



Devon Family History Society  
Joint Project Publication with  
North Devon Record Office



**DEVON RECORD OFFICE**

## **REGISTER OF TRAMPS CARRYING INSURANCE CARDS - TORRINGTON**

**1914-1915**

**DRO Reference – PLU TOR 59**

**DFHS Book Reference - N001**

Tramps were always the outsiders of society; they didn't even fit neatly into the well ordered regime of the nineteenth century Poor Law Union workhouse system. The attitude of the Poor Law Commissioners is summed up by their harsh definition of them: *'these paupers do not, as a class, possess or deserve the compassion of the public ... these are the mendicant vagrants, who are known to be generally persons of dissolute character, to lead habitually a life of laziness and imposture, and not infrequently to resort to intimidation and pilfering'*. If they applied for assistance they were given grudgingly a couple of nights' lodging in a workhouse, usually in a cold outbuilding, some bread and water for a meal, and were expected to move on as soon as possible.

It was not clear to the authorities whether tramps ought to be treated as paupers or as criminals. If anyone was caught begging or sleeping rough they risked a fortnight's hard labour under the 1824 Vagrancy Act, but often the police were unable or unwilling to enforce the letter of the law. The difficulty lay in sorting out the genuine work seeker from the shiftless vagrant.

Increasingly, the statistics showed that vagrancy and pauperism 'were closely influenced by levels of unemployment, and a greater awareness of the social and economic reasons behind vagrancy in the twentieth century led to attempts to better regulate the treatment of tramps. This register of tramps carrying insurance cards who sought help from the Torrington workhouse at the outbreak of the First World War is part of that process. It helped the system to identify those tramps who were genuinely seeking work, as opposed to those habitual drunks or vagrants deemed less worthy of assistance at the public's expense.

This register of tramps carrying insurance cards (ref: PLUITor/59) is held at North Devon Record Office in Barnstaple and covers the years 1914-1915.