

Poor Law Unions

Although Poor Law Unions in one form or another had been in existence since the late seventeenth century, a new form of Poor Law Union was set up under the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, based on a report submitted by a Royal Commission set up in 1832. Under this Act a national Poor Law Commission (later known as the Poor Law Board, then as the Local Government Board) was to oversee the forming of new Poor Law Unions.

Each Union was centred on a town where the workhouse was situated, and usually covered a ten mile radius. There were 30-40 parishes in each Union, and these were often in more than one county. After 1845 further Unions were created out of existing ones, or boundaries were changed. Many changes of parishes from one Union to another are recorded only in the minute books of the Unions.

Boards of Guardians were set up to deal with the day-to-day management of the Unions. Members of the Board were partly ex-officio and partly elected by ratepayers. It was only in 1894 that the property qualification to become a member of the Board was abolished. The main duties of the Board of Guardians were

- the overseeing of all relief to the poor (outdoor relief was phased out over the first two years)
- assessing applications for relief
- the setting up of, and the maintaining of, a workhouse
- communicating with the Church Wardens and Overseers of the Poor of each parish in their area, who were responsible for collecting the rate money (the rates were originally estimated according to the demands on each parish, but in 1865 a Union rate was introduced)

The Board of Guardians met weekly and would set up various committees to deal with specific matters. The Board of Guardians appointed permanent officers, principally the relieving officer and the workhouse master, but there would also be a medical officer, a clerk to the Guardians, a treasurer; a chaplain; and various other officers as deemed necessary. Many Unions do not appear to have had full-time staff before the 1850s or 1860s. From 1841, the Census returns record all staff and inmates.

By the 1860s all Unions had workhouses. The older workhouses, formerly run by individuals or united parishes, were taken over or abolished. The Board of Guardians was responsible for appointing the Master and/or Matron, and often married couples were appointed. The inmates of the workhouse would be set to work doing jobs such as: cleaning; gardening; picking oakum; breaking stone; cutting timber; etc.

Over the years, the Board of Guardians became responsible, under various Acts, for many non poor-law duties. These included: civil registration; sanitation; vaccination; school attendance; and the maintenance of infants separated from their parents (see Key Dates). The Poor Law Unions were abolished in 1930, under the Local Government Act of 1929. This Act transferred the functions of the Poor Law Unions to County Councils, through Public Assistance Committees. The term 'pauper' was also officially abolished. However, the Poor Law itself, including the Act of Settlement, was still in force up until 1948. Many workhouses continued to exist as Public Assistance Institutions, and many of these gradually developed into hospitals. In some instances the workhouse records have been subsumed into the hospital records.

Key Dates

- **1834** – Poor Law Amendment Act, to be enforced by a national Poor Law Commission which was to compel the forming of Poor Law Unions, each the responsibility of a Board of Guardians
- **1836** – the Poor Law Commission became the Poor Law Board
- **1845** – further Unions were created out of existing ones, and some boundaries changed
- **1853** – from this date the Board of Guardians had to oversee sanitation and vaccination
- **1855** – as the local authority, the Board of Guardians carried out the Nuisance Removal Act
- **1862** – from this date the Board of Guardians appointed Assessment Committees as rating authorities
- **1865** – from this date a Union rate replaced the former rate estimates that were made according to the demands of each parish
- **1871** – from this date there was increasing specialisation in Union institutions
- **1871** – the Poor Law Board became the Local Government Board
- **1875** – the Public Health Act made the Board of Guardians responsible as the Rural Sanitary Authority (RSA) for the part of their area not in a borough
- **1877** – after the Elementary Education Act of 1876, the Board of Guardians were responsible for school attendance in areas without a School Board
- **1894** – from this date the property qualification to become a member of the Board of Guardians was abolished
- **1894** – the Rural Sanitary Authorities were replaced by the Rural District Councils
- **1897** – from this date the Board of Guardians had to oversee infant life protection (outside London), under the Infant Life Protection Act. This meant controlling the maintenance of infants separated from their parents.

- **1908** – under the Children Act of this year, the Board of Guardians had to house youngsters in detention
- **1911** – from this date the Board of Guardians had to accommodate children aged between 3 and 16 in children's homes
- **1919** – the Local Government Board became part of the Ministry of Health
- **1929** – under the Local Government Act of this year, which came into effect on 1 April 1930, the Boards of Guardians were discontinued, and their functions were transferred to County Councils through Public Assistance Committees. The term 'pauper' was officially abolished.
- **1948** – the Poor Law itself, including the Act of Settlement, was still in force up until this year

What will I find in the Poor Law Union records?

The main records are the Board of Guardians minute books. They give: information on payments and treatment of paupers; care of children; medical officers' reports; as well as accounts and details of alterations to institution buildings. These minute books tend to be very detailed, so it can be difficult to track particular cases. Oxfordshire has almost a complete run of Board of Guardians minute books.

Workhouse records can include: admission and discharge books; masters' journals; accounts; dietaries; medical officers' reports; rate books; letters from and about individual paupers; accounts of the numbers of births, marriages and deaths. Many of these type of records have not survived for the Poor Law Unions of Oxfordshire.

Where are these records?

Oxfordshire History Centre – Board of Guardians minute books and some other types of record for each Poor Law Union.

The National Archives – The main class of records is MH, with MH12 regarded as the main one. This class holds correspondence from the Boards and local authorities with the Poor Law Commission to 1847, and its successor, the Poor Law Board. Post 1900 correspondence continues in MH68, but many volumes were destroyed during WW2. For MH12 and all other classes held at TNA, see the [National Archives website](#).

Where is the catalogue?

The catalogue for individual Poor Law Unions (references: PLU1-8) can be found in brown ring binders in the searchroom. This catalogue is online, see [Heritage Search](#).

The catalogue for the original Guardians minute books for the Oxford Incorporation for the dates 1918-1930, can be found within the Oxford City catalogue (reference: OCA/W.4.19-23, with other material at OCA/W.4.1-8). This catalogue is not online.

Secondary sources:

Microfilm copies of various records of the Oxford Incorporation (the parishes in Oxford city) are available in the searchroom. Also on microfilm is the Banbury *Guardian or Monthly Poor Law register* for 1838-1843, this later became the newspaper, the *Banbury Guardian*. The Board of Guardians Annual Reports for the Oxford Incorporation for 1873 to 1930 are in hard copy format, and can be found on the open shelves in the searchroom.

What do I do now?

The Poor Law Union in which each parish lay is shown in C.G. Harris, *Oxfordshire Parish Registers and Bishops Transcripts*, (Oxfordshire FHS, 7th edition, 2006).

[Visiting Oxfordshire History Centre.](#)