



Image credit: St Peter's Hospital (ref. Postcards/137/9)

A Guide to Sources relating to the Poor Law at Bristol Archives



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A brief history of the Poor Law

In the Middle Ages the manor, religious houses, parish clergy and the guilds all provided care of the poor. Various Acts of Parliament and the dissolution of the monasteries in the 16th century led to the parish becoming responsible for the care of its poor. The Poor Law Act of 1601 reinforced and consolidated the provisions of the previous Acts and set up a system of poor relief that remained in force until 1834.

In each parish men were chosen to serve as officers known as the “overseers of the poor”. Together with the churchwardens they were responsible for levying the poor rate (a tax to fund the support of the poor), distributing the money to the poor, and keeping accounts of how the money was spent.

The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 replaced this system (which became known as the Old Poor Law) with another, by which parishes were grouped together to form Poor Law unions. Each union, run by a Board of Guardians, was responsible for the care of the poor of the parishes within it, and the system became known as the New Poor Law.

A grouping together of parishes to provide poor relief already existed in Bristol. In the late 17th century there were major problems with assisting the city’s poor and the growing industrial parishes of St Philip & Jacob, St James and Temple were struggling to support their large numbers of paupers. There were short-term solutions, for example the parish of St Augustine was ordered to contribute to the cost of the poor of the parish of St Philip & Jacob, but something more permanent was required. In 1696 an Act of Parliament combined (or “incorporated”) the city’s 17 parishes and the ward of Castle Precincts into one body to care for the poor, called the Corporation (or Incorporation) of the Poor. An elected group, known as the Guardians of the Poor, carried out the day-to-day running of the Corporation of the Poor.

The main aim of the 1696 Act was to create a workhouse “for the better employing and maintaining the poor”, being a place where paupers were sent to work for their keep. A building next to St Peter’s church was purchased and named St Peter’s Hospital (in the old usage of the word, meaning a place providing board and lodging or “hospitality”, rather than an infirmary caring for the sick).

In rural areas beyond the city boundaries, each parish continued to be responsible for its poor until 1834, when parishes across the country were joined together into groups called Poor Law unions. The Bristol city parishes were already united as the Corporation of the Poor which was allowed to continue its work much as before. Parishes to the north and the east of the city became the Clifton Union (re-named the Barton Regis Union in 1877), and the parish of Bedminster, together with other parishes in north Somerset, became the Bedminster Union (re-named the Long Ashton Guardians in 1899).

In 1898 a new Poor Law Act replaced the Corporation of the Poor with the Bristol Board of Guardians and the area it administered was expanded to include parts of

the Bedminster, Clifton/Barton Regis and Keynsham Unions. In 1919 the Ministry of Health was made responsible for the Poor Law. The Local Government Act of 1929, together with the Boards of Guardians, officially abolished the term “pauper” and local authorities were encouraged to convert workhouses into infirmaries.

In Bristol following the Local Government Act of 1929, the duties of the Board of Guardians were transferred to the Public Assistance Committee of the Bristol Corporation (the forerunner of the City Council). This then became the Social Welfare Committee in 1941, the Welfare Services Committee in 1948 and the Social Services Committee in 1968. Minutes will be found under [M/BCC/SOW](#), [M/BCC/WEL](#) and [M/BCC/SOS](#). Nationally, the system of social security and other benefits was established in 1946.

Destruction of records during WW2

St Peter’s Hospital became the administrative headquarters of the Bristol Poor Law authorities and their records were stored there. The building was destroyed in an air raid on 24 November 1940 and with it, the records of the Corporation of the Poor / Bristol Board of Guardians, the Clifton / Barton Regis Union, and the Public Assistance Committee. This included the Poor Law records for all of the city parishes from 1696 and for all of the parishes that made up the Clifton / Barton Regis Union from 1834. However, a small number of records still exist, including some of the inmates of the workhouses at Stapleton and Eastville, as they were not stored in St Peter’s Hospital on the night it was destroyed. There is also a collection of St Peter’s Hospital deeds that survived the bombing.

Some pre-1696 Poor Law records exist for some city parishes and some pre-1834 Poor Law records exist for some of the Clifton / Barton Regis Union parishes. There are a few Poor Law records for dates after 1696 for city parishes and after 1834 for some of the Clifton / Barton Regis Union parishes. There are also Poor Law records for some of the parishes that formed neighbouring Poor Law unions.

Some later minutes of the Guardians of the Poor have been received via third parties, including [10243](#) (1901-1903), [36794](#) (1910), [37947/2](#) (1911-1913), and [46957](#) (1910-11 & 1925-1926).

Useful publications

Bristol Corporation of the Poor, 1696-1898, published by the Bristol Branch of the Historical Association (ref. [Pamphlet/HA/29](#)).

Bristol and the New Poor Law, published by the Bristol Branch of the Historical Association (ref. [Pamphlet/HA/86](#)).

Transactions of the Corporation of the Poor in the City of Bristol during a Period of 126 Years by J Johnson (ref. [Bk/114](#)).

The Bristol Corporation of the Poor, 1696-1834, published by Bristol Record Society, contains extracts from the records of the Corporation of the Poor that were later destroyed in WW2 (ref. [J/BRS/3](#)).

The Dictionary of Bristol by JW Arrowsmith gives a short history of the Poor Law in Bristol and describes Poor Law provision in the city in 1906 (ref. [Bk/15](#)).

There is a schedule listing the records of the Corporation of the Poor and St Peter's Hospital prior to their destruction during WW2 and another one listing the St Peter's Hospital deeds. These are available upon request. (staff ref. GWR22)

Poor Law unions

Poor Law unions were groups of parishes joined together to administer poor relief. They were created by the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 and run by Boards of Guardians. The Bristol city parishes were already united as a body called the Corporation of the Poor which was allowed to remain as one of the new Poor Law unions.

The Clifton Union covered a large area in south Gloucestershire to the north and east of the city of Bristol. It consisted of the parish of Clifton and other parishes such as Westbury-on-Trym, Henbury, Filton, Winterbourne, and St George. The out-parish of St Philip & Jacob was also included and the high death-rate in this densely populated industrial area caused the Clifton Union to have the worst published death-rate statistics. Concerned that this would be detrimental to the reputation of Clifton as a healthy, fashionable place to live, the inhabitants campaigned to have the name of the union changed. They succeeded and it was re-named Barton Regis Union in 1877, taking the old name of the hundred (an administrative area into which a shire was divided) that was part of the area covered by the Poor Law union.

The Bedminster Union was formed from parishes in north Somerset to the west and south-west of the city. It consisted of the parish of Bedminster and other parishes such as Abbots Leigh, Long Ashton, Portishead, Clevedon, and Winford.

Two unions were created in south Gloucestershire to the north and north-east of Bristol. The Thornbury Union included parishes such as Thornbury, Berkeley, Almondsbury, Olveston, Alveston, and Elberton. The Chipping Sodbury Union included parishes such as Chipping Sodbury, Marshfield, Hawkesbury, Iron Acton, Pucklechurch, and Westerleigh.

The Keynsham Union was formed from parishes to the north and south of the River Avon, in both south Gloucestershire and north Somerset. It included parishes such as Keynsham, Whitchurch, Marksbury, Bitton, Mangotsfield, and Kingswood.

In 1897 the boundaries of the city of Bristol were extended and it was decided to create a new Poor Law union for Bristol. In 1898 the Bristol Board of Guardians replaced the Corporation of the Poor. The area it administered was enlarged to cover portions of the Clifton / Barton Regis and Bedminster Unions and part of the parish of

Brislington (which had been in the Keynsham Union) that had become part of the newly extended city.

The urban parts of the Bedminster and Clifton / Barton Regis unions were already part of the city by a previous extension of the city boundaries in 1835. However, it was decided that the Corporation of the Poor should not administer the poor relief for these areas, therefore from 1835-1898 people living in these areas were living in the city of Bristol but were provided with poor relief by either Bedminster or Clifton / Barton Regis Union. In 1899 the Bedminster Union was re-named the Long Ashton Guardians.

By 1904, further boundary extensions had reduced the size of the Clifton / Barton Regis Union until it had become too small to administer practicably. It was abolished and its work taken over by the Bristol Board of Guardians.

When civil registration (the registering of births, marriages and deaths) was introduced in 1837, it was organised using the same administrative boundaries as the Poor Law unions. The Boards of Guardians controlled the appointment of the Registrar of Births, Marriages and Deaths, and the Clerk to the Guardians (who was usually a solicitor) often held both posts. The register offices where marriages took place were often next to, or even housed in, the same building as the local workhouse, which resulted in civil marriages being associated with the Poor Law and often regarded unfavourably.

The Local Government Act of 1929 abolished the Boards of Guardians.

Virtually all the centralised records of the Bristol Corporation of the Poor / Bristol Board of Guardians and the Clifton / Barton Regis Union were destroyed during WW2.

[Somerset Archive & Record Service](#) holds records of the Bedminster Union (ref. [D/G/bd](#)) and Keynsham Union (ref. [D/G/k](#)).

[Gloucestershire Archives](#) holds records of the Thornbury Union (ref. [G/TH](#)) and Chipping Sodbury Union (ref. [G/SO](#)).

There is a list of parishes within each the Poor Law union in the Bristol area in 1834 on pages 25-26 of this leaflet.

Poorhouses, workhouses and Bristol Lunatic Asylum

In the 17th and 18th centuries, before workhouses were established, the Overseers of the Poor distributed poor relief as money, food, clothing or other goods to paupers living in their own homes. Work was sometimes given to the able-bodied such as repairing roads for men, and laundry work for women. Most parishes had a

poorhouse or a few cottages for the accommodation of the elderly, feeble and sick, often referred to as the “impotent poor”.

The General Workhouse Act of 1723 enabled parishes to build workhouses, funded by the poor rate, in which paupers would live and be given work to do (known as indoor relief). Employment was usually spinning, weaving and unskilled tasks such as pin-making. Men were often given labouring work such as stone-breaking or the picking of oakum, which was the unravelling and cleaning of old rope.

Generally all paupers were kept inside the precincts of the workhouse, until an Act of Parliament in 1782 which required the overseers to find work for the able-bodied outside. However, employers were encouraged to reduce wages, knowing that the difference would be made up by poor relief, which resulted in a significant increase in claims and led to the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. This greatly reduced the provision of outdoor relief (poor relief for those not living in workhouses) and able-bodied paupers were compelled to live in the workhouse in order to receive assistance.

The situation regarding outdoor relief was different in Bristol. Prohibitory orders forbidding outdoor relief to the able-bodied poor had been sent to the Poor Law unions. However, the Bristol Corporation of the Poor did not receive one as it had been set up under different legislation (by a Local Act of Parliament rather than by the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act) and it continued to provide outdoor relief to its able-bodied poor.

The 1834 Act grouped together parishes into Poor Law unions and each union was to provide its own workhouse. The union workhouse would care for the sick and infirm but made a feature of strict discipline and monotonous labouring work to deter the able-bodied and encourage them to seek employment and provide for themselves and their families.

In the Bristol area some of the new Poor Law unions continued to use parish workhouses whilst others built new ones. The Corporation of the Poor, which had become the Poor Law union for the city of Bristol, already had its own workhouse at St Peter’s Hospital and, within a few years, had bought premises at Stapleton for a new one.

In 1913 workhouses were re-named Poor Law institutions and in 1929, local authorities were encouraged to convert former workhouses into infirmaries.

There are detailed notes relating to the histories of Bristol Union Workhouse, Clifton Workhouse, Clifton Union Workhouse, Pennywell Road Workhouse, St. Georges Workhouse, Southmead Workhouse, Bristol Union Lunatic Asylum and the amalgamation of the Bristol poor law unions in 1898 available (ref. [InfoBox/19/93b](#)).

St Peter's Hospital

The Bristol Corporation of the Poor originally planned to have two workhouses, one each for girls and boys, where the children would be taught a trade. Bristol Corporation (the forerunner of the City Council) lent a building next to the Bridewell for this purpose, which soon housed 100 girls. A building next to St Peter's church was purchased to become a workhouse for the boys and was re-named St Peter's Hospital (in the old usage of the word, meaning a place providing board and lodging or "hospitality", rather than an infirmary caring for the sick). Originally built for a wealthy merchant, the building had housed a sugar refinery and been used as a mint (where coins were made) before becoming the workhouse and it continued to be referred to as "the Mint" for many years afterwards.

The children were taught spinning and weaving and the products were sold. However, the Corporation of the Poor struggled to sell either the yarn or the cloth and it was soon decided to provide unskilled occupations such as pinmaking and picking oakum (the untwisting of old rope) as they achieved the quickest returns.

In 1709 the girls were transferred to St Peter's Hospital. This was rapidly becoming more of an infirmary than a workhouse, as infants, the elderly, the sick and 'lunatic' paupers were admitted. By the early 19th century St Peter's Hospital had ceased to be a workhouse, except for the inmates whose work it was to look after those who were sick and infirm. The other able-bodied inmates were given employment outside of the workhouse, such as stone-breaking at the Hot Well and the lowering of Redcliffe Hill. By the 1820s the majority of the 400-plus occupants were "impotent" and many were in need of medical care.

This included some 'lunatic' paupers, and in 1822 two wards of St Peter's Hospital were designated the 'lunatic asylum' for the Corporation of the Poor, by a Local Act of Parliament. In 1830 the Corporation of the Poor bought the old armoury in Stapleton Road, to fit out as a 'lunatic asylum'. It was never completed as, by the end of 1831, the city found itself having to raise a substantial amount of money to pay for the widespread damage caused by the reform riots of that year. Eventually, a new lunatic asylum was built at Stapleton and opened in 1861.

St Peter's Hospital had a serious problem with overcrowding and a new workhouse was proposed by the Bristol Poor Act of 1822. However, the new gaol in Cumberland Road had just been built and there was no inclination to fund another public building.

The number of occupants in St Peter's Hospital continued to grow until, by 1832, it had increased to 600. The cholera epidemic of that year and the resulting high number of deaths at St Peter's Hospital emphasised the dangers of overcrowding and, as an emergency measure, some 100 inmates were removed, probably to the old armoury building. However, there was still an urgent need for additional premises and in 1833 part of the old Admiralty prison at Stapleton was rented. Any permanent solution to the overcrowding was delayed, probably due to the imminent changes in Poor Law administration, which came about following the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834.

In 1837, the whole of the old prison at Stapleton was bought to convert into a new workhouse for the city of Bristol. By 1842 it was receiving most of the paupers and St Peter's Hospital became a hospital in the true sense, caring for the sick, elderly and 'lunatic' poor.

In 1898 St Peter's Hospital became the administrative headquarters of the Bristol Poor Law authorities. The building was destroyed during WW2 and, with it, the records of the workhouse. However, a few records exist, as they were not stored in St Peter's Hospital on the night it was destroyed. This includes some records of 'lunatic' inmates, as well as a collection of property deeds, which also contains contracts regarding the emigration of paupers to Tasmania and Australia in 1833.

Several secondary sources are notable in term of those in St Peter's:

Name index and transcription of documents relating to the emigration of paupers from St Peter's Hospital to Van Dieman's Land (Tasmania) and New South Wales in 1833 (ref. [NPM/B/116](#)).

Name index and transcription of oaths of application for relief at St Peter's Hospital, 1743-1843 (ref. [NPM/B/120](#), originals ref. [06570](#) with the names now included in the catalogue entries).

List of 'lunatic inmates' in St Peter's Hospital, c 1817-1846 (ref. [NPM/B/126](#)).

There are also title deeds and other non-personal records relating to St Peter's Hospital and some of the other poor law institutions in Bristol (ref. [St PHosp](#)).

Stapleton Workhouse

By the 1830s, St Peter's Hospital (the workhouse of the Bristol Corporation of the Poor) had become seriously overcrowded. In 1833 part of the old Admiralty prison on Blackberry Hill at Stapleton was rented as additional accommodation but any permanent solution to the overcrowding was delayed until after the passing of the Poor Law Amendment Act in 1834. In 1837 the Corporation of the Poor bought the whole of the building at Stapleton to provide a new workhouse for the city of Bristol. By 1842, most Bristol paupers were being admitted there and St Peter's Hospital became an infirmary for the sick and elderly and the lunatic poor.

Built by the Admiralty in 1779, originally to hold prisoners from the war with the American colonies, the building later held prisoners from the war with France and is often referred to as the French Prison. All but two of the original prison buildings were demolished and the new workhouse was built between 1861 and 1865.

In 1898 the Corporation of the Poor was replaced with a new Poor Law union for Bristol run by the Bristol Board of Guardians. The city boundaries had been extended in 1897 and the new union covered the wider area of the extended city, taking in

parts of the Bedminster, Clifton / Barton Regis and Keynsham Unions. The Board of Guardians took over the Clifton / Barton Regis Union workhouse at Eastville and used both Stapleton and Eastville workhouses for paupers from the newly enlarged union for Bristol.

Being near each other, Stapleton Workhouse is often confused with the Clifton / Barton Regis Union Workhouse at 100 Fishponds Road, Eastville.

In 1918 Stapleton Workhouse became Stapleton Institution for “certified mental defectives” (those with learning difficulties) and provided workshop training in bootmaking, tailoring and brushmaking.

Under the National Health Act of 1948 it became Stapleton Hospital, caring for the “aged poor” needing medical treatment, and in 1956 it was re-named Manor Park Hospital, specialising in the care of the elderly. In 1992 Manor Park Hospital was merged with the adjoining Glenside Hospital (previously Bristol Lunatic Asylum) and became Blackberry Hill Hospital, providing mental health services.

Most of the records of Stapleton Workhouse were stored in St Peter’s Hospital and destroyed during the air raids of WW2. However, a few were kept at the workhouse and survived the bombing.

Collection [43127](#) contains records from Stapleton Workhouse and the later hospitals, including a birth register 1857-1898, creed registers 1896-1953, admission registers 1915-1953, and indexes to death registers 1857-1955.

There is also a 1911 plan of the workhouse (ref. [45799/2](#)).

Clifton / Barton Regis Union Workhouse and Clifton Poorhouse

Under the terms of the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, each new Poor Law union was to provide its own workhouse. The Clifton Union (renamed the Barton Regis Union in 1877) initially tried to meet this requirement by using the two old workhouses it had acquired when it was created, those of the out-parish of St Philip & Jacob and the parish of St George.

However, in 1837 the Clifton Union was instructed to enlarge its workhouse provision and, intending to have separate establishments for the various categories of pauper, set up a poorhouse in Clifton Wood. Situated on the east of Church Lane, above Hotwell Road, it housed the elderly, feeble and sick of the Clifton Union. Children under the age of 15 were to be housed in the old St George parish workhouse, whilst the “robust and working” paupers were sent to the old workhouse of the out-parish of St Philip & Jacob in Pennywell Road. However, this arrangement was not a success and each of the three establishments suffered from overcrowding.

In 1866 the Clifton poorhouse was rented by an industrial school, which had been set up in the old workhouse in Pennywell Road in 1859. The school became known as Clifton Wood Industrial School and in 1924 it amalgamated with the National Nautical School in Portishead. The site of the industrial school has been developed for housing. Bristol Archives does not hold any records of Clifton Poorhouse.

Eventually a new workhouse for the Clifton Union was built on land at Eastville and opened in 1847. It was situated on Fishponds Road and, although it is listed under various numbers in the Bristol trade directories, at one time it must have been no 100 Fishponds Road and is often known as such. It is also known as Eastville Workhouse and is often confused with Stapleton Workhouse, the two being near to each other. The workhouse buildings at Eastville no longer exist and the site has been developed for housing.

In 1898 the Corporation of the Poor was replaced with a new Poor Law union for Bristol run by the Bristol Board of Guardians. The city boundaries had been extended in 1897 and the new union covered the wider area of the extended city, taking in parts of the Bedminster, Clifton / Barton Regis and Keynsham Unions. The Board of Guardians took over the Clifton / Barton Regis Union workhouse at Eastville and used both Stapleton and Eastville workhouses for paupers from the newly enlarged union for Bristol.

Many records of the Clifton/Barton Regis Union Workhouse were stored in St Peter's Hospital and destroyed during the air raids of WW2. However, some were kept at the workhouse and survived the bombing.

Collection [30105](#) includes creed registers 1869-1952 as well as registers of births and deaths.

There are also records relating to the sale of the old workhouse in 1893 (ref. [22936/1](#)) and plans of the workhouse (refs [31965\[STG\]/99](#) and [45799/1](#)).

Pennywell Road Workhouse and St George Workhouse

Each new Poor Law union, created by the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, was to provide its own workhouse. The Clifton Union (re-named Barton Regis Union in 1877) acquired the old 18th century workhouse of the out-parish of St Philip & Jacob in Pennywell Road, and the old parish workhouse of St George. With these, and a new poorhouse set up in Clifton Wood, it hoped to meet the requirement of the new law.

The plan was that each establishment would house a different category of pauper. The elderly and sick were sent to the new poorhouse at Clifton Wood, the "robust and working" paupers to the Pennywell Road workhouse and children under the age of 15, to the St George workhouse. However, the arrangement was not a success. Each of the three establishments suffered from overcrowding and conditions at the

Pennywell Road workhouse were particularly bad. In 1847 the Clifton Union opened a new workhouse at Eastville.

In 1859 the Pennywell Road workhouse was rented as an industrial school. The school outgrew the building and, in 1866, moved to the old Clifton poorhouse premises. It became known as Clifton Wood Industrial School and was later amalgamated with the National Nautical School in Portishead.

The Pennywell Road building was then used as a temporary place of worship by a Congregational chapel and the Clifton/Barton Regis Union sold the building in 1877.

In 1880 a public hall, the St Philip's Vestry Hall, was built, partly on the site. It became the Vestry Hall Cinema (which closed in 1957), then housed an engraving works and has now been converted into housing.

Built in around 1801, the St George workhouse was situated between what is now Hudds Vale Road and Clouds Hill Avenue. After it ceased to be used by the Clifton Union it was sold and became the Crown Pottery, a leather warehouse and soap works, at different times. By 1931 it was owned by R Moon & Co, tin box makers, who used the grounds but the building fell into disrepair. However, two buildings still exist on the site today, which is now a small industrial estate.

Bristol Archives does not hold any records of the inmates of Pennywell Road or St George workhouses. However for Pennywell Road there are historical notes (refs. [InfoBox/6/24](#) and [InfoBox/10/88](#)) and records relating to the sale of the land in 1877 (ref. [22936/86](#)).

Southmead Workhouse

In 1898 a new Poor Law Act abolished the Bristol Corporation of the Poor (the union of the city parishes) and replaced it with the Bristol Board of Guardians. The area for which it administered poor relief was expanded to include a large portion of the Clifton / Barton Regis Union and parts of the Bedminster and Keynsham Poor Law unions.

The Bristol Board of Guardians took over the Clifton / Barton Regis Union workhouse at Eastville and the (now much smaller) Barton Regis Union was left with no workhouse of its own. It built a new workhouse at Southmead, which opened in 1902. It was unusual in that, unlike the workhouses at Stapleton and Eastville, it contained a separate building designed as an infirmary. When the Barton Regis Union was abolished in 1904, the Bristol Board of Guardians took over Southmead Workhouse with the intention of making it the infirmary for all of its sick poor.

Bristol Archives does not hold any records of inmates of Southmead Workhouse. However there is the opening programme from 1902 (ref. [11169/1](#)) and an archaeological report on the site of the building (ref. [45839/Rep/2014/26](#)).

Development of the site began but, as the buildings were nearing completion, the First World War broke out and Southmead Infirmary became a war hospital. At the end of the war the Infirmary became a Special Military Surgical Hospital and was handed back to the Bristol Board of Guardians in 1920.

In 1930 Bristol Health Committee took control of what was now Southmead Hospital, and over the years that followed, expanded and developed it to become the large general hospital it is today.

Bedminster & Keynsham Union Workhouses

Under the terms of the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, each new Poor Law union was to provide its own workhouse and, unlike the Clifton Union and the Bristol Corporation of the Poor, the Bedminster Union was quick to begin work on a new purpose-built workhouse. Often referred to as Long Ashton or Flax Bourton Workhouse, it is situated at the western edge of the parish of Long Ashton, adjoining the parish of Flax Bourton. Built between 1837-1838 to the design of George Gilbert Scott and William Bonython Moffat, it was amongst the earliest of over 50 workhouses attributed to George Gilbert Scott. From 1929-1956 it was known as Cambridge House, a 'mental deficiency colony' run by Somerset County Council, and in 1962 became Farleigh Hospital for those with learning difficulties. The site was sold in the 1990s and the buildings and grounds converted and developed into offices and housing. The main workhouse building still stands.

A new Keynsham Union workhouse was erected in 1837 on a site to the south of Keynsham. The workhouse later became Keynsham Hospital and the surviving workhouse buildings were demolished in July 2007.

[Somerset Archive & Record Service](#) holds records of the Bedminster Union (ref. [D/G/bd](#)) and Keynsham Union (ref. [D/G/k](#)).

Thornbury and Chipping Sodbury Union Workhouses

Thornbury Union built a new workhouse in 1837. It later became Thornbury Hospital and remained in use until the 1990s. In 2000-2001 the buildings were redeveloped as housing.

A new workhouse for the Chipping Sodbury Union was built on a site at Yate and was opened in 1840. It became the County Infirmary, and during WW2 some of the buildings were used as an emergency hospital. After 1948, some of the buildings became the Ridgewood old people's home, and more recently Ridgewood community centre.

[Gloucestershire Archives](#) holds records of the Thornbury Union (ref. [G/TH](#)) and Chipping Sodbury Union (ref. [G/SO](#)).

Society of Friends Workhouse

By the end of the 17th century, the Bristol Society of Friends (Quakers) were concerned by the hardships caused by unemployment amongst their pauper members. At the Society of Friends Men's Meeting on 28 September 1696, ten members were appointed to investigate the best way of providing assistance. It was decided to set up a workhouse and provide weaving work as employment for the poor, the products of which were to be sold. The first building used soon proved unsatisfactory and the decision was made to build a new workhouse.

A number of Friends were already involved in the Corporation of the Poor, set up to administer poor relief for the city, and some were active in establishing both the workhouse for the city's poor at St Peter's Hospital and the Society of Friends' workhouse.

Negotiations began to buy land from Nathaniel Wade in the Lamb Ground, by the River Frome. A street was made from the workhouse up to Lawford's Gate and named New Street by the Society of Friends' Men's Meeting in 1725.

By the end of 1699 and the beginning of 1700, the new workhouse was finished and had already received inmates. A school was opened in the workhouse in 1699.

The weaving work was short-lived and came to a halt in 1721, like St Peter's Hospital, the Society of Friends workhouse struggled to sell the products. The workhouse then cared for the elderly and sick.

Bristol Archives does not hold any records of the inmates of the Society of Friends Workhouse. However the main Society of Friends collection includes accounts and papers relating to its management (ref. [SF/A/9](#)) and deeds (ref. [SF/D/9](#)). Mentions of the workhouse will also be found in the minutes, which have been published by the Bristol Record Society (ref. [J/BRS/30](#)).

There is also a comparison of management of the Friends workhouse with the Bristol Corporation workhouse (ref. [NPM/A/24](#)).

At the end of the 18th century the Society of Friends set up their First-Day (Sunday) Schools in the old workhouse, and in 1866 founded the New Street Mission in the building. In 1931 the workhouse was converted into accommodation for workmen.

Other Poorhouses and Workhouses

Most parishes had a poorhouse for the elderly and sick, and from 1723 many began to build workhouses where paupers would live and be given work to do.

The parish of Westbury-on-Trym had a workhouse and the parish of Bedminster had one in West Street, near the Red Cow Inn. The Bitton parish poorhouse was in the High Street, with a pin factory next door. Olveston parish used a house in Foxholes Lane as a workhouse from around 1814 and the parish of Frampton Cotterell had a workhouse in Church Road from around 1828.

A parliamentary report of 1777 recorded a number of workhouses operating in parishes around Bristol, in north Somerset and south Gloucestershire, including:

Thornbury (for up to 80 inmates), Elberton (for 20 inmates), Littleton (for 20 inmates), Chipping Sodbury (for up to 40 inmates), Westerleigh (for 22 inmates), Yate (for 40 inmates), Keynsham (with accommodation for 6 inmates), Brislington (for 12 inmates), Bitton (for 25 inmates), Mangotsfield (for 60 inmates), Stapleton (for up to 100 inmates), Bristol St Philip and St Jacob (for up to 100 inmates), Bedminster (for up to 60 inmates) and Winford (for 14 inmates).

Bristol Archives holds a small number of records relating to the establishment of one or two parish workhouses but does not hold records of the inmates of any of these parish poorhouses or workhouses. For those outside the city boundaries there may be material at Somerset or Gloucester Archives, particularly if they have been deposited according to location rather than parish.

Bristol Lunatic Asylum

In 1830 the Bristol Corporation of the Poor bought the old armoury in Stapleton Road to use as a lunatic asylum, but it was never completed. By 1842 most paupers were being admitted to the Corporation of the Poor's new workhouse at Stapleton and the old workhouse, St Peter's Hospital, became an infirmary for the 'lunatics', the sick and the elderly poor.

In 1845 a new Statute required county justices to provide new lunatic asylums set in large grounds and the 'lunatics' in St Peter's Hospital became the responsibility of the Bristol city and county justices, rather than the Corporation of the Poor. The Bristol justices wanted to avoid the expense of a new asylum but by 1856, the number of 'lunatics' being sent to St Peter's Hospital had increased to such an extent that it was unable to cope and there was no choice but to begin work on new premises. St Peter's Hospital was receiving more 'lunatics' because the justices of Gloucester and Somerset had decided that 'lunatics' who came from Clifton and Bedminster should no longer be cared for in the county 'asylums' at Coney Hill near Gloucester and at Wells, but should be looked after by the Bristol justices in St Peter's Hospital. A site

at Stapleton, next to the new Bristol Corporation of the Poor workhouse was chosen and the new 'lunatic asylum' for the city and county of Bristol opened in 1861. However, whilst many 'lunatics' were sent to the new asylum, it was more expensive to keep them there, so the more easily managed ones remained in St Peter's Hospital.

During the First World War, Bristol Lunatic Asylum became a temporary military hospital, known as the Beaufort War Hospital.

In 1960 it was renamed Glenside Hospital and closed in 1992, when it was merged with the adjoining Manor Park Hospital (previously Stapleton Workhouse) to become Blackberry Hill Hospital. The University of the West of England now uses the buildings.

Ref. [NPM/B/126](#) includes a list of 'lunatics' in St Peter's Hospital, c1817-1846.

Collection [40513](#) includes material relating to the lunatic asylum, later Glenside Hospital, including registers 1840s-1990s, and a large amount of other personal and non-personal material.

There are also several general historical booklets regarding Glenside and its origins, such as [Pamphlet/633](#), [Pamphlet/2057](#) and [Bk/2576](#).

Parish Poor Law records

Due to the lack of material available it is difficult to study the administration of the Poor Law in Bristol or search for those receiving poor relief. The Poor Law records for all of the city parishes from 1696 and for all of the parishes in the Clifton / Barton Regis Union from 1834 were destroyed during WW2.

Some pre-1696 Poor Law records exist for some city parishes and some pre-1834 Poor Law records exist for some of the Clifton / Barton Regis Union parishes. There are a few Poor Law records for dates after 1696 for city parishes and after 1834 for some of the Clifton / Barton Regis Union parishes. There are also Poor Law records for some of the parishes that formed neighbouring Poor Law unions. These will be found within the individual parish collections.

Please note that Somerset Archives & Record Service holds the records of the Bedminster and Keynsham Unions and Gloucestershire Archives holds the records of Thornbury and Chipping Sodbury Unions.

Poor rates and accounts

In the 16th century the parish became responsible for the care of its poor and, by Statute of 1598, was authorised to levy a poor rate on parish householders (except

paupers) to raise money for poor relief. Parish officers, known as the “overseers of the poor” and the churchwardens were responsible for levying the poor rate, distributing money or goods and keeping accounts.

The poor rate continued to be collected after the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, by which Poor Law unions were created. The responsibility for the care of the poor was transferred to Boards of Guardians (which ran the unions) and the money raised by the parishes in poor rate was handed over to the Boards of Guardians.

The information was recorded in poor rate books, which list parish householders (those who were not paupers) and the amount paid, which depended on the value of the property they owned or occupied.

Until the creation of the Poor Law unions in 1834, the expenditure on the poor was recorded in detail in parish vestry minutes, overseers’ accounts or in poor books. The accounts often recorded the amount paid in as poor rate as well. The “disbursements”, or payment of money and distribution of goods, could be recorded in detail, for example, noting clothes, medical and burial costs. Sometimes this information is recorded in vestry order books, vestry nomination books or churchwardens accounts.

In Bristol, from 1696 to 1834, the Bristol Guardians who ran the Corporation of the Poor would have kept these accounts. The records of the Corporation of the Poor were destroyed during WW2 and there is a schedule listing these records if needed.

The vestry order books for Bitton 1694-1832 and the Hamlet of Oldland 1807-1832 have been transcribed (but not indexed) and include details of relief given to named paupers (refs. [Bk/88](#), [Bk/89](#), [Bk/90](#), [Bk/91](#)).

There is a published transcription (no name index) of the overseers of the poor accounts of the parish of Holy Trinity Westbury-on-Trym 1656-1698 (ref. [Bk/97](#)).

The overseers of the poor accounts of St Luke Brislington 1719-1737 have been transcribed and name indexed (ref. [NPM/B/26](#)).

Settlement and removal

Anyone in need of poor relief was the responsibility of the parish in which they had what was known as “legal settlement”, or more specifically, where they were “last legally settled”, meaning the parish in which they had gained settlement most recently.

The Settlement Act of 1662 specified a variety of ways in which settlement could be gained and later Acts of Parliament amended these. They included serving as a parish officer, renting a property in the parish worth more than £10 per year, paying parish rates on a property, serving an apprenticeship, or working for one full year as a “covenanted” servant. Women took the parish of settlement of their husband, legitimate children under the age of 7 took the settlement of their father, and

illegitimate children were settled where they were born. Settlement could also be gained by residing in the parish for 40 days after having given the parish authorities prior written notice of the intention to do so.

Anyone who was not legally settled in a parish and required assistance, or even seemed likely to do so, could be forcibly ejected. This led to harsh enforcement of the rules, later eased by the Act of 1795, which prohibited the removal of a person unless they had become “chargeable” (i.e. actually receiving poor relief). This Act also allowed the suspension of orders to remove those who were sick.

Pregnant, single women in particular were likely to be forced to leave a parish, as an illegitimate child would have settlement in the parish where it was born and the authorities were anxious to save any future charge on the poor rate. However the Act of 1733 prohibited the removal of women during either their pregnancy or within the first month after giving birth, and a further Act of 1744 changed the place of settlement of an illegitimate child to that of its mother.

Married women took the place of settlement of their husbands and, if widowed, could find themselves in a difficult situation. A widow might be sent to a parish where she had no family of her own, no friends or may never even have visited before.

The parish officials or justices of the peace could interview newcomers as to their place of settlement. These settlement examinations can include information about where someone was born and lived, their employment or apprenticeship and details of spouses and children.

If someone had no right to settlement in the parish, a removal order would be issued, instructing that they be returned to their parish of legal settlement. Passes might be issued which required constables to conduct the person to their parish of legal settlement. The constable of each parish would escort them to the parish boundary and hand them over to the constable of the neighbouring parish and so on until they reached their destination.

To permit some mobility in search of work, the Settlement Act of 1697 allowed the overseers of the poor to issue settlement certificates, which stated the parish of settlement and confirmed that the person would be accepted back should they require assistance.

The Settlement Act of 1697 ordered that paupers were to wear a large badge on the right shoulder, featuring the letter P, together with the first letter of the name of their parish. This remained in force until 1810, although many parishes did not take it up. An Act of 1782 exempted paupers of orderly behaviour.

The Settlement Acts and other legislation remained in force after the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. From that date paupers requiring relief generally had to enter the workhouse of the Poor Law union in which their parish of settlement was located. However, migrant paupers could still be denied entry and removed to the Poor Law union that was legally responsible for them.

The court of quarter sessions (collection ref. [JQS](#)) dealt with both criminal and Poor Law cases and settlement disputes formed a substantial part of the court's business.

There is a name index and transcription of a small number of the removal orders c1718-c1831 taken from the Bristol quarter sessions papers (ref. [NPM/B/131](#)).

The removal orders and settlement documents in parish collections held by Bristol Archives have been transcribed and name indexed. Most of them are also included in the Bristol Archives catalogue. For full details and for other records held, check the Bristol Archives catalogue for the individual parish.

Bastardy

The overseers of the poor were keen to avoid the expense of relieving a 'bastard' child and the unmarried mother would be interviewed regarding the father, so that he could be made liable for his child's maintenance. Bastardy examinations record these interviews and in them the mother names the father and provides information about where she was living and circumstances relating to her becoming pregnant. A bastardy order might then be issued, naming the father and ordering him to pay maintenance. Failure to comply with the order could result in him being sent to prison. When the father agreed to pay maintenance, a 'bastardy bond' (bond of indemnification) would be drawn up, detailing the amount to be paid. Family members of both the father and the mother of the 'bastard' child may also be involved and named in the bond.

Most of the bastardy documents in the parish collections held by Bristol Archives are included in the catalogue. For full details and for other records held, check the Bristol Archives catalogue for the individual parish.

There is a name index and transcription of a small number of the removal orders c1718-c1831 taken from the Bristol quarter sessions papers (ref. [NPM/B/131](#)).

Apprenticeship

From 1601 the overseers of the poor (after 1834, the Guardians of the Poor) were empowered to arrange apprenticeships for orphans and for the children of paupers, as this saved the parish, and later the Poor Law unions, the cost of supporting poor children. Both boys and girls were apprenticed from the age of 7, and unlike other apprenticeships which lasted 7 years, parish or Poor Law apprenticeships usually continued until the age of 21 (or 24 for boys, before 1768). The master agreed to feed and clothe the apprentice and teach him them a specified trade, usually in return for a small sum of money. Although some parish apprentices were taught trades that would enable them to earn a living in later life, boys were often apprenticed to learn "husbandry" and girls "housewifery", which in reality consisted of nothing more than working as an agricultural labourer or domestic servant.

Until 1757, apprentices had to be bound by a document called an indenture. After this date (and sometimes before), poor children were bound by agreement entered in the vestry minute books or the parish registers. Apprenticeship indentures often survive in the records of a parish and there may also be apprenticeship bonds. Parish apprenticeships may also be recorded in overseers account books and some parishes may have a separate register of apprentices.

The overseers often tried to apprentice children to masters outside of their parish as, since the child would obtain settlement in the new parish by serving an apprenticeship there, this saved the home parish from the responsibility of relieving the child in the future. Under the Settlement Act of 1697, a master could be fined for refusing to take a parish apprentice without good reason. Whilst many children were apprenticed to neighbouring parishes and some to relatives, others were sent further afield.

Parish apprentices had little protection from ill-treatment or overwork. They were a convenient source of cheap labour and many were sent to work in factories or sent to sea. An Act of Parliament of 1703 empowered overseers of the poor to apprentice any boy aged over 10 found begging or receiving poor relief to the master or owner of any British ship.

The Bristol Corporation of the Poor believed that apprenticing children and training them to work was a greater act of charity than collecting the poor rate and just using it to let the children be idle, which it stated was of “no advantage to them or the nation”. Nonetheless, it did show some concern for the well-being of its apprentices, and in 1786 it took proceedings against a master and his wife for the ill-treatment of an apprentice. This was made public in the local newspapers, as a warning that the Corporation of the Poor was “determined to prosecute all persons who ill-use” or neglected their apprentices. Although the Corporation of the Poor refused to apprentice any of its children to chimney sweeps, it did apprentice children to work in the cotton factories in the north of England. A degree of after-care was provided, for example in 1816 the Deputy Governor of St Peter’s Hospital visited all the factories where the Corporation of the Poor had placed apprentices during the previous few years.

Most of the parish apprenticeship documents are included in the Bristol Archives catalogue, generally within the ‘Overseers of the Poor’ section of each individual parish collection.

Other parish Poor Law records

Amongst the Poor Law records of a parish there may be documents concerning poor relief for the families of men called to serve in the militia. These could be orders for the relief of families, or certificates of militia service and discharge.

Indemnity bonds might exist, which protected a parish against future charge on it by families or individuals, and there may be upkeep bonds in which a grandparent or relative agreed to provide for a pauper child.

When a pauper receiving poor relief died, their goods could be impounded on behalf of the parish and there may be inventories which list the goods of the deceased. Very occasionally an inventory might record the sale of the belongings, naming those who bought goods and the amount paid.

Vestry minute books often contain details regarding the administration of the Poor Law and there are often records of parish charities, which gave assistance to the poor.

For full details and for other records held, check the Bristol Archives catalogue for the individual parish.

Poor rates not in parish collections

For the Bristol city parishes that became the Corporation of the Poor, there is a fairly complete series of poor rates 1698-1854. There are also poor rates for various years for Clifton 1825-1844, St George 1800-1854, the out-parish of St Philip & Jacob 1810-1841, the out-parish of St James 1771-1786, and the out-parishes of St James and St Paul 1787-1832 (ref. [F/PR](#)).

In 1823 the poor rate and a number of other rates were amalgamated and paid together as “consolidated rates”. There are consolidated rates for the Bristol city parishes 1824-1878, and the out-parishes of Clifton 1833-1841, St George 1841, and St James and St Paul 1835-1848 (ref. [F/CR](#)).

The poor rate continued to be collected after the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, by which Poor Law unions were created. The responsibility for the care of the poor was transferred to Boards of Guardians (which ran the unions) and the money raised by the parishes in poor rate was handed over to the Boards of Guardians.

Quarter sessions

As well as dealing with criminal matters, the court of quarter sessions (collection ref. [JQS](#)) also heard Poor Law cases. It has been estimated that about half of the business of the quarter sessions related to the administration of the Poor Law, including bastardy and apprenticeship cases as well as appeals against removal orders.

The records of the Bristol quarter sessions date from 1595. The minute books (ref. [JQS/M](#)) cover 1595-1683 and, from 1682, there are doggett (or docket) books (ref. [JQS/D](#)), which are briefer summaries of the court sittings. Although the minute books

1653-1668 and the doggett books from 1826 are name indexed, the names of individual paupers are not necessarily included. For example, in settlement disputes the names of the parishes involved are noted in the index rather than the names of the paupers. The details recorded in the quarter sessions minute/doggett books are very brief and do not give personal information.

There are also quarter sessions papers (ref. [JQS/P](#)) dating from 1699 (with just a few after 1839) which often contain, for criminal cases, detailed witness statements ("informations") and lists of prisoners ("calendars") amongst which are a small number of removal and bastardy orders (for which there is a transcription and name index, ref. [NPM/B/131](#)) and also some annual accounts of St Peter's Hospital.

There is a series of folders of transcriptions of the quarter sessions papers (JQS/P above) covering 1699-1860 which includes a name index for each folder. This is available upon request in our searchroom (staff ref. green folders QS1-55).

Charities

Charity records may also contain information relating to poor relief. Bristol Corporation (the forerunner of the City Council) administered many charities, most of which were taken over by the Bristol Municipal Charities in 1835.

The Bristol Municipal Charities collection has been arranged so that the charities are in one section of the catalogue (ref. [33041/Ch](#)). For charities under the control of the Corporation you will need to search the catalogue for the individual charity name.

Censuses and parish registers

Inmates of workhouses and other institutions are recorded in the censuses. However, in some of the censuses the inmates of 'lunatic asylums' are recorded by their initials only. Taken every 10 years, the censuses are a very valuable family history source. They record where everyone was living on the night of the census and give their ages, occupations and, most importantly, birthplaces.

The first census was taken in 1801 but the early ones were purely statistical and it was not until 1841 that personal information was recorded. For reasons of confidentiality the censuses are not released to the public until 100 years have passed and the 1921 census is the most recent available for study.

The censuses are available on several websites including Ancestry, Find My Past and FamilySearch.

Bristol Archives holds microfiche copies of the censuses 1841-1901 for Bristol and part of the surrounding area, and both Ancestry and Find My Past can be used on-site at the archives and in Bristol Libraries.

The parish registers of baptisms, marriages and burials, now also available on Ancestry, often mention paupers and 'bastard' children. In the Bristol parish registers, the abode of inmates of St Peter's Hospital is often recorded as "The Mint", as the building was previously used as a mint where coins were made.

Websites

There are many websites containing information on the Poor Law. New websites are being created all the time. The following are examples of the many websites available and not a definitive list or recommendations.

The Workhouse (www.workhouses.org.uk) contains historical information about workhouses, both general and specific, and often includes photographs of the buildings.

There are numerous websites containing family history material, including the censuses. Some websites are free and others must be paid for, either by subscription or pay-to-view.

Ancestry (www.ancestry.co.uk) holds the censuses, civil registration indexes (births, marriages and deaths from 1837), military records, phone books, passenger lists and more. Bristol Libraries and Bristol Archives provide free access to Ancestry via ancestryinstitution.com.

Find My Past (www.findmypast.com) holds censuses, civil registration indexes (births, marriages and deaths from 1837), military records and passenger lists and more.

FreeBMD (www.freebmd.org.uk) is an ongoing project transcribing the civil registration indexes of births, marriages and deaths from 1837.

Familysearch (www.familysearch.org) is the site of the Church of the Latter Day Saints and includes material from all over the world as part of its International Genealogical Index (IGI)

Family History Online (www.familyhistoryonline.net) is the site of the Federation of Family History Societies and may be used for parish registers, censuses, monumental inscriptions and Poor Law records and more.

FreeReg (www.freereg.org.uk) provides free searches of baptism, marriage, and burial records, that have been transcribed from parish and non-conformist registers of the UK.

Know Your Place (www.bristol.gov.uk/knowyourplace) contains historic maps and images of Bristol.

The Bristol Archives catalogue (<https://archives.bristol.gov.uk>) can be searched for other material of interest to those researching the Poor Law. Personal names in many individual Poor Law documents, such as removal orders and settlement examinations are included.

List of parishes in the Poor Law unions in the Bristol area

This is a list of the parishes in each Poor Law union in the Bristol area in 1834. By the end of the 19th century many new parishes had been created (particularly in the areas covered by the Bristol Corporation of the Poor and the Clifton / Barton Regis Union) which are not included in this list.

Bristol Corporation of the Poor

All Saints	St Michael the Archangel on the Mount Without
Castle Precincts (city ward)	St Nicholas
Christchurch	St Peter
St Augustine	St Paul Portland Square
St Ewen	St Philip & Jacob (in-parish)
St James	St Stephen
St John the Baptist	St Thomas
St Leonard	St Werburgh
St Mary le Port	Temple
St Mary Redcliffe	

Clifton Union (re-named Barton Regis in 1877)

Clifton	St James & St Paul (united out-parishes)
Compton Greenfield	St Philip & Jacob (out-parish)
Filton	Stapleton
Henbury	Stoke Gifford
Horfield	Westbury-on-Trym
St George	Winterbourne

Bedminster Union

Bedminster	Kingston Seymour
Abbots Leigh	Long Ashton
Backwell	Nailsea
Barrow Gurney	Portbury
Brockley	Portishead
Chelvey	Tickenham
Clapton in Gordano	Walton in Gordano
Clevedon	Weston in Gordano
Dundry	Winford
Easton in Gordano (St George)	Wraxall
Flax Bourton	Yatton
Kenn	

Keynsham Union

Keynsham
Bitton
Brislington
Burnett
Compton Dando
Corston
Hanham Abbots
Kelston
Kingswood
Mangotsfield

Marksbury
Newton St Loe
North Stoke
Oldland
Queen Charlton
Priston
Saltford
Stanton Prior
Syston
Whitchurch

Thornbury Union

Thornbury
Alkington
Almondsbury
Alveston
Aust
Berkeley
Breadstone
Charfield
Cromhall
Elberton
Falfield
Ham

Hill
Hinton
Littleton-on-Severn
Northwick & Redwick
Oldbury on Severn
Olveston
Rangeworthy
Rockhampton
Stone
Tortworth
Tytherington

Chipping Sodbury Union

Chipping Sodbury
Abson & Wick
Acton Turville
Alderley
Cold Ashton
Dodington
Doynton
Dyrham
Frampton Cotterell
Great Badminton
Hawkesbury

Horton
Iron Acton
Little Sodbury
Marshfield
Old Sodbury
Pucklechurch
Tormarton & West Littleton
Wapley & Codrington
Westerleigh
Wickwar

Useful addresses

Somerset Archive & Record Service

Somerset Heritage Centre
Brunel Way
Langford Mead
Norton Fitzwarren
Taunton
TA2 6SF

Tel: 01823 278805 (enquiries)
Tel: 01823 337600 (appointments)

Email: archives@somerset.gov.uk
Website: www.somerset.gov.uk/archives

Gloucestershire Archives

Clarence Row
Alvin Street
Gloucester
GL1 3DW

Tel: 01452 425295

Email: archives@gloucestershire.gov.uk
Website: www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/archives

Map of workhouses in east Bristol (map c1920)

