

A short guide to poor relief after 1834

- ◇ Before 1834, poor relief was the responsibility of the parish. For more information, see our guide to *short guide to the poor relief before 1834*.
- ◇ The old system of poor relief was not suited to an industrial society, so in 1834 the **Poor Law Amendment Act** changed the way in which relief was provided.
- ◇ Under the new law, parishes were grouped together in **Poor Law Unions**, supervised by a local **Board of Guardians**.
- ◇ Each Poor Law Union built a **workhouse** and poor relief was only to be given to those desperate enough to enter it. Accommodation in the workhouse was segregated, so families were split up. The regime was harsh and degrading.
- ◇ People forced into workhouses included those who were old, infirm, unmarried mothers and those who were mentally ill.
- ◇ Poor Law Unions were **disbanded** by the local government acts of 1929. Responsibility for poor relief was transferred to the County Council, who set up **public assistance committees** and **guardians committees**. Workhouses became homes for elderly people or children and hospitals.
- ◇ In Shropshire some parishes had already joined together to form **Incorporations** before 1834 and these continued to operate like Poor Law Unions under the New Poor Law. These were around Atcham, Ellesmere, Oswestry, Shrewsbury and Whitchurch. 11 new Unions were created in Shropshire in 1834.
- ◇ There was some reorganisation of boundaries; most notably in **1871** the Shrewsbury and Atcham Unions were amalgamated.
- ◇ Records of all Unions and Incorporations are deposited at Shropshire Archives. Catalogues are available in our search room and also on our on-line catalogue.
- ◇ Records of public assistance committees are listed separately under the reference PA. You generally need to know the name of the committee or the name of the building.

◇ The **survival of records** is very patchy and sometimes disappointing. For some unions there is only material relating to policy and administrative detail, for others there are numerous records containing personal information. Records of most use for family historians are:

- * *workhouse master's records* - these may include admission and discharge registers, which can give you names, ages and home addresses. There are also sometimes registers of births and deaths in the workhouse and creed registers.
- * *records of outdoor relief* - in the later 19th century, some paupers were given payment in their own homes. These people will not appear in the workhouse records, but may appear in registers of outdoor relief and accounts.

* *records of civil registration* – survive for Unions where the Clerk to the Guardians was also the **Superintendent Registrar**:

Shrewsbury marriage notice books, 1837-1871 (ref: PL2/18/1/1-4)

Ludlow marriage notice books, 1837-1928 (ref: PL9/30/4/1-6)

Newport register of births, 1866-1913 (ref: PL11/245)

Newport marriage notice books, 1904-1924 (ref: PL11/246-247)

◆ **Please note that records giving sensitive or personal information are subject to data protection and therefore not likely to be available for research. Please ask staff for further advice.**

◆ Further information

Morrison, Kathryn *The Workhouse; a study of Poor-Law buildings in England*.
RCHME, 1999 (728 Reading Room)

Smith, Lance 'Union workhouses in Shropshire' In *Telford Historical and Archaeological Society Journal* no 1 1997 pp 18-26

www.workhouses.org.uk is a very useful web-site containing photographs of workhouses and maps of Unions.

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