

"Please, sir, I want some more"

Victorian Poor Law Records for Family Historians at Surrey History Centre



The above quotation, probably the best known from any Dickens' novel, has wrung the hearts of generations of readers, appalled at the callous treatment of little Oliver Twist.

In several of his novels, Charles Dickens gave the public a glimpse of workhouse life which revealed underlying faults in the administrative system and the hypocrisy of those allowed to govern it. But was he being fair to the system and were all workhouses as bad as the fictional ones portrayed in his novel? If you think your ancestors might have spent time in a Surrey Workhouse – why not visit us to try and find out!

With a couple of exceptions (Richmond and Croydon) Surrey History Centre holds records for the 10 Poor Law Unions covering the (modern) county of Surrey. Records for Richmond are divided between Surrey History Centre and Richmond Upon Thames Local Studies Library, and Poor Law Union records for Croydon are held at the Museum of Croydon.

The records for each union include a variety of different types of document and are well worth a thorough exploration. Those held by Surrey History Centre are listed among our catalogues under reference BG/-.

Boards of Guardians were given strict guidelines as to how to administer their responsibilities, including the keeping of administrative records. However, it is useful to remember that not all records were kept in exactly the same way and you can find variations between each Union. Also, sadly not all records have survived and some Unions have a better collection than others. Epsom (Ref BG/3) is particularly good; Hambledon (BG/7) is relatively poor.

Some of the records that might be useful for family historians to explore include:

Minutes

These show evidence of the day to day running of each Union. In Surrey, they are fairly complete and make fascinating reading. They are particularly useful if you are trying to find anyone who worked in the Union as they seem to have been fairly thorough at listing new and changing staff. Although occasionally they do mention inmates, this is usually only in exceptional circumstances.

However, if you know your ancestor was in a workhouse, and there are no surviving admission registers, it is worth having a look through these 'just in case'. Even if you don't find who you are looking for, you will be able to obtain a good idea of how the workhouse functioned – even what food your ancestor might have eaten while they were there.

Admission and Discharge Registers

These are fairly self explanatory but sadly they don't give us a huge amount of information other than the dates of admission and discharge. They often give the ages of the people, and families are sometimes grouped together. Occasionally there will be a brief (one or two words) description of circumstances, but this is exceptional. However, it is often possible to see 'multiple entries' of people coming in and out of the workhouse. Contrary to popular belief, the Boards of Guardians did their best to keep people out of the workhouse and sometimes inmates would stay as little as one night. It is not unusual to see some people coming in and out on a regular basis, suggesting that they were unable to get regular full time employment.

Application and Report Registers

Where they survive, Application and Report books are very useful. Not everyone applying for Poor Relief went into the workhouse and some were simply asking for help with rent, children's shoes, etc. These registers list all those applying for relief, their families (with ages), often the addresses and their circumstances. There are indexes on our website for the Godstone and Richmond Unions. However, the Admission and Discharge registers for Richmond Union are held at Richmond Upon Thames Local Studies Library.

Creed Registers

Spiritual welfare was as important to the Guardians as physical wellbeing and creed registers, as the name implies, show the religion of each inmate. This would have been particularly important for the long-term residents (remember, there were no residential homes for the elderly for the 19th century poor and the workhouse was often their only recourse when they became infirm). Additionally, in London there was a separate Jewish Board of Guardians set up in 1859 to administer for the rising Jewish population. Minutes show evidence of Roman Catholic Priests and Non-Conformist ministers being invited to contribute towards the spiritual care of their flocks.

Births and Deaths

Whilst the majority of children were born at home in the 19th century, where the mother had no home, her only recourse was the workhouse and children were born and occasionally baptised within its precincts. Also, as mentioned above, many elderly or infirm inmates saw out their last years in the workhouse. These inmates usually enjoyed a better standard of care than, say, the casual residents and were often nursed within the hospital infirmary.

Other Records

Different unions may also hold other records which family historians might find useful. These include:

Vaccination Registers: Vaccination against smallpox was compulsory from 1853. Administered by the Board of Guardians, their registers used information drawn from birth registers and, as such, usually give the child's age, name address, the date of the vaccination, and the father's name (but not often the mother's).

Apprenticeship Records: Where children were apprenticed by the parish, records usually include the employer and terms of apprenticeship

School Attendance Records: These are rare but where they do survive, often include registers of the School Attendance Officer and minutes.

We also hold several books which look at life in the workhouse including:

- *Poverty and the workhouse in Victorian Britain* by Peter Wood (Published by Allan Sutton, 1991)
- *The workhouse system 1834-1929 : the history of an English social institution* by M A Crowther (Published by Methuen, 1983)
- *Life in the Victorian & Edwardian workhouse* by Michelle Higgs (Published by Tempus, 2007)
- *The Workhouse Encyclopedia* by Peter Higginbotham (Published by The History Press 2014)

In addition, you may wish to visit the excellent website on the Workhouse, <http://www.workhouses.org.uk/> administered by Peter Higginbotham.