

Poor Law papers

From 1572 Overseers of the Poor could be appointed by each parish vestry on an annual basis, usually at the Easter Vestry meeting. They were expected, where necessary, to feed, clothe, house and find work for the poor inhabitants of the parish.

The later Poor Law Acts of 1597 and 1601, together with the Act of Settlement of 1662, placed responsibility for the poor more firmly in the hands of the parish. The 1662 Act of Settlement stated that the place of legal settlement of every pauper had to be determined. This led to the creation of Settlement Certificates, showing where a person in need of poor relief had to seek it. Settlement Examinations were often carried out by Justices of the Peace; the resulting documents provide potted biographies of paupers. Removal Orders could be issued by Justices, forcing people to return to their parish of settlement, sometimes even being whipped on the way.

Workhouses were in existence from the end of the 17th century, with some parishes or townships sharing a workhouse and others having none at all.

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Key dates

1572 – from this date Overseers of the Poor could be appointed by each parish vestry on an annual basis

1597 – Poor Law Act

1601 – Poor Law Act (“Act of Elizabeth”), defined the offices of Churchwardens and Overseers of the Poor

1662 – Act of Settlement - the place of legal settlement of every pauper had to be determined

1691 – the ways that settlement could be gained were laid down

1696 – Bristol was allowed by Act of Parliament to have a joint Union workhouse for its 19 parishes

1696 – 1721 more Unions were established

1697 – people could move to a new parish provided they took with them a settlement certificate

1723 – Knatchbull’s Act – allowed individual parishes to hire premises to use for Union purposes

1743-1744 – Act described vagrants as persons threatening to run away and leave their dependents, those returning to a parish from which they have been removed, and persons leading idle lives and begging in their own parish

1782 – Gilbert’s Act – allowed Unions (under a Board of Guardians) to give outdoor relief while retaining workhouse places for the aged and infirm

1795 – Speenhamland system – recognised a sliding scale for outdoor relief related to the price of grain

1832 – Royal Commission set up; the New Poor Law was to be based on their report

1834 – Poor Law Unions created

Where to find records

Most parishes have transferred their records to Oxfordshire History Centre, or at least those before 1900. The records themselves are not online.

Catalogue

Many but by no means all parishes have a catalogue online.

Enter PAR and the name of the parish into our [Heritage Search](#) and choose the “Archive Catalogue” collection to see if the catalogue you want is there.

If the parish you are interested in does not appear you will need to visit the History Centre to look at the catalogue in printed form.

Notices of appeal against a removal order would come up at Quarter Sessions, as would prosecutions by apprentices.

[Visiting and contacting the Oxfordshire History Centre.](#)