



Devon Family History Society
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TAVISTOCK WORKHOUSE DEATHS

1866-1901

DRO Reference - Tavistock PLU 23

DFHS Book Reference - D004

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 was added which caused a considerable strain on the resources of the Tavistock Union. Tavistock Hamlets was added from 1898.

People ended up in the workhouse because they were too poor, old, ill or infirm to support themselves, or had no-one to care for them when they became elderly. Before public mental asylums were established in the mid-nineteenth century (and sometimes even after that), poor persons who were mentally ill and mentally handicapped were often sent to be cared for in the workhouse. Many inmates were long-term residents of the workhouse. A Parliamentary Report of 1861 found that over a fifth of inmates had been in a workhouse for more than five years. Most of these were elderly, chronically sick, and mentally ill paupers.

Workhouse accommodation included fever-wards for the sick and a dead-room or mortuary. If an inmate died in the workhouse, the family members were notified and they could, if they could afford to or wished to, organize the funeral themselves. If this did not happen, the Poor Law Guardians arranged a burial which usually took place in a local cemetery or burial ground. The burial would be in the cheapest possible coffin and in an unmarked grave, into which several coffins might be placed

on the same occasion. Unclaimed bodies could also be disposed of by donating them for medical research and training.

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 in Tavistock have since been converted to residential use.

This register of deaths in Tavistock Union Workhouse [ref: DRO Tavistock PLU 23] is held at Devon Record Office in Exeter. It covers the dates from 1866 to 1919. 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.