

POOR LAW TO 1848

POOR RELIEF, 1626-1773

The Overton Records

No records of the poor rate or how it was spent have survived from this period. However, there are the church wardens' accounts for 1623-28¹ and 1680-1708.² They concern the church rate, including charitable giving to travellers, but also reveal two aspects of the poor law.

Marshalsea money

There are regular payments from 1623 referred to simply as 'Marshalsea money' or in more detail in 1695, to '*maymed souldiers, Marshalsey, Kings Bench, Common Gaol and House of Correction, 16s 8d.*' This county levy on parishes was removed by amendments to the poor law in 1739.³

Overton Poor House

In 1686, the Overton vestry instructed the overseers to keep the house 'that belonged to the church' in good repair and that the overseers should pay the church wardens a yearly rate '*for so long as the Parish doth put in any poore man into it which is not able to pay the rent.*'⁴

Thereafter there were regular yearly payments of £1 6s. rent by the overseers of the poor for the church house and the church wardens paid 8s. 6d for the house to be re-thatched in 1703.⁵ In 1707, they paid 9s. for one load of rice for the church house.⁶ It appears that the overseers were generally paying for the running costs of the church house from the poor rates of which there is no record, but for some reason on this one occasion the item was paid from the church rate. In the year to Easter, 1776, the rent of the poor house and the 'habitation of the poor' cost the overseers £6 4s. 6d.⁷ There is no record of the number of paupers the house would accommodate.

From 1777, the overseers also paid 17s. rent for a parcel of land at Dellance (Dellands).⁸ It may be that this land was the site of the poor house and was used to grow vegetables for the inmates. Payments of rent continued until 1803 when they stopped,⁹ presumably because the functions of the poor house had been taken over by the newly built workhouse, or 'house of industry'.

POOR RELIEF, 1773-1848

Overton records

The poor law records survive from 1773-1848. They contain the overseers' accounts for collecting the poor rates and the outdoor relief dispensed.¹⁰ The vestry minute book, 1796-1801,

¹ HRO 81M72/PW1.

² HRO 81M72/PW2.

³ Georgii II, CAP XXIX, 1739.

⁴ HRO 81M72/PW2, entry dated 1686.

⁵ HRO 81M72/PW2, entry dated 1703.

⁶ HRO 81M72/PW2, entry dated 1707.

⁷ *Parl. Papers*. Abstract of the Answers and Returns made pursuant to an Act for procuring returns relative to the Expense and Maintenance of the Poor of England, (London, 1776), 455.

⁸ HRO 81M72/PW11, entry dated 1777.

⁹ HRO 81M72/PW11, entry dated 1803.

¹⁰ HRO 27M80/PO7. Vestry meeting 17 March 1837.

concerns the setting up of the workhouse¹¹ and the *Register of Relief* at the workhouse gives details of the relief dispensed, 1823-1848.¹² Although incomplete, these records provide a clear picture of the way the system worked. The overseers evidently applied the Poor Law Act of 1782, known as Gilbert's Act,¹³ which empowered parishes to provide a workhouse exclusively for children, the aged, infirm and impotent, i.e. those individuals who were '*not able to maintain themselves by their Labour*' who would '*do as much work as they can.*' The able bodied were to be found employment with indoor relief only on a temporary basis.

The poor rates

In the 1790s, poor rates were generally on the rise because of the French wars, the blockade of imports from France, a succession of bad harvests and long-term population increase. The harvest of 1795 was disastrous. Nationally, the price of wheat almost doubled and food riots broke out up and down the country.¹⁴ In 1790-1 the amount spent on the poor in Overton was £270.¹⁵ In 1795-6 it was more than four times higher at £1,173.¹⁶ Similar rises occurred in most, though not in all, parishes in Hampshire in this period.¹⁷ The rates were charged to those who occupied land or premises from which a profit could be made. In 1801, about half of the 230 householders paid the poor rate but the seven farmers who occupied nearly all the land paid two-thirds of it.¹⁸

Outdoor relief

The overseers recorded individual payments on a monthly basis, including the cost of relief dispensed in kind, such as bread, clothes and shoes.¹⁹ The reasons sometimes given were '*want, sickness and distress*'. About 90% of the money was expended on permanent relief through regular monthly payments. 'One-off' benefits given in money included payments for fostering orphans and for children who were ill, payments to those who were 'lame' or 'ill'; payments for 'lost time' (though it is not clear whether it was because of illness or unemployment.); arrears of rent; the services of a midwife; laying out a body, digging a grave and the knell at a funeral; transport to the County Hospital at Winchester and payments to poor travellers on the road.

The range of benefits available was very similar to the state welfare provision which exists now. In 1808-9, the average number of households receiving outdoor relief was 37 and about 16% of families were 'on benefit'.²⁰ In 1817-8 the average number of families receiving outdoor relief had increased to 79 and about 34% of households were 'on benefit'.²¹

¹¹ HRO 81M72/PV1.

¹² HRO 27M80/PO8.

¹³ Shave, S.A., '*Pauper Policies: Poor Law Practice in England, 1780-1850*', (Manchester, 2017), 58.

¹⁴ Minchinton, W.E., '*Agricultural Returns and the Government during the Napoleonic Wars*', *Agricultural History Review*, 1 (1953), 29.

¹⁵ HRO, 27M80/PO2, annual accounts to Easter, 1791.

¹⁶ HRO, 27M80/PO2, annual accounts to Easter, 1796.

¹⁷ Eden, F. M., '*The State of the Poor; Or, An History of the Labouring Classes in England.*' (London, 1797), 2, 218-66. In Petersfield, for instance, the amount expended fell between 1791 and 1795, 222.

¹⁸ HRO 27M80/PO4, annual accounts to Easter 1801.

¹⁹ As illustrated by the monthly accounts in 27M80/PO3, 1800-08.

²⁰ HRO 27M80/PO4, accounts for 1808-9; Census, 1811, the number of households was 232.

²¹ HRO 27M80/PO4, accounts for 1817-8; Census, 1821, the number of households was 257.

		£	s	d
Bro! Forward		784	8	8 3/4
Pd Dame Waldern for laying out J. Oram's Child		2		
Pd for Bread & Cheese		2		
Thos. Ransden Ill		2		
Dame Fisher's Child		8		
Gave D ^r for Shoes		5		
Paid to a Pa's				4
Paid David Strong for the Stiepi of a Boy from Oct. 6 up to Dec. 29		1	10	
Pd. M ^r Webb for 1 Years Interest due at Easter 1804		5		
Let John. Matens Wife have			5	
Nov. 5 W ^m Ewens Ill			3	6
Pd for Warrant & Examination for Ser. Field			3	
Pd for a Warrant for Joseph Snow			2	
9 Pd D. Painter for laying out Orams Child			1	
Paid D ^r for Bread & Cheese			2	
Paid to a Pa's				6
11 J ^{ms} Orams Child Ill			1	
17 Pd J ^{ms} Nash for 2 Graves			2	
Pd J ^{ms} Purdue for the Knell & Funerals W ^m Ewens last Time			3	8
Laying out Sarah Parch			2	
Widow Butcher's House Room			2	
Widow Goddard			2	
Pd Widow. Monney at 8 Weeks at 2/6		1		
Paid W ^m Baker a Bill		5	17	2 1/2
Paid W ^m Tregeed a Bill		1	16	9
Paid Mary Hercher a Bill		1	10	7 1/2
Paid W ^m Pyle a Bill		4	13	4 1/2
Paid. Mich ^l Knight a Bill		4	12	6
Paid R ^d Knight for maintaining the Poor 4 Weeks		30	14	11
John Comdery Ill			5	
Gave Mary Lovell for Rent			10	
Sarah Woodhouse in distres			1	6
Pd John Lovell Esq ^r 3 Years Interest due at Easter 1805		45		
Pd D ^r for 2 Shares on the Work House		100		
		989	15	7 1/4

Fig. 1 A typical page from the overseers' account book in November 1805.

Indoor relief: Overton workhouse

In November 1796, a vestry was called with a proposal to build a workhouse in Overton.²² It was a meeting of the gentlemen proprietors of land in the parish to consider the general state of the poor in order to adopt a better plan for their support, maintenance and employment and also for reducing the 'exorbitant' poor rates which had increased alarmingly in the previous seven years. They proposed to build a 'manufactory' along the lines of one in Medstead parish to provide employment and thereby reduce the poor rates.

The gentlemen represented the interests of the ratepayers but they also expressed concern for the poor. At the next meeting, they were joined by the churchwardens and overseers.²³ A committee was formed and instructed to find a site and to make an estimate of the costs. They commissioned a report from Mr Jones, the master of the house of industry at Michelmersh, near Romsey. He said they employed about 40 men, women and children in a woollen manufactory from which they earned a total of about three pounds a week and that the expense of supporting them amounted to about four pounds a week. Their usual diet consisted of meat three days in the week, and the other four days of broth, milk, bread, cheese and small beer. The Overton vestry therefore had a business model to work to.



Fig. 2.

In February 1797, their report was approved.²⁴ The church already owned the site at Dellands (Fig. 2²⁵) and the committee was instructed to raise £400 for the building and furniture and to find a builder. They estimated that about 50 people would become resident in the house of industry with another 20 employed in the daytime only, returning to their homes at night. Of these, 25 or 30 could be deducted through employment at the silk mills.

The parish population at the 1801 census was 1,130, so the problem of unemployment (including children) was significant but not huge. To pay for the building, the vestry asked for voluntary subscriptions which would be paid back gradually over the course of five years from the poor rate. Five gentlemen bought shares totalling £560.²⁶ These were investments, not gifts. They would get their money back with interest, but it was a quick way of getting the workhouse built.

The committee was concerned that the current hand-outs were sometimes 'improperly applied' and reckoned that the master of the workhouse would know the poor better and would not only save a good deal of money but also save the parish officers a much trouble.

Some asked why a second manufactory was needed as well as the silk mill. The response was that the silk mill only employed about a quarter of the children needing support; that it was not suitable for the aged and infirm, nor for boys over 12 who should be apprenticed on the farms. However,

²² HRO 81M72/PV1, minute No 1.

²³ HRO 81M72/PV1, minute No 2.

²⁴ HRO 81M72/PV1, minute No 4.

²⁵ HRO COPY/148.

²⁶ HRO 27M80/PO4, page 1.

children needing support should be taken on as apprentices in the silk mill.²⁷

There is then a three-year gap in the records. The next entry, in December 1799, is concerned with the appointment of John Jones and his wife as master and mistress of the house of industry at a joint salary of thirty guineas per year. They were to be instructed in the making of sacking.²⁸ The workhouse opened shortly afterwards, probably in 1800. During 1802-3, 38 people were permanently relieved in the workhouse and 154 received outdoor relief, amounting to about 17% of the total population.²⁹

In that year, the annual income from 'manufactures' was £25, enough to pay for the keep of 11 inmates at 3s 6d per month. The running expenses were £541 15s, so initially the predictions made about reducing the poor rate were wildly optimistic.³⁰ Unfortunately, there is no further record of the income. The costs of keeping 40 people in the workhouse in 1808-9 was £192³¹ so the costs did come down. However, the numbers of inmates gradually fell and the average number was 29 in 1817/18.³²

The next set of records are from 1823 to 1829.³³ They include the directions to the master of the workhouse.

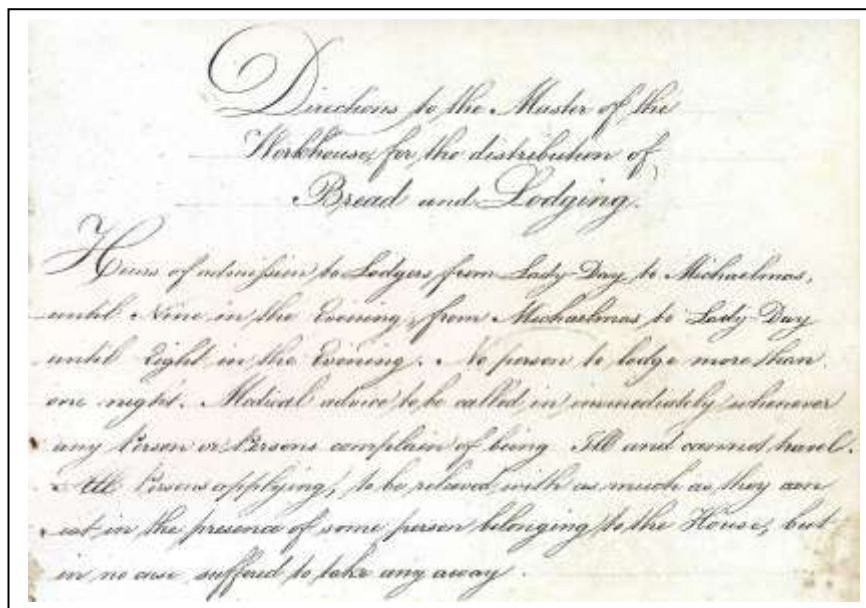


Fig 3. Directions to the master of the workhouse.

The master kept a daily tally. The numbers lodged for the night were generally between one and six. (This was in addition to those already there. Presumably the master made a daily assessment of need.) The instructions about medical advice reflects a grave concern about contagious diseases

²⁷ HRO 81M72/PV1, minute No 5.

²⁸ HRO 81M72/PV1, minute No 11.

²⁹ *Parl. Papers*. Abstract of the Answers and Returns made pursuant to an Act for procuring returns relative to the Expense and Maintenance of the Poor of England (London, 1804), 455.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 454.

³¹ HRO 27M80/PO4, annual accounts for 1808-9.

³² HRO 27M80/PO4, annual accounts for 1817-8.

³³ HRO 27M80/PO8.

such as typhoid and smallpox. Advice was given by Overton's apothecary, Leonard Wooldridge. It was sensible not to allow bread to be taken away in case people who were not really in need might be tempted to sell it. The master classified those applying for relief as '*Needy, Vagrants, Lodged, Saucy, Requested bread, Refused lodging, Sham ill and Really ill.*' He also recorded whether they were given bread or not. He was clearly on the look-out for people trying to claim benefits who did not really need them.

The effects of the Poor Law Amendment Act, 1834

The rising cost of poor relief resulted in a new Act of Parliament being passed in 1834³⁴ which sought to reduce the numbers claiming poor relief. It brought the poor law administration under central government control, abolished outdoor relief altogether and decreed that conditions in workhouses were to be made worse than the poor could expect outside. Applying for poor relief had previously been seen by the poor as a right but it then became a matter for shame.

In order to achieve economies, parishes were brought together into Poor Law Unions. Thus, in 1835, Overton joined with other parishes to form the Whitchurch Poor Law Union.³⁵ The Overton workhouse was bought by the Union along with an extra piece of land for alterations and improvements.³⁶ The administration of the Overton workhouse was taken over by the Whitchurch Union and it did seem to have had the desired effect.

In 1836 there was a Report from the Commissioners of the Poor Laws in England. Henry Earle gave evidence to the Commission for the Whitchurch Union.³⁷ He said that since the formation of the Union, '*there is decidedly a moral improvement in the labouring classes and a great decrease of able-bodied pauperism.*' He claimed there were no able-bodied paupers in the Union workhouses and scarcely any out of employment in any of the parishes in the Union.

Poor rates had generally dropped by about half. The average annual amount expended on the poor from the Overton rate in 1831-4 was £ 1,017.³⁸ By 1837 it had dropped to £545.³⁹ There are no records to indicate what effect this had on the poor of Overton. In 1836, payments for outdoor relief by the Overton overseers suddenly stopped, apart from occasional payments for coffins and transport to hospital.⁴⁰ Lump sums were transferred to the Whitchurch Union instead.

The report of 1836 coincided with a new master being appointed to the Overton workhouse but a few days later, it was burnt down when sparks from the chimney ignited the thatch in a high wind.⁴¹ There are no records about the rebuilding but it must have been done quickly since a vestry meeting

³⁴ Poor Law Amendment Act, (1834) 4 & 5 Will. 4 c. 76.

³⁵ HRO PL3/18/1.

³⁶ PRO MH12/11074.

³⁷ *Parl. Papers*. Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners for England and Wales, (London, 1836), Appendix, 290.

³⁸ *Parl. Papers*. Parliamentary paper 500. Poor Law Commissioners, First Annual report, Appendix, House of Commons, 1835, 247.

³⁹ Parliamentary paper 595. Poor Law Commissioners, Third Annual report, House of Commons, 1837, Appendices A, C and D, 170.

⁴⁰ HRO 27M80/PO7.

⁴¹ *The Times*, 11 May 1836.



Fig. 4. A retouched photograph of part of the former workhouse, c1950.

was held at the workhouse ten months later.⁴² The census of 1841⁴³ shows that John Penfold, the master, with his wife and five children, were in the workhouse on census night along with 29 paupers. Eight of them were elderly. There were three single mothers with children and ten other children under 16 without a parent. Half of all the inmates were children under 16. There were only two adults of working age without children and they may have had physical or mental disabilities. It does appear that the aim of keeping able-bodied adults out of the workhouse had largely been achieved.

In 1846, plans were laid for a single workhouse at Whitchurch to replace all the small parish poor houses in the area and it opened in 1848.⁴⁴ A year later, the former Overton workhouse was rented to five families.⁴⁵ At the 1851 census⁴⁶ there were twenty Overton-born people at the Whitchurch Workhouse. Three were elderly and the rest were single mothers with children. It was demolished in the 1950s.⁴⁷

VCH OVERTON TEAM

⁴² HRO PL5/13, 17 March 1837.

⁴³ Census, 1841.

⁴⁴ HRO 43M66/DU23.

⁴⁵ HRO 27M80/PO7, October 1842.

⁴⁶ *Census*, 1851.

⁴⁷ Pers. comm. A. Deveson.