

London Metropolitan Archives

Information Leaflet Number 4

Poor Law records in London and Middlesex



Introduction

Many people in the past have been forced by old age, illness, disability, unemployment, bereavement, or other misfortune to seek assistance from the Poor Law authorities. This assistance might have taken the form of out relief, that is money or food or medical assistance provided while they continued to live in their own homes, or they might have been admitted to the workhouse or treated for illness in the workhouse infirmary or county lunatic asylum. Children may have been brought up and educated in the Poor Law schools and when old enough, apprenticed or placed in service or joined the merchant navy or armed forces.

When anyone applied for poor relief, they would probably have undergone a settlement examination to determine which parish was legally responsible for relieving them. The settlement examination would have taken the form of questioning about their life history, including where they were born, whether they had served an apprenticeship or been in service for a year, where they had lived and for how long and what rent they had paid, where their children were born, and even their parents' life histories, as any of these might determine their place of legal settlement or that of their children. A married woman or a widow would have been questioned about her husband. If their place of legal settlement was found to be elsewhere, a magistrate could sign a removal order forcing them to go there.

From 1846 no one who had been continuously resident in a parish for five years could be removed to their place of settlement if they applied for poor relief. This was reduced to three years in 1861 and one year in 1865.

Where to find Poor Law Records

If they survive, records relating to the many people who received poor relief should be found amongst the archives of the local authority which was responsible for poor relief at the time and for the area in question. This was the parish until 1834 when the Poor Law Amendment Act was passed replacing the Old Poor Law by the New Poor Law. All except the largest parishes were forced to combine into poor law unions which elected Boards of Guardians which took over responsibility for poor relief. Some London parishes which had before 1834 obtained local acts of Parliament to regulate their administration of poor relief were able to continue their existing arrangements until 1867, when the Metropolitan Poor Act forced all London parishes to come under the control of Boards of Guardians.

The Local Government Act passed in 1929 abolished the Boards of Guardians. On 1 April 1930 the responsibilities of the 25 London Boards of Guardians, the Metropolitan Asylums Board, and the Poor Law School Districts were transferred to

the London County Council. Middlesex County Council took over the responsibilities of the Boards of Guardians in Middlesex.

The Old Poor Law: Parish Records

Surviving records relating to the administration of poor relief up to 1834 are normally found amongst parish records. If records of that parish are held by London Metropolitan Archives (LMA), any poor law records such as overseers' accounts, rate books, apprenticeship records, workhouse registers, settlement examinations and removal orders, will be listed with the other parish records. Records of most Westminster parishes are in the care of the City of Westminster Archives Centre, 10 St. Ann's Street, London SW1P 2XR.

In many London and Middlesex parishes records relating to poor relief before 1834 passed with vestry minute books, rate books and other records of local government to the successor local authorities and ultimately to the London Boroughs. Consequently, if LMA does not hold records relating to poor relief in a particular parish, the relevant London Borough Archives or Local Studies Collection should be contacted. Unfortunately for some parishes few records have survived.

Records relating to poor relief in the following Middlesex parishes have been deposited in LMA as part of the archives of Middlesex local authorities and local solicitors:-

- Ealing (see London Local Authorities, Ealing ACC/2208)
- Hampton (see Kent and Sons, Solicitors ACC/333)
- Edgware, Harrow, Kingsbury, Great Stanmore and Little Stanmore (see London Local Authorities, Harrow Borough Predecessors, LA/HW).

Some of these records have not yet been catalogued and can be made available by prior appointment only.

Records available online

18th century records of two City of London parishes, St Botolph, Aldgate, and St Dionis, Backchurch, as well as St Clement Danes, Westminster, have been digitised for the London Lives 1690– 1800 project and can be searched for individuals on the London Lives website at www.londonlives.org.

This also includes St Martin in the Fields settlement examinations 1725-1793 and St Luke Chelsea Workhouse admission and discharge registers 1743-1769 and 1782-1799 (P74/LUK/110-111). Transcripts of the Chelsea Workhouse admission and discharge registers and judgements of settlement and bastardy examinations also for

Chelsea 1733-1750 are available on the Workhouses [website:](http://www.workhouses.org.uk)
www.workhouses.org.uk

The London Workhouse (CLA/075)

The London Workhouse was built by the Corporation of the Poor, a body active between 1647 and 1660 which established the first workhouses in London. The workhouse was primarily used for the housing of neglected and vagrant children.

The workhouse was closed after an Act of Parliament in 1829 allowed the Governors to sell leases owned by the workhouse and to reinvest the money in other estates for the education and apprenticing of poor children. The funds were put towards the building of the City of London Freeman's Orphan School. Records of the London Workhouse, 1662-1847 include lists of children in the workhouse 1709-1712, petitions, committee minutes and reports, orders of Common Council regarding the workhouse, financial accounts and inventories.

London Parishes exempted from the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act

The following parishes did not come under the control of Boards of Guardians until the years 1867-1869. Records relating to the administration of poor relief in these parishes from 1834 to 1867/9 will be found with the parish records:-

- St. Giles-in-the-Fields and St. George, Bloomsbury (P82/GIS)
- St. James and St. John, Clerkenwell (P76/JS1 - few records held by LMA, other records at Islington Local History Centre)
- St. Leonard, Shoreditch (P91/LEN)
- St. Luke, Old Street, Finsbury (P76/LUK - few records held by LMA - other records at Islington Local History Centre)
- St. Mary, Islington (P83/MRY1)
- St. Mary, Newington (P92/MRY)
- St. Marylebone (P89/MRY1)
- St. Pancras (P90/PAN1)
- St. George, Hanover Square
- St. James, Westminster, records held by City of Westminster
- St. Margaret and St. John, Westminster Archives Centre

The New Poor Law 1834-1930: Boards of Guardians

Except for the parishes listed above for the years 1834 to 1867/9, records of poor relief will be found amongst the records of the Boards of Guardians for London and Middlesex (including the City of London) held by LMA. These are listed with the records of London Local Authorities. At the front of the first volume of these lists a table shows which London parishes were incorporated into which Board of Guardians at what date with details of the many changes which took place between 1834 and 1930.

At the front of the list of each of the six Middlesex Boards of Guardians (Brentford, Edmonton, Hendon, Staines, Uxbridge and Willesden) a table shows which Board of Guardians was responsible for each Middlesex parish. The boundaries of poor law unions did not necessarily respect county boundaries. The Middlesex parishes of Finchley, Friern Barnet, Monken Hadley, and South Mimms formed part of Barnet Union the rest of which was in Hertfordshire. Records of Barnet Board of Guardians are held by Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies, County Hall, Hertford, SG13 8EJ. The Middlesex parishes of Hampton and Teddington were in Kingston Union most of which was in Surrey. Records of Kingston Board of Guardians are in the care of the Surrey History Centre, 130 Goldsworth Road, Woking, Surrey, GU21 1ND.

In general far more records survive for the London Boards of Guardians than for Middlesex. In particular virtually all the records of Staines Board of Guardians are believed to have been destroyed in a fire shortly before 1929.

The London Borough Archives and Local Studies Collections may also hold records relating to poor relief in the second half of the 19th century, in particular records of the overseers of the poor for each parish who continued to hold certain responsibilities.

Access to Records

Some of the more recent records relating to named individuals are subject to a period of restricted access in order to protect the confidentiality of anyone who may still be alive. It may therefore not be possible for you to consult all the records yourself. We are able to undertake research on behalf of an individual to provide information from the records but we do have to ensure that the information is only being released to either the individual concerned or in the case of a third party request that the person concerned is deceased. We do charge for undertaking such searches within our records.

Workhouses

In 1913 all workhouses were officially renamed Poor Law Institutions, though they were commonly still known as workhouses.

How to find a workhouse

To find the records of a particular workhouse, you first need to know which parish or Board of Guardians was responsible for running it at the relevant period. If you have only the name or address of the workhouse, this may not be obvious. Some workhouses were situated outside the area which they served. For instance, Holborn Union Workhouse was in City Road in Shoreditch. Maps and Post Office Directories can help to identify workhouses. A wealth of information about individual workhouses, poor law infirmaries and children's homes including photographs and maps showing their location is available on The Workhouse [website: www.workhouses.org.uk](http://www.workhouses.org.uk)

The following finding aids are available in the Information Area at LMA:

1. Institutions Index (including workhouses, hospitals and poor law schools) compiled by LMA. Ask at the counter in the Information Area
2. Stanford's Map of the Poor Law Administration in the County of London 1905 shows the location of workhouses. It also includes a table giving the names and addresses of the workhouses, infirmaries, and schools run by each Board of Guardians and Poor Law School District. A copy of this forms part of the reference map collection in the Information Area.

Workhouse Records

By the mid 19th century the main types of registers of inmates had become standardised.

Admission and Discharge Books or Registers

These list people admitted to the workhouse each day and those who were discharged or died each day. They are not usually indexed nor are there normally any cross references from an admission entry to show when that person was discharged or died.

Creed Registers

Creed registers are so called because they give the religious creed or faith of each inmate. They are often easier to use to trace details of an individual than the admission and discharge books. They usually record inmates in alphabetical sections, starting with everyone with a surname beginning with 'A' and then listing them in order of date of admission. The date of discharge or death is normally added to the

admission entry. If the column for date of discharge or death is left blank, this usually means that the person concerned was still in the workhouse when a new creed register was started. The next creed register should contain an entry for the same person under their original date of admission. This can sometimes cause confusion about the date a creed register was started.

Registers of Births

In many London and Middlesex poor law unions or parishes the maternity ward was in the workhouse rather than in the workhouse infirmary. After 1904 a birth certificate should not state that a birth took place in a workhouse giving instead the street and number as the place of birth, for instance, 4 Kings Road, St. Pancras, instead of St. Pancras Workhouse. Alternatively a euphemistic name might be used such as Twyford Lodge for Willesden Workhouse Infirmary or The Lodge, Bancroft Road, for Mile End Workhouse.

Registers of Baptisms

Sometimes Boards of Guardians records include registers of baptisms in the workhouse. Otherwise baptisms solemnised in the workhouse may be recorded in the parish registers of the local church.

Registers of Deaths

Boards of Guardians records frequently include registers of deaths which occurred in the workhouse, but not usually any records of burials. Burials of people who died in a London workhouse would normally have taken place in a local parish burial ground until these were closed, usually in the 1850s. Subsequent burials would have taken place either in the local cemetery, if there was one, or in one of the large private cemeteries outside London which entered into contracts with local authorities for the burial of the poor.

Poor Law records on Ancestry

Some of our registers of births and baptism and deaths in workhouses have been digitised by Ancestry. Together with the parish registers and bishops' transcripts which we hold, these records of births and baptisms for 1813-1906 and deaths and burials for 1813-1980 have been indexed and can be searched by name on ancestry [website: www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk).

Many other Poor Law records 1834 – 1940 can be viewed on Ancestry, but have not yet been transcribed or indexed. Free access to Ancestry is available at LMA and Guildhall Library.

Workhouse Infirmaries and Pauper Lunatic Asylums

The first county lunatic asylum for Middlesex, Hanwell Asylum, opened in 1831 followed by the first county lunatic asylum for Surrey in 1841. The City of London built its own asylum at Dartford in 1866. The 1867 Metropolitan Poor Act obliged the London Boards of Guardians to establish workhouse infirmaries which were run separately from the workhouse. It also led to the formation of the Metropolitan Asylums Board which provided infectious diseases hospitals and certain types of mental hospitals for the whole of the metropolitan area. The London County Council and Middlesex County Council took over responsibility for the county lunatic asylums in 1889 and for the former workhouse infirmaries in 1930. The London County Council also took over the Metropolitan Asylums Board's hospitals in 1930. In 1948 all these hospitals became part of the National Health Service.

Many hospitals in London and Middlesex have deposited their records in LMA. Records of patients admitted to a workhouse infirmary may be found either with the records of the Board of Guardians which was responsible for running it until 1930 or with the archives of the NHS hospital which it later became. Boards of Guardians records usually include registers of people whom they sent to county lunatic asylums, private asylums, or to Metropolitan Asylums Board hospitals.

For further information see Information Leaflet No.35 Records of patients in London Hospitals.

Out Relief

Payment of out relief was continued by most Poor Law unions and parishes after 1834. A system of non resident relief developed whereby rather than attempting to remove to their place of legal settlement someone claiming poor relief for what was likely to be a limited period, the parish of residence would pay out relief then reclaim the payment from the place of settlement. Certain London parishes and unions where the influence of the Charity Organisation Society was strong from the 1870s virtually ceased to pay out relief. They included St. George-in-the-East, Stepney and Whitechapel. Deserving applicants were instead directed to seek charitable relief.

Few records of those applying for out relief or receiving out relief in any form survive amongst the archives of most London Boards of Guardians. Often less than half a dozen volumes survive for the whole period 1834-1930. However, series of applications for relief mainly for 1893-1912 exist for Poplar Board of Guardians.

Poor Law Schools

After 1834 the Poor Law Commission required each union to set up a properly constituted residential school for pauper children with a salaried schoolmaster or

schoolmistress. Pauper children were to receive both a basic education and industrial training to fit them for employment. The 1844 Poor Law Amendment Act and 1848 District Schools Act gave the Poor Law Commissioners powers to combine parishes and unions into school districts which would establish a large residential school outside London for the care and education of all pauper children from the areas concerned. Seven Poor Law School Districts were formed in the metropolitan area. Their records are held by LMA and are listed with the records of London Local Authorities.

Poor Law School Districts

Brentwood School District 1867-1887 (BSD)

Children from Hackney and Shoreditch were sent to Brentwood School and Harold Court School, Essex.

Central London School District 1849-1930 (CLSD)

Children from the City of London and St. Saviour, Southwark, 1849-1930 and from St. Martin-in-the-Fields 1853-1868 were sent to Hanwell Schools, Hanwell, Middlesex 1856-1933. These were sometimes known as the Cuckoo Schools.

Forest Gate School District 1868-1897 (FGSD)

Children from Hackney 1868-1877, Poplar 1868-1897, and Whitechapel 1868-1897 were sent to Forest Gate School, Essex, 1854-1907 and the Training Ship Goliath 1870-1875.

Kensington and Chelsea School District 1876-1930 (KCSD)

Children from Chelsea and Kensington 1876-1930 and St. Marylebone 1920-1930 were sent to Banstead Schools, Banstead, Surrey, opened in 1880, and renamed Beechholme in 1951.

North Surrey School District 1849-1930 (NSSD)

Children from Chelsea 1850-1876, Croydon 1849-1884, Kensington 1870-1876, Kingston 1849-1871, Lewisham 1849-1930, Richmond 1849-1882 and Wandsworth and Clapham 1849-1930 were sent to Anerley Schools, Upper Norwood, Surrey, 1850-1937.

South Metropolitan School District 1849-1902 (SMSD)

Children from Bermondsey 1849-1902, Camberwell 1849-1902, Greenwich 1849-1902, St. Mary, Newington, 1854-1869, Stepney Union 1873-1902 and Woolwich Union 1868-1902 were sent to Brighton Road School, Sutton, Surrey 1855-1902, Banstead Road School, Sutton, Surrey 1844-1902, Herne Bay School, Kent, 1876-1897, and Witham School, Essex, 1882-1900.

West London School District 1868-1930 (WLSD)

Children from Fulham and Hammersmith 1868-1930, Paddington 1868-1930, St. George, Hanover Square, 1868-1870, St. George's Union 1870-1913, and the City of Westminster Union 1913-1930 were sent to Ashford Schools, Ashford, Middlesex, 1872-1930.

Other Poor Law Schools

By 1870 all the Boards of Guardians in London which did not form part of one of the Poor Law School Districts had established schools for the children in their care which were run separately from the workhouse. By 1897 most poor law schools had been moved out of central London into the countryside and the newer ones had been built as cottage or scattered homes.

From 1862 Boards of Guardians were permitted to pay to send children to certified schools for children of a particular religious faith or with special needs. These schools were usually charitable institutions. LMA does not hold the records of these schools, but the records of the Boards of Guardians often include registers of children in their care whom they sent to such schools or to the hospitals for children run by the Metropolitan Asylums Board.

Training Ship Exmouth

This trained London poor law boys for the Royal Navy and merchant navy. Records of the Metropolitan Asylums Board (MAB) held by LMA include registers of boys sent to the Training Ship Exmouth 1876-1947 as well as administrative records, a staff register, reports, magazines and photographs.

Children in the Workhouse

Very young children under three years old were usually cared for in a nursery in the workhouse, not being sent to the Poor Law Schools until they were old enough to be educated. Children often passed through the workhouse briefly on first being taken into the care of the Board of Guardians or when being returned to the care of their families. By the early 1900s many London Board of Guardians whose schools were outside London had established Receiving Homes for children within the area they served where children were first taken into care before being transferred to an appropriate institution.

Boarding out Children

Some orphaned or deserted children were boarded out with foster parents, who were paid to take care of them. Normally foster homes were situated outside London.

Boards of Guardians records may include registers of children boarded out with foster parents.

Staff Records

Boards of Guardians records may include registers of officers and servants employed by the Board of Guardians in their workhouse, infirmary, residential school, administrative offices, and out relief offices. Appointments and resignations or dismissals of staff may be recorded in the Board of Guardians minute books and in the volumes of correspondence with central government (Poor Law Commissioners 1834-1847, Poor Law Board 1847-1871, Local Government Board 1871-1919, Ministry of Health 1919-1930), who had to approve appointments of staff until 1921. None of these records are likely to yield much information beyond name, post held, and dates of employment. Occasionally we have copies of applications and testimonials (e.g. St. George, Hanover Square, c.1863-1913) or staff files (e.g. Stepney 1925-1930 and City of Westminster c.1900-1930).

The Ministry of Health archives held by the National Archives, Kew, Richmond, Surrey TW9 4DU, also include records relating to staff employed by Poor Law authorities. See registers of paid staff (MH9) and correspondence with poor law authorities (MH12).

Reading List

This is only a very small selection from our extensive holdings of publications relating to the history of the Poor Law. LMA library references are given in brackets.

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