

# Axminster's Workhouses

## The Poor Laws prior to 1723

From Medieval times until the onset of the industrial revolution the basic building block of English society was the parish. Devon has about 500 parishes, of which Axminster is one of the larger ones.

When national taxes were being raised this was ultimately dealt with at a parish level, as was the supply of fighting men in times of war. Just as importantly, parishes were deemed to be responsible for looking after the welfare of all of their residents. Prior to the 17<sup>th</sup> century this was done as a matter of practice, and with big local variations as to cost and effectiveness, but in 1601 the 'Old Poor Law' was enacted, formalising the role of parishes and allowing the Parish Overseers of the Poor to levy a local poor rate for the specific purpose of relieving the effects of poverty. The Parish Overseers of the Poor were appointed (without any right of appeal) by local Justices of the Peace, and in levying a poor rate they were entitled to rely on the co-operation of those parishioners who made up the Parish Vestries, and in particular the church wardens.

The next key law was the 1662 Law of Settlement and Removal (further tweaked in 1685 and 1693) which made birth or residence a necessary condition for receiving parish relief.

The principle of parish responsibility meant that if a weaver from Axminster moved with his family to (say) Tiverton, and then suffered some sort of accident or illness which rendered him unable to work, he and his family were likely to find themselves sent back to Axminster so that the cost of their care and welfare did not fall onto the parishioners of Tiverton. Since the precise status of indigent labourers was not always entirely clear, this could well result in a formal examination of the evidence<sup>1</sup> before a removal order was granted.

## The first Axminster Workhouse: 1738 to 1836

Prior to 1723 parishes often had 'poor houses', where the indigent who were living on parish relief could be allowed (or even required) to live. In Axminster there were seven such poor houses. In 1723, however, an Act of Parliament was passed which allowed parishes to replace their old poor houses with purpose-built institutions known as workhouses. The underlying logic was that this would generate some efficiencies (i.e. savings) to be made, while also enabling the labour of those who could work to be coordinated, possibly in activities which were more valuable than a bottom-of-the-pile labourer could hope to achieve, thereby generating some income for the parish. This approach was based on the assumption that there would be some able-bodied workers living in workhouses.

In 1738 Axminster's first workhouse was opened on West Street, opposite the churchyard entrance steps. It was adjacent to, and in front of, the then existing parish house. It is understood<sup>2</sup> that by 1777 it could accommodate 80 residents. The original building was destroyed by fire in 1789, but it was re-built in stone on the same site, and remained there

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<sup>1</sup> Any surviving written records of such examinations, mainly dating from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, are of great help to family historians, but their survival is very patchy.

<sup>2</sup> No contemporary source for this figure has (yet) been found, and is possible that the figure of 80 refers more specifically to the era after re-building.

for almost 40 more years. It was described in the Universal British Directory of 1792 as “... a large, airy, good house for the poor”.

Although not directly related, it may be of interest to note that by this time Axminster had two Friendly Societies providing some element of social insurance to their members. The Men’s Society had been founded in 1763, and the Women’s Society 3 years later, in 1766, making Axminster unusual, though by no means unique in this regard. By the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Men’s Society had getting on for 700 members, and the Women’s Society had 300.

Not long before the fire and consequent re-building of the workhouse, in 1782, a further Act of Parliament, sometimes known by the name of Thomas Gilbert, its primary sponsor, permitted groups of parishes to get together to form Unions, and to build workhouses for the use of all of the parishes in the Union. However, it also prevented accommodation in such Union workhouses from being offered to the able-bodied: they were specifically required to be offered outdoor relief only.

We know that the Axminster workhouse was based on the Union principle because we have its accounts<sup>3</sup> covering the years 1804/05 and 1805/06, from Easter to Easter. Because the date of Easter varies, the accounting years were of unequal length. They show the following:

Axminster Union Workhouse	1804/05 (54 weeks)			1805/06 (51 weeks)		
Inhabitants	63			61		
	£	s	d	£	s	d
General costs of workhouse	489	11	8	501	2	10¾
Clothes	32	3	10	28	17	8
Shoes	23	16	4	17	18	4
Governor’s salary	27	0	0	27	0	0
Gross costs	572	11	10	574	18	10¾
Income from work	53	17	1	62	19	2
One inhabitant’s annuity	20	0	0	20	0	0
Net costs	498	14	9	491	19	8¾
Average cost per inhabitant per week	2 11			3 1¾		

Further research is required to establish which other parishes formed part of Axminster Union at that time.

<sup>3</sup> Source: Pages 385 to 386 of ‘General View of the Agriculture of the County of Devon’, by Charles Vancouver, drawn up for the Board of Agriculture and published in 1808. This is accessible in Axminster library, and can also be found on-line.

The same source document (published in 1808, but drawing on data collected a year or two earlier) also reports the following parish-by-parish records of income and expenditure for an unspecified year, presumably 1805 or including part of 1805. The following are the figures for Axminster and nearby parishes, with all figures rounded to the nearest pound.

Parish	Income from poor and other rates	Expenditure on churches, highways, bridges, militia rate etc	Expenditure on out-work (i.e. parish relief)	Expenditure on industrial or work houses	Other costs of poor relief
Axminster	£1,108	(*) £317	£208	£511	£38
Membury	£611	£90	£516	-	£5
Kilminster	£185	£17	£159	-	£5
Musbury	£219	£52	£111	£24	£1
Uplyme	£342	£52	£272	-	£3
Combyne	£51	£14	£37	-	-
Axmouth	£407	£66	£256	-	£5
Rousdon	£7	-	£7	-	-
Thorncombe	£780	£74	£387	£314	£9
Shute	£504	£73	£364	-	£39

Note: (\*): It is commented that this figure included some significant work on the church. It is not stated whether this had required a higher-than-normal rate to be levied, or if the cost had come out of accumulated funds saved over a period of years.

Axminster's income from the poor rate and other rates at this time (taken from the same source document) was £1,108. This can be compared with that of other nearby market towns in East Devon, as follows. Colyton: £1,065, Hemyock: £941, Honiton: £932, Sidbury: £888, Seaton and Beer (a single parish): £691, and Sidmouth: £307. The wealth of Seaton, Beer and Sidmouth should also be compared with that of parishes detailed in the table above such as Membury, Axmouth, Thorncombe and Shute.

The same source shows that no Devon parishes to the east of a line running north-south just to the west of Dunkeswell and Sidmouth which are not already named above had an income from poor and other rates in excess of £700. At this time Stockland, Dalwood, Chardstock and Hawkchurch were all in Dorset, while Thorncombe was in Devon.

Although it should not be assumed that all workhouses were alike, it may be considered interesting to see the following information (from the same 1808 source) regarding the diet provided to inmates of the Exeter workhouse at very much the same time.

<i>Breakfast; Sun, Mon, Thurs, Fri</i>	<i>Ounces of bread</i>	<i>Pints of broth</i>
Adults	3	2
12-15	3	1½
7-12	2	1
<7	2	¾

<i>Breakfast; Tues, Weds, Sat</i>	<i>Ounces of bread</i>	<i>Pints of goat milk</i>
Adults	3	2
12-15	3	1½
7-12	2	1
<7	2	¾

<i>Dinner (midday); Sun, Thurs</i>	<i>Ounces of meat</i>	<i>Pints of broth</i>	<i>Potatoes</i>	<i>Ounces of bread</i>	<i>Pints of beer</i>
Adults	6	2	3-4	4	½
12-15	5	1½	2-3	4	½
7-12	4	1	2	4	-
<7	3	¾	2	3	-

<i>Dinner (midday); Mon, Fri</i>	<i>Ounces of bread</i>	<i>Pints of goat milk</i>	<i>Pints of beer</i>
Adults	4	2	½
12-15	4	1½	-
7-12	4	1	-
<7	3	¾	-

<i>Dinner (midday); Tues, Sat</i>	<i>Ounces of bread</i>	<i>Pints of pease</i>	<i>Pints of beer</i>
Adults	2	2	1
12-15	2	1½	½
7-12	2	1	¼
<7	2	¾	-

<i>Dinner (midday); Weds</i>	<i>Ounces of baked pudding</i>	<i>Pints of beer</i>
Adults	13	1
12-15	10½	½
7-12	8	¼
<7	6	-

Supper was the same every day. Adults received 4 oz of bread and either 2 oz of cheese or ½ oz of butter, plus ½ pint of beer. Those aged 12-15 received 4 oz of bread and 1½ oz of cheese (with no butter option), plus ½ pint of beer. Those aged 7-12 received 4 oz of bread

and either 1¼ oz of cheese or ¼ oz of butter, plus ¼ pint of beer. Those aged under 7 received 3 oz of bread and either 1 oz of cheese or ¼ oz of butter.

Further context can be taken from national estimates<sup>4</sup>, which show that the administration of the Poor Laws, which had cost £2 million in 1785, had doubled by 1803 and doubled again by 1817, by which point it represented one sixth of all public expenditure, and 13/6d per head of population. It fell a bit thereafter, and by more in per capita terms, because the underlying population was rising so rapidly.

The Parish Overseers of the Poor were also encouraged to identify 'failing families', where the wages coming into the household were simply inadequate to support the whole family. In the short term they might provide some poor relief, by paying the head of household to undertake work for the general good (known as 'outdoor relief'). Where the position was clearly not going to get better, they had the power to arrange for one or more of the children to be apprenticed to local farmers, tradesmen or householders, effectively as indentured servants. This was often done at the age of about 10, and the term of the apprenticeship was intended to take that child through to adulthood, at which point they ought to be able to enter the wider wage economy. Parish records sometimes show three, four or five children from a single labourer's family being apprenticed, providing clear evidence of the poverty of their parents' household.

Most apprentices were placed with a master who lived in their parish of origin, but some were assigned to masters from neighbouring parishes. Where this was the case, the apprentice became the long-term responsibility of that parish (so that if, in later years, they fell on hard times, they would be returned to the parish where they had been apprenticed rather than to their birth-place).

Widows (or others) who were too old and unwell to be expected to work would be provided with charitable support. The concepts of the 'deserving' and 'underserving' poor largely survive from this distinction between those who were deemed to be capable of supporting themselves but for one reason or another failed to do so, and those who by any reasonable standard were in need of permanent welfare.

As the industrial revolution got under way, and more and more families moved long distances, this parish-based welfare system came under increasing strain. Some parishes to which industrial workers were moving saw their populations explode, from a few hundred to thousands, if not tens of thousands of residents, over a couple of decades.

### **The move to Foxhill**

The Poor Law (Amendment) Act of 1834 sought to bring some order and uniformity to the provision of welfare, and to increase the size of most local workhouses, not least to reflect the rapid growth in population which was already becoming evident by then, and which continued throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

It ended parish control of poor relief, bringing in Boards of Guardians, and establishing principles of public supervision, inspection and audit by a Central Board of Commissioners<sup>5</sup>. It also established two guiding principles, marking a clear change in tone and practice. Firstly it established that able-bodied men seeking relief could seek it in the workhouse, but only there: outdoor relief was abolished. Secondly it explicitly required conditions in the

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<sup>4</sup> Source: Encyclopedia Britannica entry on Poor Laws.

<sup>5</sup> In 1871 these oversight responsibilities were passed to the Local Government Board.

workhouse to be made uncongenial, if not downright unpleasant, to make the option of entering the workhouse as unattractive as possible.

The 1834 Act also required (as opposed to allowing) groups of parishes to form themselves into Unions, and established about 600 such Unions nation-wide. The Axminster Union comprised 17 parishes spanning the Devon / Dorset county boundary, of which the other 16 were (in alphabetical order): Axmouth, Chardstock, Charmouth, Colyton, Combpyne, Dalwood, Hawkchurch, Kilmington, Lyme Regis, Membury, Musbury, Seaton and Beer, Shute, Stockland, Thorncombe and Uplyme. The parish of All Saints had not been created by then. The Union had four Overseers, whose duties were performed by a paid Assistant Overseer.

The new Axminster Union Workhouse, which opened in 1836, was built well outside the town, at Foxhill, to the east of the Musbury Road. It cost about £7,000 to build and could accommodate 300 residents (almost three times the old workhouse's capacity). Before very long it was extended at a cost of a further £2,500<sup>6</sup> and its capacity raised to 450 persons.

It was run by an appointed Overseer, who was appointed and guided by a Board of Guardians, the members of which were elected from the ratepayers of the member parishes. The day-to-day work of the Overseers of the Union (not just the one with responsibility for the workhouse) was carried out by a paid Assistant Overseer.

Before the formation of the Union the cost of poor relief in the 17 parishes had been £10,218, whereas for the three years ending 1840 the average annual cost was £9,058<sup>7</sup>.

By 1850 the paid position of Assistant Overseer was held by John Bradford, and William Gomm was the master of the workhouse while his wife acted as matron. Rev Zachary James Edwards was the chaplain, and George Coleman ran the workhouse school.

In 1856 George Cartwright was Chairman of the Board of Guardians (which met fortnightly in the boardroom of the workhouse), Robert Orley was the master of the workhouse and Mrs Mary Orley was the matron. Dr Charles Hallett was the surgeon, Rev Edwards remained the chaplain, and the clerk was Charles William Bond, a local solicitor. John Bradford was still the Assistant Overseer. The Relieving Officer for Axminster was Robert Phelps Pearce, there being a second Relieving Officer who was generally based in Colyton. This team remained largely unchanged for about 15 years, though by 1870 Rev William Bulmer Bailey was the chaplain, Samuel Griffin was the Relieving Officer based at Axminster, and a schoolmaster and mistress (John Hilditch and Miss L M Patterson respectively) had been added. In 1871 there were 80 males and 59 females housed in the workhouse<sup>8</sup>.

By 1873 Thomas Couch was the Assistant Overseer, John Hebditch was the master at the workhouse (while Mrs Orley remained the matron), and William Forward had taken over as clerk to the Board of Guardians. Alfred Brewer was the schoolmaster, and Mrs Lucy Hebditch was the schoolmistress.

Five years later, in 1878, James Loveridge of Lyme Street had taken over as Assistant Overseer and Thomas Pickering was the master of the workhouse. The Chairman of the Board of Guardians was John C Bentley, and the two Vice Chairmen were Charles Henry Ewens and T D Chapple. Dr Hallett and William Forward remained surgeon and clerk

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<sup>6</sup> Source: Several directories, including Billings directory for 1857.

<sup>7</sup> Source: Kelly's directory for 1878/78, which also reports that by 1876 the annual cost had risen to £13,223 with the average weekly cost of food for indoor paupers being 2s 10½d plus 6d for clothing.

<sup>8</sup> Source: Kelly's directory for 1878/79.

respectively, and Samuel Griffin of South Street was still the Relieving Officer. Mrs Mary Jane Hutchings was the matron, and the school teachers were Mr Cousins and Miss Vanstone.

The directory for 1878/79 reported that the Board of Guardians had grown to 30 elected members, and its responsibilities were expanding to include more public health functions, with an emphasis on the vaccination of children. This involved the nomination of several other local doctors to support Dr Hallett.

The only changes in personnel at the workhouse from above were the arrival of Rev John William Hanson as chaplain, and the addition of Mrs Mary Ann Rockett as nurse and Thomas Rockett as porter. By 1883 Rev Hanson had in turn given way to Rev John Nott Dyer Hurdon and by 1889 the chaplain was Rev A Newman. Thomas Pickering remained master of the workhouse, but the surgeon was Dr Langran and the matron was Mrs T K White.

By the 1890s conditions in workhouses were gradually relaxed. In 1891 toys and books were allowed in; in 1892 tobacco and snuff were permitted; and in 1894 residents were allowed to have some access to tea, milk and sugar so that they could make tea for themselves. In 1897 trained nurses were required to be available for the care of the sick, and then in 1900 in a complete reversal of principle, 'the aged of good character' were allowed to apply for outdoor relief.

By 1893 the master at the workhouse was John Bevan, and Mrs Emily Elizabeth Bevan was the matron. Rev A Newman and Dr Langran were still the chaplain and surgeon respectively, and Samuel Griffin was still the Relieving Officer. Mrs Bevan had died by 1902, and her successor as both wife and matron was Mrs Ada Bevan. By 1910 Mr and Mrs Bevan had left, and they were replaced by Mr and Mrs John H Lingard. By 1914 they too have left, and the new incumbents were Mr and Mrs George Bareham. Rev Philip Leach Nicholas was the new chaplain, and Dr Langran remained the surgeon. By 1919 only Dr Langran remained a constant: Mr A E Barroll and Mrs F T Barroll were the master and matron, and Rev Ernest Bramwell was the chaplain.

By 1922, well after World War I but also well before the great depression of the 1930s, almost 5% of the population of England and Wales was in receipt of poor law relief, with big local variations.

By 1923 Rev Frederick Hayne Sanders was the new chaplain, but the other three posts remained unchanged from 1919, and there had been no further changes by 1926.

### **Closure of the workhouse, and its conversion to Box House**

The workhouse system was in effect abolished by the Local Government Act of 1929, and the Axminster workhouse closed in 1930. The final list of officials appeared in the 1930 directory, and it comprised Mr E A Warner (presumably the master, but this was not specified), Rev Sanders and Dr Langran, who by then had held the post of surgeon to the Axminster Union for over 40 years.

Like some other Devon workhouses it was converted into a residential home for mental patients, and by 1933 at the latest it was operating in this way, under the name of Box House. In 1971 it was re-named St Mary's Hospital, but it was later closed and demolished to make way for housing.