



Devon Family History Society
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NEWTON ABBOT WORKHOUSE BIRTHS

1846-1866

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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.

Newton Abbot Poor Law Union was formed on 20 June 1836 and the workhouse was built in 1837 in East Street, Newton Abbot. It was intended to accommodate 350 inmates who came from 36 parishes in the area surrounding the town of Newton Abbot: the parishes of Abbotskerswell, Ashburton, Bickington, Bishopsteignton, Bovey Tracey, Buckland-in-the-Moor, Corkington, Combe-in-teignhead, Coffinswell, Chudleigh, Denbury, Dawlish, Haccombe, Broadhempstone, Highweek, Hennock, Islington, Ipplepen, Ideford, Kingskerswell, Kingsteignton, Lustleigh, Moretonhampstead, Manaton, North Bovey, Shaldon St Nicholas, East Oggwell, West Oggwell, St Marychurch (Torquay), Stoke-in-teignhead, Torbryan, Tormoham (Torquay), Trusham, East Teignmouth, West Teignmouth, Teigngrace, Wolborough, Woodland and Widecombe-in-the-Moor.

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. In 1878, the Newton Abbot workhouse had room for about 400 inmates. The wards, yards etc. occupied 2 acres and there were gardens adjoining.

The workhouse era ended, officially at least, on 1st April 1930; the Boards of Guardians were abolished and their responsibilities passed to local authorities. Newton Abbot Workhouse became the Newton Abbot Public Assistance Institution and the buildings now form part of Newton Abbot Hospital.

This register of births in Newton Abbot Union Workhouse [ref: DRO 6223A/UR 1] is held at Devon Record Office in Exeter. It covers the dates from 11 October 1847 to 27 February 1866, but also contains a list of earlier births, between 25 March 1846 and 13 August 1847, inside the back cover.