

# Heritage Search Poor Law

## Background

From 1572, Overseers of the Poor could be appointed annually by each parish vestry, usually at the Easter Vestry meeting. They were expected, where necessary, to feed, clothe, house and find work for 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 17<sup>th</sup> century, with some parishes or townships sharing a workhouse and others having none at all.

## 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
- 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 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 are these records?

Many parishes have transferred their records to Oxfordshire History Centre. The records themselves are not online.

## Where is the catalogue?

For most parishes, a collection catalogue can be viewed online on [Heritage Search](#).

All parish collections have the prefix **PAR**. A list of parishes can be browsed within our catalogue list [here](#), in section Parishes (Ecclesiastical).

The few parish catalogues not yet on Heritage Search are accessible in pdf form via the [Digital resources for Oxfordshire History website](#).

## More information

- Oxfordshire History Centre [catalogues](#)
- [Visiting](#) Oxfordshire History Centre
- [Contact us](#) to book a visit to consult archive documents