

Boards of Guardians and Workhouse records

Background

Before 1834 poor relief was the responsibility of individual parishes. In 1832 the government set up a Royal Commission to investigate the existing system and make recommendations for changes. The solution seemed to be to reduce the number of people claiming relief and to abolish 'outdoor relief' – the practice of supporting people in their own homes. Anyone not able to support themselves would be cared for in a workhouse.

Under the provisions of the Poor Law Amendment Act, 1834, the whole of England and Wales was divided into Poor Law Unions – there were about 650 in all – administered by an elected Board of Guardians. Each union provided a single Workhouse to accommodate anyone not able to support themselves. The workhouse was intended to be so unpleasant that people would either find employment or turn to a charity or their family for support.

From the late 19th century, public attitudes to poverty started to change as the state began to accept more responsibility for welfare. The increasing cost, shared between local ratepayers and central government drove change and in 1930 the Unions were abolished. The workhouses were taken over by council councils who ran them as Public Assistance Institutions until the National Health Service was created in 1948 and then they either closed or continued as hospitals or old people's homes.

What records are there and what information will they contain?

The Data Protection legislation applies to some groups of records less than 100 years which include personal information so you may be asked to sign a Data Protection form before you use them. Please ask for more information about this.

Type of record	What will it include
Minutes of the Board of Guardians and its various subcommittees	These will vary in the amount of detail included but can provide information about individual inmates especially if an extra cost to the Guardians was involved e.g. pursuing a parent who'd abandoned their family, paying for medical help/equipment, paying for an apprenticeship or emigration
Registers of indoor relief or admission and discharge registers	These will include personal details of individual inmates of the Workhouse. They may vary in the amount of information given
Registers of deaths and births/baptisms	Workhouses kept registers of births and deaths in the workhouse. These may contain more information than official certificates.
Records relating to children	These may include admissions to the workhouse school, records relating to apprenticeship, employment, boarding-out or children's homes. All these can include personal details
Records relating to lunatics supported by the Guardians in the county asylum	These can include Information about the cost of treating the lunatic – generally no information about the treatment itself or the patient's medical condition. For more information see Research Guide: Asylum Records
Lists of people in receipt of or applying for out-relief	These can include personal details of the applicants, reason for needing aid, decision of the Guardians

Other Records Available

Type of record	What will it include
Poor Rate Book	Names of property owners, tenants and the amount of Poor Rate paid.
Valuation List	Names of property owners, tenants and the value of a property
Sanitation and public health	Information about disease and nuisances in the area
Vaccination returns or registers	Details of children vaccinated including father's name, address and occupation
School attendance	Information about enforcing the laws relating to attending school. May include information about individual pupils.

Most of these other functions passed to urban district councils (UDC) or rural district councils (RDC) in 1894 or 1927. For more information see Research Guide: District Councils.

How do I find the records?

Gloucestershire was covered by over 20 Unions and some parishes near the county boundary fell within Unions whose centre was actually outside Gloucestershire which means that either some or all the records are not held at Gloucestershire Archives. Three places, Kingswood near Wotton-under-Edge, Uley and Warmley are listed as separate Unions, but no Guardians' minutes or admission/discharge registers survive.

Union	Reference
Cheltenham	G/CH
Chepstow	G/CW
Cirencester	G/CI
Dursley	G/Du
Evesham	
Gloucester	G/GL
Kingswood	G/KI
Monmouth	G/MON

Union	Reference
Newent	G/NE
Northleach	G/NO
Ross	G/RO
Sodbury	G/SO
Stow-on-the-Wold	G/STO
Stroud	G/STR
Tetbury	G/TET

Union	Reference
Tewkesbury	G/TEW
Thornbury	G/TH
Uley	G/UL
Warmley	G/WA
Westbury-on-Severn	G/WE
Wheatenhurst	G/WH
Winchcombe	G/WI

Be Aware: For some Unions very few records have survived. You may find the only records that exist are the Minutes of the Board.

Records held at the National Archives

The Poor Law Unions were overseen by the Poor Law Board or the Poor Law Department of the Local Government Board after 1871. So some records relating to the individual unions are held at the National Archives. These are held as part of the records of the Ministry of Health (Ref: MH). The main series are:

Reference	Record
MH 12	Correspondence, 1834-c.1900
MH 14	Plans of lands and buildings, 1861-1918 (arranged by Union)
MH 32	Reports by Inspectors, generally arranged by individual inspector rather than by Union
MH 68	Correspondence, 1904-1933
MH 9	Registers of people employed by the Unions, 1837-1921

For more information see the Research Guide available from the National Archives:

<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/poverty-poor-laws/>