorporation** stray records among the Halesworth parish records including minutes 1764-1769. The main series of records is at Ipswich branch.

Quarter Sessions

If there were legal proceedings against a pauper, runaway apprentice etc, or a civil action between two parishes disputing liability, the order books of the Court of Quarter sessions would contain information. These are housed at the Ipswich Record Office and are indexed by name. More detailed paperwork including copies of settlement examinations or removal orders may be found in the Quarter Sessions bundles.

Newspapers

Cases heard at Quarter Sessions were often reported in the local newspapers. However, researchers can only use this source if they already know the approximate date of the case, or find reference to it in a newspaper index.

Parochial Charities

These were not part of the Poor Law, but in practice would have been closely linked with it. A benefactor would endow a charity (e.g. an almshouse, an annual payment to widows, or a distribution of bread, coals, clothes etc). The churchwardens administered parochial charities, although endowments often had their own trustees as well. The main records are in section L (or 12 at Bury) of the parish catalogues, with some also in sections A or E (or 1 & 5) at Bury. (Not all charities were for the relief of the poor: some were for the upkeep of the church or the provision of education.) Acts of 1786 and 1812 gave the **Clerk of the Peace** a role in overseeing charity records, so the Quarter Sessions records (at Ipswich and Bury) include details of accounts, objectives, trustees and income.

The Charity Commission for England and Wales was set up in 1853. One of its purposes was to ensure that charity funds were not wasted or misappropriated. The Commission still holds its own archives in London although some records of charities have been transferred to local record offices, especially accounts. At Ipswich record office there is an index, based on the Commission's modern records, giving details of current parochial charities (many of which have ancient origins).

New Poor Law from 1834

In 1834 Union Workhouses were established. This drew together the resources of groups (Unions) of parishes to build and manage a workhouse. The groupings usually related to the parish hundred. A workhouse master was appointed to oversee the day to day running of the establishment. A Board of Guardians was set up to manage the establishment. It is generally the Guardians' Minute books that survive. These reflect the business side of running the workhouse, but contain little information about inmates.

Workhouse Registers

The most useful records for family historians are the birth/baptism and death/burial registers. Registers have survived for approximately half of the Union Workhouses in Suffolk. In the 1930s as the National Health Service was established, many of the workhouses became General Hospitals and sometimes workhouse registers are listed in the Hospital collections (Class ID in Suffolk record offices).

Workhouse Admission Registers

By the 1920's some workhouses were keeping Admission and Discharge books. These contain lots of useful information, however very few survive. As part of the admission process people were asked about their religions beliefs. Their information was entered into a **Creed Register**. This can be useful if the Admission register has not survived.

Health provision

There was medical help available and at a time when people had to pay for medical help, this could be one of the benefits of entering the workhouse. Medical records particularly **Vaccination Registers** can contain helpful information.

Workhouse School Records

In the late 1800's School Attendance committees were set up. Poor children were often given basic education while living in the workhouse. The aim was to help their employability so they could lead a more independent life and cease to be a drain on public finances. Their records especially registers are useful if they survive.

Outdoor relief

During the 1920s there was a huge demand for places in the workhouses so a system of outdoor relief was established to alleviate poverty. There can sometimes be lists of outdoor relief from this period.

Bury Record Office, 77 Raingate Street, Bury St Edmunds, IP33 2AR

Telephone: 01284 741212

Email: bury.ro@suffolk.gov.uk

Ipswich Record Office, Gatacre Road, Ipswich, IP1 2LQ

Telephone: 01473 584541

Fax: 01473 584533

Email: ipswich.ro@suffolk.gov.uk

Lowestoft Record Office, Clapham Road, Lowestoft, NR32 1DR

Telephone: 01502 405357

Fax: 01502 405350

Email: lowestoft.ro@suffolk.gov.uk

Suffolk Record Office web site: <http://www.suffolk.gov.uk/sro>

Suffolk Heritage Direct website: <http://www.suffolkheritagedirect.org.uk>