



Devon Family History Society
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Devon Record Office



DEVON RECORD OFFICE

TIVERTON ST PETERS PAUPERS

1776

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Before the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, which set up Poor Law Unions and authorised the building of huge Union Workhouses, poor people were looked after in their own parishes. Two of the inhabitants of each parish were appointed every year as overseers, and, using the money raised by the parish poor rates, they would help paupers belonging to their parish by giving them food and clothing, arranging nursing care when they were ill and putting their children out to work as parish apprentices. Some parishes had almshouses for the poor, administered by local charities, others had a parish poorhouse, paid for from the poor rates, and others cared for paupers in their own homes, or boarded them out with other parishioners. Overseers would keep detailed accounts of the money they collected and spent, and at the end of their year of office, would total up their income and expenditure before handing over the responsibility of caring for the parish poor to the overseers for the following year. Where the overseers' account books still survive among parish records, they can help to give a broader picture of the lives of people in the 17th and 18th centuries, by describing, for example, the help given to a pauper family on the birth of a new baby, or when someone was sick. Some families received constant monthly hand-outs, but others could usually manage to support themselves and only needed help when accident or illness prevented one of the parents from working. Old age was another reason for asking for poor relief, as those who were too poor to save while they were young, became destitute when they were old and unable to work, especially if their children were also too poor to support them.

This account book was kept by the overseers of the poor in Tiverton and records payments made to the poor every month between July and November 1776. There are two sections to the book. The first part lists, in alphabetical order, those receiving poor relief in their own homes. This was known as "out-relief". Often these people would need help for a short period only. The occupations of the paupers are given, the number of children dependant upon them, the reason they needed relief and the amount paid to them each month. The second part of the book lists the paupers in the workhouse and the reasons they were there. These were people who were too young, too old or too infirm to earn their own living, and the reason for relief is usually stated briefly in words such as "blind" or "sick". No ages or occupations are given.

The account book was kept with other records of the borough of Tiverton and unfortunately, it does not seem to have been one of a series as no similar account books survive from an earlier, or later, date. This means that it is not possible to follow the life of a person in receipt of poor relief through subsequent years. However, as a snapshot of the poor of Tiverton in just a few months of one year, it is an invaluable record, while for anyone researching Tiverton ancestors, it will help to breathe life into some of those names and dates on a family tree.