The Twentieth-Century Poor Law in the Midlands and Wales
1900-1930

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The final thirty years of the poor law, from 1900 to the system’s abolition in 1930, have received relatively little attention from historians. This project attempts to uncover how the poor law operated during this period in different places across the Midlands and Wales.

Key research questions

I have 2 sets of research questions. The first set are ‘small scale’, focusing on poor law administration in individual poor law unions, such as:

◊ How did the levels of indoor and outdoor relief change over time?
◊ Who received relief during this period?
◊ What forms did outdoor relief take?

These feed into a set of broader questions, including:

◊ How much did the poor law change in its operation and extent at the ‘point of access’ over the course of the early twentieth century?
◊ How did perceptions and provisions of poor relief compare across the Midlands region, between Wales and England, and between individual poor law unions?
◊ To what extent was the poor law able to adapt to changes in centralised welfare provision of the early twentieth century?

Sources

This project is rooted in documents produced by local poor law administration. These include outdoor relief lists and any other surviving records of relieving officers, such as application and report books and relief order books; poor law guardians’ minute books and minutes of board subcommittees, such as the Boarding-Out Committee; and workhouse admissions and discharge registers. Official records of central authorities

Why the Midlands? Why Wales?

An influential conception of regional welfare cultures, outlined by Steve King, suggests that attitudes towards and experiences of poor relief in northern and western England were different to those in the south and east of the country. Concentrating my research on the Midlands allows me to cut across these two welfare ‘zones’, and include poor law unions from both within my study.

Wales has been almost entirely neglected by poor law historians, with very few studies focusing on how the system functioned in that country. This is despite the fact that, as Keith Snell has suggested, the experience of Welsh poor law unions differed substantially from very many English unions. By including Welsh unions in this project, I can start filling in this historiographical gap.

Chosen unions

I am taking a ‘case-study’ approach to this project, selecting several poor law unions from across the region which will then be studied in depth. These are:

◊ Blaby, Leicestershire
◊ Stafford, Staffordshire
◊ Newcastle-under-Lyme, Staffordshire
◊ Spalding, Lincolnshire
◊ Llanfyllin, Montgomeryshire
◊ Machynlleth, Montgomeryshire
◊ Newtown & Llanidloes, Montgomeryshire