

THE POOR LAWS and WEST MIDDLESEX



Short History of the Poor Laws

There have been a number of Poor Laws passed by Parliament dating back to 1536. The purpose of the Poor Laws was to provide a level of protection to those who had fallen on hard times; wives whose husbands had deserted them, breadwinners suffering major illness, etc. Workhouses were built to provide shelter to the needy, and taxes were levied on the better off to pay for the running of the workhouses. Determining if an individual or family was entitled to Poor Law relief was the job of Overseers of the Poor who were appointed by each and every parish, and the concept of a person's "settlement" was introduced to determine which parish had the responsibility to pay this relief.

Hence, whenever there was any doubt as to which parish should be providing the required relief, there would be a formal "settlement examination" of the head of the family involved. These were run by Justices of the Peace, and would be signed by the examinee. Because the examinations were all about where the examinee was born, who their dependants were, where their parents lived, who were the fathers of illegitimate children, etc they are extremely valuable records for doing family history.

The main problem with Poor Law records is that there was never any legal requirement to keep particular records, nor any central filing of the records. The records were simply part of a large quantity of administrative paper work being produced at parish level, and subject to the vagaries of each church choosing to retain its records or not. Hence for West Middlesex as a whole only a fraction of the original Poor Law records are available today, with most, but not all, of them now available at the London Metropolitan Archives.

The Old and New Poor Laws

Poor Laws remained part of English law up until the modern welfare state was formed after the Second World War, but it is usual to distinguish the Old Poor Law in force up to 1834, and the New Poor Law which became law in 1834. However the records which were maintained by parishes were much the same under both sets of law.

From the point of view of family history research there is considerably greater value to be obtained by researching the period up to 1834 rather than from the later records, as it is generally true that family history research becomes much firmer and easier to do from 1837 onwards, when birth, marriage and death registration became mandatory, and with census records starting in 1841, whereas detailed family records before 1837 are much harder to find.

Poor Law records is a general term and they consist of a variety of records, some much easier to use for family history than others. The following section contains a brief description of the various types of record that have been included in the West Middlesex Poor Law Records database.

Types of Poor Law Records

Settlement Examinations

These are the most informative of the poor law records. Settlement Examinations were carried out whenever there was any doubt as to the parish which should be providing relief to an impoverished person or family. The examinant was usually the head of household of the family to be supported, but it could be a spouse, relation, or an Overseer of the Poor who spoke for the person or family.

The examination was run by two Justices of the Peace, and was written up by a clerk and then signed by the examinant with their signature or mark. It was usually one page long, and would typically identify the examinant's status as single, married etc, give their age, identify all dependents providing the names and ages of all children involved. Particular attention would be made regarding illegitimate children as where they were born becomes critical in determining their settlement status. Unfortunately for those concerned children did not necessarily end up with the same parish of settlement as their parents. As explained in a later section detail of apprenticeships, longer periods of servitude, and property renting were all relevant to the process of establishing each individual's 'settlement'.

Removals From

Following the settlement examination, and usually having the same date, a Removal Order was produced if required. These also are written one page per removal order, but most of the text is standard, with much less detail given. Even so, all the individuals in a family are usually named, and the children's ages are usually given, and importantly the parish where a family is to be removed to will always be identified. For more distant parishes, and particularly if the removal is to another country, the removal order will state the more local parish where the family will be escorted to.

Removals To

A Removal To is the same document as a Removal From but seen from the other parish's perspective. The person/family being removed is accompanied by an Overseer of the Poor, and they will meet with an Overseer of the Poor for the receiving parish. The Removal From document is passed over with the person/family, and should then be filed with the Overseer's records of the receiving parish.

Removal Order Appeal

The receiving parish who will be responsible for providing relief to the person/family being removed to them have a right to appeal against the order. In which event the case will be heard at a Court of Quarter Sessions. This is likely to be noted in the records of the Overseers of the Poor of the relevant parishes.

Removal Order Suspended

A Removal From may also be suspended. This happened quite often and would usually be because an individual was too sick to travel, or for pregnant women that they were in advanced pregnancy. Suspended Removal Orders would usually then take place a few weeks later.

Register of Removals

In a few cases we do not see Removals From and Removals To records but the parish may have kept a Register of Removals, which is effectively a shorter form containing the same information.

Settlement Certificates

While the general rule was that a person/family would reside in the workhouse of the parish that supported them. This was not always the case. In such circumstances the person/family might reside in one parish but be given poverty relief by another. When this was so the Overseers of the supporting parish would usually produce a Settlement Certificate addressed to the Overseers of the parish where the person/family lived, which clearly states that they acknowledge the settlement rights held by the person/family.

Bastardy Examination

A common cause for women to be in need of poverty relief was to become pregnant of a bastard child. In such cases part or all of the examination would be focussed on identifying the reputed father who made the woman pregnant (or had carnal knowledge of her is the phrase usually used). The place of birth, even the place of conception, was important in such cases as it would usually determine the 'settlement parish' of the bastard child.

Bastardy Order

Following the Bastardy Examination, and once the Justices were satisfied as to the reputed father's identification, then a Bastardy Order would be drawn up which would spell out the several costs required to be paid by the reputed father, and also smaller amounts to be paid to the parish by the mother. The proper term for one of these orders was an Order of Filiation. Typical amounts to be paid by the father were £3 towards the lying-in of the pregnant woman, then 5/- per week for support of the child, and a further £3 costs for raising the Order of Filiation. The woman was typically required to pay 6d per week for the maintenance of her child.

Bastardy Bond

In some cases after an Order of Filiation had been raised requiring payments by a reputed father the parish would seek a further indemnity from the father requiring him to sign a bond of the order of £40 to £80 to support the bastard child. As the reputed father was unlikely to be able to produce a bond of such a large amount these bonds frequently involved

other parties such as the reputed father's father, in order to satisfy the parish that the required weekly payments of the Order of Filiation would be made.

Miscellaneous Order

The main files of Settlement Examinations and Removal Orders included additional records requiring this or that to be done. These have been grouped under the heading of Miscellaneous Orders.

The rules governing Settlement

The Poor Law acts define the rules by which any individual's settlement will be determined, of which the following is a brief summary.

1. When an individual can obtain settlement by more than one of their acts then it is the most recent act that determines their current place of settlement.
2. Settlement is obtained by renting a property (or mix of properties) that is valued at £10 per annum or more rent when unfurnished for 12 months or more.
3. Settlement is obtained by serving an apprenticeship with a master for 12 months or more. In such a case the apprentice lives in accommodation provided by his master.
4. Settlement is obtained by being a live-in servant to a master. It needs to be an annual contract. The term 'yearly hired servant' is frequently used.
5. A married woman, and children to the age of 6, take their settlement directly from the father of the household.
6. Only when the father of the household has no settlement (he may have been born abroad) do the above rules then determine a wife's settlement on her own account.
7. Children from the age of 7 may acquire their own settlement which then takes priority.
8. If the father of the household has no settlement deriving from his own acts then he will take his settlement from that of his legitimate father. If his legitimate father had no settlement, or when his birth was illegitimate, then his settlement derives from the parish where he was born.

Transcribing the records

The first transcription of West Middlesex Poor Law records was carried out by unrecorded volunteers from West Middlesex Family History Society in the period 1980 to 2000 by the volunteers visiting the relevant archives, finding the records, and transcribing the detail to their notebooks. The records were then typed up and presented in book form to our library. Much more recently in 2019 to 2021 those records were then transcribed again into spreadsheet form ready to be loaded to a Poor Law database supporting searches made through the Society website.

While transcribing the detail to spreadsheets it was noted that the same individuals were turning up in more than one record. This was to be expected when a Settlement Examination was immediately followed by a Removal From order. It was also found that some individuals were repeat offenders in the sense that they kept returning to the place that they had been removed from. Where this was seen to be happening the two or more records have been marked as linked records.

The spreadsheets were then reworked to a format that could be submitted to Find My Past,

ultimately providing the widest possible access to the records. All this activity has combined to deliver Phase 1 of the full project of digitising the West Middlesex Poor Law records, and was completed in March 2021, while COVID-19 restrictions prevented any further access to the archives, mainly the London Metropolitan Archives, where further relevant Poor Law records were known to exist.

Online access to the original Poor Law records

Most of the original Poor Law material at the London Metropolitan Archives has been photographed and is available from unindexed records on Ancestry Co. Transcription has necessarily included some difficult reading of the original material, and also necessary shortening of the rather wordy original examinations. The copy of data available from the Society website includes live links back to the source records on Ancestry where this is possible, which is for most of the data. Of course the researcher will need an Ancestry Co subscription to actually see the records. For the Find My Past copy of data this was not possible.

Indexing the records

Seeing that ages are provided for many of the individuals to be indexed, and that reasonable guesses could be made for all the people mentioned in the records it was decided to provide an estimate of the birth year for all people to be indexed. The year of death is also given for some individuals, so this was captured during indexing as well, and could help to find records when searching using Find My Past.

The Age field is shown in the detail record for each individual. It does not mean that the person was living at the time of the event, but ages were estimated first so that the year of birth could then be estimated.

All family members were clearly going to be indexed. As for the names of landlords, apprentice masters, servant masters, and the like they have been indexed with an estimated age only when a forename and surname is also available for them. Overall this has led to an average of 3 persons being indexed for each Poor Law record.

Coverage (Phase 1)

This document is published alongside providing online access to the Poor Law records described above as forming Phase 1 of the overall project to digitise all the available West Middlesex Poor Law records up to 1840.

The table below provides a summary of this data. Whereas 10 parishes in the West Middlesex are listed in the table the reader is reminded that West Middlesex (as at 1840) consisted of 36 parishes, so what you see is only a small percentage of the full story.

A summary of the Poor Law records included in Phase 1					
Parish	Settlement Examinations	Removal events	Bastardy events	All events	Earliest event
Chelsea, St. Luke	1260	84	2107	3451	1733
Ealing, St. Mary	186	59	52	297	1827
Feltham, St. Dunstan	5	7	13	25	1715
Fulham, All Saints	653	0	6	659	1706
Hammersmith, St. Paul	11	0	109	120	1796
New Brentford, St. Laurence	5	1	90	96	1792
Shepperton, St. Nicholas	37	4	49	90	1714
Staines, St. Mary	322	1	269	592	1699
Stanwell, St. Mary	1	1	12	14	1752
Uxbridge, St. Margaret	11	0	244	255	1716
Total All Parishes	2491	157	2941	5589	1699

Coverage (Phase2)

All transcribing of the Poor Law records in Phase 2 requires a visit to a county archive, which for most of the records identified is the London Metropolitan Archives (LMA). The records have not been found online despite the LMA catalogue declaring that most of these records can be found on Ancestry.

A summary of Poor Law records still to be digitised (Phase 2)				
Parish	Settlement Examinations	Removal events	All events	Earliest event
Chelsea, St. Luke	2800	500	3300	1787
Ealing, St. Mary	200	0	200	1783
Hammersmith, St. Paul	200	0	200	1824
New Brentford, St. Laurence	13	0	13	1721
Hampton, St. Mary	100	0	100	1800
Hampton Wick, St. John	10	0	10	1824
Isleworth, All Saints	200	0	200	1779
Kensington, St. Mary Abbott	400	0	400	1699
Teddington, St. Mary	100	0	100	1800
Total All Parishes	4023	500	4523	1699