This essay examines the archive created by the poor law commissioners as a result of the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. Struggling to deal with the mountain of correspondence that resulted from its attempt to supervise local government across the whole of England and Wales, the commissioners invented new ways of keeping track of their records. The surviving archive provides a goldmine of information for historians interested in local and social history.

Keywords: poverty, workhouses, medicine, crime, bastardy, chartism, industrial unrest

The Background

Following a protracted period of discussion concerning the potential abolition or reform of the various poor laws, and in the aftermath of the “Swing” disturbances in 1830 and 1831, the government set up a Royal Commission to examine the operation of the poor laws across England and Wales. The Commissioners reported their findings and set out their recommendations in the Spring of 1834. Following this the Poor Law Amendment Act was on the Statute Book by the autumn of the same year. Over the next few years, as the newly formed Poor Law Commission rolled out its “New Poor Law” with its newly defined view of pauper management, the system of welfare changed from a generally local matter to a more (but not universally) centrally defined administrative affair. It is difficult to overestimate the importance of the Poor Law Amendment Act 1834 (PLAA 1834) in terms of its effect on the lives of the vast majority of people in England and Wales. The act was considered by historian David Englander as “the single most important piece of social legislation ever enacted” as it redefined the principles on which poor relief was to be offered and secured. It touched every aspect of Victorian life. People might have been workhouse inmates, outdoor paupers, they may have been employed by the local poor law union as workhouse staff or in the various outdoor posts such as relieving officers, medical officers or rate collectors, they may have spent time as guardians or have been local ratepayers; they may of course have been several of these in their lifetimes. For the vast majority of the population, the labouring poor, the workhouse or reliance on outdoor relief was only an accident or downturn in trade away.

From its very beginning the PLAA 1834 divided opinion. Its supporters believed...
poverty, for the able bodied, was a voluntary condition. Thus they believed that the new welfare system would reduce dependency on the rates as the deterrent aspects of the New Poor Law would force the pauper into the workplace to find whatever work he could. It would therefore be the means to provide an asylum for the really poor and needy whilst cutting relief to the indolent and improvident. The detractors of the new law saw it otherwise. In 1834 The Times raged against what it saw as “the unconstitutional direction and control of the entire funds of upwards of 15,000 parishes in England and Wales”.

Working class criticisms of the New Poor Law were based around the withdrawal of outdoor relief, the loss of liberty this entailed and the segregation of families in the workhouse. The placing of workhouse inmates in uniforms to mark them out as “other” and the subsequent loss of what we might today phrase civil and human rights, dignity and self-worth, were resisted. The attachment to such ideals ensured riots and other disturbances in places such as Oldham, Rochdale, Todmorden, Huddersfield and Bradford as the implementation of the act moved to the northern industrial towns and cities in 1837. The New Poor Law thus set the scene for the working class political agitations of the late 1830s and 1840s when, in the winter of 1838–39, the anti-poor law movement passed into Chartism “taking with it a legacy of organisation, leadership, experience and hatred”.

Correspondence Archive Creation

Not only should we not underestimate the importance of the PLAA 1834 in regard to its effect on people in the past, but we can make a similar (if obvious claim) in regard to the archive created by the act and by the institutions brought into existence by it. It is difficult to underestimate the importance of the “poor law archive” to historical research. Philip Harling, in his assessment of the discussion of continuity and change from the old to the new poor law, comments on the charge laid on the Poor Law Commission with “creating the first ever centrally supervised bureaucracy at the local level . . .”. In turn this led to the creation of one of the most sophisticated, detailed and integrated of archives. The New Poor Law archive may best be considered as comprising firstly, the records of the Central Authority, and secondly the records of the 650 unions across England and Wales. The records of the first can be found in The National Archives [TNA] at Kew while the union records are to be found in the relevant borough record office, county record office or local studies library. The Central Authority produced and collected an impressive internal correspondence archive: the correspondence of the assistant commissioners and successors, with its

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6 The PLAA 1834 was very much aimed at the able-bodied male pauper. See P Thane, ‘Women and the Poor Law in Victorian and Edwardian England’ History Workshop Journal, 1978, 6 (1), pp. 29-51.
7 Brundage, The English Poor Laws, p. 68.
11 The Poor Law Commission was set up in 1834 and ended in December 1847 when it was replaced by the Poor Law Board. In mid-1871 the Poor Law Board made way for the Poor Law Department which was a part of the Local Government Board. Unless we are making a specific point about one of these bodies we will refer to them collectively as the “Central Authority”.
12 We are speaking here of the archives created and collected by the Central Authority and the local unions. We will not here examine the other materials which are essential for research into nineteenth century poverty such as the records of the quarter sessions, petty sessions, newspapers etc.
13 The assistant poor law commissioners were employed by the Commission to carry out much of their field work: establishing ‘unions’, dealing with local officials, sending reports for inclusion in the annual reports, making detailed inspections the districts allocated to him, attending many meetings (including those of ‘their’ unions, making inspection of unions, investigating and reporting on cases of neglect, irregularities etc.
own set of registers; correspondence of the Poor Law Commission and successors with other government departments which again have their own registers; correspondence with asylum districts and boards; and of course the wonderfully informative, but woefully described “Miscellaneous Correspondence and Papers”. In this particular article we will concentrate on the correspondence that passed between the 650 (or so) poor law unions and the Central Authority in London and the surviving registers which the clerks in London created as a convenient means of reference to that correspondence. Taken together these are record series MH 12: Local Government Board and predecessors: Correspondence with Poor Law Unions and Other Local Authorities; and MH 15: Local Government Board and predecessors: Subject Indexes of Correspondence, 1836–1920.

The first thing to be clear about is the size of the archive created by the New Poor Law. The business of the Poor Law Commission was immense and we get an initial idea of their day to day work through the entries in the Commission minute books. Following the various administrative matters concerning the swearing in of the Commissioners and the appointments of Edwin Chadwick as secretary, George Coode as assistant secretary, and Moore, Mence and Austin as the first clerks we can see that very quickly the Commission establish themselves as an administration based on a registry system; that is that each piece of correspondence is formally noted in a specifically defined register as it enters the Commission along with a short precise of its contents and the allocation of a unique identifying number against each piece of correspondence. We see this in the minutes from 25 August 1834 onwards as “The Letters from No 1 to 17 were read, and answers prepared and approved; and minutes thereof inserted in the Register”. The very next day the same is said for “Letters No 18 to 41”, the next day “Letters No 42 to 51”, and so on. Between 25 August and 10 September they had processed their first 474 incoming letters. This of course was just part of the “corresponding” nature of the Commission. By the second day of the Commissions existence “the consideration of the expediency of a preliminary communication to the parish officers throughout England and Wales was resumed”. It was ordered that 16,000 copies of the PLAA 1834 would be sent, along with this “preliminary communication”, to all parishes and places where the poor were separately provided for. A few days later a similar number of a printed set of preliminary queries were ordered to be sent to the same places. We see here the immediacy with which the Commission began their work. Here, the Commission sought to put in place a continuous round of information sharing between themselves and the localities within a few days of the Commissioners taking up their duties. However, the Commission quickly found that the scale of its administrative task outstripped its administrative resources. Within a matter of weeks it was minuted that the clerks within the Commission were “being engaged considerably beyond the customary office hours” and that the planned despatch of

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14 Series MH 32: Local Government Board and predecessors: Assistant Poor Law Commissioners and Inspectors, Correspondence, 1834–1904; MH 32 have their own registers for the assistant commissioners in MH 33: Poor Law Commission: Assistant Poor Law Commissioners, Registers of Correspondence, 1834–1846. Local Government Board and predecessors: MH 19: Correspondence with Government Offices, 1834–1909; MH 19 have their own registers in MH 20: Local Government Board and predecessors: Registers of Correspondence with Government Offices, 1837–1920. MH 25: Local Government Board and predecessors: Miscellaneous Correspondence and Papers, 1834–1900.

15 MH 1/1–35: Poor Law Commission: Minute Books, 1834 to 1842. The clean minutes end in 1842 and researchers would use MH 2: Poor Law Commission: Rough and Classified Minute Books, 1834 to 1847 to take their study to the end of the Commissions existence.

16 MH 1/1: Poor Law Commission: Minute Book, Volume 1, 25 August 1834 to 10 September 1834, after this the specific indication of correspondence is replaced with “Read, the Letters of the day; and answers prepared and approved; and they were ordered to be registered”. 

“Act, Circular and Queries” to an estimated 700 parishes a day was impossible. It was ordered that an “extra set of Clerks [to] be engaged for the evening” until these pieces of correspondence were dealt with.17 As the correspondence from the localities poured in over the next few years the Commission perused, discussed and answered the various problems and queries presented to them. The matters discussed were varied as these few examples demonstrate from September 1837: “Read a Letter from the Clerk of the Eton Union communicating the Opinion of the Board of Guardians that Mr Robarts, one of the Medical Officers of the Union should be dismissed on account of his insulting conduct”. “Read a Letter from the Chairman of the Huddersfield Union forwarding a Copy of the Minutes of the Proceedings of the Guardians… from which it appeared that they still refused to elect a Clerk”. “Read a Letter from the Chairman of the Stockton Union enquiring whether the 19th section of the Poor Law Amendment Act prevents a sick inmate of a Workhouse from being visited by any individual (lay or otherwise) from whom such inmate may be desirous of receiving religious instruction and advice”.18 The correspondence then was not only voluminous but was made up of diverse local subject matters and the Commission placed great store in such a command of the local information contained within it. Charles Mott, one of the early assistant poor law commissioners, claimed in 1836 that “. . . when the means of obtaining information by correspondence with the different boards of guardians, shall have been established, and information on all subjects can be procured in a short space of time, with facilities hitherto unobtainable; when, in short, the new system, in all its branches, is fully and properly developed, it cannot fail to produce results which will procure for it the support of the country”.19

The success of the Commission was thus perceived to rest on the correspondence and their ability to manage the information it contained. However, receiving, holding and exploiting that correspondence was a long term problem. The Central Authority long struggled with the sheer size of its own records. It was not only the number of letters received (added to which would be the responses these might require along with the numbers of orders they would send out) but the correspondence could vary remarkably in quantity, thus “A hard winter, manufacturing distress, and the numerous contingencies of weather or trade which affect the relief of the poor, never fail to bring an unusual pressure of business upon our Commission”.20 The Commission office was simply not big enough to cope with the archive it was producing. As early as the end of January 1838 the amount of paperwork within the office was causing operational problems. John Johnston, who worked in the registry room in the Commission offices, wrote to Chadwick complaining that the previous year that “on removing the Old Papers of 1834–5 and 6 into the passage to make room for those of 1837 and the then current year of 1838 it was found that the passage would not contain more than about half consequently the remainder of the Papers have been on the floor ever since and Subjected to be tossed about every time the Room has to be Swept out – thus rendering it very difficult to find former papers when wanted”.21

At first the difficulty of finding former papers’ may have been partly solved by the Register of Correspondence (see below) which appears to have been the main means of

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17 MH 1/1: Poor Law Commission: Minute Book, Volume 1, 23 August to 31 December 1834, 9 September 1834.
18 MH 1/13: Poor Law Commission: Minute Book, Volume 13, 21 September to 30 December 1837, 21 September 1837.
21 MH 19/177: Correspondence with Government Offices: Poor Law Board, 1836–1848, John Johnston to Edwin Chadwick, 30 January 1838.
reference but this was quickly deemed inefficient. In 1846 the Commissioners decided that indexes were needed both for the minutes and correspondence. However, again their own records were too large a collection for the Commission clerks to work on and additional clerks were sought to undertake the work. At first clerks “having no present connexion with the office” were insisted upon, until the Commission clerks petitioned the Commissioners to work “in extra official hours, and with extra remuneration”.22 Perhaps as a necessary corollary to the indexing work the Commission decided at the same time that the loose papers of the union correspondence be brought together by union in reference number order and bound into volumes. Indexing to bound volumes made more sense than indexing to loose papers which were easily “tossed about”. That September Edwin Chadwick wrote to the Treasury asking them to sanction the employment of some of the clerks in the office in making indexes to the bound volumes of orders, correspondence and minutes of the Commission. He stated that the work would be too great for the present staff of clerks within official hours and also claimed that the Commissioners “consider the work to be indispensably necessary for the safe and convenient dispatch of the business of the Commission”.23 In late 1846 the Treasury agreed that the Commission could employ additional assistance to prepare the correspondence for binding the volumes from 1834 to 1842 and expected the work to take around 6 months.24 The work took much longer than anticipated and in March 1848 David Brewer stated he had been engaged for more than 17 months in the collection and arranging of union correspondence for binding.25 We should certainly date the initial binding and indexing to the mid-late 1840s and allow the cause of both to be something of a culmination of the increasing size of business of the Central

22 MH 19/177: Correspondence with Government Offices: Poor Law Board, 1836–1848, [16 named office clerks] to the Poor Law Commissioners, 16 September 1846; Edwin Chadwick to the Treasury, 25 September 1846; and Treasury to the Poor Law Commission, 29 September 1846. If the MH 15 indexes are those being referred to here then the first 12 years’ worth were retrospectively produced; this was not an unusual practice when government departments introduced indexes.


24 MH 19/177: Correspondence with Government Offices: Poor Law Board, 1836–1848, Treasury to the Poor Law Commission, 28 October 1846.

25 In 1848 David Brewer stated he had been engaged for more than 17 months in the collection and arranging of union correspondence for binding MH 19/177: Correspondence with Government Offices: Poor Law Board, 1836–1848, David Brewer to George Nicholls, 2 March 1848.
Authority and the increasing difficulty posed to the clerks in needing to explore their own records.

The majority of the incoming letters from individual poor law unions to the Central Authority form the largest series within the huge Ministry of Health collection held at TNA; this is the MH 12 correspondence series referred to earlier. These records are organised first by country, England then Wales; then alphabetically by county, then union name and finally chronological by union. The Commission then ascribed an individual number to each poor law union which still runs through the series list. The poor law union correspondence itself, the letters, reports, memos etc., were bound into volumes usually covering one, two or three years. The volumes for each union usually begin in 1834 and finish around 1900; give or take a few years. The list, taken from the TNA online Catalogue shown below, is that of the 27 volumes for the Alnwick Poor Law Union in Northumberland. The number “322” is the union number given by the Poor Law Commission and we will see later that this allocation of union numbers was an important part of the overall registry system. We can also see that the TNA list ignores the date changes in name and organisation of the Central Authority.

| MH 12/8927 | Alnwick 322 | 1834–1842 |
| MH 12/8928 | Alnwick 322 | 1843–1846 |
| MH 12/8929 | Alnwick 322 | 1847–1849 |
| MH 12/8930 | Alnwick 322 | 1850–1851 |
| MH 12/8931 | Alnwick 322 | 1852–1854 |
| MH 12/8932 | Alnwick 322 | 1855–1859 |
| MH 12/8933 | Alnwick 322 | 1860–1863 |
| MH 12/8934 | Alnwick 322 | 1864–1866 |
| MH 12/8935 | Alnwick 322 | 01/01/1867–18 Aug 1871 |
| MH 12/8936 | Alnwick 322 | 19 August 1871–1873 |
| MH 12/8937 | Alnwick 322 | 1874–1875 |

26 Occasionally, second unions were created out of an initial union. For example, several parishes were carved out of the Bradford Poor Law Union in 1848 to create the North Bierley Poor Law Union. The Bradford Poor Law Union had been allocated the union number 563 in 1837 and so North Bierley was allocated 563A.

27 Volumes for some of the smaller unions may cover more years; for example the first Reeth Poor Law Union volume of correspondence, MH 12/14587, covers the years 1835 to 1846.

28 MH 12: Local Government Board and predecessors: Correspondence with Poor Law Unions and Other Local Authorities, c.1833–1900. There are a number of occasions when some earlier correspondence is bound in with a union’s first volume. The cut off around 1900 is the result of enemy bombing during the Second World War. Most papers after 1900 were destroyed by enemy action in 1941 or fire in 1944. Papers which survived were then incorporated in various MH or HLG (Ministry of Housing and Local Government) series.

29 The listing in MH 12 treats the correspondence with the Poor Law Commission 1834–1847, the Poor Law Board, 1848–August 1871 and the Local Government Board, August 1871 to c.1900 as a single run; it was (sensibly) never considered appropriate to create a series each for poor law union’s correspondence with the Poor Law Commission, Poor Law Board and Local Government Board. However, for every poor law union the Poor Law Boards correspondence closes the relevant volume on 18 August 1871 and starts their first Local Government Boards correspondence on 19 August 1871.
We can also see that in the Alnwick example listed above, the poor law union correspondence proper is then followed by a small collection of “Sanitary Papers” correspondence volumes based around urban and rural sanitation districts in the unions. This collection of sanitary volumes is a common feature of the record series.\(^3\)

Let us begin with a physical description of these correspondence volumes. They are primarily made up of bound sets of incoming letters and reports along with any enclosures.\(^3\) We can take, as an example, the incoming letter shown here [fig. 1] and referenced at TNA as MH 12/2095/286. It is a letter, dated 24 February 1838, from Charles Bond, Clerk to the Guardians of the Axminster Poor Law Union, to the Poor Law Commission, which also included a copy of a letter from J H Croft, Curate of Mudford in Somerset. The letter concerned John Perren, a widower aged 30, a pauper with five children ranging in ages from 11 years to 5 years; the youngest having been

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\(^3\) This collection of volumes at the end of the lists across the various unions probably stems from the local government reorganisation in 1894 which saw the formation of rural and urban district councils as well as parish councils. See the Local Government Act 1894, 56 & 57 Vict. cap. 73.

\(^3\) Many enclosures may later have been sent to another section within the Central Authority or elsewhere and hence some letters in the correspondence refer to enclosures now not included in the volume.
born without a hand. Croft petitions for outdoor relief to be granted to enable this “industrious man of good Character” to maintain his children or to take some of them into the workhouse. Perren’s weekly wage of 8s is insufficient to sustain his family. Bond reports that after considerable discussion the board granted Perren 1s 6d per week to maintain his children. Although the pauper lives in a parish which comes under the Yeovil Poor Law Union, his place of settlement is Hawkchurch which is part of the Axminster Poor Law Union. The guardians are concerned they may be contravening the law and were seeking the Commission’s guidance. Various guardians cited grounds for relief as being the rules relating to “Non-Resident Paupers”, or those relating to “exception of Accident”, the youngest child being born with one hand or that the family’s situation meets the criterion of “Urgent necessity”. Here then is one of the many hundreds of thousands (possibly millions) of incoming pieces of correspondence dealt with by the Central Authority. What then would have been the process for such a letter from entry into the Commission’s office to being bound into one of the union correspondence volumes?

Bearing in mind that the Central Authority changed the way in which the correspondence was registered over time a basic registry pattern is continued throughout. In the early years of its existence the Commission divided England and Wales into as many districts as there were assistant commissioners. These districts were then formed into three divisions, each of which were then assigned to the first three Commissioners; Messrs Frankland Lewis, Lefevre and Nicholls being respectively divisions A, B and C. This letter code sequence thus also referred to their clerks:
Messrs Fletcher, Lass and Cane. When a letter entered the Commission it would be opened by a clerk tasked to undertake this activity and stamped showing the date of receipt; in this case 28 February 1838. The deposit clerk would then write in the union number. This was the number allocated to the union by the Commission. In the example we are following we can see in the top right hand corner that one of the clerks had written “76”; this is the union number for Axminster. If we look at the top left hand side of the letter we see another number followed by the letter “B”. The number is the reference number allocated to it on entering the Commission and the letter code is the divisional letter code which indicates which Commissioner and commissioner’s clerk were responsible for dealing with the content of this particular piece of correspondence; in this case Lefevre and Cane. We can see in our example the reference number 1564 has been written on the left hand side of the correspondence. This indicates the letter is the 1564th letter received within the Commission that year (1838). If we take this step by step then the reference/divisional code/union number provided the Commission with a full internal paper number; which in this instance would be 1564/B/76.

Each letter being so identified, an abstract from each was entered on an “agenda sheet” and the original letter passed to the three commissioner’s clerks responsible to each Commissioner. These clerks would then look through the correspondence, attach any required documents for reference, and then take them to the Commissioners in their separate rooms. Here, the Commissioners and their clerks would read through the correspondence, minute directions upon the letters themselves, or reserve them for consideration of the Commissioners meeting as a board. Most of the correspondence was either routine or was dealt with by referring the correspondence to an assistant commissioner or one of the assistant secretaries. In either case these were then dealt with by the clerks. The reserved correspondence was then dealt with, mainly in the afternoons, with directions minuted on the letters and initialled by the divisional Commissioner (and sometimes two Commissioners). We can see much of this...
work as the reverse of each letter was often used as a place to minute instructions or even wholly draft the response.

The original letters were of course sent to the various poor law unions or others who corresponded with the Central Authority. These would now, if they survive, be found in local archives as part of the unions’ collection; unfortunately most of these records do not survive. From the researchers perspectives one of the advantages of the archived correspondence is that in the vast majority of cases, perhaps somewhere in the region of 95% plus, each incoming piece of correspondence is followed by a draft of the outgoing response. Here, [fig. 2] is a draft copy of the response to Bonds letter which advised him that the Commission acknowledged his letter regarding Perren but that he (Perren) does not to qualify for relief. The plea of accident or sickness does not relate to the applicant, being forced rather by Perren’s permanent burden of his children and his low but continuing wages. The youngest child’s missing hand does not increase the urgency of his situation as the child is too young to work anyway; even if the child had lost the hand as a result of an accident, the permanent nature of the disability is not a qualification for relief. Note the paper number 1564/B/76 is also found on the draft letter. This is one of the features of the MH 12 records; the regular inclusion of the draft response allows the researcher to “hear” both sides of the conversation. This is an example of the unique identifying number which would be written on each piece of correspondence as it came into the Central Authority.

The procedure for dealing with correspondence changed over the years and this impacted on the registry system. Following George Nicholls departure for Ireland in 1838, the A, B and C divisional system relating to each Commissioner was abandoned (although this may have been retained for a short time for the clerks). The letter “C” as indicating a division was formally abandoned the following year in August 1839 although the practice of dividing the correspondence across the three senior clerks continued, with each clerk taking the papers to either of the Commissioners remaining in London without any distinction.37

By 1847 the procedures remained broadly the same.38 We know that the correspondence was numbered, distributed to the three senior correspondence clerks and information still entered on the Agenda Sheets [fig. 3]. The senior correspondence clerks would then make a judgement on which papers might be passed to an assistant commissioner or one of the assistant secretaries; these he would minute on the papers. If a clear precedent existed, or if one of the assistant commissioners or assistant

36 1564/B/76: the reference number and the letter indicating the divisional Commissioner are on the top left and the union number top right of the paper. However, see footnote 34 above.
37 PP. 1847 (148) Copies of Letters from the Poor-Law Commissioners to the Secretary of State, Respecting the Transaction of the Business of the Commission, pp. 3-4.
38 We know this because of the parliamentary investigations into the workings of the Poor Law Commission at the time of the Andover scandal. For the scandal itself see I. Anstruther The Scandal of the Andover Workhouse, 1973.
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secretaries expressed their opinion, then the clerk would minute the suggested response. Other letters would be left with no suggested reply and the whole collection of the correspondence was thus prepared. The clerks would then separately attend the two commissioners sitting together in the board room where the papers were discussed, decided upon and minuted. At the same time one of the other senior correspondence clerks would be sat with the third Commissioner, if he was present that day, going through his own (the clerks) divisional set of papers in the same way. In addition, papers initially sent to the assistant secretaries would be returned to the commissioners with their advice on legal questions.39

Following the meetings between the senior correspondence clerks and the commissioners, information concerning the general subject of each letter was entered from the Agenda Sheets into Agenda Books to create an easy way of reference and retrieval of papers [fig. 4]. The Agenda Books, as well as collecting the various numbers and letter needed for reference provided details of to whom the correspondence might have been referred, when referred, when returned, date of approval or final direction on the letter etc.

The information from these sheets was then copied onto prepared sheets which, every second year, were bound to form the Register of Correspondence [Fig. 5]. This, in theory, provided the clerks with a comprehensive finding aid for the tracking and retrieval of papers required for the business of the Commission where there were requests by Commissioners or others, for information contained in previous papers.

In late 1847 the Poor Law Commission was replaced by the Poor Law Board and significant changes took place in the internal workings relating to the poor law correspondence. By 1854 the general correspondence was divided into three parts with three senior clerks responsible for each. One of these clerks was responsible for the papers relating to the appointments, conduct, salaries and dismissals of paid union officers. The second and third of these clerks were responsible for the miscellaneous correspondence which was now divided in two with each division comprising a specified number of poor law inspectors districts. When the two secretaries of the Board and the second assistant secretary were present in the office they would take the correspondence of each division.

In addition the senior assistant secretaries were responsible for the legal correspondence while other clerks were given the responsibility for several sections on non-general correspondence such as the letters relating to union/parish property and emigration, surcharges and disallowances of auditors, and for letters regarding the payment of auditors. The Reports of Committees of Inquiry into Public Offices etc. recommended that this office management of the Board or "the whole work of preparing the correspondence of the day for the consideration of the Executive officers, and of disposing of it after it has received that consideration, should be carried on in one department". A further change in the registry system was carried out in early 1857.

By this time the Poor Law Board had a series of correspondence departments within it which were to insert a letter over the reference number indicating their department: A - General Correspondence Department, B - Paid Officers Department, C - Legal Department, D - Order Department and E - Audit Department. This identifying and marking by department was intended to ensure the relevant correspondence quickly and efficiently found the right recipient within the Central Authority. By 1868 the Board had eight correspondence divisions plus one for the registry of correspondence and another for the custody of records and preparation of correspondence for binding. In addition, another clerk was responsible for the Diary of Correspondence and another for the Index of Correspondence. As the Central Authority developed we see a more sophisticated organisation, an increasing level of business and an increasing level of sophistication of the contemporary means of reference needed to access their own records.

Using the Archive

The problem for the researcher today is that very little of the registry system survives: the Agenda Sheets, Agenda Books and Register of Correspondence; none survive. We do not know the size of the central poor law archive when it came to an end in 1930.
However, we do know the size of it in 1914 as in that year the *Royal Commission on Public Records* reported that there were 22,000 union volumes (presumably this number is that from which the 16,741 union correspondence volumes now survive). The report also states that “Registers are arranged in two series:-

(1) 1834-1846 – 190 registers
(2) 1847 to date [1914] – 4,150 [registers]”.

At the time of this report then there were 22,000 poor law union correspondence volumes and 4,340 registers. “Generally speaking, correspondence arising on any subject within the area of a particular poor law union is bound in volumes endorsed with the number and name of that union, and the year to which it relates. The registers of correspondence also bear the union numbers. The précis and other particulars which they contain afford a convenient means of reference to records and correspondence”. Most of the registers now no longer survive. An examination of the MH records at TNA show that comparatively few registers exist up to 1913. Only 16 MH poor law record series contain registers. Of these just 11 are series of registers only, the other five being registers or indexes to other surviving records in their own series. These 11 series of registers contain the grand number of 821 registers. Most of these are sets of registers which refer to other individual series; and the dismal overall picture of a lack of surviving general registers to the poor law union correspondence is broken only by MH 15: Local Government Board and predecessors: Subject Indexes of Correspondence.

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46 See footnote 26 above regarding destruction in World War Two.
48 For example, series MH 10 is Ministry of Health and Predecessors: Circular Letters. However, within the series itself are registers of circulars for 1848 to 1951 and indexes for 1848 to 1946.
The record series MH 15 is made up of 107 registers which refer the researcher, in the main, to the MH 12 poor law union correspondence. The registers begin in 1836 and between that year and 1855 a single volume was created annually. The way the registers are organised internally change somewhat over the years but as with the correspondence numbering system a basic registry pattern is preserved. Each annual volume is divided into alphabetical sections, or cuts, in which incoming correspondence received in that year was indexed. A main alphabetical set of subject headings was developed throughout the register under which correspondence could be entered. Headed columns across the page were pre-printed and details of the correspondence were entered by the clerks. At the top of each page a main generic subject header would be inserted. Under this the clerk would write a nuanced subject description of each piece of correspondence which was deemed to come under that subject header. Next to the subject description would be inserted the reference and union number of the piece of correspondence [see Fig. 8 as an example of this]. There was also a column for any remarks but this was almost invariably unused.\textsuperscript{50} Taken together, the paper and union number, along with the year of the register (and thus the year of the correspondence volume) allows the researcher to track the correspondence to the relevant union volume.\textsuperscript{51} Within the volume the researcher would browse by reference number within the relevant year to the actual piece of correspondence.

\textsuperscript{50} In MH 15/1-4, 1836-1839 there are columns headed A, B and C set out across a double page entry system, and here the paper/union numbers were entered. This marked the letter as the responsibility of one of the three individual Poor Law Commissioners. In MH 15/5, 1840, the same pre-printed columns are there but are now ignored and this volume follows the style of MH 15/6 onwards where the entries were reduced to subject heading, correspondence description and paper number/union number reference with the subject heading now entered over only a single page. However, the reference system worked in exactly the same way.

\textsuperscript{51} This can be achieved by using TNA’s online catalogue by using the union number as the search term, restricting the search to MH 12 and the catalogue level option to ‘piece’.

![Figure 8: Page showing the main generic subject header “Paupers, Punishment of” under the “P” cut in MH 15/7: Local Government Board and predecessors: Subject Indexes of Correspondence, 1842](image)
From 1856 onwards the annual volumes are replaced by multi-volume sets of
registers, so for example the years 1860 to 1863 have three registers with alphabetic
cuts covering A to G, H to P and R to W. By the time we reach the years 1893 to
1899 we find these seven years are covered by 16 registers. This meant the registry
numbering system from 1856 changed slightly as the unique identifying reference
needed to incorporate the year as well as the paper number and union number. Looking
for information on children in the mid-1860s a researcher would need to order MH
15/26 as this covers subjects A to F for 1864 to 1867. Turning to the cut for “C”
and the subject heading “Children” the researcher would be confronted with several
pages of references to correspondence concerning children listed variously in regard to
a proposal to admit children to workhouse without the father, refusal of guardians to
allow an adopted child of the late master and mistress back into the house, neglect of
parents to provide food for their children etc.

The example here [fig. 9] is for
“Practice to place orphans with relatives of friends at the costs of the Poor Rate
& to set them to work in factories when they are of such an age as not to be able
to get their own living – objected to”.

You will see that in these entries the reference given is 64 (the year 1864) over
3178 (the paper number) over 571 (the union number). Any clerks, who were asked
to track pieces of correspondence using the subject indexes would then select the
relevant union’s correspondence in the given year, and browse the paper number on
each page to find the letter itself; today this would bring up MH 12/15164 which is

52 Local Government Board and Predecessors: Subject Indexes of Correspondence. Part 1. A to F. 1864-1867.
the Keighley volume for 1861–1864. On occasions the references will omit a union number altogether and include instead the name of an assistant commission/inspector (referring now to MH 32) or "misc" for miscellaneous (referring to MH 25).

The really puzzling part of these surviving subject indexes is why they were created. This is not an index to the whole of the poor law union correspondence. Although the vast majority of the references refer to the correspondence volumes in MH 12, the size of the MH 15 archive precludes this, being made up of only 107 volumes. Creating an index to MH 12 would present many problems. The MH 15 series purports to contain "... indexes of selected subjects dealt with in correspondence and papers of the Poor Law Commission and Board and the Local Government Board, and noted precedents in the Index Department". So which selected subjects would they include bearing in mind that the selection of subject headings change, sometimes from year to year, and the numbers and sophistication of the main subject heading increased over time as the Central Authority needed to ask more complex questions about its own work? In 1836 there were 136 main subject headings for the whole year. In 1837 and 1838, 136 subject headings would only reach T for "Tolls" and P for "Parishes" respectively. To cover the period 1882 to 1892 the Local Government Board created 13 volumes to cover 11 years; from A for "able bodied" to Y for "Yellow Fever". In this instance the first 136 subject headings reaches only the letter A for "account books etc. collector to the improvement commissioners". The clerks within the Central Authority effectively built a changing and detailed paper database from 1836 onwards. The index may be useful in tracking precedents but it is not a useful precedent index of itself as it includes a mass of other references to non-precedent material (or material which was superseded but not marked as such). As a precedent index it would have hid as much as it illuminated.

The "selected subjects" in the MH 15: Subject Indexes of Correspondence seem to refer to matters which appear somewhere in the public arena: such as in newspapers, various circulars or in the annual reports produced by the Central Authority. The official papers relating to known public matters might be requested by senior members of the Central Authority at any time and just as the clerks might track papers in the past so researchers can do the same now. For example, we find in the subject indexes for 1840 under the main heading "advertisements", the description "for contracts, expediency of" and the reference 100A/359. The union number 359 is for the Market Drayton Poor Law Union in Shropshire and that union's poor law correspondence for 1840 is to be found in MH 12/9918. This volume, under the paper number 100A, is the original correspondence claiming the unnecessary expense in advertising contracts in local papers when tenders are rarely if ever issued in consequence of these advertisements. This letter, along with the Central Authority’s reply was then published...
in OfficialCircular No 3, issued 4 April 1840. In the same subject index volume, we find, under the main subject header “Vaccination, under Vaccination Extension Act”, and the specific description “Whether receipt of, would disenfranchise recipient” and the reference 272V/258. The union number 258 is for the Stamford Poor Law Union in Lincolnshire and that union’s poor law correspondence for 1840 is to be found in MH 12/6820. In this volume, under the paper number 272V, is the original correspondence asking if a child’s vaccination under the vaccination acts would lead to the parents losing the right to vote. This letter, along with the Commission’s reply was then published in Official Circular No 9, issued 10 November 1840. However, this tidy explanation is not enough and other examples illustrate this. So when Alfred Power, Assistant Poor Law Commissioner, submitted his report (one of many) to the Poor Law Commission on 20 November 1837 on the riots at Bradford in the West Riding of Yorkshire this was bound into the Bradford Poor Law Union’s correspondence with the paper number 10044/A. His report was also published in

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Vaccination act correspondence reference numbers are followed by a capital V. This does not affect the researchers’ ability to track the correspondence via the subject indexes in MH 15. It is like that the V inserted on those incoming documents concerning vaccination simply allowed them to be easily identified and passed to the relevant part of the Central Authority.

MH 12/6820, Stamford Poor Law Union Correspondence, 1838–1842. Jeremiah Clapton, Clerk to the Guardians of the Stamford Poor Law Union, 8 October 1840.


MH 12/4720, Bradford Poor Law Union Correspondence, 1834–1839, 20 November 1837, ff 146-147. This volume has been edited and published; see P. Carter, Bradford Poor Law Union: Papers and Correspondence with the Poor Law Commission, October 1834 to January 1839, Yorkshire Archaeological Society, 2005.
full in the Commissioners’ Annual Report in 1838. Technically this is an assistant commissioners’ paper and should therefore strictly have been bound into the assistant commissioners and inspectors’ correspondence in MH 32 and thus registered in the assistant commissioners and inspectors registers in MH 33. Yet we have found a great deal of correspondence registered in MH 33 and not bound in the appropriate MH 32 volume; finding it instead in the MH 12 correspondence under the union.

The broad scope of the subject matters, which we will comment on below, and the physical make-up of the union correspondence volumes with their easy relation between incoming letter and copies of responses, would always have made this a premier resource for historians. Added to this is the sheer size of the archive as illustrated here [fig. 10]. This shows the numbers of volumes for each series from a selected “Poor Law Collection”. These are the record series found in the Ministry of Health records and include all MH series which date from 1834 to 1930 (at appendix 1 is the list from which this is based). There are 16,741 surviving volumes of these MH 12 correspondence volumes and they dwarf the rest of the Central Authorities poor law archive.

Cataloguing and Content: Poor Law Union Correspondence

Over the last few years TNA and the British Association for Local History (BALH) have been running projects which have seen 183 volumes made key word searchable via TNA’s online catalogue. In both cases groups of leisure, family and local historians have worked from online digitised images to create detailed enhanced catalogue descriptions, albeit for a tiny proportion of the poor law union correspondence. An example of their work is reproduced below:

MH 12/11196/303
Folio 532. Letter from Robert Weale, Assistant Poor Law Commissioner, to the Poor Law Commission, having received the enclosed letter from Joseph Lowndes, Clerk to the Guardians of the Wolstanton and Burslem Poor Law Union, concerning the decrease in the able-bodied applicants for poor relief.

Lowndes letter, dated 3 August 1842, reports that the number of able-bodied applicants for out-door relief continues to decrease and that there are at present 285 at the workhouse. He states that most of the collieries and manufactories in the neighbourhood are beginning to work and predicts that the number of such applicants will be further diminished.

He has been ordered by the guardians to investigate allegations that several persons have received relief under false pretences so that proceedings might be taken against them if appropriate. He reports that one able-bodied applicant, Hamlet Booth, a Chartist, has been haranguing the men in the workhouse grounds and condemning the ‘Poor Law’ in very strong language tending to create dissent. Lowndes has been instructed to collect evidence against Booth and submit it to the stipendiary magistrate of the district for advice.

Annotated: acknowledge and thank for information. Paper number: 10408/B/1842.

Poor Law Union Number 415. Counties: Staffordshire.

07-Aug-1842

66 In terms of selection of record series I have not included those which begin after the end of the poor law guardians in 1930. See Local Government Act, 1929, 19 & 20, Geo. IV cap. 17.
67 Between 2008 and 2010 TNA ran the Living the Poor Life project and between 2012 and 2014 BALH ran the Pauper Prisons (Midlands) project (the latter was funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund). See also P. Carter and N. Whistance, Living The Poor Life: Guide to Poor Law Union Correspondence 1834–1871 held at The National Archives, BALH, 2011. See also Appendix 2 for a full list of MH 12 volumes currently catalogued/digitised. The project members who have done this work have added c. 10 million words to TNA’s online catalogue.
This will allow for searches on the TNA Catalogue on words or phrases such as Robert Weale, Joseph Lowndes, Hamlet Booth, able-bodied, out-door relief, Chartist etc., as well as running searches on the reference number which may have been found elsewhere including local archives. The resulting work of these projects has illustrated the wide variety of subject matters which the correspondence covers. Many of the accounts which appear in the archive can be traced over several months or years. So a search on “Henry Cartwright” a pauper child in the Bromsgrove Workhouse who died after being immersed in a solution of sulphuret of potassium as treatment for the itch, finds 10 returns within volume MH 12/13905 between 12 February and 9 April 1842.68 The information in each letter or report builds to give a detailed account of his death in late January or early February: the assistant poor law commissioner’s report which stated the boy died after being immersed in the potassium sulphate solution and found the conduct of Thomas Fletcher, the medical officer, to be negligent; the Poor Law Commissioners’ letter asking for information after they received a copy of the verdict of the coroner’s inquest; letter from Thomas Day, Bromsgrove Union clerk, saying they resolved that blame was to be attributed to Fletcher for having delegated the application of the treatment to Sarah Chambers, nurse, but that because of his previous unblemished professional record they propose to retain his services; letter from the Commission agreeing that blame can be attributed to Fletcher for having delegated the application to Chambers but because of his previous record that he should continue in office with an admonition.69 In other cases references to individuals, places or subject matters extend over years rather than months. For example, on 13 May 1857 John Kirkland, the Southwell Union clerk, wrote to the Poor Law Board enclosing the appointment form for Fanny Adams Hooton as workhouse school teacher. The letter was annotated doubting her competence and requesting a report on her performance after three months. Hooton must have satisfied the teaching requirements as numerous letters and reports later we find Hooton resigning some 16 years later in April 1873.70 For subject matters the MH 12 correspondence volumes are particularly rich for the historian containing thousands, even millions, of detailed accounts of medical cases and medical neglect, Chartist activities, industrial unrest and strikes etc., unmarried mothers and bastardy, employment and wages, pauper diets and foodstuffs, ill treatment of paupers (beatings etc.), criminal matters (such as fraud and assault); it covers nineteenth century social history in all its’ guises.

The conclusions to draw here are diverse. The Poor Law Commission set themselves the task of supervising local government across England and Wales in a way never undertaken in the past. This bureaucratic task included creating a fully integrated registry system which operated across both local and national government institutions created by virtue of the PLAA 1834 and one which thus now operates across local and national poor law archive collections. Researchers who will gain the most from these records will do so through their knowledge of the records arrangement, the contemporary subject indexes, the use of the data in the catalogued volumes and the use of complimentary series which have only been lightly touched on here. Taken together: physical size, wide scope of subject matter and the incredible detail the union

68 There are 10 hits on the TNA catalogue for “Henry Cartwright” but there are further details of the same case recorded under the death of “a pauper” or “a boy” at a time when the name of the child was not given in the correspondence. For these see MH 12/13905/147 and MH 12/13905/148.
69 Bromsgrove Poor Law Union, MH 12/13905/149, 12 February 1842; MH 12/13905/150, 12 February 1842; MH 12/13905/151, 14 February 1849; and MH 12/13905/152, 2 March 1842.
70 MH 12/9531/221, 13 May 1857 and MH 12/9535/29, 8 April 1873. There are some c. 75 catalogue entries across five volumes of Southwell Union correspondence for Fanny Hooton between these years.
correspondence volumes contain, means that these records rival (and in our experience eclipse) the census as the most important nineteenth century domestic social history archive.

Appendix 1: Poor Law Collection in Ministry of Health Series at The National Archives (MH series to 1832-1930)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Record Series</th>
<th>Title and Brief Description</th>
<th>Dates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MH 1</td>
<td>Poor Law Commission: Minute Books</td>
<td>1834-1842</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MH 2</td>
<td>Poor Law Commission: Rough and classified Minute Books</td>
<td>1834-1847</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MH 3</td>
<td>Poor Law Commission: Appendices to Minutes</td>
<td>1835-1846</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MH 4</td>
<td>Poor Law Commission and successors: Extracts from Minutes and Abstracts of Correspondence</td>
<td>1839-1879</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MH 9</td>
<td>Poor Law Commission and successors: Paid Officers Department and Metropolitan Department: Registers of Paid Officers</td>
<td>1837-1921</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MH 10</td>
<td>Ministry of Health and predecessors: Circular Letters</td>
<td>1834-1962</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MH 12</td>
<td>Local Government Board and predecessors: Correspondence with Poor Law Unions and Other Local Authorities</td>
<td>1833-1909</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MH 14</td>
<td>Poor Law Board and Local Government Board: Architect’s Department and Metropolitan Department: Poor Law Union Plans</td>
<td>1861-1918</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MH 15</td>
<td>Local Government Board and predecessors: Subject Indexes of Correspondence</td>
<td>1836-1920</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MH 17</td>
<td>Poor Law Commission and successors: Correspondence with Asylum Districts and Boards</td>
<td>1845-1930</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MH 19</td>
<td>Local Government Board and predecessors: Correspondence with Government Offices</td>
<td>1834-1909</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MH 20</td>
<td>Local Government Board and predecessors: Registers of Correspondence with Government Offices</td>
<td>1837-1920</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MH 21</td>
<td>Local Government Board: Turnpikes and Highways Department and Sanitary Department: Highway Boards, Correspondence and Papers</td>
<td>1879-1900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MH 23</td>
<td>Local Government Board: Public Health Department: Notification of Infectious Diseases, Correspondence and Papers</td>
<td>1877-1896</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MH 25</td>
<td>Local Government Board and predecessors: Miscellaneous Correspondence and Papers</td>
<td>1834-1900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MH 27</td>
<td>Poor Law Board and Local Government Board: Poor Law Administration Department and Metropolitan Department: Poor Law School Districts and London School Board, Correspondence</td>
<td>1848-1910</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MH 32</td>
<td>Local Government Board and predecessors: Assistant Poor Law Commissioners and Inspectors, Correspondence</td>
<td>1834-1904</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
MH 33 Poor Law Commission: Assistant Poor Law Commissioners, Registers of Correspondence 1834 1846
MH 34 Local Government Board and predecessors: Legal Department and Order Department: Workhouse Expenditure, Registers of Authorisations 1834 1902
MH 48 Local Government Board, and Ministry of Health, Health Divisions: Public Health and Poor Law Services, Local Authority Correspondence (Series I) 1868 1935
MH 52 Ministry of Health: Poor Law Division and Health Divisions: Public Health and Poor Law Services, Local Authority Correspondence (Series II) 1913 1973
MH 53 Ministry of Health: Health Divisions: Public Health and Poor Law Services, Local Government Administration and Finance, General Registered Files (91,000 and other Series) 1910 1972
MH 54 Ministry of Health: Poor Law Division: Local Government Act 1929, Administrative Schemes and Regulations 1929 1947
MH 57 Local Government Board and Ministry of Health: Poor Law Department and successors: Public Assistance, Registered Files and Papers 1907 1970
MH 64 Local Government Board, Order Department, and Ministry of Health, Legal Branch: Poor Law Instruments 1916 1932
MH 68 Local Government Board, Poor Law Administration Department, and Ministry of Health, Poor Law Division: Correspondence with Poor Law Authorities 1904 1933
MH 96 Welsh Board of Health: Registered Files 1872 1978

Appendix 2: Poor Law Unions and MH 12 Volumes which were part of Living the Poor Life project and the Pauper Palaces . . . Pauper Prisons (Midlands) project.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Union</th>
<th>MH 12 references</th>
<th>Years catalogued and digitised</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Axminster</td>
<td>2095-2099</td>
<td>1834–1848</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Basford</td>
<td>9228-9253</td>
<td>1834–1871</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Berwick</td>
<td>8976-2981</td>
<td>1834–1852</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Bishops Stortford</td>
<td>4536-4540</td>
<td>1834–1852</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Blything</td>
<td>11728–11735</td>
<td>1834–1840</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Cardiff</td>
<td>16246–16249</td>
<td>1834–1853</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Clutton</td>
<td>0320–10324</td>
<td>1834–1853</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
10. Kidderminster 14016-14024 1834–1871
11. Liverpool Select Vestry 5966-5970 1834–1856
12. Llanfyllin 16543-16548 1834–1856
13. Mansfield 9356-9371 1834–1871
14. Mitford and Launditch 8474-8478 1834–1849
15. Newcastle under Lyme 11363-11368 1834–1871
17. Reeth 14587-14590 1834–1871
18. Rye 13076-13080 1834–1843
19. Southampton Incorporation 10997-11001 1834–1858
20. Truro 1527-1530 1834–1849
21. Tynemouth 9156-9159 1834–1855
22. Wolstanton and Burslem 11196-11202 1834–1871

Outside of the projects which undertook the work above the the correspondence of two other poor law unions was researched and catalogued. A group of local and family historians in Nottinghamshire catalogued the complete Southwell Poor Law Union correspondence, 1834 to 1900. The Southwell material to mid-1871 is available online without payment but no images are available after that date. For Manchester, TNA staff and a small body of volunteers catalogued the correspondence for the period 1834 to 1847. However, none of the Manchester images are currently online.