



Poor Law Union Records

Introduction

Nottinghamshire Archives holds Poor Law Records for the eight Nottinghamshire Poor Law unions:

- Basford
- Bingham
- East Retford
- Mansfield
- Newark
- Nottingham
- Southwell
- Worksop

The types of document are varied and a range of different information is recorded. It is important to remember that the type and quantity of records for each poor law union varies and a large amount of documentation has simply not survived.

The Poor Law

The Parish

During the Middle Ages the church was seen as having moral responsibility for the poor, and religious houses regularly distributed alms. After the suppression of the monasteries by Henry VIII a statute was made in 1536 which placed the responsibility of the poor upon the parish, and the office of Overseer of the Poor was created in 1572. The Poor Law Act of 1601 created a system of poor relief, in which the overseers were required to levy a poor rate on the parish householders in order to provide expenditure for the poor. One way of providing for the poor was the provision of money, food and

clothes to paupers whilst they lived in their own or a relative's home. This was known as 'outdoor relief'.

A variety of records exists among parish records documenting the relief of the poor, including overseers' account books, settlement records and apprenticeship indentures.

After 1834: The New Poor Law

In 1834 the Poor Law Amendment Act was passed which altered the system of poor relief. This was due not only to increasing expense, but also to prevailing beliefs that people were trying to avoid work and live off the parishes, and that employers paid low wages knowing the parishes would ensure that workers did not starve.

Parishes were now grouped into about 600 Unions throughout the country, and responsibility for the poor now rested with a Board of Guardians, members of which were elected from local ratepayers. The Boards of Guardians reported to the Poor Law Commission in London (which became the Poor Law Board in 1847 and then the Local Government Board in 1871).

Each union was divided into districts. The union was administered by a body of paid officials: clerk, treasurer, workhouse master, matron, chaplain, collector, relieving officers and medical officers. There was a 'relieving officer' for each union, who was responsible for considering the circumstances of anyone who applied for relief.

The Workhouse

The 1834 Act also required each union to erect a workhouse. Workhouses had first appeared in the late seventeenth century when authorities felt that the 'idle poor' should be dissuaded from living off the parish. These early workhouses were generally used to accommodate the sick, aged and orphaned poor, instead of the parish paying for their rent and food.

Under the 1834 Act the able-bodied poor were no longer given outdoor relief, but were instead admitted to the workhouse. The old, the sick, and widows with dependent children could still receive outdoor relief; and the guardians of some unions also granted outdoor relief to paupers whom they considered to be the 'deserving poor'.

The conditions of individual workhouses varied. Some were humane and clean. Others operated under strict and harsh regimes and were often little more than prisons. As a result, entering a workhouse was, for most people, only a last resort.

The End of the Poor Law

In 1919 the Boards of Guardians became part of the Ministry of Health. The introduction of old age pensions in 1908 and unemployment insurance in 1911 largely did away with the need for the poor law and workhouses. In 1930 poor law administration was given to local authorities, and the Boards of Guardians were abolished. Many workhouses did continue after this date, though the poor law was finally abolished in 1948. Many workhouses subsequently became hospitals or asylums.

In Nottinghamshire

Nottinghamshire and in particular the Southwell district was of major importance during the years leading up to the 1834 Act. This was owing to the work of the 'Nottinghamshire Reformers'. The Reverend J T Becher (1770 – 1848) was responsible for reforming poor relief at a local level in Southwell. He appointed Sir George Nicholls (1781 – 1865) as overseer of the poor in Southwell in 1819. Both men shared similar views on poor relief as a deterrent, but

Nicholls was closer in view to Reverend Robert Lowe of Bingham (1811 – 1892), a neighbouring magistrate. Lowe and Nicholls both became ardent supporters of the abolition of outdoor relief and the workhouse as a harsh test of destitution, and were influential in developments in the poor law leading up to the 1834 Act.

There were eight unions in Nottinghamshire, but the boundaries of the unions often ignored historic county boundaries, and so some parishes at the edge of the county were in unions centred in adjoining counties. These unions were Shardlow in Derbyshire, Melton and Loughborough in Leicestershire, Gainsborough in Lincolnshire, and Doncaster in Yorkshire. There is a map of the Union boundaries at the front of the Poor Law Union catalogue binders.

Under the pre-1834 parochial poor law system Nottingham had three workhouses, one in each parish: St Mary, St Peter and St Nicholas. After 1834 the three parishes combined to form the Nottingham Poor Law Union. In 1843 a new union workhouse was opened in York Street, but this building was pulled down in the late 1890s for the erection of Victoria Station and was replaced by a new workhouse at Bagthorpe, which was completed in 1903. Some of the original buildings at Bagthorpe now form part of the City Hospital.

Poor Law Records

The following are the main types of poor law records held at Nottinghamshire Archives:

- **Guardians' Minute Books:** these are the principal administrative record of the union. They contain a range of information, including:
 - principal decisions
 - appointments
 - expenditure
 - financial contributions from parishes
 - new building
 - maintenance
 - problems of workhouse inmates

- the administration of sick wards and infirmaries

We hold minute books for:

- **Basford, 1836 – 1930**
- **Bingham, 1836 – 1930**
- **East Retford, 1836 – 1930**
- **Mansfield, 1838 – 1930**
- **Newark, 1836 – 1930**
- **Southwell, 1836 – 1930**
- **Worksop, 1848 – 1930**

Other administrative records include sub-committee minutes, such as finance, visiting, dispensary, boarding-out and vaccination; yearbooks; registers of officers and servants; staff insurance policies; staff testimonials; orders of the poor law commissioners; letter books; and returns of persons receiving relief

- **Admission and Discharge Registers:** these record details of people entering and leaving the workhouse. The following may be included:
 - Dates of admission and discharge
 - Name
 - Occupation
 - Religion
 - Year of birth or Age
 - Parish from which admitted
 - Cause of seeking relief – can be very specific or very general
 - Class of diet – from this it is often possible to determine time of admission and discharge, as the next or last meal is stated
 - Discharge due to death, if relevant

The registers are arranged in chronological order and usually form a single sequence. For Nottingham, however, duplications occur during the period between 1896 and 1903 as the new Bagthorpe workhouse was being built and the inmates were temporarily housed in other buildings.

The Nottingham registers also include a complete list of all workhouse inmates

taken on 26 September 1863 and again on 24 September 1865, both of which serve as a sort of census of the workhouse on those dates.

The image shows a page from an 'Admitted' register. The table has columns for 'Number', 'Name', 'Parish of Origin', 'Age', 'Cause of Admission', and 'Last Place of Residence'. The entries are numbered 1 through 42. Some names are written in cursive, and there are some handwritten notes and corrections. The document is aged and has some staining.

We hold admission and discharge registers for:

- **Basford, 1854 – 1857**
- **Newark, 1919 – 1946**
- **Claypole Workhouse (in Newark Union), Lincolnshire, 1882 – 1894**
- **Nottingham, 1856 – 1920**

There are gaps in these series.

- **Indoor Relief Lists:** these record details on inmates in the workhouse. We hold indoor relief lists for **Nottingham, 1858 – 1910**, with some later information. They are divided into the parishes of St Mary, St Peter and St Nicholas, and later also include Radford, Sneinton and Lenton. They are arranged alphabetically by surname. We also hold indoor relief lists for **Mansfield, 1911 – 1912** and **Newark, 1949 – 1952**. They record:
 - Name
 - Occupation
 - Year of birth
 - Religion
 - The number of days in which an inmate was present, entered into columns
 - Discharge due to death, if relevant

It is possible to work out the approximate date of admission or

discharge by counting the weeks from the time of year that the register is known to have started or ended. Each register usually covers a six-month period, ending on Lady Day (25 March) or Michaelmas Day (29 September).

- **Registers of Death:** these contain entries that also appear in the registers of discharge. They record:
 - Date of death
 - Name
 - Age
 - Parish to which the person is chargeable
 - Cause of death, for the period 1851 – 1852 and 1861 – 1862

We hold registers of death for:

- **Nottingham, 1864 – 1926**

- **Creed Registers:** these are registers compiled recording people's religious creed, and are arranged alphabetically by surname. They contain:
 - Patient's name
 - Parish
 - Dates of admission and discharge
 - Religious creed

Later registers may also contain:

- Occupation
- Year of birth or age
- Last address of the inmate
- Name and address of the nearest relative

We hold creed registers for:

- **Mansfield, 1888 – 1891; 1905 – 1908**
- **Mansfield, 1913 – 1935** (cottage home)
- **Nottingham, 1881 – 1942**

- **Registers of Casual Vagrants:** these record admissions and discharges of vagrants. They contain:
 - Dates of admission and discharge
 - Name
 - Occupation
 - Year of birth or Age

- Where the vagrant slept on the night prior to admission
- Where the vagrant was going to next
- Tasks the vagrant was set whilst in the workhouse. These included sawing, chopping, cleaning or bundling wood, filling boxes and cleaning the wards
- Amount of money the vagrant was carrying. This column is rarely entered, although there is more detail after 1930

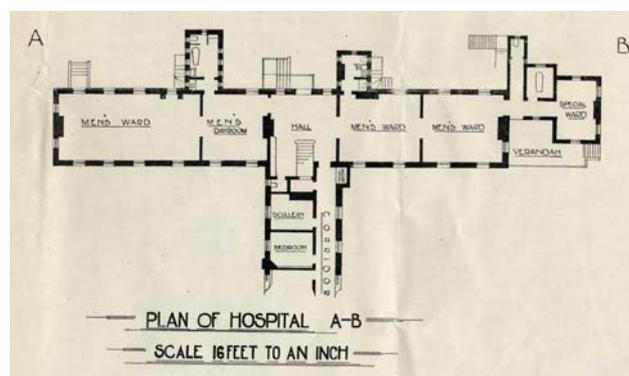
We hold registers for:

- **Nottingham, 1892 – 1939**

- **Workhouse Plans:** these include plans of workhouses, sick wards, and infirmaries.

We hold plans for:

- **Basford, 1913 – 1927**
- **Mansfield, 1908 – 1924**
- **Newark, c 1915 – 1930**
- **Southwell, c 1930**
- **Worksop, c 1930**



Other workhouse records include master's report books, punishment books, dietaries and inventories of fixtures (see also below).

- **Outdoor Relief Lists:** these record payments granted to persons needing poor relief within the union's districts, but outside the workhouse. The relieving officer was responsible for administering these payments. The lists include:
 - Name
 - Parish
 - Pauper Classification

- Relief payments granted

We hold outdoor relief lists for:

- **Basford, 1900 – 1930**
- **Mansfield, 1898 – 1920** (abstracts)
- **Southwell, 1923 – 1928**

Other records of the relieving officer include application and report books, memorandum books and abstracts of relief.

- **District Medical Relief Books:** these record medical treatments administered by the medical officer, on a weekly basis. They contain:
 - Patient's name
 - Parish
 - Nature of disease (accident, injury or illness)
 - Treatment

We hold district medical relief books for:

- **Basford, 1857 – 1928**
- **Nottingham, 1899** (workhouse only)

- **Vaccination Registers:** these registers provide details on children vaccinated. They record:
 - Name of child
 - Place of birth
 - Date of birth
 - Father's name or, if illegitimate, mother's name
 - Profession or occupation of father

We hold registers for:

- **Basford, 1896 – 1916**

- **Bingham, 1866 – 1921**
- **East Retford, 1871 – 1919**
- **Mansfield, 1923 – 1930**
- **Newark, 1881 – 1932**
- **Southwell, 1871 – 1879 and 1901 – 1921**
- **Worksop, 1902 – 1925**

Other vaccination records include returns of births and returns of deaths of infants, report books and summary totals.

- **Apprenticeship Records:** poor law unions had the power to apprentice pauper children. This meant that the child was looked after and provided for by a tradesperson who would also teach their trade to the child.

Apprenticeship indentures record:

- Name of the child
- Age of the child
- Parish
- Name of the Tradesperson
- Trade
- Period of time for which the apprenticeship was to last

We hold apprenticeship indentures for:

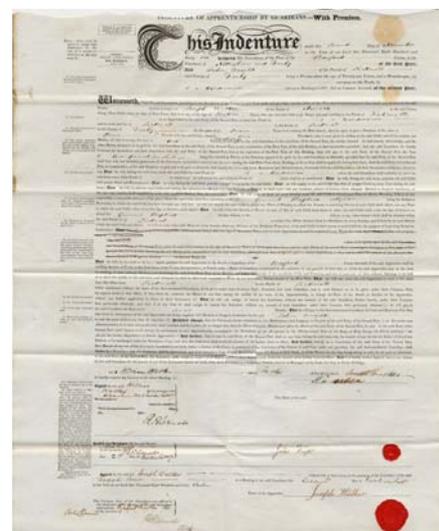
- **Basford, 1845 – 1903**

Apprenticeship Registers also list:

- Address of master of mistress
- Dates of visit
- Remarks, e.g. on conditions

We hold an apprenticeship register for:

- **Worksop, 1879 – 1909**



- **Settlement Records:** when a person requested poor relief, it was possible that they could be examined to determine their place of settlement. Settlement was determined by a variety of legal aspects, such as duration of residence in a parish. If a person was not found to be settled in a parish, they could be removed to their previous parish of residence. Settlement cases can include correspondence and other papers. We hold records for:
 - **Nottingham, 1901 – 1907**
- List of boarded-out children
Newark, 1919
- Boarded-out children maintenance pay list
East Retford, 1924 – 1930
Southwell, 1922 – 1930
- Relief order books and lists
Mansfield, 1924 – 1930
- Relieving officer application and report books
Nottingham, 1910 – 1911
Southwell, 1923 – 1928
- Training Institute children's history book
Nottingham, 1896 - 1913

Other Sources

The following is a selection of other Poor Law sources which may also be useful.

- Annual lists of guardians and paid officers
Mansfield, 1839 – 1921
- Registers of officers
Mansfield, 1874 – 1919
- Records of salaries and wages
Mansfield, 1907 – 1930
Nottingham, 1912 – 1946
Worksop, 1911 – 1930
- Guardians' attendance register
Newark, 1915 – 1930
- Register of births
Bingham, 1837 – 1930
Mansfield, 1866 – 1894
Newark, 1914 – 1946 (closed until 2050)
- Register of children maintained in the workhouse
Basford, early twentieth century
Worksop, 1901 – 1930
- List of children in the workhouse
Basford, 1915
- Register of deserted children
Nottingham, 1900 – 1911
- Register of lunatics in the workhouse
Southwell, 1891 – 1928 (closed until 2029)
- Bathing registers
Southwell, 1914 – 1931
- Workhouse punishment book
Southwell, 1852 – 1936 (closed until 2012)
- Registers of boarded-out children
Basford, 1926 – 1930
Worksop, 1911 – 1929

Finding Aids

There is a catalogue of all listed poor law records available in the archives search room.

The following records are available on microfiche:

- **Nottingham Admission and Discharge Registers, 1856 – 1920**
- **Nottingham Death Registers, 1851 – 1926**