

POOR LAW UNION WORKHOUSES

By the early 1830s the existing poor relief system was unable to cope and the New Poor Law Act came into effect in 1834. Northamptonshire was divided up into 12 poor law unions: Brackley, Brixworth, Daventry, Hardingstone, Kettering, Northampton, Oundle, Peterborough, Potterspury, Thrapston, Towcester and Wellingborough. Some of these include cross-border parishes. Likewise, some parishes will come under Poor Law Unions in adjacent counties.

The information below gives an overview of the different types of records that are available. Survival varies for each Union.

Admission procedure

You could admit yourself, or be referred by the parish or Relieving Officer. You would be interviewed, be given a bath and be issued with a workhouse uniform. Your own clothes would be washed and returned when you left. Details would be entered in the Admission and Discharge register and often in the Master's journal. These admission examples are from Northampton Union.

Goodman Ann aged 16 years. single, shoemaker, venereal, destitute, Born at Winslow, been in Northampton five years. Adm: 19 Sept 1877

Izzard – Sarah aged 27 years, independent, charwoman, Married and destitute, and 2 children Anne 4, Maria 2, husband in prison, he is a native of Weedon. Vagrants were housed in 'casual wards' and there are separate registers for these admissions.

Discharge

You could leave at own request. If you came in as a family, you left as a family. You could ask for short term absence ie to visit family members and able-bodied men were allowed out to find work. Some people treated the workhouses as free lodging, coming and going as the mood or the weather took them! You can follow their trail in the registers.

Northampton Union examples:

Potter Frederick aged 13 years. To the service of Mr Simco, Mears Ashby. Discharged 4 August 1888

Mallard 1879 – Alice 8, Edith 6, Emma 4, From the school to meet their father who is to be discharged from prison this morning.

Medical Officer

He attended to the poor needing medical assistance and provided medicines. He examined the inmates on admission and reported to the Guardians – as below.

Discharged 5 Nov 1877 Bates, Richard age 61, Emma age 13, George 11, Agnes 6. At his own request.

They were re-admitted six days later where Richard is described as a labourer, widower and destitute, born at Grendon, been in Northampton 5 years.

Work

Those capable were expected to work – men in the workhouse gardens and the women with domestic duties. Casual inmates had to perform some tasks towards their upkeep, - often breaking stones or unpicking oakum.

Workhouse Staff

Master and Matron They were responsible for the running and administration of the workhouse. The Master's Register often contains notes about those admitted and it supplements the Admission register.

Relieving Officer He evaluated the cases of all persons applying for medical or poor relief and authorised emergency relief (both indoor or outdoor). He supplied the weekly allowance of the paupers within his district.

Porter He kept a register of those entering, particularly the casual vagrants. He also had to lock all the outer doors, and take the keys to the Master, at 9pm every night, and to receive them back from him every morning at 6am. The Porter's Admission register may survive.

Board of Guardians An elected body which included representatives from the parishes. They oversaw all administration, discussed relief, received reports and made decisions on putting out older children as apprentices. The Guardian Minute Books are a treasure trove of information.

Out Relief

Not everyone in need was admitted, those suffering from temporary illness or hardship were allowed out relief, sometimes cash but more usually in the form of bread or other goods. The Registers give information about claimants, why they needed relief and for how long payments were made.

Births in the workhouse

These were registered and also recorded in the Workhouse's own register of births. In 1904, to reduce stigma, the birth registration did not state workhouse but gave an address such as 1 Glaphorn Road for Oundle, or The White House for Potterspury.

Deaths in the workhouse

These were registered with the local registrar and should also be found in the Admission and Discharge books. Relatives could collect the body and arrange burial in the deceased home parish, if not, burial was arranged by the Guardians. Many of the birth and death registers have been transcribed. *You may find notes like the following: The widow of the Thomas Lea a lunatic who died in the Asylum applied for a box containing his wearing apparel. Ann Pratt begs to be allowed the clothes of her father, James Clarke deceased. Allowed.*

Contributions towards upkeep

In order to keep the poor rate low, family members would be asked to contribute towards the upkeep of parents in the workhouse. Details can be found in Guardians minute books and in the local newspapers.

Apprenticeships

Children were educated so they could support themselves. The workhouse was also seen as a source of labour from those needing servants or apprentices, and not just from local families, but from further afield as the following examples show.

Peterborough

24 April 1869: Cornelius Wootton, a poor boy aged 16, apprentice for 5 years to Henry Edwards of Grimsby, owner of the smack 'Henry'.

28 April 1869 Samuel Toombs, aged 13, apprentice, ditto and George Baxter, aged 14, to Henry Edwards, owner of smack 'Mary'.

Other Records

Creed Registers: From 1869, an inmate's religion was recorded on admission and these are useful where other admission records do not survive.

Newspapers:

They reported on the Guardians meeting so include discussions which are not always minuted. You will also find job adverts and requests for tenders for the supply of grocery, uniform and other necessities.

Where to find Workhouse records.

Northamptonshire Archives holds surviving records and there is good coverage for most Unions except Potterspury (which are held at Buckinghamshire Archives). Some of the births/deaths registers have been transcribed.

The National Archives has some records, especially for correspondence from the Poor Law Commissioners.

See also www.workhouses.org.uk – a superb site with very detailed information on the background to the setting up and administration of workhouses along with a county gazetteer.

Eureka Partnership

The following books are available from NFHS bookstall or online via www.parishchest.com

Banbury Union Miscellany (includes some Northants)

Brackley Union Miscellany Vol 1 & 2

Brixworth Union

Births & Deaths 1837-1914

Hardingstone Union

Births 1838-1893, Deaths 1836-1874 & 1898-1925, Pauper Lunatics 1875-1915

Kettering Union Miscellany

Includes births & deaths 1893-1914, some settlement and removals 1862-1883 and lunatics records

Northampton Union

Vol 1 Births and Deaths 1837-1870, Births 1870-1910 & Deaths 1889-1915

Vol 2 Deaths 1889-1915

Vol 3 Births 1870-1910

Oundle Union

Births 1877-1910 & Deaths 1848-1914

Annual Return of Lunatics 1854 1876, Pauper Lunatics 1876-1908

Peterborough Union

Births 1836-1910 & Deaths 1836-1914, Apprentices 1869-1910

Thrapston Union

Births 1839-1910, Deaths 1837-1910

Wellingborough Union

Births & Deaths 1867-1914

Northamptonshire Archives

The following lists the main records for each workhouse. Please note that there may not be full coverage between the start and finish dates for each group of documents. **Please also note that access to documents under 100 years old is restricted due to Data Protection regulations. The Record Office may be able to research these documents on your behalf (fee payable).**

Brackley Poor Law Union Ref. PL1

Guardians minutes	1835-1930
Workhouse master's records	1836-1935
Including Register of apprentices	1882-1927
Register of admission and discharge registers	1914-1927
Medical Officer of Health papers	1869-1932
Including register of births	1910-1932
Register of deaths	1910-1931
Religious creed register	1890-1934
Outdoor relief records	1837-1930

Brixworth Poor Law Union Ref. PL2

Guardians minutes	1835-1930
Workhouse master's records	1899-1934
Including admission and discharge orders	1840; 1910-1935
Medical Officer of Health records	1901-1934
Including register of births	1837-1920
Register of deaths	1914-1934
Religious creed registers	1861-1920
Outdoor relief papers	1837-1934
Vaccination records	1853-1856, 1882-1895
School attendance records	1875-1877

Daventry Poor Law Union Ref. PL3

Guardians minutes	1836-1930
Workhouse master's records	1879-1936
Medical Officer of Health papers	1896-1935
Vaccination papers	1899-1930
Religious creed registers	1902-1934
Outdoor relief papers	1899-1928
School attendance records	1877-1903

Hardingstone Poor Law Union PL4

Guardians minutes	1835-1914
Workhouse master's papers	1899-1925
Including registers of admission and discharge	1903-1922
Medical Officer of Health papers	1836-1924
Including registers of births	1837-1922
Registers of deaths	1836-1925
Religious creed register	1900-1915

Outdoor relief papers	1836-1930
Vaccination papers	1853-1923
School attendance records	1877-1903

Kettering Poor Law Union Ref. PL5

Guardians minutes	1836-1930
Workhouse master's records	1874-1930
Including admission and discharge registers	1907-1931
Including registers of births	1893-1912
Registers of deaths	1893-1914
Outdoor relief papers	1848-1930
School attendance papers 1877-1884	

Northampton Poor Law Union Ref. PL6

Guardians minutes	1835-1929
Admission and discharge registers	1837-1933
Registers of births	1837-1915
Registers of deaths	1837-1915
Outdoor relief papers	1900-1903

Oundle Poor Law Union Ref. PL7

Guardians' minutes	1835-1930
Workhouse master's records	1842-1930
Including registers of admission and discharge	1836-1938
Medical Officer of Health papers	1876-1930
Including registers of births	1877-1913
Registers of deaths	1848-1914
Religious creed registers	1869-1914
Outdoor relief papers	1841-1930
Childrens' papers	1883-1929
Vaccination records	1874-1928
School assistance papers	1877-1896

Peterborough Poor Law Union Ref. PL8

Guardian's minutes	1835-1930
Workhouse master's papers	1836-1938
Including admission and discharge registers	1836-1930
Medical Officer of Health papers	1836-1945
Including registers of births	1836-1945
registers of deaths	1836-1931
Religious creed registers	1915-1945
School attendance papers	1877-1903
Vaccination papers	1882-1918

Potterspury Poor Law Union Ref. PL9

Weekly returns 1926-1930	
Buckinghamshire Record Office has Guardians minutes 1840-1930, and school attendance records 1887-1896	

Thrapston Poor Law Union Ref. PL10

Guardians minutes	1835-1930
Workhouse master's records	1880-1934
Including admission and discharge registers	1901-1933
Medical Officer of Health papers	1839-1933
Including registers of births	1839-1933
registers of deaths	1837-1933
religious creed registers	1914-1933
School attendance records	1877-1903
Vaccination papers	1888-1930

Towcester Poor Law Union Ref. PL11

Guardians minutes	1835-1930
Workhouse master's records	1883-1930
Admission and discharge registers	1901-1929
Medical Officer of Health papers	1837-1932
Including registers of deaths	1837-1930
Religious creed registers	1914-1930
Outdoor relief papers	1893-1930
School attendance papers	1877-1903

Wellingborough Poor Law Union Ref. PL12

Guardians minutes	1835-193
Workhouse master's records	1898-1931
Including admission and discharge registers	1896-1933
Medical Officer of Health papers	1867-1931
Including registers of births	1867-1914
Registers of deaths	1867-1914
Religious creed registers	1869-1920
Outdoor relief papers	1906-1929
Childrens' records	1902-1930
Vaccination records	1879-1928