Caring for the poor, sick and needy.
A brief history of poor relief in Scotland

Aberdeen City Archives
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1. A brief history of poor relief up until 1845

The first acts of parliament to deal with the relief of the poor were passed in 1424. Most of these and subsequent acts passed in the 15th and 16th centuries dealt with beggars and little information on individuals survives from this time.

After the Reformation, the responsibility for the poor fell to the parish jointly through the heritors, landowners and officials within burghs who were expected to make provision for the poor and were also responsible for the parish school til 1872 and the church and manse til 1925, and the Kirk Sessions (the decision making body of the (or local court) of the parish church, made up of a group of elders, and convened (chaired) by a minister.

The heritors often made voluntary contributions to the poor fund in preference of being assessed, and the kirk sessions raised money for the poor from fines, payments for carrying out marriages, baptisms, and funerals, donations, hearse hiring, interest on money lent, rent incomes and church collections.
In 1597, an act entitled *For Punischment of Strang and Idle Beggars and Reliefe of the Pure and Impotent* was passed, and made provision for each parish to make a list of its own poor, those who had been born in the parish or had lived there for at least seven years, so that the poor and infirm could be provided with places to stay. It also enabled the heritors to take the children of beggars into unpaid service until they were 18 in the case of girls, and 24 for boys.

A subsequent act of 1672 ordered magistrates to build "correction houses" or work houses in which beggars could be put to work.

However, as the Act of Union in 1707 had allowed Scotland to retain its own judicial system, the Poor Law Amendment Act in 1834 did not apply to Scotland, and with the Disruption in the Church of Scotland in 1843, there were fewer people to administer the relief of the poor through the Kirk Sessions, and it was realised that the situation had to be looked at. So in January 1843, a Commission of Enquiry was set up to assess the state of poor relief in Scotland and to suggest ways in which it could be improved.
2. A brief history of poor relief after 1845

In 1845 the Scottish Poor Law Act was passed,¹ following the report of the Commission of Enquiry which was delivered on 2 May 1844. The Act did the following:

- Allowed for the setting up of a central Board of Supervision would administer the system. The Board's membership would consist of the Lord Provost of Edinburgh, the Lord Provost of Glasgow, the Solicitor General of Scotland, the Sheriffs Depute of the counties of Perth, Renfrew, Ross & Cromarty, and three other persons to be appointed by the Crown. It was the Board's duty to see that every parish provided, and put into order, the system of administration required by the Act.

- Set up Parochial Boards in each of Scotland's 880 parishes, who were locally appointed each year, and whose duty it was to see that the poor were given sufficient relief.

- Authorised the Parochial Board to decide whether to raise poor relief funds voluntarily or to impose a poor rate,

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¹ The Amendment and better Administration of the Laws Relating to the relief of the Poor in Scotland (8 & 9 Vic. c. 83)
generally to be based on the assessment of property ownership

- Poor relief could be given in cash or kind, and a poorhouse could be set up to house the sick and destitute but not the able-bodied
- Parishes could be united for settlement and poor relief purposes, including the establishment of joint poorhouses - this was common in urban areas (leading to Combination poorhouses, approval for the building of these was given by the Board of Supervision)
- An Inspector of the Poor in each parish would examine all applications for poor relief and was appointed by the Parochial Board
- Required Parochial Boards to place insane persons in an asylum
- Required medical attendance and a nutritious diet to be provided for the sick poor
- Gave those who were refused relief a right of appeal to the Sheriff, and those who were dissatisfied with the nature or amount of relief offered, a right of appeal to the Board of Supervision
- Authorised the removal to their respective countries, English and Irish paupers who had not gained settlement in Scotland
Authorised the Parish who relieved a destitute person not having settlement in that Parish, the right to recover costs from the Parish of Settlement
Authorised the prosecution of persons deserting, or failing to maintain, their wives and families
Authorised the Board of Supervision to institute proceedings in the Court of Session against any Parochial Board refusing or neglecting to perform its statutory duties

The Scottish Act was different from the Act in England and Wales as it exempted able-bodied persons from claiming relief, and relief was not confined to the poorhouse as poor houses were voluntary in Scotland, but required in England and Wales.²

In 1830, only 230 of Scotland's 880 parishes were using the assessment system to provide poor relief, rather than voluntary contributions, but in 1853 this had risen to 680.

² The term **poorhouse** was used in Scotland while **workhouse** was mainly used in England. Scottish poorhouses were not expected to meet their own costs from the labour of inmates as English workhouses were.
In 1894 the Board of Supervision was replaced by a more powerful Local Government Board which was responsible directly to Parliament. The Parochial Boards were replaced by Parish Councils which held office for three year terms, and emphasis was placed on improving hospital facilities. The trade depression of the 1920s led to the amendment of the rule that the unemployed were not entitled to poor relief, and thereafter the parishes usually kept separate records of applications for 'ordinary' and 'able-bodied'. After the passing of the Local Government Act of 1929, many poorhouses became Public Assistance Institutions providing care for the elderly, infirm, chronically ill, and unmarried mothers-to-be.

In 1930 Parish Councils were abolished under the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1929. The parish system as it was, was uneven around the country, as there was a tendency for relief to vary between parishes, and there was a high level of dispute over who was responsible for the relief of individual paupers. Larger authorities were required to bring a better level of standardisation and to ensure that the burden of poor relief was spread more equitably.

3 Poor Law Emergency Powers (Scotland) Act 1921
After 1930 poor law authorities were the county councils and large burghs acting through the Department of Public Assistance. This survived until 1948 when the National Insurance Act was passed, but various welfare functions remained with local authorities, including provision for the homeless, homes for the elderly, care of the mentally and physically handicapped, and various functions relating to children including adoption and fostering. These and others were grouped into the Social Work Departments under the Social Work (Scotland) Act of 1968.

3a. Parochial Board/Parish Council Minute Books

These deal with the administration of the system of poor relief and matters relating to it. The information tends to be of a more general nature but can mention specific cases and it may be worthwhile looking through these if little information is found in other records.

Matters covered range from levying the assessment on the land and property owners, health concerns, diets, etc.
The content differed from parish to parish, and some rural parish minutes contain a lot of information, such as residence of the applicant and their living conditions, reason for application, reasons for acceptance or rejection of an application, members of the applicant's family and their earnings, and comments by the Inspector of the Poor. Yet some minutes contain little information on applicants, sometimes only their name and the decision made regarding them.

3b. Records of Applications

In this series of documents you can find records of the original applications made and their reasons for acceptance or rejection.

The information they contain includes:

- the hour and date of the application
- the applicant's name, residence and country of birth
- the date of the Inspector's visit to their home
- their condition, age, occupation and average weekly earnings
- whether the applicant was wholly or partially disabled
- the names and ages of any dependants they may have
- other information pertinent to the claim
- number of previous applications
- results of the application
- grounds for refusal
- number in the General Register of the Poor (if accepted)

3c. General Registers of the Poor

These were the poor relief registers maintained by individual parishes. In 1865 the Board of Supervision introduced new General Registers of Poor and Children's Separate Registers. They contain a wealth of information on individual applicants including names, place of residence, disability, family members, trade/occupation, and general comments on their relief and living conditions, and any changes in circumstance.

Sometimes information in them may contradict information in other records. This can be because the applicant was ill or elderly and may only have given vague information to the Inspector of the Poor. Some applicants also give false information to qualify for relief, or a clerical error may result in a misspelled name, or someone being located in the wrong parish or county.
3d. Children's Separate Registers

Children's Separate Registers were introduced in 1865 by the Board of Supervision and were designed to record the applications for relief of children who were receiving relief from the parish or combination. These children were either orphaned or deserted by their parents, or may have been ordered to be separated from their parent or parent and placed elsewhere.

They contain a great deal of information including:

- reference to the relevant General Register Folio
- age, condition, health, and any ailments
- reason they have been separated from their parent(s)
- name and residence of parents
- details of who they were boarded out to
- name of the school they attended
- whether they were apprenticed or a servant

3e. Register of Guardians

The Register of Guardians was required to be kept under the Children act of 1908.
It contains information on families and guardians who were to be in charge of children who were either separated from their parents or orphaned.

They contain information including:

- the name of the person receiving the child and where they live
- the name, date and place of birth, sex, date received, date of the notice given to the parish council for the child
- the name, address and the terms agreed upon of the person from whom the child was received
- occupation of the guardian
- the number of rooms in the dwelling house of the guardian, and the number of people living there
- the number of children under the ages of 7 that the parish council have authorised to be retained there
- and any details of the Inspector's Visits, Reports and findings

**3f. Assessment Rolls**

Assessment Rolls were kept by the Parochial Boards and Parish Councils to enable the levying of the poor relief among the
landowners and property owners of the parish.

They provide a great deal of information on the social standing of the population, giving such details as:

- the name and address of the land/property owner
- the amount of rent they are due yearly for their land/property
- how much they have been assessed at
- and how much was paid to the collector

They also include an abstract of the money paid by a. tenants and owners, and b. proprietors

3g. Public Assistance Committee Minutes

The Public Assistance Committee was set up under the Local Government Act of 1929 and carried on the functions of the parishes until they in turn were abolished by the National Insurance Act of 1948.

The minutes include information on:
- the name, age, marital status, address, disability and allowance granted to applicants
• unemployment relief
• boots and clothing allowances
• casual relief
• repairs to churchyards
• changes on the relief rolls
• appeals for relief

4. Records for Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire

4a Aberdeen City
Aberdeen City Archives holds the following records relating to poor relief:— minutes for the St Nicholas Parochial Board; indexes to the minutes from 1845; minutes from 1884 - 1895; minutes and reports of the committee from 1856 - 1895. From 1895 the Minutes of the Aberdeen City Parish Council have survived and along with the day to day running of the poor houses and the administration of the poor relief - the minutes also give the names of those receiving help at both the West and East Poorhouses. These minutes are printed and run from 1895 - 1930 when parish councils were abolished under the Local Government (Scotland) Act of 1929 which introduced Public Assistance.

The Local Studies Department of the Central Library, Rosemount Viaduct hold the
following printed records for the Parochial Board of Old Machar:- Reports of the Finance and Assessment Committee of the Parochial Board of the parish of Old Machar, 1867 - 1884 and 1886; Reports of the Managers for the Poor of the parish of Old Machar, 1838 - 1840, 1846 - 1848 and Reports of the Committees of the Parochial Board of the parish of Old Machar with Lists of Paupers etc, 1855, 1859 - 1860, 1866 - 1867, 1870 - 1873 and 1877 - 1880.

No records relating to individuals, such as the Records of Application, General Registers of the Poor or Children's Separate Registers survive for any of the city poor houses or parochial boards.

Three North-East poorhouses later transferred to the National Health Service and were used as hospitals. The surviving records of Oldmill (now part of Woodend Hospital, Aberdeen), the Buchan Combination Poorhouse (Maud Hospital) and Kincardine Combination Poorhouse (latterly Woodcot Hospital) are held by Northern Health Services Archives. These include minutes and general admission registers (Oldmill, 1937 - 89, Maud 1912 – 83, and Woodcot 1867 –1970). Records of individuals are closed for 100 years.
4b Aberdeenshire
Records relating to the parochial boards and parish councils for many parishes in Aberdeenshire are held by Aberdeen City Archives at the Old Aberdeen House branch in Dunbar Street. They also care for the records of Moray. The records have been indexed by parish and personal name by the Aberdeen and North East Scotland Family History Society. These indexes are available at the ANESFHS in King Street and at Old Aberdeen House.

All Poor Law and Parochial Board, Parish Council, Public Assistance and Health Service records are subject to the Data Protection Act (1998)
**4c Contact Details**

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Open Mon - Wed 9.30 - 1.00, 2.00 - 4.30  
Limited parking is available

Central Library, Rosemount Viaduct, Aberdeen AB25 1GW  
Telephone: 01224 652512  
[LocalStudiesLibrary@aberdeencity.gov.uk](mailto:LocalStudiesLibrary@aberdeencity.gov.uk)

Northern Health Services Archives, Victoria Pavilion, Woolmanhill Hospital,  
Aberdeen AB25 1LD  
Telephone: 01224 555562  
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Aberdeen & North East Scotland Family History Society, 164 King Street, Aberdeen AB24 5BD  
Telephone: 0124 646323  
Email: [enquiries@anesfhs.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@anesfhs.org.uk)
5. Further Reading

H.M.S.O., *Rules, Instructions, and Recommendations to Parochial Authorities, issued by the Board of Supervision for the Relief of the Poor in Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1890)

Mackay, George A., *Practice of the Scottish Poor Law*, William Green & Sons (Edinburgh, 1907)

Mitchison, Rosalind, *The Old Poor Law in Scotland: The Experience of Poverty, 1574-1845*, Edinburgh (Edinburgh, 2000)

N.A.S., *Poor Relief in Scotland* (Edinburgh)
Aberdeen City Archives staff are happy to give talks and arrange evening visits to the archives for interested groups. Please contact our Old Aberdeen House office on 01224 481775 or our Town House office on 01224 522513 for further information.