

Explore The New Poor Law



What was the New Poor Law?

The New Poor Law was introduced in England and Wales under the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. Prior to this, laws governing poverty and the distribution of relief had remained largely unchanged since 1601 when Elizabeth I introduced the first official Acts regulating the poor. The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 signalled major changes in the administration of the Poor Law and the kind of relief granted to the poor. For this reason, the Act of 1834 became known as the New Poor Law while the previous system, which had existed between 1601 and 1834, became known as the Old Poor Law.

How did the New Poor Law differ from the Old Poor Law?

Administration

Under the Old Poor Law it was the responsibility of each individual parish to raise taxes (known as the poor rate) in order to provide relief for poor people living within the parish. The system was administered by officials known as 'overseers', who were elected annually and unpaid. Overseers were often churchwardens or landowners. The duties of an overseer included collecting the poor rate; forcing able-bodied paupers to work; and providing money, housing and other forms of relief to those who were unable to work. There was no central oversight of this system; it was the responsibility of each parish to keep their accounts and administration in order.

Under the New Poor Law, groups of parishes were brought together for the purpose of administering the Poor Law. These groups of parishes were called Poor Law Unions. Each Union was headed by a Board of Guardians, and staffed by paid officials. Committees were also established to help the Guardians with the day-to-day management of the Union. Each Union was responsible for collecting the poor rate and hearing and determining applications for relief from poor people in their jurisdiction. However, over the course of the nineteenth century, the Poor Law Unions also assumed other, non-Poor Law duties, such as school attendance; vaccination; registration of births,

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registration of marriages and deaths; and sanitation. The Poor Law Unions were governed by the central Poor Law Commission (later the Poor Law Board) in London.

Poor Law Unions and Boards of Guardians were eventually abolished under the Local Government Act, 1929. Many of the duties of the Poor Law Unions were assumed by Public Assistance Committees, which were formed in 1930. Despite the abolition of the Poor Law Unions, the New Poor Law itself continued as the principal system for administering welfare to the poor and needy. It was formally abolished under the National Assistance Act, 1948 and the introduction of the modern welfare state, which included the National Health Service.

Workhouses

Workhouses, or poorhouses, existed prior to the introduction of the New Poor Law, and were intended to deter the able-bodied poor from applying for relief and to offer accommodation for those unable to support themselves in their own home. Some workhouses prior to 1834 were not purpose-built but rather individual houses rented by the parish for the homeless poor. The administration of workhouses and the rationale for admitting paupers varied from parish to parish under the Old Poor Law.

Under the New Poor Law the workhouse became the central component of poor relief. Each Union was expected to build (or extend) a workhouse that would accommodate different classes of pauper in segregated accommodation. These new workhouses were meant to act as a deterrent, to stop the able-bodied poor applying for relief. It was intended that only those desperate enough to endure the privations and harsh conditions of the workhouse would be offered relief in the form of accommodation and food.

Out-Relief

Prior to 1834, out-relief was the principal means of assisting the poor. The relief could be paid in money, fuel, food or clothing and allowed paupers to remain in their own homes. The introduction of the New Poor Law was intended to end all out-relief, which by the early nineteenth-century was no longer considered to be economically sustainable. Those in need were expected to receive relief in the workhouse or no relief at all. In reality this proved impossible to enforce, and Poor Law Unions continued to provide a mix of indoor (workhouse) relief and out-relief depending on the situation of the individual pauper.

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