

## **The Poor Law**

From 1601 the relief of the poor was the responsibility of the parish in which a pauper was born, or in which he or she had officially settled. This was funded by means of rates. However, the mass movements of population caused by the Industrial Revolution made this system unworkable, and the lack of central organisation made for a wide variation in the way the original provisions were applied. Even before the Poor Law Amendment Act parishes in some areas banded together to provide for their poor jointly. By the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 a commission was set up to reorganise and standardise the entire system. Unions were created consisting of several adjacent parishes. Each would elect a board of guardians with powers to levy rates, to erect a workhouse to house the poor and to oversee the provision of poor relief within the union.

The Local Government Act 1929 saw the abolition of the administrative structure of poor law unions. The boards of guardians were dissolved, and their powers transferred to county councils. Poor relief became known officially as 'public assistance'. In 1948 the poor law was finally brought to an end by the National Assistance Act and the creation of the welfare state.

Poor Law Unions did not adhere rigidly to county boundaries: for example, Llanelli Union, which was mainly made up of Carmarthenshire parishes, also included Loughor, which was in Glamorgan. When civil registration began in 1837, the poor law unions were used as registration districts. In 1872, unions in rural areas took on powers for public health as rural sanitary authorities (later to become rural district councils).

## **Typical records**

*Minute books:* boards of guardians met regularly to discuss matters relating to the running of the workhouse, and the minute books constitute the formal record. In some cases there were committees to deal with particular types of business. Individuals' details are not recorded in the minute books.

*Lists of inmates:* there are various classes of document that list the inmates of the workhouse. Creed registers record religious persuasion; admission and discharge registers give the dates of entry and departure of each inmate. Some unions also published printed lists of the recipients of poor relief.

*Regulations:* there were lists of regulations to be observed by the workhouse inmates. Punishment registers record the consequences of breaking the rules.

*Rating records:* the workhouse was funded by means of rates. Valuation lists were drawn up to establish the rateable value of each house. Rate books give the name of the owner and householder of each property, and record payment and arrears of rates.

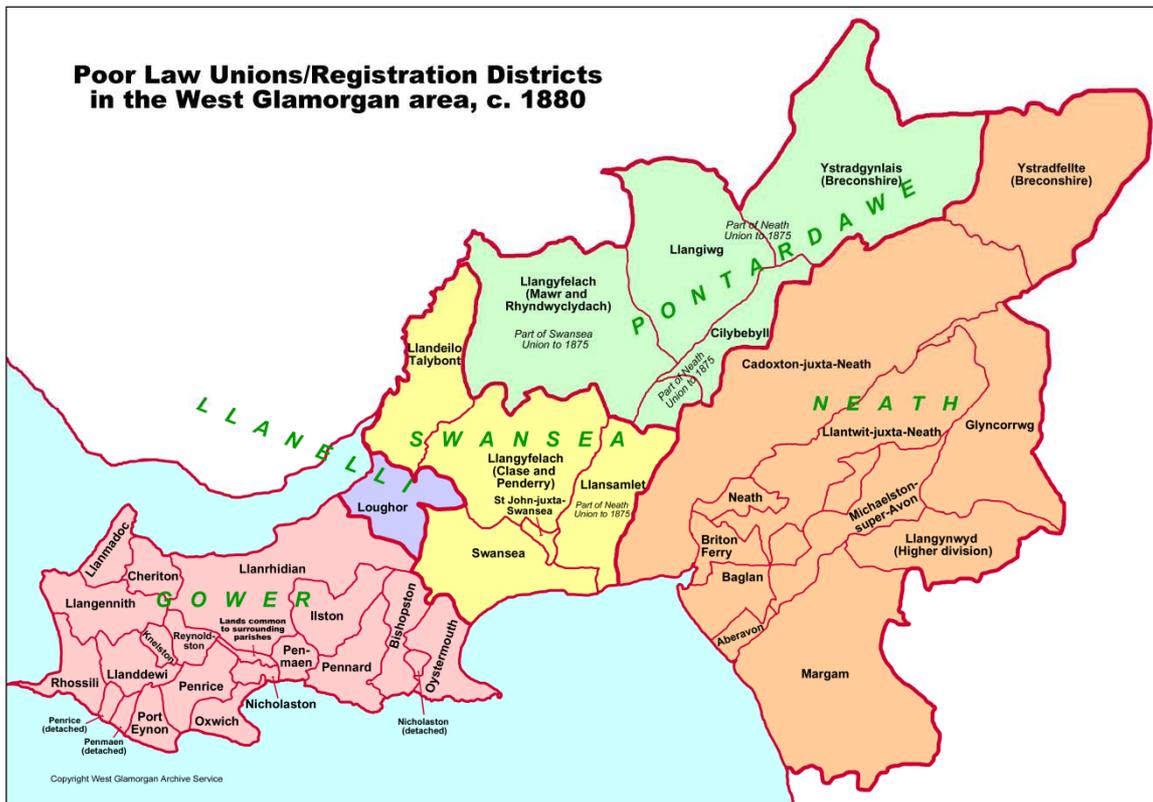
*Accounts:* details of income and expenditure on such matters as wages of staff, and the purchase of food, clothing and other materials.

*Health records:* there may be registers of births and deaths (containing brief details only), medical officers' report books, and registers of lunatics resident in the workhouse and transferred to local asylums. Neath Union preserved a set of vaccination registers.

*Other records:* there are several classes of records that give information about the operation of the workhouse: inventories of property, regulations for inmates, plans of the workhouse, photographs of inmates, buildings and staff

Please note: because of the sensitive nature of these records, access to any entries relating to individuals who may still be living will be restricted.

## Poor Law Unions covering the West Glamorgan area



**1. Swansea Union:** Swansea Union originally consisted of Swansea, Llangyfelach, St John-juxta-Swansea, Llandeilo Talybont and the Gower parishes. The Gower parishes were formed into the Gower Union in 1857. In 1875 the boundaries were altered again, with the inclusion of Llanamlet parish (formerly part of Neath Union) and the loss of Rhyndwyclydach and Mawr hamlets of the parish of Llangyfelach to the newly formed Pontardawe Union. The workhouse, known later as Tawe Lodge, was built at Mount Pleasant, and was used later as a maternity hospital. It is currently in use as flats. There were also cottage homes in Cockett, since demolished.

Records: Minutes, 1849-1930; correspondence, 1859-1869; valuation lists, 1863-1928 (reference U/S); rate books, 1845-1918; accounts, 1866-1949 (reference TR); photograph of Board of Guardians, 1895 (reference D178); Swansea Union Workhouse: master's reports, 1842-1914; registers, 1836-1954; accounts, 1838-1927; Cockett Cottage Homes: Visiting Committee books, 1878-1904; report books, 1883-1950; accounts, 1878-1905 (reference U/S). Held at the West Glamorgan Archive Service (WGAS).

**2. Neath Union:** Neath Union originally consisted of the parishes of Aberavon, Baglan, Briton Ferry, Cadoxton-juxta-Neath, Cilybebyll, Glyncorrwg, Llangiwig, Llangynwyd (Higher division only), Llansamlet, Llantwit-juxta-Neath, Margam, Michaelston-super-Avon, Neath, Ystradgynlais and Ystradfellte. However, in 1875 there were considerable changes to the boundaries. Llansamlet was ceded to Swansea, and Cilybebyll, Llangiwig and Ystradgynlais, and a division of Cadoxton-juxta-Neath parish called Ynysymond, went to make up part of the new Pontardawe Union. The workhouse, known as Lletty-nedd, was built at Penydre on Llantwit Road, Neath, and part of it is still in existence. There were cottage homes in Bryncoch, which have now been demolished.

Records: list of paupers in Parish of Margam, 1842 (reference D/D Xlm); minutes, 1853-1930; accounts, 1917-1930; vaccination registers, 1853-1947; Neath Union Workhouse: registers, 1867-1940; report books, 1917-1930; accounts, 1912-1946; Bryncoch Cottage Homes: registers, 1877-1955; accounts, 1901-1949 (reference U/N). Held at the WGAS.

**3. Gower Union:** The inhabitants of Gower petitioned for the creation of a separate union in 1843, and the Gower Union was created out of the Swansea Union in 1857. It covered the parishes of Bishopston, Cheriton, Ilston, Knelston, Llanddewi, Llangennith, Llanmadoc, Llanrhidian, Nicholaston, Oystermouth, Penmaen, Pennard, Penrice, Port Eynon, Reynoldston and Rhossili. The workhouse was built at Penmaen in 1860-1861. Formerly known as the Penmaen Institution, it is currently an old people's home.

Records: minutes, 1896-1930; accounts, 1895-1930; Gower Union Workhouse: title deeds, 1860-1866; registers, 1869-1949; day books, 1922-1949; accounts, 1915-1952 (reference U/G); accounts, 1916-1924 (reference TR); plan and conveyance for workhouse at Penmaen, 1858-1860 (reference D/D Xau). Held at the WGAS.

**4. Pontardawe Union:** Pontardawe Union was formed in 1875 from parts of Neath and Swansea unions, and covered the parishes of Cilybebyll, Llangiwig, Ystradgynlais (Breconshire), Llangyfelach (Mawr and Rhyndwyclydach divisions only) and Ynysymond (a division of Cadoxton-juxta-Neath parish). The workhouse was built in Pontardawe in 1879, and renamed 'Danybryn Hostel' in 1948. It was closed in 1988 and subsequently demolished.

Records: minutes, 1875-1930; accounts, 1875-1930; valuation lists, 1897-1927; Pontardawe Union Workhouse: registers, 1902-1943; day books, 1933-1949; accounts, 1875-1949 (reference U/Pd). Glamorgan County Council Public Assistance Committee: minutes, 1931-1936; registers, 1933-1962; accounts, 1929-1958 (reference GCC/PAC/Pd). Held at the WGAS.

**5. Llanelli Union:** despite being in Glamorgan, Loughor parish was included in Llanelli Union. The union also included the Carmarthenshire parishes of Kidwelly, Llangennech, Llanedi, Llanelli, Llannon and Pembrey. The workhouse was a short distance outside Llanelli, on the road to Swansea.

Records: The records for Llanelli Union are held at the Carmarthenshire Archives Service.

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