

Poor Relief

Poverty in the Middle Ages

Poverty, homelessness and unemployment are not exclusively the product of the modern age. References to these problems can be found at least as far back as the Middle Ages, where responsibility for dealing with them lay mostly with religious houses or individual parishes. Under an Act of 1388, vagrants who could not be maintained by a particular parish were sent back to the parish of their birth, and vagrants found to be capable of working were severely punished. The Statute of Mortmain of 1391 decreed that in parishes where the tithes were held by an ecclesiastical institution such as a monastery, a proportion of that parish's tithe income was to be used for poor relief. Further severe punishments for able-bodied vagrants were introduced in 1494.

There are, however, very few surviving local records relating to medieval poor relief.

The Poor Law

After the suppression of the monasteries at the Reformation, parishes were made wholly responsible for the care of those unable to work. Private almsgiving became an offence, though each church could appeal for charitable donations during Sunday services. From 1547 vagrants refusing work could be branded.

The 1563 Poor Law stipulated that two or more persons from each parish should be appointed to collect all local charitable donations. In 1572 the parish office of Overseer of the Poor was created; Overseers were elected by the parish vestry and supervised any charitable funds. From 1597/8 parishes were permitted to levy a poor rate. From this, some poorhouses were built where paupers could be set to work. Raw materials were bought for this purpose. Poor children were to be apprenticed from the age of seven.

The Poor Law Act of 1601 divided the poor into 3 categories: able-bodied and willing to work, able-bodied and unwilling to work, and unable to work. It also determined that in each parish the churchwardens and two or more substantial landholders should act as Overseers of the Poor and collect the poor rate. The rate was to be spent on setting poor children to work where their parents could not support them, setting able-bodied adults to work, providing stocks of flax, wood, iron, etc. on which to set the poor to work, and for the relief of the elderly and infirm. From 1691, registers of parishioners receiving poor relief were supposed to be kept.

Records Relating to the Poor Law

Overseers' accounts and poor rate books for north Devon parishes, where surviving, can be found in the lists of parish records in the North Devon Record Office searchroom or on the Discovery website at www.discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/. The accounts record money paid out, mostly to named individuals, whereas the rate books list those from whom the poor rate was levied. Apprenticeship indentures give details of pauper children apprenticed out by the parish officers, those to whom they were apprenticed, and their occupations or residence. Apprenticeship under the Poor Law meant being separated from one's parents and living with another family, often as unpaid help. Further information on records held may be found by consulting the North Devon Record Office subject index under LOCAL GOVERNMENT: parish overseers of the poor.

Vagrants or the bankrupt poor may have been incarcerated in the local gaol or bridewell. Records relating to Barnstaple's bridewell can be found in the list of Barnstaple Borough records (ref. B1) in the North Devon Record Office searchroom or at www.discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/.

Settlement and Removal

Under the Law of Settlement of 1662, a stranger in a parish could be forcibly removed by the authorities if he had no immediate prospect of work or if he did not rent property worth over £10 per year. If he worked in his adopted parish continually for a year, a stranger could claim settlement there and thus receive poor relief. Under the 1697 Settlement Act, strangers could settle in a new parish only if they held a settlement certificate from their home parish guaranteeing to take them back if they became liable for parish relief. The Law of Settlement had the effect of prohibiting the poorest labourers from moving outside their own parish.

Records Relating to Settlement and Removal

As part of the parish records, Overseers' accounts may show expenses incurred by the parish in ascertaining a pauper's legal place of settlement. The accounts of parish constables may also list expenses made in removing individuals to another location. Overseers' records will often include removal orders, settlement certificates and other related papers. Cases involving settlement and removal of paupers may also be found in Quarter Sessions court books. The North Devon Record Office holds Borough Quarter Sessions records for Barnstaple, Bideford, Great Torrington and South Molton (see the North Devon Record Office 'List of Collections' for details); County Quarter Sessions records are held at the Devon Heritage Centre, Great Moor House, Bittern Road, Sowton, Exeter 01392 384253. Further records can be located by consulting the North Devon Record Office subject index under LOCAL GOVERNMENT: parish overseers of the poor.

Illegitimacy and Related Records

Parish vestry minutes may contain records of proceedings against fathers for the maintenance of illegitimate children. Bastardy bonds, by which putative fathers were contracted to pay maintenance, may also be found in Overseers' records. The cost of maintaining single mothers or widows was a burden on the parish poor rate and would often have resulted in attempts to remove the 'offending' parties from the parish.

The North Devon Record Office holds indexed transcripts of north Devon parish settlement certificates, removal orders, apprenticeship indentures and bastardy bonds in the searchroom.

The Poor Law, 1700-1834

Under Knatchbull's General Workhouse Act of 1723, parishes were given powers to erect workhouses, in which the poor were set to work and to which they were restricted except for Sundays. This was followed in 1782 by Gilbert's Act, which encouraged a few parishes to combine to form Poor Law Unions. This act reversed some stringencies of Knatchbull's Act, providing employment for able-bodied persons outside the workhouse, not separating children under the age of seven from their parents, and boarding out orphaned children.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, most people saw the ever-increasing problem of poor relief as a national burden that required radical reform.

The Poor Law Amendment Act, 1834

The harsh measures introduced by the Poor Law Amendment Act made confinement to the workhouse the central mechanism of poor relief. Furthermore, it directed administrators to discourage paupers from seeking relief by making workhouses as unpleasant as possible. From now on, married couples entering the workhouse were separated and children taken away from their parents.

The Act also completed the work of Gilbert's Act in the formation of Poor Law Unions. All parishes were now made part of larger unions, each union supervising a workhouse. The unions themselves were administered by Board of Guardians, though parish vestries remained responsible for levying poor rates for the upkeep of workhouses.

Workhouse Records

The North Devon Record Office holds various documents relating to workhouses. Some of the earliest include a contract for a workhouse (or poorhouse) in Barnstaple, 1641 (ref. B1/719) and a reference to a house near the Barnstaple workhouse in 1776 (ref. B1/3352). Most consist of Board of Guardians' minutes, etc. and are listed under 'Poor Law Unions' in the catalogues in the Record Office searchroom. Other workhouse records include Barnstaple workhouse plans, late 19th century (ref. P31/1-3); Barnstaple Union accounts, 1842, 1894 (ref. 3964A/PO9-10), and notes on South Molton Union workhouse (ref. B264/7). Further details can be found by consulting the North Devon Record Office subject index under LOCAL GOVERNMENT: poor law unions. Please note that some records relating to workhouse inmates are subject to a 100 year closure period.

Poor Relief in the 20th Century

With the advent of the 20th century and the growth of trades unions and the socialist movement, attitudes towards the poor had begun to change. The National Insurance Act of 1911 brought about the first provisions of social security. Two years later, workhouses were officially renamed Poor Law Institutions. The Local Government Act of 1929 abolished Boards of Guardians as well as the term 'pauper'; it also transferred the powers of the Guardians to local authorities such as County Councils and encouraged local boroughs to convert workhouses into infirmaries. By 1946 the modern framework of social security benefits was established. Any County Council records relating to poor relief will be held at the Devon Heritage Centre, Great Moor House, Bittern Road, Sowton, Exeter, though a closure period may apply to any documents of a personal nature.

Charities

Traditionally, charities have been actively involved in poor relief. Some charities were run by parishes, others through donations or trusts laid down by wealthy individuals. The North Devon Record Office holds deeds, surveys, accounts, administration books, etc. relating to a number of Barnstaple charities including the Penrose and Horwood almshouses, 17th to 20th centuries (ref. TD146). The North Devon Record Office also holds the records of the Pilton Feoffees (ref. 1239F) who administered various charities in Pilton, including St. Margaret's Hospital; these records include deeds, accounts, minutes, correspondence and historical notes, 15th to 20th centuries. For a list of all charity records held by the North Devon Record Office please consult the 'List of Collections' at the North Devon Record Office searchroom or website, the subject card index under CHARITIES, or the Discovery website.

Useful Reading

- *The Local Historian's Encyclopaedia*, John Richardson (1974)
- *Sources for English Local history*, W B Stephens (1981)

- *The Parish Chest*, W E Tate (1969)
- *Annals of the Poor*, Eve McLaughlin (1979)
- *The Problems of the Poor in Tudor and Early Stuart England*, A.L Beier (1983)
- *The Old Poor Law 1795-1834*, J D Marshall (1968)
- *Poor Law Documents Before 1834*, Anne Cole (1993)
- *The Poor Law in Nineteenth-century England*, Anne Digby (1982)
- *The Workhouse System 1834-1929*, M A Crowther (1981)
- *Almshouses*, Brian Bailey (1988)

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