

Overseers of the Poor Records

Background

Until 1834 each individual parish was responsible for any resident unable to support themselves. The Poor Law Act of 1597/8 required each parish to appoint overseers of the poor who were chosen from the local householders and usually appointed at the annual Vestry meeting. The overseers' responsibilities included:

- Providing "outdoor relief" (help for the individual at home) and "indoor relief" (help in an almshouse or workhouse).
- Providing the most appropriate help. The overseers would not necessarily provide outdoor relief in the form of money. Relief in kind, such as the provision of clothing, food and fuel, was often preferred, as money could be drunk or gambled away.
- Finding work for those capable of employment. This was largely an attempt to stop begging by those who could work. These people were sometimes called "sturdy beggars". They also arranged apprenticeships for poor children or orphans.
- Levying and collecting the poor rate. This was a tax levied on householders to raise money to support the poor.

By the early 1830s this parish-based system was outdated and inefficient. Under the terms of the Poor Law Amendment Act 1834, responsibility for the poor passed to the Boards of Guardians who managed poor relief for a group or 'union' of parishes with a central Workhouse. This system was in place until the 1930s. Look at our 'Research Guide: *Boards of Guardians*' for more information.

What records are there and what information will they contain?

When an individual or family moved into another parish, the overseers were required to establish who would be responsible for them if they were unable to support themselves. The records they created as part of this process generally form part of the larger parish collection and are often called 'parish chest records' since they were originally kept in a wooden chest in the parish church. These records are a valuable resource for researchers and include:

- **Settlement certificates**
These were issued by the parish from which the individual or family had come to acknowledge its responsibility for them if they couldn't support themselves in their new parish. They were introduced in 1691.
- **Settlement examinations**
A Justice of the Peace was required to examine on oath any individual who moved into a parish to establish their place of 'legal settlement'. This would identify who was responsible for them if they were unable to support themselves. These records can include detailed biographical information about an individual and family members. The place of 'legal settlement' (originally the place of birth) could change during an individual's lifetime depending on whether they completed an apprenticeship, worked for more than a year, held a public office or (for a woman) married. So, the examination can reflect all these life experiences.

- **Removal orders**

These were issued when the parish in which the person needed support sent them back to their last place of legal settlement. There are two kinds: orders to remove people **from** the parish and orders to remove people **to** the parish. Both include the names of the people involved and sometimes details of the parishes they were going to pass through on their journey.

Amongst the other overseers' material, you are most likely to find references to individuals in the following records.

- **Bastardy records**

The overseers were responsible for identifying the fathers of illegitimate children who became a financial burden on the parish, so they could contribute towards costs. There can be an examination of the child's mother to encourage her to name the father and a bond against the father committing him to provide financial support.

- **Apprenticeship records**

The overseers were responsible for apprenticing poor children. This would ensure that they would learn a trade and be able to support themselves. There can be apprenticeship indentures (formal agreements between the parish overseers and the master) and lists of children apprenticed at the parish's expense.

How to find the records

The overseers were parish officers, so the first place to look for any surviving records that they produced is within the parish records (reference P) as a series (reference OV). The following types of records may have survived. Our *Parish Register Guide* will tell you which **P** reference code to use for each parish. **Please note that overseers' records do not survive for every parish in the county, and even when they do the series of records may not be comprehensive.**

Reference	Type of Record
OV1	Poor rates
OV2	Overseers' accounts
OV3/1	Settlement certificates
OV3/2	Removal orders from parish
OV3/3	Removal orders to parish
OV3/4	Settlement examinations
OV3/4	Miscellaneous settlement records
OV4	Apprenticeship
OV5	Bastardy
OV6	Militia
OV7	Miscellaneous overseers' records
OV8	Post-1834 records
OV9	Workhouse

There is a searchable index for some overseers' records for the years 1615-1888. You can access it via Ancestry's website, free of charge from the Gloucestershire Family History Society Centre, Gloucestershire Archives or any Gloucestershire library.