

HERITAGE HUB SOURCE LIST

POOR LAW RECORDS

Finding an ancestor described as a “pauper” in a census return, is an immediate prompt to turn to poor law records, which can be valuable sources of information for family historians.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Poor Law in Scotland before 1845

Parliamentary legislation concerning the poor dates from the 15th century. Early statutes were mostly for the suppression of idle beggars, but gradually two important principles emerged. All parishes were to be responsible for their own poor, but only certain categories of “deserving” poor were identified. Excluded were the able bodied unemployed. A statute of 1579, firmly established these rules, which remained the basis of the poor law until 1845. Those entitled to relief through age, illness or otherwise, were to go to the last parish in which they had lived seven years, or failing that the parish of their birth. Married women could adopt their husband’s parish of birth or residence.

The parish authorities responsible for the poor were the kirk sessions and the heritors who were local landowners with powers for the maintenance of the church and school. For the most part the parishes relied on church collections, donations and other sources of income. The system suited rural society reasonably well but was ill-adapted to the large industrial towns of the early 19th century, where the poor tended to be congregated in slum areas. In 1843 a Royal Commission of Inquiry was appointed, whose recommendations led to reform two years later

Poor Law in Scotland 1845-1930

The Poor Law (Scotland) Act 1845 established parochial boards in rural parishes and in the towns, with a central Board of Supervision in Edinburgh. The system of poor rates spread more widely. . The parochial boards built poorhouses (*indoor relief*) for those categories of paupers who did not receive '*outdoor relief*', normally in the form of small weekly sums of money, or medicine or clothing. During the second half of the century, government increasingly found it convenient to give added powers to parochial boards, such as the registration of births, deaths and marriages, and in particular public health.

In 1894 parochial boards were abolished and replaced by wholly elected parish councils, but with their functions practically unchanged. The trade depression of the 1920s led to the abandonment of the rule that the unemployed were not entitled to poor relief (Poor Law Emergency Powers (Scotland) Act 1921).

Poor Law in Scotland since 1930

In 1930 parish councils were abolished (Local Government (Scotland) Act 1929). Thereafter the poor law authorities were to be the county councils, large burghs and the four cities, acting through Departments of Public Assistance (or Public Welfare). These maintained a system broadly similar to that of their predecessors until 1948, when the existing poor law was entirely abolished and almost all of it replaced by the modern 'social security' (National Insurance Act 1948). Records from this period are subject to closed access.

Scottish Poorhouses

Poorhouses or almshouses existed in Scotland since medieval times, principally in burghs. Between 1845 and 1930 over 70 poorhouses were constructed in Scotland, many serving a number of parishes (called 'poor law unions' or 'combinations'). The regime, diet and living conditions in poorhouses were austere, partly to discourage applications from those who could rely on family support instead. Often deserted wives or single women with children turned to the parish for support - usually as a last resort. On the other hand poorhouses provided medical and nursing care of the elderly and the sick, at a time when there were few hospitals and private medical treatment was beyond the means of the poor. Borders provision is outlined below

Berwickshire - A number of parishes in Berwickshire operated their own small almshouses or parochial lodging houses, but most parishes used the services of Kelso Combination Poorhouse – see below.

Galashiels Combination Poorhouse was formed in around 1859 and comprised the parishes of Galashiels, Bowden, Melrose, Selkirk, and Yarrow, joined in around 1900 by Caddonfoot.

The Hawick Combination Poorhouse, built in 1857 comprised the 13 parishes of Ashkirk, Canonbie, Cavers, Ewes, Hawick, Hobkirk, Kirkhope, Kirkton, Langholm, Lilliesleaf, Minto, Robertson, and Wilton.

Jedburgh Combination Poorhouse comprised the 9 parishes of Ancrum, Bedrule, Castleton, Crailing, Jedburgh, Maxton, Oxnam, and Southdean.

Kelso Combination Poorhouse (sometimes referred to as Kelso Union), erected in 1854, initially comprised 23 parishes across Roxburghshire and Berwickshire: Eckford, Ednam, Hownam, Kelso, Linton, Morebattle, Roxburgh, Smailholm, Sprouston, Stichel, Yetholm and Coldstream, Duns, Earlston, Eccles, Edrom, Gordon, Greenlaw, Ladykirk, Lauder, Legerwood, Nenthorn and Swinton. Additional members in 1890 were: Chirnside, Coldingham and Hutton. By 1905, Fogo, Hume, Westruther, and Whitsome had also joined, but Coldingham had left.

Peebles Combination Poorhouse was formed in around 1856 and initially comprised the parishes of Drumelzier, Eddlestone, Kirkurd, West Linton, Lyne and Meggat, Manor, Newlands, Peebles, Skirling, Stobo, and Tweedsmuir; later joined by Biggar, Innerleithen, Penicuik, and Traquair

Poor Law Records

Prior to 1845, not all parishes kept formal records of poor. The only references to individual paupers may be in minutes of financial transactions of kirk sessions and heritors. Nearly all such records are held at the National Archives of Scotland – www.nas.gov.uk

From 1845, the main types of record were:

- *Record of Applications for Poor Relief*
The applications for poor relief often survive as a separate series. They included the 'casual poor', that is, those given relief by the inspector without a decision by the board and therefore not on the poor roll. For instance the Melrose records show relief given to a mother and children "footsore and weary", walking from Newcastle to Glasgow.
- *Registers of Poor*
Each parish had a poor roll, revised annually and available for public inspection. Paupers could only be admitted to the roll by order of the parochial board. The registers of poor, normally bound volumes of printed forms are particularly informative, almost giving a short biography - name, address, age, birthplace, marital status, occupation, whether disabled and if so how, financial circumstances, details of a husband or children, and, geographical movement of the individual, plus a record of the decision by the parochial board as to how the case was to be dealt with. Separate registers for children were introduced in 1865, and for the unemployed in the 1920's.
- *Parochial Board Minute Books*
These contain information on applications and awards of poor relief, but the amount of information varies depending on the parish. Most minute books are not indexed, so require a time consuming trawl to find relevant information – best left for situations where no other records survive. They can be useful in identifying "failed" applicants.

Sources of Information

- <http://www.scan.org.uk/knowledgebase/topics/poorrelief.htm>
- <http://www.nas.gov.uk/guides/poor.asp>
- Tracing Your Scottish Ancestors: the official guide. National Archives of Scotland, 2007.

POOR LAW RECORDS AT THE HERITAGE HUB

Please note: many of the pre-1900 records are available at the Hub in digitised format. More recent material will be subject to Data Protection restrictions. Staff will be happy to advise.

Archive Collection	Reference
Berwickshire - collection of over 1100 documents, 1845-1902	SC/B/33
Berwickshire - parish records	B/PR
Berwickshire - parochial board papers, 1889-1890	B/PB
Broughton, Glenholm & Kilbucho, 1867-1928	SBA/360/24-28
Broughton - applications for parochial relief, 1857-1921	SBA/360/27

Broughton - applications for poor relief, c.1937-1947	SBA/360/30
Broughton - applications from vagrants, 1945-1951	SBA/360/31
Coldstream - list of paupers & accounts, 1872-1874	SC/B/43
Dispute between Ayton & Coldingham parishes, 1840	SBA/74/13
Drumelzier - pay roll, registered poor, 1857-1922	SBA/360/10
Drumelzier - applications for parochial relief, 1864-1922	SBA/360/11
Drumelzier - general register of poor, 1859-1922	SBA/360/13
Eccles - listings of paupers, 1882-1895	B/PR/1/40-41
Eddleston - general register of poor, 1864-1933	SBA/360/20
Eyemouth - inspector of poor record book, 1845-1871	B/PR/1/48-49
Eyemouth - visiting book registered poor, 1878-1896	B/PR/1/51
Galashiels - list of registered poor, 1868-1891	SC/S/16/3
Galashiels - plan of combination poorhouse, c.1860	SBA/59/1
Galashiels - poor house records, 1851-1949	S/PR/3-4
Galashiels - register of guardians, 1909-1912	S/PR/4/9/1
Glenholm - applications for parochial relief, 1857-1921	SBA/360/27
Glenholm - register of poor persons, 1845-1864	SBA/360/25
Glenholm - register of poor, 1845-1886	SBA/360/26
Hawick - parish council minutes incl. poorhouse committee, 1860-1930	R/PR/1/8/1-34
Hume - parish accounts incl. distribution to the poor, 1773-1868	B/PR/1/59-61
Hutton - register of outdoor relief, 1847-1855	SBA/271/1/8
Hutton - register of pauper children, 1874-1890	SBA/271/1/14
Jedburgh poor law records, 1852-1874	On CD Rom
Jedburgh poor law records, 1875-1893	On CD Rom
Jedburgh register of poor, 1849-1930	R/PR/1/10
Kelso - register of poor, 1877-1930	R/PR/6/1
Kelso - union poorhouse laundry - letters, 1934	D/30/13/6/1
Kelso - union poorhouse records, 1854-1949	SBA/4/8-10
Kilbucho - applications for parochial relief, 1857-1921	SBA/360/27
Kilbucho - register of poor persons, 1845-1864	SBA/360/25
Kilbucho - register of poor, 1845-1886	SBA/360/26
Kilbucho, Glenholm & Broughton - parish records, 1850-1930	SBA/360/21-37
Manor - register of poor, 1858-1928	SBA/360/41
Melrose District - pay roll for poor, unemployed, 1934-1949 <i>[Data Protection restrictions]</i>	R/DC/2/42
Melrose - parochial board pay roll - registered poor, 1855-1930	R/PR/1/16/5
Melrose - parochial board applications for relief, 1883-1890	R/PR/1/17/8-9
Melrose - general register of poor, 1909-1935 <i>[Data Protection restrictions]</i>	REF?
Peebles - parish records – CHECK	SBA/360/42-58
Peeblesshire - poorhouse minute book, 1893-1920	P/PR/12
Peeblesshire - parish records	P/PR
Peeblesshire - parish records, 1845-1930 CHECK	SBA/360
Roxburghshire - parish records	R/PR
Roxburghshire County Council - public assistance records	R/PA
St. Boswells - applications for poor relief, 1901-1905	R/PR/4/1
Selkirk - documents re poor relief, 1802-1834	SC/S/3
Selkirk cess and poor roll, 1753-1785	SC/S/12/4
Selkirk - night asylum minute book, 1843-1887	D/8
Selkirkshire - parish records	S/PR
Selkirkshire - receipts for poor rates due, 1854-1855	SC/S/26/2
Skirling - registers of poor, 1845-1909	SBA/360/64-68
Stobo - register of poor, 1645-1935	SBA/360/85
Swinton – correspondence, 1846-1902	SC/B/33

