

# COVENTRY ARCHIVES: GUIDE TO POOR LAW AND ASSOCIATED RECORDS



**Coventry Archives** is located in the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, Jordan Well, Coventry, CV1 5QP. Admission to both the Reading Room and Research Room is free. Documents and books can be consulted without charge, but a charge is made for photocopying or the taking of digital images. Visitors are required to make an appointment to view original documents in the Research Room. Material in the Reading Room is available without the need of an appointment.

**Opening hours:** The Coventry Archives Reading Room and Research Room are open, 10.30 am – 3.30pm, Wednesdays – Fridays; the Reading Room is also open on alternate Saturdays, 10.30 am – 3.30pm. Please refer to the Herbert website at [www.theherbert.org](http://www.theherbert.org) for further details, or telephone on 02476 237583.

## Introduction

By 1580, a house of correction (or “bridewell”) had been established at Bablake to put the unemployed to work. Parish rates for poor relief under the “old poor law” were levied by the seventeenth century. In both the city parishes of Holy Trinity and St Michael’s workhouses changed their buildings and the organisations remained separate until a local Act united them.

The national 1834 Act which inaugurated the “new poor law”, introduced new records into the city but the administration stayed within the local Act until 1874. The new poor law system, now nationally controlled, lasted until 1930. The City Council’s Public Assistance Committee took charge from that date until the National Assistance Act of 1948 again took the responsibility away from local government.

Coventry's present-day suburbs administered their poor relief on a parish basis until the 1834 Act. All were taken into the Foleshill Union, with some exceptions: those based in Coundon hamlet and Allesley parish went to Meriden Union. Styvechale and Stoneleigh parishes (the latter embracing the swathe of land from Finham to Tile Hill) went into Warwick Union. Despite Coventry's administrative expansions between 1890 and 1928, the new suburbs stayed within their old unions. From 1930, areas administratively already within Coventry were served by the Public Assistance Committee, as were other areas upon coming within the city boundary in 1932. For more information see the *Victoria County History of Warwickshire* Vol. VIII p.3 for the boundary-changes; the same book's pp.40-124 *passim* for the outlying parishes, and pp.275-277 for the city-centre. Another noteworthy source is W.E.Tate's *The Parish Chest: a study of the records of parochial administration in England*, the best detailed guide to poor law records.

### **A Brief Word About The Coventry Workhouse**



*The dormitory at  
Coventry Workhouse,  
1914*

In 1801, the Coventry Guardians of the Poor acquired the Carmelite friary of Whitefriars at London Road and converted it into a workhouse. Within three years all of the city's poor were being sent there and while the directors operated a fairly enlightened regime, their approach was at odds with attitudes of such bodies as the Poor Law Commission.

It was the Commission's belief that the general standard of comfort at Coventry was too high, and that the best way to deter the poor from seeking refuge was to impose harsh conditions on its inmates. The Coventry Guardians eventually yielded to the Commission's wishes, and families were separated on admission, were obliged to wear uniforms, and worked a twelve hour shift with an hour for lunch. In later years an infirmary at the site administered to the sick, and both the workhouse and infirmary remained under the auspices of the Guardians until 1930, when they passed into the hands of the city's public health department. They remained in local authority hands until the passing of the 1948 National Assistance Act, one of the founding principles of what later became known as the welfare state.

The borough archive's Corporation Powers and Cases section, Baker subsection (BA/F/I) lists records concerned with the administration of the House of Correction, 1580 – 1586. Other records relating to the poor law include:

BA/E/B/50/1-5

Recommendations for appointments of overseers of the poor and other parish officers, 1823

BA/E/B/52-61

Settlement and apprenticeship, 1659-1833.

BA/H/I

Records, 1575-1831.

BA/H/Q/A79/217

From Earl of Denbigh to Alderman Clarke about giving his fee as recorder to the poor, 1648.

PA5

Settlement-certificate re. Berkswell and Coventry, 1699.

PA143

Overseers of the Poor, St. Michael's Parish - accounts and assessments, 1732-1830.

PA144

St. Michael's and Holy Trinity Parishes - guardians' minute-book, 1801-1861.

PA173

Holy Trinity Parish Workhouse - site-deeds, 1726-1803.

PA524

Attorney's bills, 1787-1792.

### **Coventry Suburbs Poor Relief to 1835**

BA/E/B/63

County orders, 1760-1838.

PA133

Stoke Vestry - minutes, 1820-1835.

PA295

Allesley Civil Parish, 1651-1859.

PA321

Foleshill overseers - poor rate returns, 1820-1834.

### **Coventry City Poor Relief, 1835-1930**

BA/E/B/55

Recommendations and forms of order for removal of Irish and Scottish paupers to Liverpool, 1838

### **Coventry Board of Guardians Records**

In a folder in the Coventry Archives Research room entitled *Superseded Local Authorities* is a list of Coventry Board of Guardians records (reference SLA/6), including:-

SLA/6/1

Minutes of the Board of Guardians, 1844-1930;

SLA/6/13

Admission and discharge registers, 1853-1946

*Please note that some chronological gaps do exist in these registers, and some of the more recent registers will be unavailable for viewing due to data protection laws.* Those registers open to public scrutiny, however, follow a general format: the week's admissions are arranged on the left hand side of the register, and include such details as date, day of week, name of inmate, next meal after admission, calling, religion, year of birth, parish from which admitted, by whose order admitted, date of order, name of parent if born in workhouse, and observations (e.g. destitute). Details of the week's discharges are arranged on the right hand side of the register and include date, day of the week, last meal before discharge, how discharged (e.g. sent to Hatton Asylum, Meriden Union, discharged at own request), column for death, parish from which admitted; in the observation column there are a few entries containing addresses.

SLA/6/17

Registers of deaths, 1845-1943

Includes: date of death, name, age, whence admitted, certified cause of death, when and where buried and master's initials and date

SLA/6/16

Registers of births, 1875 – 1933

Includes the following entries: date of birth; sex; legitimate or illegitimate; parents or mother (name; whence admitted); Christian name; when and where baptised; remarks; master's initials & date

SLA/6/30

Plans of the Workhouse at Whitefriars, 1856-1904.

**See also:**

PA476

Coventry Board of Guardians (Poor Law Union) - correspondence, plans and tenders, 1894-1925.

PA2388

Coventry Board of Guardians – photograph, taken on the last day of the Board's existence

PA744

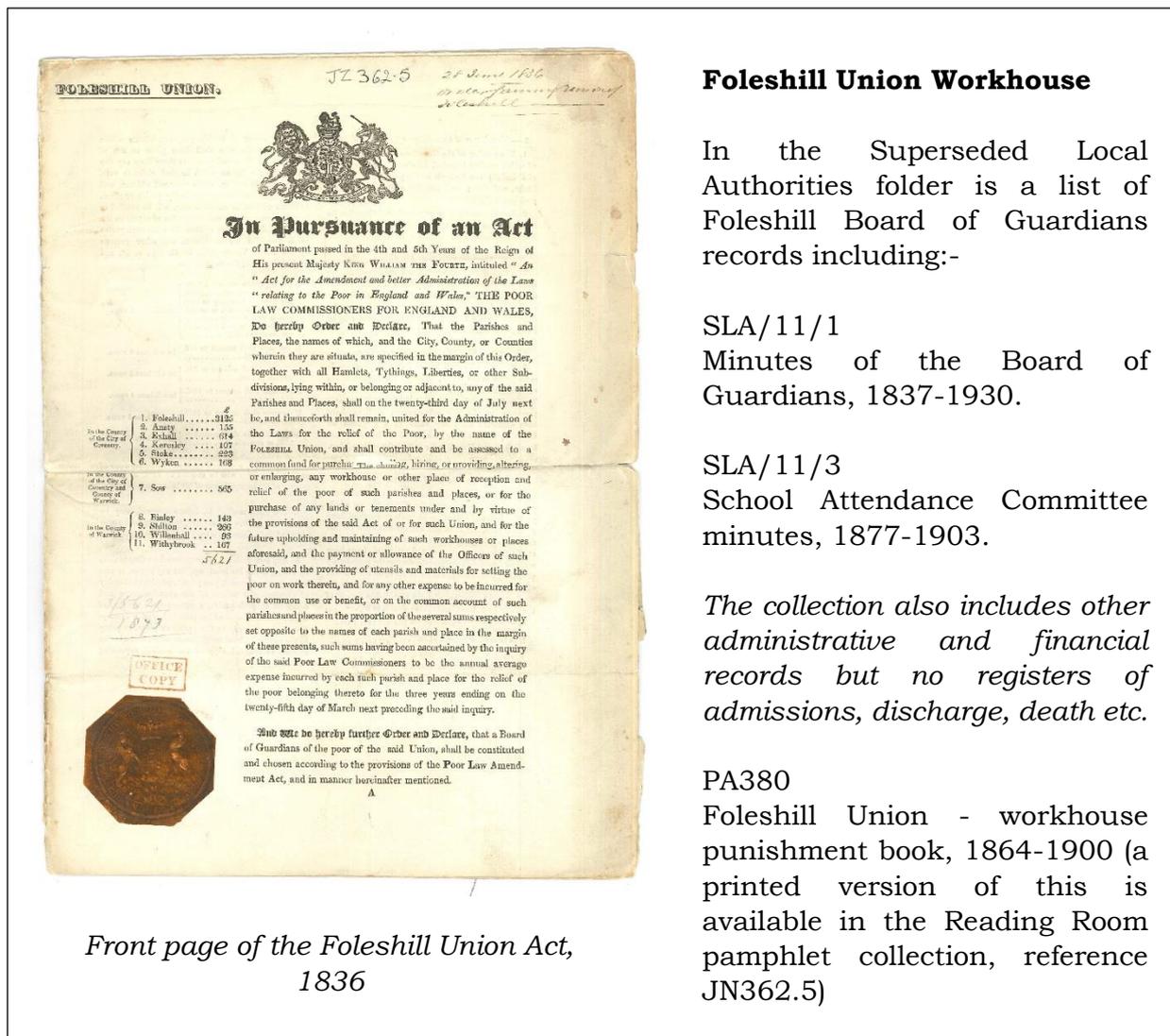
Coventry Union House of Industry – inventory of effects, 1845.

PA772

Coventry Poor Law Union, list of Guardians, 1813-1890; contract for workhouse boiler, 1906.

PA1803

“Coventry Standard” cuttings, 1855-1866 (photocopies). Also available in microfilm format in the newspaper cabinets, Coventry Archives Reading Room



Front page of the Foleshill Union Act,  
1836

**Printed, general sources:**

Selected books/pamphlets on the general history of poor law in Coventry (ref. JN362.5)

- “The Relief of the Poor in Coventry, 1830 – 1863” by Peter Searsby;
- “The Operation of the Poor Laws in the County and City of Coventry, 1601 – 1900”, edited by R Morris (education pack);
- John Carter, “Report from the Select Committee on the Poor Law with the minutes of evidence, 1817”;
- “City of Coventry Poor Law Act, 1859”;
- “Ninth Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners, 1843”;
- “Memories of London Road Institution,” by EA Evans;
- “Workhouse Children,” by Rosemary Hall;
- “Distressed Weavers, Deserted Wives and Fever Cases: an analysis of admissions to the Coventry Workhouse,” by Rosemary Hall

Parochial records, including those for overseers of the poor, and dealing with some aspects of city-centre poor law administration as well as suburban, are at:

Warwickshire County Record Office  
Priory Park  
Cape Road  
Warwick, CV34 4JS.  
Telephone: 01926 412735  
E-mail: [recordoffice@warwickshire.gov.uk](mailto:recordoffice@warwickshire.gov.uk)

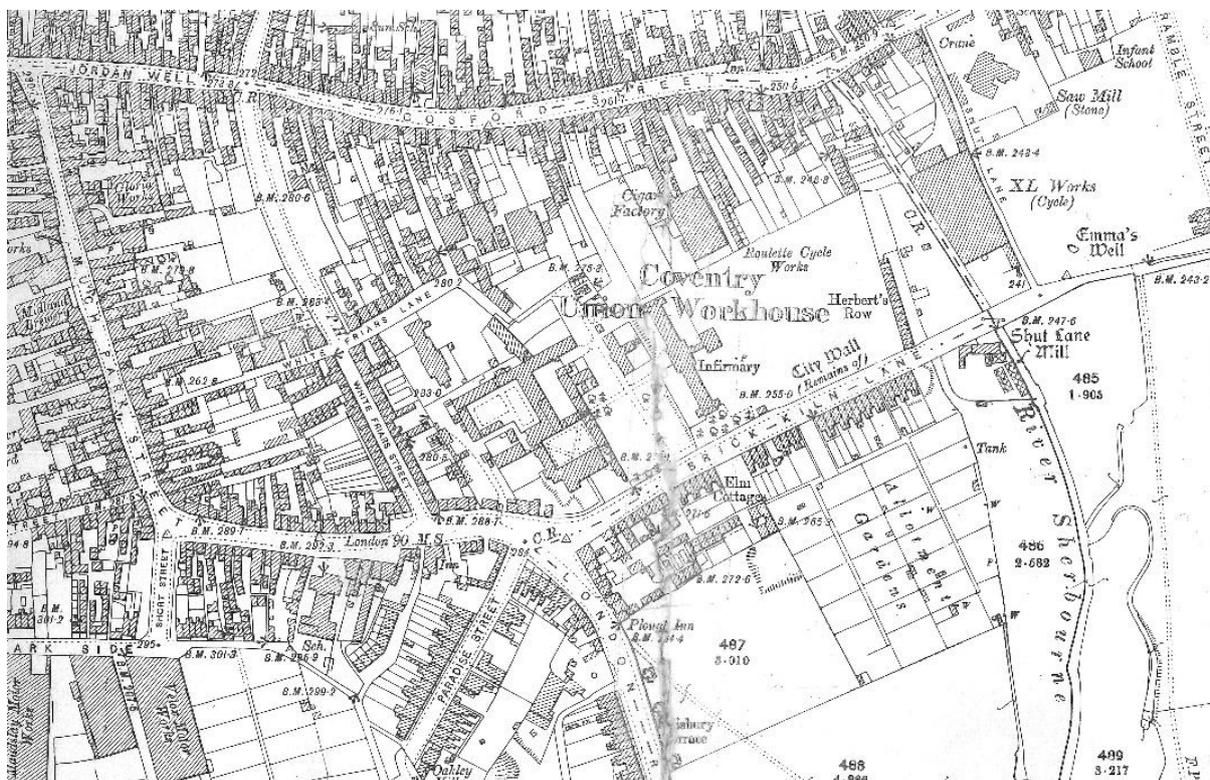
There is a list of parish records held at Warwick in the Coventry Archives Reading Room. Warwick also holds the records of the Meriden and Warwick Poor Law Unions.

For central government's view of the "new poor law" local scene, contact:

National Archives  
Kew, Richmond, Surrey,  
TW9 4DU  
+44 (0) 20 8876 3444  
[www.nationalarchives.gov.uk](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk)

This link provides a brief research guide to Poor Law records:

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/poverty-poor-laws>



*Site of the Coventry Workhouse, 1906*