



Devon Family History Society
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TAVISTOCK WORKHOUSE BIRTHS

1866-1901

DRO Reference - Tavistock PLU 21

DFHS Book Reference - D003

The 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act proposed that all 15,000 parishes in England and Wales form into Poor Law Unions, each with its own workhouse and supervised by a local Board of Guardians. In the late 1830s, hundreds of new workhouse buildings were erected across the country. The buildings were designed to provide segregated accommodation for the different categories of pauper — male and female, able-bodied and infirm, and children.

Tavistock Poor Law Union was formed on 8th October 1836, and the workhouse was built in 1837 at a site in Bannawell Street, Tavistock. It was originally intended to accommodate 300 inmates, who came from 24 parishes in the area surrounding the town of Tavistock: the parishes of Bere Ferrers, Bradstone, Brentor, Buckland Monachorum, Coryton, Dunterton, Kelly, Lamerton, Lifton, Lydford (including Dartmoor), Marystow, Mary Tavy, Meavy, Milton Abbot, Peter Tavy, Sampford Spiney, Sheepstor, Sydenham Damarel, Stowford, Tavistock, Thrushelton, Lewtrenchard, Walkhampton and Whitchurch. At a later date Calstock and Tavistock Hamlets were added.

A 'bastardy clause' in the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act had made all illegitimate children the sole responsibility of their mothers until they were 16 years old. The putative father therefore became free of any legal responsibility for his illegitimate offspring. Unmarried pregnant women were often disowned by their families and the workhouse was the only place they could go during and after the birth of their child.

The highly controversial measure in the 1834 Act was overturned in a subsequent Act in 1844, which enabled an unmarried mother to apply for an affiliation order against the father for maintenance, even if she was not in receipt of poor relief. However unmarried mothers from poor backgrounds still entered the workhouse to have their babies. Pregnant women who were ill, infirm, very poor or deserted by their husbands, and who became dependent on poor relief, were also forced into the workhouse to give birth.

The workhouse era ended, officially at least, on 1st April 1930; the Boards of Guardians were abolished and their responsibilities passed to local authorities. The surviving buildings have since been converted to residential use.

This register of births in Tavistock Union Workhouse [ref: DRO Tavistock PLU 21] is held at Devon Record Office in Exeter. It covers the dates from 1866 to 1918. Because Poor Law Union records are closed for 100 years from the date of creation, this index currently only includes entries up to the end of 1901.