

Workhouse sources and the Westcountry Studies Library

Factsheet 21

A brief history of Workhouses with reference to Exeter Corporation Workhouse and St Thomas's Union Workhouse

Early History

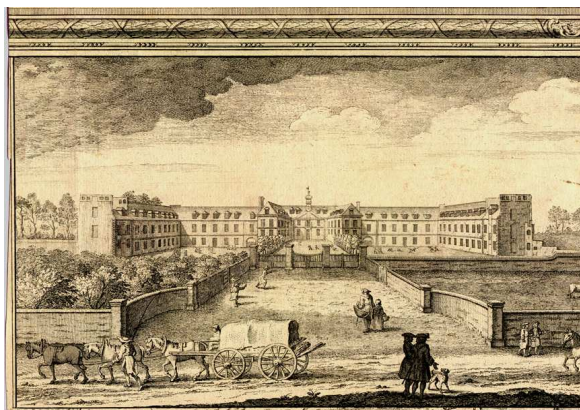
Every historical age has its poor, and support has changed as each age seeks its own solution.

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) 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.

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. Each diocese is divided into parishes. In densely populated areas, smaller, more numerous parishes are to be found. The city of Exeter had 21 medieval parishes. St Thomas was a rural parish outside the city.

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 would be denied further support.

In 1777 there were 94 parish workhouses in operation across Devon. Small parishes were allowed to form a "union" sharing a single workhouse, following the pattern of the larger towns which could form a "corporation of the poor". 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.

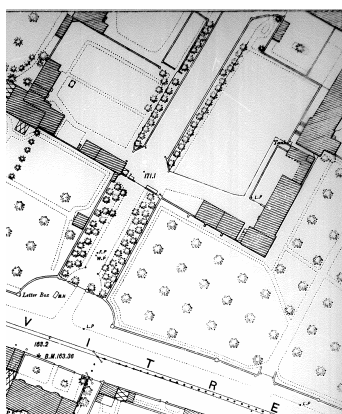
In the 1670s, an early workhouse was built in St Sidwell's parish, around the present Triangle Car Park next to Clifton Road. It was paid for by Canon John Bury who left £40 per annum in his will for the able-bodied poor of the parish to work there, and be maintained.

In 1697, Exeter was one of the first towns to form a "Corporation" to cope with the escalating problem of urban poor. In 1701, a new workhouse opened in Heavitree Road (the entrance was opposite St Luke's College's). The inmates enjoyed a healthy diet, although they worked long hours, mainly spinning "woosted-wooll". In about 1821, an infirmary was added, enlarged in 1858, and catered for patients outside the Workhouse, including fever and maternity cases. From this period, hospital and workhouse developed together.

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

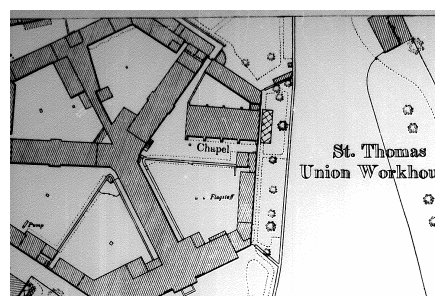
In 1834, the Poor Law Amendment Act introduced a complete change in favour of 643 Poor Law Unions across the country, each with a board of guardians and a centralised workhouse to serve a group of parishes. Out-door relief was abolished. Union workhouses were to save money, amid concern about increasing 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.

Exeter's status as a Corporation meant that it did not become a Poor Law Union until **1877**. The corporation included the parishes of Allhallows Goldsmith-street, Allhallows-on-the-Walls, Bedford Precinct, Precinct Close, Holy Trinity, St David, St Edmund, St George the Martyr, St John, St Kerrian, St Lawrence, St Martin, St Mary Arches, St Mary Major, St Mary Steps, St Olave, St Pancras, St Paul, St Petrock, St Sidwell, and St Stephen. St Leonard's was added in 1877.



The Exeter Workhouse expanded throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By 1889, it was large enough for 500 inmates. It included a hospital, schools, workshops, lunatic wards and receiving wards. A children's home was added in 1913. The Workhouse was redefined as a Public Assistance Institution, before the site and many of the buildings were absorbed by the City Hospital (later the Royal Devon & Exeter Hospital, Heavitree) in 1939. Of the original buildings, only the 1905 infirmary and the Children's Home have survived the bombing and post-war rebuilding.

St Thomas Poor Law Union was formed on 21st April **1836** with a new workhouse opening in the same year at Redhills, on the present corner of Okehampton and Exwick Roads. While the Exeter Workhouse served the City, St Thomas was one of twenty-one Devon unions, providing for a large group of rural parishes. Its operation was overseen by an elected board of 61 Guardians, representing its 49 constituent parishes which



were as far apart as Mamhead, Dunsford, Otterton and Broadclyst. The workhouse was built to accommodate 450 inmates and expanded during the course of the nineteenth century. It included a hospital, a chapel, workshops and exercise areas, built into the hexagonal design by architect Sampson Kempthorne who was responsible for many workhouses including Axminster, Barnstaple, South Molton, Crediton, Torrington and Okehampton (but not Tiverton).

In October 1908, the union bought Chase Villa, 49-51 Church Road, Exeter as a home for twenty children. The workhouse was re-defined as a Public Assistance Institution in 1930 and became Redhills Hospital in 1948. After various other uses, it has now been converted into housing.

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.

Workhouse Reading and Resources in the Westcountry Studies Library for Exeter, St Thomas and general background

See our online catalogue (www.devon.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)

NAME and SURNAME (The initials only, of Exeter, may be used)	(1) RELATION to Head of Family—or (2) Position in the Institution.	CONDEMNED Write whether "Married," "Widow," "Single," or "Unmarried," against the Name of all Cases except Young Children.	AGE [not Birth-day]	
			MALE	FEMALE
1 James Apple	Widow	Married	69	
2 Elizabeth Apple	Widow	Married	66	
3 Charles Apple	Grandson	Unmarried	12	
4 James Brethling Walker	Schoolmaster	Unmarried	21	
5 Caroline Williams	Schoolmistress	Unmarried	25	
6 John Wells	Walter	Unmarried	27	
7 Francis Warden	Warden	Unmarried	36	
8 Thomas Doyle	Appt. of det.	Unmarried	26	

Early history to eighteenth century

- *An Account of the Legacies left to the Poor of the City of Exeter from the year 1164 to 1674 inclusive* by Samuel Izacke, Exeter, 1820 (sB/EXE/362.5/IZA). Names 130 benefactors, with relevant will extracts, plus 55 later donors. Includes a name index.
- *Exeter's Almshouses* by Jane Passmore, 2010 (sB/EXE/362.615/PAS). Histories, locations and details of benefactors of around 32 almshouses in and around the city of Exeter. Illustrated with photographs and maps.

Nineteenth century - workhouse life and legislation

- Exeter poor law acts, reprinted by C.Eyre and W.Strahan (sB/EXE/362.5/EXE). Acts of parliament concerned with the erecting of hospitals and workhouses between 1697 and 1788.
- *Clementine Montgomery: a tale of the Exeter workhouse* by William H.C.Nation, manuscript, 1857(ms820.2/NAT) A work of fiction which includes contemporaneous descriptions of Exeter, and the City Workhouse and life within it (see particularly from page 52, Book 2, Chapter 1).
- *An Analysis of the Expenditure for the Relief of the Poor by the Board of Guardians of the St Thomas Union together with the State of Pauperism and its cost per head upon the Population in the Seventeen Unions in the County of Devon for the Year ending Lady Day 1844* by John Bowring, Exeter, 1844 (sB/EXE/362.5/BOW) Statistical analysis, discussion,

and interesting details of workhouse officers, their jobs and salaries. Indicative of the anxiety about the cost of the poor at this time.

- *Aspects of poor law administration in St. Thomas Union, Devon, 1834 to 1846* by G.R.King, Thesis (BA Hons), Worcester, 1987 (sxB/EXE/362.5/KIN) Includes the formation of the new poor law in St Thomas Union, Administrators and Poor Relief, Management of St Thomas Union Workhouse and the Workhouse Young, plus a large bibliography
- *Opening of the new infirmary at the workhouse, Exeter, Wednesday 18th October 1905* by Sir C.T.D.Acland by Arthur Snell, 1905 (sB/EXE/362.11/PAR) A detailed history of poor relief and workhouses in the City of Exeter, including daily life and diets in the early buildings, and the development of the hospital. Illustrated with plans and photographs.
- *Exeter Poor Relief Rules*, Eyre & Spottiswood, 1856 (sxB/EXE/362.5/EXE). Detailed rules including workhouse officer duties, inmate activities, pauper apprenticeships and care of the sick. Forms for accounts and record-keeping.

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.

Beyond Westcountry Studies: Records and where to find them

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

Newspapers

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

Maps

Early city maps show original workhouse. 19th and early 20th century maps plus the 1930s revisions show the locations and ground plans of the later workhouses.

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.