

THE POOR LAW IN EAST AND WEST SUSSEX 1601-1929

The Old Poor Law 1601-1834



The church was responsible for the poor in each parish through the Vestry Meeting. The Vestry appointed unpaid parish officers each year on Lady Day (25 March) and recorded it in the **Vestry Minutes**. The officer who was responsible for the poor was called the Overseer of the Poor who collected the Poor Rate from the parishioners, whose names appear in the **Rate Books**. The **Overseer's Accounts** included the names and the amount of relief pay out to each pauper. These records are under the parish records.

Other Poor Law Records:-

Examination, Settlement and Removal

There were restrictions on movement from the parish of Settlement. This was a parish of birth, if illegitimate, if not from where a father had settlement, or where an apprenticeship had been completed. A woman gained settlement through marriage to a man with Settlement; it could also be gained by paying £10 rent on a property, employment, paying taxes or holding public office. Anyone wanting to move had to have a Settlement Certificate, a guarantee that the parish of Settlement would support them should they become chargeable on the new parish's poor rate (unemployment, sickness or death). Anyone arriving in a parish without employment would be Examined for Settlement and then Removed by the local JP in court, back to their parish of Settlement. If the parish of Settlement would support them in their new parish until they had employment they could stay. These records for East Sussex have been indexed and are found under the **Sussex Quarter Sessions**.

Bastardy Orders

Women who were about to have an illegitimate child, that would be chargeable on the Poor Rate, were interviewed by the Church Wardens and the Overseer of the Poor and asked to name the father of the child, so he could support the child until it was old enough to work. The father would be taken before the local JP and a Bastardy Order against him was made for payment for the midwife and the maintenance of the child. These records for East Sussex have been indexed, and are found in the **parish records**.

Apprenticeship of Poor Children by the Parish

The Churchwardens and the Overseer of the Poor would arrange apprenticeships for poor children at low cost to trades people. These records are with the **parish records** and not part of the printed lists of apprentices and masters which were taxed (1710-1752 Sussex Record Society).

The Gilbert Act 1782 allowed parishes to set up workhouses, sometimes with other parishes. These records were **parish records**. (Examples are Brighton and West Firle).

Website <http://www.workhouses.org.uk/>

The New Poor Law 1834-1929

The Poor Law Amendment Act 1834

The old Poor Law was finished and this new system took over, but not always at once. Parishes were grouped together in Unions that were administered by the following authorities:-

1834-1847. The Poor Law Commissioners were in charge and the government paid for Union Workhouses to be built to house the poor; out relief was stopped but not in all cases. The Poor Rate payers elected a Board of Guardians to oversee each Union.

1847-1871. The Poor Law Board took over the responsibility of the Union Workhouses.

1871-1919. The Local Government Board administered the Workhouses.

1919-1929. The Ministry of Health became involved; records now were not only held under **The Guardians** of each Union but in the **National Archives** under MH. Correspondence of each Union is held under MH 12 and contains details of those sent to the County Asylum and immigrants to the British colonies from the Union.

The Ministry of Health through the Board of Control could certify an inmate if the doctor employed by the Board of Guardians would not sign the papers. The Guardians had the power to adopt the children of certified inmates. A woman who had more than one illegitimate child could be certified as feeble minded by just one doctor, employed by the Board of Guardians. This virtual imprisonment kept some inmates in an institution for the rest of their lives.

The Master, Matron and the Porter of the Workhouse had the power of arrest if any inmate tried to escape. Their power over the inmates was total.

East Sussex Unions: Battle, Brighton, Chailey, Eastbourne, West Firle, Hailsham, Hastings, Lewes, Newhaven, Rye, Steyning, Ticehurst.

West Sussex Unions: Cuckfield, East Grinstead, Chichester, Horsham, Midhurst, Petworth, East Preston.

Union Workhouse Records, found under Guardians held in The Keep and the West Sussex Record Office. Records held under the Guardians of union workhouses include: Minute Books; Letter Books; Admission Book; Discharge Book; Register of Births; Register of Deaths; Boarded Out of Pauper Children; Education of poor children; Emigration of the Poor; Infirmary Records; and Creed Books.

Useful sources of Poor Law information:

The following indexed transcripts of Poor Law documents by Michael J. Burchall have been published by the Parish Register Transcription Society on CD and these may help your research:

Eastern Sussex Bastardy Papers 1594-1845

Eastern Sussex Removal Orders 1662-1862

Eastern Sussex Settlement Certificates and Bonds 1651-1834

The Sussex Poor 1661-1800

The Sussex Poor 1801-1850

West Sussex Settlement Certificates & Bonds 1658-1853

For West Sussex parishes, there is an online index of Poor Law documents available on the Sussex Record Society web site at <http://www.sussexrecordsociety.org/dbs/pl/>

The Sussex Record Society has published:

"Mid Sussex Poor Law Records 1601 - 1835" by Norma Pilbeam & Ian Nelson (vol 83) ISBN 0854450505

"Winchelsea Poor Law Records 1790 - 1841" by Malcolm Pratt (vol 94) ISBN 9780854450763

PTO for the Old Poor Law 1601-1834

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