A Guide To Using The Records Of The Boards Of Guardians
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Introduction

This leaflet will focus on the records created by the Boards of Guardians. These boards were established under the ‘Poor Law (Amendment) Act’ of 1834. They are also referred to as Poor Law Unions. The Unions consisted of a group of parishes directed by an elected Board of Guardians who met weekly to discuss the formal business of the union. The union was regulated by the Poor Law Commissioners (also known as the Poor Law Board).

The New Act and Early Beginnings

The aim of the new Act was to try and eradicate the system of out-relief replacing it only with relief in the form of admission to the workhouse and thus it was hoped the spiralling costs that parishes were spending on providing relief to their poor would be reduced. The report of the Royal Commission of March 1834 contained, amongst its 300 pages, this key element, “That except as to medical attendance...all relief whatever to able-bodied persons or to their families, otherwise than in well-regulated workhouses...shall be declared unlawful, and shall cease.”
In practice this meant that poor relief was only to be given on admission to the workhouse; the re-building or enlarging of existing parish workhouses was for many unions one of the first tasks that needed to be undertaken, as on admission different classes of pauper were to be segregated from one another. Although there was resistance to the New Poor Law in many areas of the country the records of authorised workhouse expenditure do show that there was a significant increase in spending on workhouse buildings following the introduction of the Act in 1834.

The position of Guardian attracted in the main part the middle-class tradesman; to be eligible to stand the Guardian had to occupy property worth more than £25 per year; according to correspondence from the Poor law Commissions, “the qualification for Guardian does not depend upon residence. A person, who is rated to the poor rate in the union in respect of sufficient annual rental, will be eligible for office, though he may not reside in the union.” In practice the vast majority did reside in the area for which they were Guardian and each parish in the union would return at least one Guardian. Any magistrate who lived in the area was also entitled to sit on the board. Voting took place in private and only
ratepayers and property owners of the parish were entitled to vote. Positions were rarely contested and in some cases the same Guardians and other workhouse officials would remain on the Board for many years, for example, Mr Richard Bond, a Guardian and Relieving Officer of the Southwark Union workhouse, only retired his position when he was aged 67 after serving for more than 24 years. There was also a range of staff employed in the union to assist with the running of the workhouse. The master and the matron had overall daily control of the workhouse, other staff included the porter, the taskmaster, the relieving officer, vaccinators and medical officers. The wages paid to staff were not excessive and the posts did not always attract the best or most capable individuals. The records of the Poor Law Commissioners are full of correspondence relating to complaints against Union workhouse officials.

The Guardians were used to implement more than just the New Poor Law, for example, the newly established unions were also the basis for the introduction of Civil Registration of births, marriages and deaths. The Guardians were responsible for appointing a registrar and for finding the premises for the registrar within the district so he could perform his duties, in some cases the offices were situated within the workhouse complex. Initially he had to report his activities to the Guardians,
the board minutes at this time often include the names of those intending to marry at the register office. Following the introduction of the 1840 Vaccination Act the Guardians became responsible for appointing vaccinators, a task made mandatory by an amendment to the Act in 1871. They also collaborated with other service providers, for example, during the several cholera epidemics of the nineteenth century the Guardians were responsible for ensuring that nuisances and filth were cleared in their districts.
Admission And Discharge

The most commonly used records of the Boards of Guardians are those relating to the inmates. There were strict rules about the admission of paupers to the workhouse and its various wards and strict rules about record keeping (unfortunately these latter points were sometimes not followed!). The New Poor Law categorized paupers into distinct categories:

- The Sick and Infirm
- The Able-Bodied
- Children

The treatment of these different classes of paupers was reflective in the model plans of the workhouse issued by the Commissioners which clearly indicated separate wards for not only males and females but also the sick and the able-bodied. It was required that each pauper be entered into an admission and discharge register when entering and leaving the workhouse and it is these registers many people consult first. Sometimes, if one is lucky, there may be different sets of admission and discharge registers surviving as the unions were required to keep one set for the workhouse proper and one set for the casual wards. The porter also kept his own record of admissions and discharges which should include everyone who entered and left the workhouse buildings but often these ledgers have not survived.
The information that can be found in an admission and discharge register varies slightly between registers but one would expect to locate details such as:

- Name of pauper
- Date of admission and discharge
- Occupation
- Age
- Marital status
- Religion
- Parish to which chargeable
- Cause of seeking relief
- Class of diet
- Observations
- Information such as sex, age and cause of seeking relief were necessary to categorize the pauper; the parish to which chargeable

This information was recorded whether or not the pauper should actually have been admitted to that Union and the class of diet was important as the Commissioners issued diet sheets for the different classes of pauper for each union to use – amendments were able to be made but only subject to the Commissioners agreement. The observations category could contain a wide range of information and was very much dependant on whoever was filling in the register.
As can be seen from the extract below Mary Shields was noted as being, “Rather Careless” and John Cain who was 15 years old was described as being, “Badly Disposed.” Of course these are simply opinionated observations but sometimes the extra information can be valuable including details of other family members, for example, of children that were at the union schools or names of spouses who had deserted the family.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>By whose Order Discharged.</th>
<th>Day of the Week when Discharged.</th>
<th>OBSERVATIONS on general Character and Behaviour in Workhouse, &amp;c.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Own record</td>
<td>To go to Service 30.</td>
<td>Rather Careless.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. Creed Registers

The main difficulty that is often encountered when using admission and discharge registers is that they are compiled in date order with no indexing. Creed registers tend to be alphabetical.

The creed register was primarily concerned with recording the religion or creed of an individual but as they are in alphabetical order it is recommended to try these registers first before seeking additional information from the admission and discharge registers.
As can be seen from these images of the left and right hand pages of a creed register the information is in alphabetical order and shows the date of entry, date of admission, name of the pauper from where they were admitted, religion, name of informant and date of discharge.

Creed registers can also be a valuable source of information when admission and discharge registers have not survived.
4. Birth And Death Registers

In some union records you will find separate birth and death registers. Whilst the information contained in these records may add little to what is already known, especially if a civil registration certificate of the event has been traced, they are worth consulting. After 1904 it was recommended not to use the term ‘workhouse’ on a birth certificate and as such many workhouses adopted euphemisms, for example, ‘4 Kings Road’ is the
St. Pancras Workhouse and ‘Twyford Lodge’ refers to the Willesden Workhouse.

**In a register of births you may find:**
Date of birth, whether male or female, name of parents or mother, parish to which the infant will be chargeable and baptism information. There may also be an observations column which is often used to record legitimacy but could yield unexpected information.

**In a register of deaths you may find:**
Name, date of death, age, from where admitted and date of admission it is also often the case that supplementary information can be found such as the cause of the death and possibly information relating to the disposal of the body which may give burial details which are unlikely to be found elsewhere. The example on the left shows that John Eldred was buried, “By Friends” whereas for Henry Summers the actual place of burial is noted, “Woking Cemetery.”
5. Settlement Records

‘Settlement’ or ‘belonging’ was an important issue on admission to a workhouse. If a pauper applied to the house and was admitted the master could make them undertake a settlement examination. If it was found that the pauper did not belong to any of the parishes which formed the union then the Guardians could send the pauper back to their place of settlement. This was a difficult issue for the Guardians, especially in the metropolitan area which had a large transient community, as the cost of removing the pauper was chargeable to the union sending the pauper away. It is also important to realise that a persons’ parish of settlement may not necessarily be that in which they were born. Rules relating to settlement were amended over time. However the following are some examples of how settlement may have been obtained:

- Birth from legally settled parents remaining in the area
- If illegitimate a child took settlement from the mother
- Working for a specific period of time in the parish
- Serving a full apprenticeship to a settled parishioner
- Holding parish office
- Paying parish rates or completing 40 days residence
- By owning or renting property worth at least £10 per annum
On marriage a woman gained her husband’s settlement

The survival of settlement records varies enormously and they are rarely indexed but through information gathered in records such as the admission and discharge register, creed register or perhaps census records it can be determined whether a search of these records is worthwhile.
6. Lunatic Records

For certain classes of paupers one can find separate series of records. One of these classes is the lunatic. It was often the case that the Medical Officer of the union would have been responsible for the certification of a lunatic. Usually a lunatic was admitted to the workhouse prior to being transferred to either one of the private asylums which had arranged contracts to accept pauper patients (London examples include Peckham House and Grove Hall amongst others) or to one of the County Lunatic Asylums. The first Surrey County Lunatic Asylum known as Springfield was opened in 1841 and the first Middlesex County Lunatic Asylum was opened at Hanwell in 1831.

The types of records generated by the Board of Guardians in relation to lunatics include:

- Settlement examinations of lunatics
- Registers of lunatics in the workhouse
- Registers of lunatics in various asylums

The settlement examinations are the most detailed and often include next of kin information and details relating to the supposed cause of insanity. The registers of lunatics in various asylums are also helpful, especially as the records of many of the private lunatic asylums have not survived.
The settlement below shows details of Joseph Barnes admitted on 7 September 1897 at the age of 41 to Banstead Asylum. He was born at 4 Richardson Street on 1 March 1855 and his mother was Mrs Sabin of 117 Douglas Buildings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Names of Persons chargeable</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Place of Birth</th>
<th>Date of Birth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Joseph Barnes</td>
<td>41</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4 Richardson Street, Long Lane</td>
<td>1st March, 1855</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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7. Children’s Records

Children may have come under the care of the Board of Guardians for many different reasons; common reasons include being orphaned or deserted or being admitted with their family. Whilst in the workhouse children were required to be separated from the adults but most were placed in schools situated away from the main union buildings. In London some unions made agreements with private establishments to take their pauper children under contract but gradually many established their own schools or joined with other unions to form school districts. The records generated by the school districts will be found separately to those of the union records. In addition to being found in the workhouse admission and discharge registers and creed registers there are often separate series of children’s records such as:

- Registers of children maintained in various institutions
- Registers of children in district schools
- Registers of apprentices
- Records of children sent to service

The children sent to the workhouse schools would receive a basic education and industrial training in order that when the child was old enough they might be placed for apprenticeship or be a candidate for entering service.
Many residential schools were situated outside the central London area.

An example of an apprenticeship indenture is below

![Indenture document image]
8. Infirmary Records

The 1867 Metropolitan Poor Act required all London Boards of Guardians to establish a workhouse infirmary which was separate from the actual workhouse; although many unions had provided such accommodation prior to this Act. The Workhouse Infirmaries were one of the few places where the poor sick were able to receive free treatment; although there were a number of private and charitable hospitals these either had rigid admission policies or were simply over-subscribed. Many of the former workhouse infirmaries in London are still operating today as hospitals, for example, St. Pancras Hospital was the former Union infirmary.

Increasingly throughout the later 19th century many of the workhouse infirmaries were accepting patients that were not actually in receipt of poor relief but were just admitted for the duration of their illness.

On the abolition of the Board of Guardians in 1930 responsibility for the maintenance of the London workhouse infirmaries fell mainly to the London County Council and the Middlesex County Council until they too were relieved of this responsibility when the National Health Service was introduced in 1948. Hospital records can therefore be found either within the records of the appropriate Board of Guardians or separately within the
Hospital collections.

The types of records generated by the infirmaries can include the following, although the survival of records varies greatly between each institution:

- Admission and discharge registers
- Creed registers
- Registers of births
- Registers of deaths
- Case files
- Post mortem registers
9. Records Of The Board

The Board of Guardians were required to meet at weekly intervals to discuss the business of the union. The main records to be generated from these meetings are the board minutes which contain information about the administration of the union, for example, issues relating to staff, enlargement of the buildings, repairs and alterations and the tendering of contracts to supply the workhouse with food and other necessary provisions. The minutes occasionally contain references to individual paupers, although as they are rarely indexed, these references can be very difficult to find and may not yield a lot of information. Examples of information relating to paupers include those who were particularly troublesome, abandoned children or apprenticeship agreements and disputes.

There may also be some records surviving that relate to staff. The advertisement for and the appointment of new staff will often be recorded in the minutes as may rises in salaries but there may also be additional records such as registers of officers and servants.

In addition there may be copies of letters sent and received by the union. These can be particularly illuminating in relation to disputes between the union and the central poor law authorities.
10. Case Examples

SETTLEMENT

On 20th February 1851 Mary Crane, 26, gave birth to an infant boy (named George) in the St. George’s Union Workhouse, Mint Street. Mary did not have settlement in that union. A surviving settlement examination gives details that she came from the parish of Rishangles in the County of Suffolk. Amongst the evidence given in the examination was that she was the daughter of George and Rhoda Crane who had been married in the parish of Rishangles in 1803 and that Mary had been born in a cottage near to a blacksmiths shop and her fathers’ father had also resided at the same place. The examination also notes that her father George was an inmate of the Hertemere Union Workhouse at this time. Mary Crane and her infant were returned to the Hertemere Union.

Records searched:
Orders of Removal 1851 [SOBG/028]
Register of Births 1835 – 1860 [SOBG/034/001]
THE CHILDREN

The Walton children were admitted to the Central London District School at Hanwell in June 1893. They included Caroline (13), Annie (12), Jessie (10) and Richard (5). The children had come into the care of the St. Saviour Union after their mother was admitted to the workhouse infirmary and subsequently died. The children remained at the school until they were of an age to be put out to employment. The records show that Caroline was sent to service in 1900 to Mrs Holton of ‘Oakville’ Stanley Road, Teddington. The proposals for service show that Caroline would have a large airy room to herself and would always be able to attend church on a Sunday. Annie was sent to the East Kent Industrial Home in Ramsgate; Jessie was sent to service in 1898 to Mrs Patson of 6 Lancaster Place, Belsize and in 1902 Richard was apprenticed to Glover and Co., on the Old Kent Road.

Records searched:
Creed registers of the school 1892 – 1902 (CLSD/222-226)
Proposals of girls for service 1894 – 1902 (CLSD/227)
Lists of girl sent to service 1900 – 1902 (CLSD/247)
A MASTER

Mr Richards was appointed master of the St. Saviour Workhouse in September 1840 at a salary of £100 per annum. He had previously been employed by the Strand Union. His first wife died in early 1842 and he re-married in the September of the same year and his new wife took over the post of matron of the workhouse. The master and matron were responsible for all aspects of the daily running of the workhouse but it seems that Mr and Mrs Richards were not very adept at fulfilling their task. Correspondence from the Poor Law Commissioners was received by the Board of Guardians in the April of 1844. Many complaints were made against Mr Richards including not keeping a check of the accounts, ordering provisions without the consent of the Board, allowing himself extravagant allowances, unauthorised absences from the workhouse, skimming fat from the paupers’ broth for re-sale, using pauper labour to whitewash the house of his friend, not keeping the keys to the gate on his person and being habitually out late at night and returning in a state of intoxication. A full investigation was undertaken which resulted in Mr Richards tendering his resignation on 19 April 1844. The Board refused a request for a testimonial.

Records Searched:
Minutes of the St. Saviour Union 1844 [SOBG/039/006]
Correspondence of the Poor Law Board 1844 [SOBG/070/001]
THE SICK

Caroline Marston in 1841 was one of the first female patients to be transferred to the newly opened Surrey County Lunatic Asylum by the St. Saviours’ Union who had previously been maintaining her at Peckham House, a private asylum that took individuals on a contract agreement with the Union. She was 42 and suffered from hereditary illness. In 1845 she was briefly transferred to the Stone Asylum before being released to her friends. A note in the minute book of April 1845 shows that she had relapsed and had been returned to Peckham House. Caroline does not appear in the Union records again.

**Records Searched:**
Springfield Hospital admission register 1841 [H46/SP/B/01/001]
Minutes of the St. Saviour’s Board 1845 [SOBG/039/007]
11. Sources for Further Information and Accessing Records

Further information about Poor Law Unions can be found online at the website ‘The History of Workhouse’ by Peter Higginbotham http://www.workhouses.org.uk/

‘The Workhouse Encyclopedia’ (2012) by Peter Higginbotham is available to consult at LMA (our ref: 20.61 HIG)

The National Archives holds records of the central poor law authority under code MH. Further information can be found in the research guides, ‘Looking for Records of a Workhouse’ and ‘Looking for Records of a Workhouse Inmate or Member of Staff’ available on their website at http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk

London Metropolitan Archives holds the surviving records of the Board of Guardians from the London area. To discover which records we hold for particular Poor Law Unions you can consult either our online catalogue at: http://search.lma.gov.uk/opac_lma/index.htm

or consult our London Generations lists (available on our website at www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/lma) which just show records relating to individuals admitted to the workhouse or other poor law institutions.
Some, but not all of the poor law records that we hold have been digitised in partnership with Ancestry.co.uk. It is necessary to have a subscription to Ancestry.co.uk to access the poor law records however we are providing free access here at London Metropolitan Archives.

For further advice on our holdings, accessing and using the records in our care please do contact us at:

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