

Who were the poor?

Almost every family tree in existence, has some amount of those who would be called poor. But who are the main groups we might consider poor and the terms we should remember?

- **Agricultural Laborers/Farm Servants:** Those who worked on the land, in farms and with no stake in ownership (in the 1851 census, 1,460,896 people were recorded as this). They often travelled for work, most being employed for a year as seasonal workers and moving each year. Although in gainful employment, a poor harvest could see them out of work and in need of assistance.
- **Paupers:** A recipient of public charity or Poor Law relief. Primarily, these people did not have trades and skills, but anyone could fall on hard times and become part of this system.
- **Vagrants:** A person who has no settled home and no regular work, wandering from place to place, earning their living through begging.

Poor Law

England/Wales: Although there are earlier rules, the need to provide for those who could not provide for themselves led to formalized systems being put into place. The Poor Laws as we come to understand them today began in the Tudor era. This early period is known as the 'Old Poor Law', with the 'New Poor Law' arriving from 1834. Poor Law Unions and Workhouses were built, and most relief was administered through these.

This (the admission and discharge of people from institutions is where the most useful records can arise. The poor law system in England & Wales was finally abolished in 1948, though parts of it remained until much later.

Scotland: Scotland had a different system to England and Wales, which can be explored, from the 1500s to 1929. From 1579, Scottish parishes were responsible for their own poor, and the rather unfortunately named 'buttock mail' tax was levied from 1595. Workhouses in Scotland began to be built in 1672. From 1845, the Scottish Poor Law act created a host of records that are invaluable to a genealogist.

Unlike in England and Wales, Scottish paupers were legally allowed to appeal if they were denied relief. Outdoor relief happened often, but frequent mismanagement of the system meant that a more restricted system after 1868 which relied more on the poorhouse. A high number of these original applications and appeals survive. The Mitchell Library in Glasgow has more than 1 million for Glasgow and the west of Scotland!

Vagrancy

From the Settlement Act of 1662, vagrancy became an offence, and anyone who travelled from parish to parish could be forcibly removed back to the place they came from, sent to a workhouse, prison, or transported to the colonies for seven years. Vagrant passes could be

issued that would allow a recipient to travel without punishment on their way to their final destination, taking room and board from overseers and church wardens on the way where needed. This system was abused in many ways.

The Vagrancy Act 1824 made it an offence to sleep rough or beg, with punishments for those caught, but there were many loopholes that were often taken advantage of.

Travel & Migration

The poor have been resettled in other countries since as early as 1619, when 100 vagrant children were sent to Jamestown, Virginia, with more sent in 1620 and 1622. Many children were even kidnapped during this period (particularly in Scotland), to satisfy the need for labour in the new colonies. Convicted criminals were also sent to colonies, from the early 1600s to 1868. This disproportionately affected the poor.

Poor Law Commissioners could arrange the emigration of the poor to the colonies, paid for by the local parish. Many of these people were sent to Canada, with 36,000 people sent between 1835 and 1899.

From 1833, the Colonial Land and Emigration Commissioners were set up to offer free passage to those who were under 40, able to work and were of good character, vaccinated against smallpox. This scheme however, excluded workhouse inmates and those in receipt of parish relief.

The Workhouse

The most notable and well-known destination for those who fell on hard times is the workhouse. In existence in many forms, it provided a place to care for the poor, delivering housing and food, with the opportunity to transform inmates (either through hardship and punishment, or by assistance to encourage future work).

From 1782, paupers were not sent to workhouses more than 10 miles from their former homes, and children under 7 remained with their parents. Orphans and foundlings were boarded out to be in locations that were a little more like a home and badges (a terrible remnant of the medieval system) were no longer required to be worn by those of good character. Workhouses were encouraged and the system began to expand. Many documents were created during the administration of the Poor Law, and they are invaluable in your genealogical search.

Important record sets

Census records: Workhouses and institutions were included in the census from 1851, with the head of the household being the person in charge of the establishment.

Criminal Records: Due to the absence of a welfare system, the poor were often caught on the wrong side of the law in their attempts to survive. They were routinely harshly sentenced and records of their treatment at the hands of the law can fill in great detail, or explain where missing ancestors may be found.

Workhouse: A broad range of records exist in the workhouse system, not just admission registers with unprecedented detail, but records of births (sometimes illegitimate) within the workhouse chapel that otherwise might not appear in parish or civil registers.

The Workhouse registers also includes deaths, which in the case of the very young would also include the name and occupation of the father (or mother if illegitimate). Board meetings minutes can include the names of those admitted and discharged and other information on named individuals.

Creed registers: These were introduced in 1869 and recorded the religion of those who entered a workhouse or institution in order to assist the local clergy in identifying new arrivals of their religious persuasion so they could be properly administered, their format varies a little between different unions. They often contain more information and their format varies between different unions.

As well as religion, they include dates both of admission and discharge, and are grouped by first letter of surname which makes browsing much easier. They sometimes include other helpful information such as names and addresses, relatives or friends.

Settlement Certificates/Examinations and Poor Law removals: Most of the Poor Law records that survive are from the Poor Relief Act of 1662. This required a person to be legally settled in a parish to be given parish relief. Settlement certificates were kept in the parish chest and identified the legal home of individuals and families, given by these individuals to local officials to obtain relief, so that the original home could pay for it or take them back into their own care.

If a settlement certificate, was not obtained when someone left, an examination was held by local overseers or the constable to determine how financially stable they were and where they came from originally. If the examination proved that the stranger was not a legal resident of that parish and could be a potential liability, they would write a removal order and the constable would have them removed and returned back to their parish of legal settlement.

Rate books: These were used to pay for poor relief, listing the amount of money paid by individuals. They can be used to trace ancestors between censuses and give you a better idea of their social status and wealth.

Those on the edge

Many who became a part of the welfare system and found themselves in a workhouse were able to rectify their situation and return to their families. Similarly, for those of working class who disappear from the places you'd expect to find them – there's always a chance that they may have fallen on hard times and required assistance. With a reliance on seasonal work, many mouths to feed and usually having only a single breadwinner, so many families were one accident or illness away from destitution.

Understand which Poor Law Union they may have been administered by, and seek these workhouse records. If your relations are not home during a census year, check similar names in

a local workhouse or institution. If a death record is just outside of your area, but still in the same Poor Law Union, don't discount it without further study.

Things to remember

Poor law records cover a wide range of situations – This table will help you to judge which records to use for the most appropriate results.

To discover	You can use
Where a family originated before they arrived at their current home.	Settlement certificates, settlement examinations and removal orders.
When a family arrived or left a parish	Rate books
The name of the father of an illegitimate child	Bastardy bonds, bastardy examinations, indemnifications.
The age and father of a pauper child	Indentures for apprenticeships
Replace poor law records that may have been lost, or find information that isn't stored elsewhere.	Overseers' accounts, vestry minutes, churchwardens accounts and more.

Many records of the poor simply do not survive, and many more are not digitised. Be prepared to interrogate archive catalogs in the areas that your ancestors originated.

Resource Index

- **The Workhouse:** A full and detailed description of the workhouse, a great place to start learning more about this aspect of genealogy. <http://www.workhouses.org.uk>
- **Museum of English Rural Life:** A collection of archival material to give you a better understanding of what the life of farm-workers was like. <http://www.reading.ac.uk/merl>
- **Findmypast:** British and Irish specialists, home to over 9 billion records that can connect you to your family tree and help you tell the story of your past. <https://www.findmypast.com>
- **FamilySearch Catalog:** Home to many unindexed, browsable record collections – search by town and county for best results. <https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/search>
- **Discovery:** Catalog of over 2,500 archives across the UK, hosted by the National Archives. <http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk>

Books

- **Life in a Victorian Workhouse** - Peter Higginbotham
- **Workhouse Cookbook** - Peter Higginbotham
- **Voices from the Workhouse** - Peter Higginbotham

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