

Explore The New Poor Law in York



The York Poor Law Union

The York Poor Law Union was formed in July 1837 and originally consisted of 80 parishes located in the City of York, the North Riding, the East Riding and The Ainsty (West Riding). By the later nineteenth century the number of parishes in the Union had grown to 83, consisting of 40 parishes in York City, 23 parishes in the North Riding, 14 parishes in the East Riding, and 6 parishes in the West Riding. By 1929 the number of parishes had increased again to 87. The geographical area covered by the Union was approximately 103 square miles and comprised the non-industrialised urban town of York and the surrounding rural/agricultural belt.

The Union was administered by a Board of Guardians made up of elected and ex-officio representatives from the constituent parishes. They met weekly, later fortnightly, in their offices at No. 1 Museum Street, York. During the nineteenth century a committee structure developed to assist the Guardians in the administration of the Union and Workhouse. The Guardians' primary responsibility was to supervise and administer all aspects of poor relief, which included the building and management of a workhouse.

However, over the course of the nineteenth century the Guardians also accrued the following non-poor law responsibilities:

- assessment and valuation of properties for the purpose of collecting the poor rate (1862-1925)
- school attendance (1876-1902)
- vaccination (from 1840)
- registration of births, marriages and deaths (from 1837)
- rural sanitary authorities (1875-1894)

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In 1894 the York, Bishopthorpe, Escrick and Flaxton Out-Relief Unions were formed for the purpose of administering out-relief. The York Out-Relief Union was responsible for administering out-relief for the York City area; the Bishopthorpe Out-Relief Union was responsible for administering out-relief in the area of the York Union that lay in the West Riding; the Escrick Out-Relief Union was responsible for administering out-relief in the area of the York Union that lay in the East Riding; and the Flaxton Out-Relief Union was responsible for administering out-relief in the area of the York Union that lay in the West Riding. All four out-relief unions were part of the York Poor Law Union, otherwise known as the Joint York Union. Members of the four out-relief unions also sat on select committees of the Joint York Union for the purposes of administering indoor relief (workhouse relief) for the whole Union.



The Poor Law Offices at No.1 Museum Street
(now Visit York)



York Workhouse on Huntington Road, c1910

York's Workhouse

Initially the York Poor Law Union took over the old Workhouse in Marygate (until recently, the Post Office Employees Social Club), which had been established by a number of the city parishes. However, the Poor Law Commissioners in London considered the Marygate Workhouse not fit for purpose, as it was overcrowded, unsanitary, and the building did not allow for the segregation of inmates. A new workhouse, located on Huntingdon Rd, was completed in 1848. The building, designed by local architects JB and W Atkinson, could accommodate 354 inmates and included separate wards for women, men, children, 'idiots', the sick, and the aged. Over the course of the nineteenth century the workhouse evolved into a home for the infirm and elderly, with sick wards and trained medical staff. For York's poorer citizens it was the only place where they could access free medical care and many people were 'admitted' to the Workhouse for this reason.

In the 1920s, in an effort to reduce the stigma surrounding the word 'workhouse', it became known as the 'City Institution' (or simply 'The Institution'). In 1930, when the Poor Law Union ceased to exist, it became a Public Assistance Institution (but was still known as the 'City Institution', or the 'Institution and Infirmary'). Between 1939 and 1941 some of the infirmary wards of the Institution acted as an Emergency Medical Services Hospital to accommodate the wounded military.

In 1947 the workhouse buildings were renamed again as The Grange, and what had previously been known as the Infirmary was called the Grange Hospital. In 1955 The Grange Hospital became St Mary's Hospital, while buildings known as The Grange continued to offer welfare accommodation. By the 1970s both The Grange and St Mary's had closed, and in the 1990s the former workhouse buildings were converted into student accommodation for St John's University.

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York's Public Assistance Committee

In 1929, Poor Law Unions were abolished in England and Wales and replaced by new administrative bodies called Public Assistance Committees. However the Poor Law itself continued as the principal system of providing relief to the poor, destitute and infirm until 1948 when it was abolished with the introduction of the National Assistance Act. During the period from 1930 to 1948, York's Public Assistance Committee continued to administer the Poor Law in the York City area and carried out the functions previously performed by York's Board of Guardians, including the running of the City Institution (formerly the York Workhouse). For this reason, the records of the Public Assistance Committee were amalgamated with the records of the York Poor Law Union. In 1930 the areas of the York Union that lay in the North, East or West Ridings became the responsibility of the Public Assistance Committee for the relevant county.

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