

Poor Law records at Surrey History Centre



Prior to the Poor Law Amendment Act in 1834 the parish was the key unit in the administration of the poor law, and it is among the parish records that you will find the most records. However, you can also find references among family papers, quarter sessions records, charity records, business records, early printed sources and even illustrations, and together they can provide a very detailed picture of welfare provision from the later middle ages and especially from 1600.

MAIN LEGISLATION



Until the second half of the sixteenth century the care of the poor, whilst legally falling on the manor, had morally been seen as the duty of the church. A series of acts from 1388 onward tried to address the problem with very limited success. After the Dissolution of the Monasteries in the 1530s, combined with

a population increase of around 25% in the second half of the sixteenth century and a series of disastrous harvests in the 1590s, something needed to be done.

An Act of 1597, re-enacted in 1601, placed the burden of poor relief squarely on the parish. Two, three or four substantial householders were to be appointed each year as Overseers of the Poor who, in conjunction with the churchwardens, raised rates from the owners of property within their parish to provide funds to support the poor. The overseers (supervised by the justices of the peace) were responsible for distributing the proceeds of the poor rate and were to keep accounts.

Next came the **Settlement Acts** of 1662, 1691 and 1697 which laid the basis for the law of settlement and removal. Disputes often arose as to which parish was legally responsible for supporting particular paupers, since each parish was naturally eager to reduce their burden as much as possible! These acts laid down that the poor were the responsibility of the parish where they were last legally settled.

Any stranger settling in a parish who became chargeable or, before 1794, it was suspected *might* become chargeable, could be removed by the justices unless he or she could prove legal settlement.

An act of 1723 authorised parish officers to buy or rent workhouses and to contract with businessmen to 'lodge, keep, maintain, and employ' the poor. People refusing to enter the workhouse were to receive no more relief. A different approach was tried with the so-called 'Gilbert Act' of 1782. This allowed parishes to unite together into a 'Gilbert Union' and to employ paid guardians to manage poor relief in their area. The parishes could share the cost of poor relief through 'poor houses' which were established for looking after only the old, the sick and the infirm. Able-bodied paupers were explicitly excluded from these poor-houses; instead, they were to be provided with outdoor relief or work near their own homes.



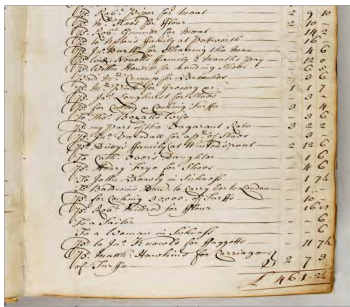
Leatherhead House of Industry by John Hassell
(SHC Ref 4348/2/96/1)

Under the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 the Old Poor Law system was abolished. Parishes were grouped together into Unions, each with a Board of Guardians elected by local property owners, to administer poor relief. Each Union had to run a Workhouse which all had to enter if they were unable to find work.

Main Records

Overseers and their accounts

The overseers were the most important people responsible for administering poor relief, and were responsible for both collecting the poor rate and administering relief. Records relating to rate assessment, collection and disbursement survive in considerable quantity for Surrey. Poor rate accounts (that is, the money collected for the relief of the poor) may survive in separate books or be included in the vestry minutes.



Overseers' Accounts
SHC Ref P38/3/11

The resulting documentation can provide a useful guide to the families living in

a parish – particularly before the censuses of the nineteenth century, and give some idea of their financial position in the community.

The overseer also had to produce accounts showing where the money was spent and their accounts can prove very illuminating, showing not only monetary relief but also relief given in kind, such as food, clothing, bedding, furniture etc. These accounts may also be found in separate books or included in the vestry minutes.

Overseers bills, vouchers and papers

Some parish deposits include bundles of bills and vouchers accumulated by the overseers that record their daily expenditure. If the account books do not survive, these might be the only documentary source for poor relief for those lost years. Even if accounts do survive, the vouchers often supplement the information recorded more formally for the vestry.

Documents relating to Settlement and Removal

The settlement of the poor was a significant part of parish poor law administration. Typically, the

management of this produced 3 main documents: settlement certificates, settlement examinations and removal orders. Many of these can be found in parish collections or in Quarter Sessions papers.

Settlement certificate

The settlement certificate was a product of the 1697 Act of Parliament. It allowed people to move about because their own parish promised to take them back if they became in need of relief and therefore a burden on the ratepayers of the parish in which they were currently residing. When a stranger expected only a temporary stay in the parish, eg at harvest, he had to bring a settlement certificate from his own parish agreeing to take him back if he fell on hard times

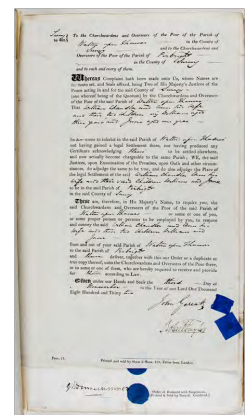
Settlement Examination

Much time was spent in examining paupers to establish their place of legal settlement, since it seems apparent that many people moved from one place to another without a settlement certificate, or lost the one they originally had. The settlement examination was conducted by a justice of the peace and gives the name, occupation and place of residence of the examinee and often gives a veritable brief biography of him or her.

Removal orders

If the place of settlement was found to be elsewhere a pauper could be removed by the parish authorities under a removal order from the Justices.

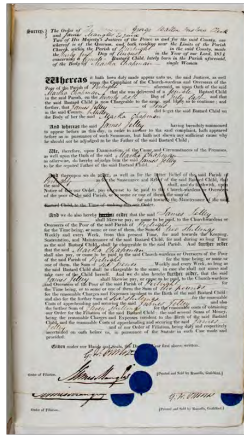
While the settlement certificate, the settlement examination and the removal order, form the backbone of the documentation relating to the old poor law, there are other records relating to poor law administration, dealing with such matters as illegitimacy, vagrancy and apprenticeship. which are also useful sources for research.



Removal Order
SHC Ref 8370/1

Illegitimacy

Until 1743 an illegitimate child was settled in its parish of birth. After 1743 a child born in a place where its mother was not settled was to have its mother's original settlement. However, an illegitimate child could be a burden on the parish so the overseers were anxious to make the father liable for the upkeep of his child. The bastardy examination was the document produced as a result of the examination of the woman by two justices. Once the name of the father had been established the overseers took steps to try to ensure that he paid for the maintenance of the child. This might be done by way of a bastardy bond or filiation order. These may be found amongst parish collections or in quarter sessions papers.



Filiation Order
SHC Ref 8370/1

Vagrants

Vagrancy was a serious problem and steps were taken to ensure those thought to be vagrants were moved on as quickly as possible. Amongst parish and quarter sessions papers, in addition to removal orders for those deemed to be vagrants, you may find vagrants' passes, issued by the justices to enable vagrants to pass unapprehended to their place of settlement, or orders to the overseers to convey such people from one parish to another.

Apprenticeships

Under the 1601 Act the parish authorities had the power to bind pauper children as apprentices, such apprenticeship giving them a right to legal settlement. Therefore, if the overseers could arrange an apprenticeship with someone from another parish the child would no longer be chargeable to their original parish. These apprenticeship agreements, or registers of apprentices, may sometimes be found amongst parish papers and will typically give the name of the child being apprenticed, the name, parish and occupation of the prospective master and the term of years of the agreement.

Until 1757 it was required by law that apprentices must be bound by an indented deed, but after this date, any deed was valid as long as it was properly stamped.

Many of the Poor Law records for Surrey parishes have been indexed by the West Surrey Family History Society which is a useful starting point for poor law research.

Workhouses

Although the Elizabethan poor law imposed a duty on overseers to support those unable to work and also provide work for the able bodied poor, the study of workhouses can be said to begin with an act of 1723 which authorised parish officers to buy or rent workhouses and contract with somebody to 'lodge, maintain and employ' the poor. Parishes too small to have a workhouse of their own could join with neighbours and this latter provision was later embodied in the Gilbert Act of 1782 which allowed parishes to unite together into a Gilbert Union and employ paid guardians to manage the poor relief in their area.



Guildford Union Workhouse
SHC Ref PX/72/610

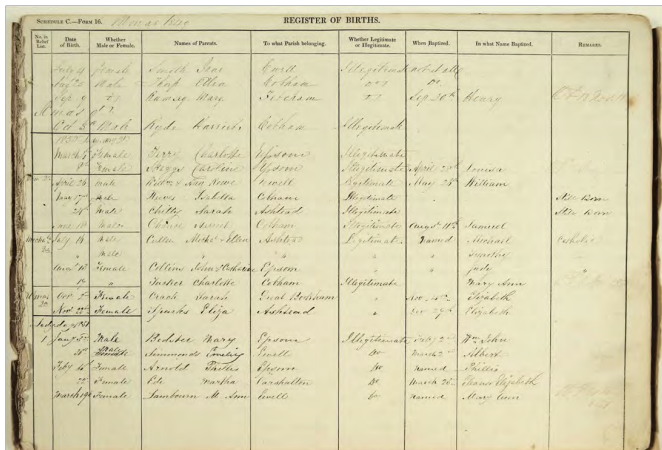
In 1790 the justices of the peace were empowered to inspect workhouses and report on the conditions they found and so further material arising from their reports may be found in the order and process books of the quarter sessions.

Boards of Guardians and Poor Law Unions

The greatest change in poor law administration came about with the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, when administration was centralised under the Poor Law Commissioners who managed the poor law provision throughout England and Wales. Boards of Guardians were established to supervise poor relief at a local level and, as the century progressed, the Guardians were given additional duties of overseeing vaccination, school attendance etc, which also, of course, created further records that may help family historians.

The survival of records of Boards of Guardians of Surrey Poor Law Unions is quite patchy. For some unions very few records survive beyond a few minute books and deeds to the workhouse property, but for other unions quite extensive records may survive.

The main records to look for if you are searching for people who might have been 'relieved' at the workhouse are those of the relieving officer, to whom the poor applied for either out-relief at home or admission to the workhouse, and admission and discharge books. Registers of births and deaths in the workhouse were also kept.



Date of Birth	Sex	Name of Parents	To what Parish belonging	Whether Legitimate or Illegitimate	When Registered	In what Town Registered	Remarks
1841	Male	South West	South West	Illegitimate	1841	Woking	
1842	Male	John White	St. Andrew	Illegitimate	1842	Woking	
1843	Female	Henry West	St. Andrew	Illegitimate	1843	Woking	
1844	Male	John White	St. Andrew	Illegitimate	1844	Woking	
1845	Female	John White	St. Andrew	Illegitimate	1845	Woking	
1846	Male	John White	St. Andrew	Illegitimate	1846	Woking	
1847	Female	John White	St. Andrew	Illegitimate	1847	Woking	
1848	Male	John White	St. Andrew	Illegitimate	1848	Woking	
1849	Female	John White	St. Andrew	Illegitimate	1849	Woking	
1850	Male	John White	St. Andrew	Illegitimate	1850	Woking	

Register of Births in Epsom Workhouse
SHC Ref BG3/37/1

There were also records of any lunatics who were admitted to the workhouse. These are especially useful because they may provide background information about someone who was mentally ill who, after 1845, might have been sent to the county asylum.

Registers of children under the control of the guardians can be a useful source for orphans, as are apprenticeship registers and registers of those who were placed in service or boarded out with local families. Be mindful that Data Protection can come into play here: records of boards of guardians that name individuals are subject to closure if less than 100 years old.

By the beginning of the 20th century the responsibilities of the boards of guardians had grown to an unmanageable size.

In 1905 a Royal Commission investigated the administrative structure and the changes proposed eventually led to the 1911 National Insurance Act (which allowed people to make provision for the payment of unemployment insurance) and to the abolition of the Poor Law unions altogether in 1929 when the Local Government Act passed all responsibility for the administration of poor relief and hospitals to County Councils.

For more information on these and many other sources contact:

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Opening Hours

Monday	CLOSED
Tuesday	9.30-5.00
Wednesday	10.15-5.00
Thursday	9.30-5.00
Friday	9.30-5.00
Saturday	9.30-4.00