

Devon Libraries

Researching Devon workhouses in the Westcountry Studies Library

Factsheet 29

Introduction: A brief history of workhouses with reference to Devon

Early History

Every historical age has its poor, and support has changed as each age seeks its own solution.

Until the nineteenth century, those unable to survive without help were largely the concern of the Church, not the state. Religious houses (monasteries and other religious communities such as Tavistock Abbey or St Catherine's Priory at Polsloe) collected and distributed alms to the poor until the Reformation, when many were destroyed. Benefactors often included the local poor in their wills, sometimes providing for the building and maintenance of alms-houses where the elderly poor could live. Many survive in some form, such as those in Cross Street, Mortonhampstead or Higher Street, Cullompton.



After the Reformation, various Tudor poor laws centred responsibility for the poor on individual parishes.

Parishes date from before the Norman Conquest. England and Wales were divided by the church into areas called dioceses, administered by bishops. The present diocese of Exeter roughly corresponds with the boundaries of Devon, but used to include Cornwall which is now the diocese of Truro. Each diocese is divided into parishes. In densely populated areas, smaller, more numerous parishes are to be found.

Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries

From the sixteenth century, each parish managed its own affairs and appointed officers to particular jobs.

An important parish office created by an Act of 1572 was Overseer of the Poor. Two Overseers, appointed annually in each parish, were responsible for raising a "poor rate" tax from parish residents to spend on the poor within their parish boundary. They also organised work for those classed as "able-bodied poor", usually based in the paupers' homes (called "out-door relief"). Those who refused to work were sent to a "House of Correction". Those classed as "impotent poor" (unable to work) could live in a parish "poorhouse". Overseers were also responsible for returning vagrants to their declared parish of residence, birth or baptism.

From 1722 parishes could choose to build or designate a "workhouse" to replace outdoor relief with a single work location for the able-bodied poor. Those refusing to enter were denied further support. Knatchbull's Act of 1723, which dictated that poor relief was only dispensed on admission to a workhouse, caused several hundred workhouses to be set up.

In 1776-7, a Parliamentary survey of poor-relief expenditure in England and Wales, the *Abstract of Returns Made by the Overseers of the Poor*, included an inventory of workhouse provision. There were 94 parish workhouses in operation across Devon. Small parishes were allowed to



form a "union" sharing a single workhouse. This followed the pattern of the larger towns which could form a "corporation of the poor" (e.g. Exeter, 1697, Tiverton and Crediton, 1698 and Plymouth (1707). However, these workhouses became gradually used more for the old and infirm, while out-door relief was reintroduced in many places during the eighteenth century. Here is the list from 1777, as reproduced by www.workhouse.org. The

names have been given in their modern form where known, and the numbers refer to the places available in each workhouse:

Alverdiscott (6), East Allington (20), West Alvington (30), Ashburton (100), Ashford (12), Aveton Gifford (40), Awliscombe (10), Axminster (80), Bampton (60), Barnstaple (80), Berrynarbor (12), Berry Pomeroy (40), Bicton (6), Bideford (75), Bigbury (20), Blackawton (34), Bridford (12), Brixham (60), Brixton (23), Burrington (20), Cadbury (10), Chagford (20), Chawley (24), Cheriton Fitzpaine (30), Chittlehampton (40), Christow (15), Chudleigh (20), Chulmleigh (36), Clyst Hydon (14), Clyst St Lawrence (10), Colaton Raleigh (27), Cullompton (120), Colyton (66), Comb Martin (2), Compton Tefford (Compton and Efford? Compton Gifford?) (3), Cornworthy (40), Crediton (90), Cruwys Morchard (30), Culmstock (20), Feniton (8), Hartland (90), Heanton Punchardon (16), Hemyock (10), Holcombe Burnell (6), Honiton (60), Huntsham (Two families), Ilfracombe (60), Kenton (150), Kingsbridge (20), Knowstone (28), Langtree (16), Lifton (50), Loddiswell (25), Loxbear (6), Malborough (28), Membury (18), Merton (30), North Molton (45), South Molton (100), Moretonhampstead (60), Newton Abbot (70), Northam (80), Northcott (Boyton) (4), Bishops Nympton (60), Otterton (20), Parkham (20), Pilton (30), Plymouth (200), Plympton St Mary (100), Plymstock (30), Ringmore (20), St Mary Ottery (100), St Saviour within the Borough of Clifton (40), St Thomas the Apostle (52), Sampford Courtenay (30), Sandford (60), Seaton and Beer (24), Shobrooke (40), Sidbury (40), Sidmouth (20), Silverton (60), Staverton (30), Stoke Damerel (175), Tavistock (50), Thurlestone (20), Tiverton (400), Topsham (82), Great Torrington (20), Totnes (40), Uffculme (50), Uplyme (10), Wear Gifford (8), Woolfardisworthy (8), Yealmlpton (26).

Nineteenth and Twentieth Century: the Poor Law Unions to the Welfare State

In 1834, the Poor Law Amendment Act introduced a complete change in favour of 643 Poor Law Unions across the country, each with a board of guardians and a centralised workhouse to serve a group of parishes. Out-door relief was abolished. Union workhouses were to save money, amid concern about increasing poor rates. Their bleak regime was designed as an incentive to find work, although individual workhouses often delivered a more humane approach. The Union districts formed the basis for Registration Districts introduced in 1837.

The Devon Poor Law Unions, each with its own workhouse, were Axminster, Barnstaple, Bideford, Crediton, East Stonehouse, Exeter, Holsworthy, Honiton, Kingsbridge, Newton Abbot, Okehampton, Plymouth, Plympton St Mary, South Molton, Stoke Damerel (which became Devonport), Tavistock, Tiverton, Torrington and Totnes.

From 1871 until 1919, the Local Government Board was responsible for poor relief, and many changes were made, including the updating and expansion of medical care in the 1890s. The old age pension was introduced in 1908, and children were removed from the system in the same year and placed in separate Children's Homes. In 1929, the Poor Law Unions were abolished, many workhouses became Public Assistance Institutions, and legislation moved toward the creation of the Welfare State in 1948.

	NAME and SURNAME (The initials only, of females, may be used)	(1) RELATION to Head of Family—or (2) Position in the Institution.	CONDITION	AGE (last Birthday)		1
				MALES	FEMALES	
	No Person under the Age of Twenty, April 1 st 1834, to be entered here, except those who are admitted during that night and who arrive on the morning of Monday, April 1 st .	State whether Wife, Son, Daughter, or other Relative of Offend. See, and give the Designation of Institute.	Write either "Married," "Widow," "Single," or "Unmarried," against the Name of all Females except Young Children.			
	Write after the Name of the Head of the Institution the names of his Wife, Children, and other Relations, with his Visitors, and Servants; their Offices, their Families, and Occupations; and Study the Special Inmates.					
1	James Lodge	Master	Married	69		
2	Elizabeth Appia Lodge	Wife	Married	65		
3	Charles Lodge	Grandson		12		
4	James Brooking Walker	Schoolmaster	U	21		
5	Katherine Williams	Schoolmistress	U	25		
6	John Ellis	Pauper	U	47		
7	Margaret Winder	Pauper	U	36		
8	Thomas Taylor	Pauper	U	40		

Workhouse Reading and Resources in the Westcountry Studies Library

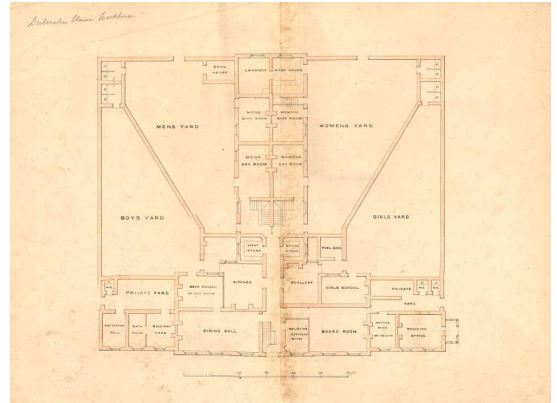
See our online catalogue (www.dev.gov.uk/localstudies) for workhouses and poor relief in other parts of Devon and further study

Background to the poor relief system

"Yon house that holds the parish poor" - the history and development of the poor relief system by Tim Wormleighton, Senior Archivist, NDRO, 2002 (Devon Family History, Journals 102 & 103)

Devon (for Exeter sources, see separate Information Sheet)

- *A Devonshire Hospital, being a Treatise shewing how the Poor of the County of Devon may be maintained and provided for ... (etc.)*, by "a philo Devonian", Exeter, 1727 (s362.5/DEV/DEV)
- *Poor Relief in Devon: Two Studies* (historical background and case studies of Abbotskerswell, 17th /19th C, and Totnes and Dudley, 1919 - 1929), S. Wheelaker and S. Eyles, Devonshire Association, 1991 (p362.58/DEV/WHE)
- *Poverty, Migration and Settlement in the Industrial Revolution: Sojourners' Narratives* by James Stephen Taylor, USA 1989. Includes examples and accounts from Devon. (s362.5/DEV/TAY)
- *The Barnstaple Bridewell and Dornat's Mineral Water Factory* by R. Akers and O. Friend, 1991 (p362.5) History of the Barnstaple Workhouse which overlapped with that of the prison.
- *Plymouth Workhouse in the census return of 1861* by W.N. Bryant, Devon Historian Vol.32, pp 26 - 28, 1986
- *Devonport Workhouse* by Ann Chiswell. Devon & Cornwall Notes & Queries 35:2, 1982, pp 79 - 82
- *The Silvertown Mummies* by Edwin S. Chalk, Devon & Cornwall Notes & Queries, 9:8, 1917, pp 228 - 232, about a play directed by former mummies, inmates of Tiverton Workhouse in 1900.
- *The Land of Goschen: life in the Totnes Union Workhouse 1869/ 70*; Totnes, 1986 (p362.5/TOT/GER)
- *Scandal in the Workhouse: a study of discontent*; Totnes, 1986 (p362.5/TOT/MAN)
- *The Community of Colyton and its Poor 1800 - 1850* by Norman F. Hoare, Leicester University dissertation, 1973 (s362.5/COL/HOR)



Somerset

- *An Index to Somerset Settlement & Removal Cases in Quarter Sessions 1607 - 1700* by Adrian James Webb, Western-Super-Mare 1997. Name and place index, including country-wide references; worth consulting the name index wherever your ancestors came from. (p362.5/SOM/WEB)
- *Rattle his Bones* by Jack Hurley, Dulverton, 1974. A century of Poor Law administration, an account based on the records of the workhouses at Dulverton and Williton. (s362.5/SOM/HUR)
- *Somerset Paupers: Unremembered Lives* by Thelma Munckton, Wincanton 1994. Includes case studies from settlement examinations, removal orders, bastardy papers, vagrants' passes and other early administrative material. Interesting, readable background includes wife selling. (s362.5/SOM/MUN)

Dorset

- *The Almshouses of Dorset* by Elizabeth O. Cockburn, Dorchester 1970 (s362.6/DOR/COC)

- *Badges and Beans; the Annals of the Poor of Yetminster Hundred, Dorset in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* by N. Haywood and N. Windridge, Yetminster, 1989. Much of general interest.
- *The Christchurch and Bournemouth Union Workhouse* by Sue Newman, Christchurch, 1st and 2nd (revised and enlarged) editions, 1994 and 2000 (s362.5/CHR/NEW)

Cornwall

- *A Social History of Bodmin Union Workhouse* by Tony Philip, Bodmin 2005 (s362.5/BOD/PHI)

Projects

- *The union workhouse: a study guide for teachers and local historians* by Andy Reid
- Chichester, Phillimore 1994 (s362.5/GEN/REI)
- Teaching aid, including background and history, records and resources, and themes for investigation.

Records and where to find them

- *Devon Union workhouses and their records* by Barbara Bolt, Devon Family History Society, 2000 illustrated handbook detailing all nineteenth century Devon workhouses and surviving records, with a list of unions and the parishes included. (p362.5/DEV/BOL)
- *Poor law union records. 3: South-West England, the Marshes and Wales* by Jeremy Gibson and Colin Rogers, Federation of Family History Societies, 2000. Very comprehensive handbook, detailing runs of records with dates and repositories. Introduction includes description of types of records available. (p016.3625/WES/GIB)
- *Poor law union records. 4: Gazetteer of England and Wales* by Jeremy Gibson and Frederic A.Youngs, Federation of Family History Societies, 1997. Describes composition of each union, detailing when places were added or moved. Organised under county. (p016.3625/GEN/GIB)

Newspapers

Check the *Trewmans Exeter Flying Post* card index under Workhouses for eighteenth and nineteenth century references to construction, appointments, meetings and activities.

Maps

19th and early 20th century Ordnance Survey maps plus the 1930s revisions show the locations and ground plans of the Union workhouses, which usually became Public Assistance Institutions or hospitals.

Sheet numbers are as follows: Axminster: 72/5; Barnstaple, 13/7, 13/3; Bideford: 19/6; Crediton: 67/2; Devonport (originally Stoke Damerel): 123/3; East Stonehouse: 123/11; Exeter: 80/6; Holsworthy: 50/14; Honiton: 70/4; Kingsbridge: 132/14; Newton Abbot: 109/16; Okehampton: 76/4; Plymouth: 123/8; Plympton St Mary: 124/2; South Molton: 22/5; St Thomas: 80/5; Stoke Damerel (became Devonport): 123/3; Tavistock: 105/8; Tiverton: 45/3; Torrington: 29/8; Totnes: 121/5. Microfiche copies are available and can be printed from the machines. Ask at the desk.

Censuses

Censuses showing all residents including inmates and staff are available from 1841 - 1901 on microfilm/fiche or via free access to www.ancestry.library

Online

www.workhouses.org.uk – a mine of illustrated information about English and Welsh workhouses, their histories, locations, legislation, architecture and daily life.