

Dorset History Centre - Guide to Sources

Settlement and Bastardy Papers

- Following the Poor Law Acts of 1597-1601 **Overseers of the Poor** were elected on an annual basis by each civil parish
- They were responsible for the collection of the poor rate from local inhabitants and for using those funds to **provide relief to the poor**
- The Poor Law was overhauled in 1834 and the post of Overseer was superseded by elected **Board of Guardians** responsible for managing groups of parishes known as **Poor Law Unions**
- In 1930 the responsibility for the poor was transferred to the local authorities
- The survival rate for records of the Overseers is patchy and varies from parish to parish

Settlement and Removal Papers

- Following the **Act of Settlement** in 1662 the parish only had to help those who were 'legally settled' in the parish
- The act allowed a person to be **challenged within 40 days** of arriving in a parish if they occupied a property valued at less than £10 per year, and unless they could provide an indemnity (a Settlement Certificate) against becoming chargeable to parish they could be **removed by force** and sent to their parish of legal settlement
- A **right of settlement** could be claimed by a person born in the parish, by serving as a parish officer for a year, by working in the parish for more than a year, by a woman marrying a legally settled man or upon serving an apprenticeship to a person legally settled in the parish. A person's place of settlement could change over time

Settlement Certificates

- Settlement Certificates were issued from **1697** and enabled the poor to move from parish to parish

- The certificates certified that the family or individual would be **accepted back by their 'home parish'** should they be chargeable to the new parish and that any sums paid out would be reimbursed
- The certificates record the names of those concerned, the parish from which the family has moved and the parish to which they are intending to go
- Sometimes the certificate would allow the person to remain in a parish, even if they were receiving relief, as the home parish could agree to pay back any monies
- Settlement Certificates were **issued at the discretion** of the parish

Settlement Examinations

- If challenged the person would be examined by the Overseers in an attempt to find out their last legal place of settlement
- The examinations usually **identify the parish of birth** and any other parishes in which the examinant has lived
- The examinations may also provide information concerning apprenticeships and employment, such as the names of masters and employers, the length of service and wages. In effect the examinations often provide a 'potted biography' of the examinant

Removal Orders

- Removal Orders could be **issued by the JPs** if the person or family had no right to settlement in the parish
- The family would be escorted by the **parish constable** to the parish boundary where they would be passed to the constable of the neighbouring parish and so on until they reached their place of legal settlement. Alternatively the constable could escort the family all the way to the parish of settlement
- Removal Orders **record the names** of the paupers involved, the parish from which they were removed and the parish to which they were to be removed. The orders will usually be dated
- Removal Orders sometimes list all the children in the family and give their ages

Bastardy Records

- Parishes wanted to ensure that illegitimate children were not born in their parish, as this could give them cause to claim poor relief
- Elaborate procedures were followed to save the parish from such claims

Bastardy Examinations

- These were taken to **identify the father** of an illegitimate child
- The examinations took the form of an **oath by the mother** as to the identity of the 'reputed father'
- They could take place before or after the birth of the child, with the child being referred to only as the male or female bastard child without a name being specified

Bastardy Orders

- Bastardy Orders were issued by local JPs
- The reputed father is ordered to **pay maintenance** for the support of his illegitimate child
- Bastardy Orders name the reputed father, his parish of residence and his occupation (if known), they will also name the mother and give the sex of the child. The **name of the child is rarely given**
- Refusal to pay could result in a jail sentence

Bastardy Warrants

- Bastardy Warrants were issued by local JPs for the apprehension or arrest of a reputed father

- Issued if the reputed father **refused to pay maintenance** or if he couldn't be found and needed to be brought before the Overseers to answer charges of being the father of an illegitimate child
- Bastardy Warrants name the reputed father, his parish of residence and his occupation (if known), they will also name the mother and may give the sex of the child. The **name of the child is rarely given**

Bastardy Bonds

- In a Bastardy Bond the reputed father, or another surety, pledged himself to contribute to the **upkeep of the child**
- Failure to provide for the child would then mean the reputed father or other sureties having to **pay the parish a sum of money**, usually £40 or £50
- £40 or £50 in the 1750s was the equivalent of 5-10 years wages for an agricultural labourer
- Bastardy Bonds record the name of the surety and sometimes the name of the reputed father. The name of the mother is recorded, but the child may only be identified by gender

Where are they now?

- Settlement and Bastardy papers are usually kept with the parish archive. The **Diocesan Record Office** should hold most parish archives for their area. The local **County Record Office** usually acts as the Diocesan Record Office on behalf of the Bishop
- Catalogues of all the parish archives held by Dorset History Centre are available on our Search Our Catalogues pages