

Workhouses

Only a generation back, the word 'Workhouse' would put fear into people's eyes. They or their parents or grandparents would remember the stigma of having been in there – even if it was the Infirmary that had been attached to or grown out of the original Workhouse. An Act of Parliament in 1601 decreed that parishes should legally take responsibility for looking after their own poor people, with taxes being levied on the rich landowners to help pay for this.

A Bit of History

Workhouses only really came to become part of the landscape after the Workhouse Test Act was passed in 1723. Parishes could provide relief as an individual parish, combine with other parishes or poor relief could be sub-contracted out to those that would feed, clothe and house the poor in return for a weekly rate from the parish. It also allowed Parishes to join together to form Unions, which in turn were able to build the workhouses themselves.

In 1782, Thomas Gilbert persuaded Parliament to pass the Poor Relief Act, which provided a more simple way for groups of parishes to set up a common workhouse for paupers other than able-bodied adults. It did this by introducing changes in workhouse administration, so that they were managed by a Board of Guardians appointed from the member parishes, and regulated by a Visitor. The Act also included a set of standard rules under which workhouses were to operate rather than each operating to their own. Funding was still provided by taxing the rich, many of whom were beginning to think that their taxes were paying for people to shirk work and live for free!

The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 saw that the poor were housed in workhouses and were clothed and fed but in exchange for this, they all had to work for several hours each day. Children in the workhouse did receive some schooling. The conditions within these workhouses were severe. This was on purpose so that only those who were desperate would resort to the workhouse. They were made to wear a uniform and, although food was provided, it was nearly the same each day. The work that the inmates were made to do was equally monotonous and soul-destroying: breaking rocks and picking oakum – unravelling old, tarred rope – was commonplace.

By 1913, workhouses were being referred to as Poor Law Institutions in official documents and the Local Government Act of 1929 abolished all Poor Law Authorities and transferred their responsibilities for 'public assistance' to local councils.

What Records are there?

- ❖ Admission and Discharge books or Registers – daily lists of everyone who was admitted, discharged or died
- ❖ Creed Registers – lists of the religious faith of each inmate
- ❖ Registers of Births – from 1904, a birth certificate could not state that a birth took place in a workhouse. Instead, the street name and house number were recorded.

- ❖ Registers of Deaths – only death records were kept; burials were recorded in the parish register of where the burial took place.
- ❖ Guardians' Records – these usually included records of people who were sent to asylums as well as those who were admitted to the workhouse infirmary.

Where are the Records Kept?

Many can be found in the local County Archives appropriate to the parishes covered. There are also Ministry of Health records held at the National Archives about the workhouse staff. An excellent source about Workhouse history can be found at workhouses.org.uk/ and census records will also help you in your quest.

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If you are having problems in finding a particular record or would like to search for further information, someone else might be able to help you. Register for FREE at <http://www.genealogy-specialists.com/> and post details of your ancestor. The members will be delighted to try to help you.

If you would like to discover more about Workhouses and the Poor Law, listed below are some products that will certainly help you to understand, and all of them are available from [www.parishchest.com](http://www.parishchest.com). Just pop the reference number in the website search box to see the details:

- Life In A Rural Workhouse Ref: SAD-1041
- Manuals of the Duties of Poor Law Officers. Master and Matron of the Workhouse Ref: ANG-ARA 456
- One Monday in November and Beyond Ref: JOS-33-8
- Paupers in Workhouses Ref: ANG-ARA 150
- Poor Law Records for Family Historians Ref: FHP-184
- Workhouses of the Midlands Ref: FHP-118
- Workhouses of the North Ref: FHP-117
- Understanding Parish & Manor Records: Practical Guides for Family History & Local History Research Ref: DPS-PGFRCD

Within their Family History Bookshop, Parish Chest has a complete section that is dedicated to the Poor Law. It is broken down by county and country and lists products that are relevant to that particular area. Take a look on [www.parishchest.com](http://www.parishchest.com) to find the region in which you are searching.