

A local historian must use sources, both primary and secondary to support any research made about a historical theme. Primary sources can provide any researcher with a contemporary view of the event, community or person being studied, without the subjective interpretation that may be made in a secondary source. But, we must also be careful with primary sources as they may also be subject to bias. I will be looking at three different sources to extract information regarding the treatment of the poor in the Parish of Brighton and more specifically the Elm Grove Workhouse. This will include demonstration of the actual evidence that can be found within the sources and also a compare and contrast of how useful they can be.

The three sources are the workhouse element of the 1881 Census, a book of correspondence from the 1860's between the Poor Law Board in London and the Brighton Poor Law Union and a book of the minutes from the Guardians meetings from 1902.

The Elm Grove (or Race Hill) Workhouse in Brighton was built by George Maynard and completed in 1867. It consisted of the main workhouse building with clock tower, an infirmary, chapel, laundry and casual wards. Its capacity at the time of building was 861. The workhouse was expanded between 1887 and 1898 to include more casual wards and 2 more infirmaries. The inmate were expected to wear the workhouse uniform (grey suits for men and blue and white striped dresses for the women) and were put to work breaking stones (men) and picking oakum (women) in order to discourage people for applying for parish relief (Carder, T 1990).

The census has been taken almost every ten years since 1801, providing us with information on every person resident in the UK at the time of completion. Copies of the relative portion of the census can be found in almost every record office so is an easily accessible source to find out about the inhabitants of a region. Unfortunately there are a number of criticisms that can be aimed at the census. Firstly, it is easy to take the detail out of context. By not looking at the wider historical picture of contemporary society, results can be misinterpreted. Events that may have happened at the same time as the completion of census returns can give an explanation of seemingly anomalous findings.

Definitions and standardisation of categories can also result in the facts being recorded incorrectly and therefore being interpreted incorrectly. There were regional differences for example in job titles or in definitions of households, plus there was also the possibility that the census enumerator have applied their personal interpretation. It is also possible that mistakes in transcription could have been made and as many of the original returns have been destroyed or lost, or the handwriting being difficult to read, the local historian is unable to go back to the originals to verify the details.

An individual census return, as with so many historical sources, only provides us with a 'snapshot'. We can only say with any conviction, that this is how it was on this date and this date only. Ideally the researcher needs a sequence of census returns to provide chronological or regional comparative data.

We can easily convert the census returns into statistics providing us with quantitative data, which we can then manipulate quickly and easily. For example, if we take the ratio of male to female inmates, as shown in Figure 1, we can see that the split was fairly even. It would be more useful to compare this with the population split of Brighton itself to see if this is an accurate reflection of the male to female ratio. This is also interesting as it is commonly believed that women were able to find alternative work to keep them out of the workhouse, for example to work as chaperones for other members of the family.

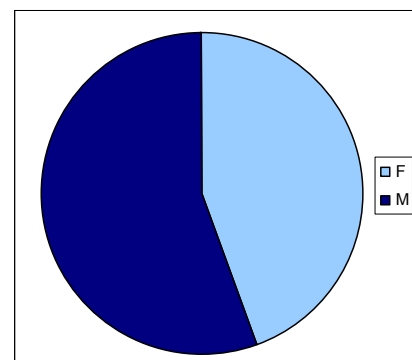


Figure 1 : Male to Female proportion in the Elm Grove Workhouse at the time of the 1881 census

Figure 2 shows us a list of previous occupations of the inmates. There are a large variety of jobs listed could tell us the higher risk jobs – those that fluctuate with the seasons or bad harvests for example. Without comparing these statistics with other censuses from other regions or years we cannot tell if these are typical employment types that may find themselves in need of poor relief. With Brighton being a seaside tourist town it is interesting to note the variety of occupations that may be particular to that type of area, for example Lodging House keepers, waiters and fish hawkers.

Figure 2 : Previous occupations of inmates

Occupation	#	Occupation	#	Occupation	#
Labourer	131	Engine Fitter	2	House Furniture Painter	1
Domestic Servant	105	Fly Driver	2	Huckster	1
None	87	Footman	2	Inn Keeper	1
Child	60	Harness Maker	2	Iron Castings Moulder	1
Charwoman	51	Journeyman	2	Iron Foundry Labourer	1
Cook Domestic	37	Lawyers Copying Clerk	2	Ironmongers Asst	1
Washer Woman	36	Miller	2	Laundry Assistant	1
Needlewoman	35	Milliner	2	Lithographic Printer	1
Laundry Worker	28	Milliner & Dressmaker	2	Manchester Warehouseman	1
Carpenter & Joiner	26	Platelayer (Railway)	2	Marble Polisher	1
Shoe Maker	25	Plumber & Painter	2	Master Mariner	1
Bricklayer	21	Sailmaker	2	Master Watchmaker	1
Stableman	20	Tin Plate Worker	2	Mat Maker	1
Ironer	15	Umbrella Mender	2	Merchandise Warehouseman	1
Nurse	14	Waterman	2	Musician	1
Gentlemans Servant	13	Actress	1	Net Mender & Fisherman	1
House Painter	13	Barmaid	1	Pensioner 6th Dragoons	1
Baker	12	Bathing Woman	1	Porters Assistant	1
Fisherman	11	Boot Maker	1	Post Boy Roundsman	1
Blacksmith	10	Box Maker	1	Postmaster & Chemist	1
Hawker	9	Builder Journeyman	1	Printer	1
Tailor	9	Buying & Selling Old Clothes	1	Printer Compositor	1
Porter	8	Cab Man	1	Railway Worker	1
Scholar	8	Cabinet Maker	1	Railwayman	1
Brick Maker	7	Carrier	1	Rope Maker	1
Carter	7	Chemists Porter	1	Salt Boiler	1
Coachman Domestic	7	Childrens Nurse	1	Seaman Stoker	1
Groom	7	Church Warden	1	Selling Water Cresses	1
Monthly Nurse	7	Clay Pipe Maker	1	Ships Steward	1
Painter	7	Coach Body Maker	1	Shipwright	1
Butcher Journeyman	6	Coachsmith	1	Shoe Rivetter	1
Teacher	6	Coalman	1	Shopwoman Confectioner	1
Lodging House Keeper	5	Costermonger	1	Signal Man On Railway	1
Mariner	5	Cutting Wood One Leg	1	Slater	1
Wood Sawyer	5	Drapers Assistant	1	Stagecoach Man	1
Dressmaker	4	Dyer	1	Stay Maker	1
Fish Hawker	4	Engine Driver	1	Straw Bonnet Maker	1
Hairdresser	4	Engraver Of Brass Work For Churches	1	Surveyor & Draughtsman	1
Plasterer	4	Equestrian Performer	1	Tallow Chandler	1
Plumber	4	Farmers Widow	1	Ticket Writer	1
Shoe Binder	4	French Polisher	1	Upholsterer	1
Shoeing Smith	4	Fruit Hawker	1	Weaver Handloom	1
Unknown	4	Furniture Porter	1	Wheelwright	1
Waiter	4	General Assistant	1	Whitesmith	1
Excavator	3	Gingerbread Baker	1	Wig Maker	1
Gardener	3	Goods Porter Railways	1		
Chimney Sweep	2	Greengrocer	1		
Clerk	2	Grocers Assistant	1		
Coach Trimmer	2	Ground Digger	1		
Cooper	2	Honiton Lace Maker	1		

This small sample of statistics shows us the range of information we can get from the census. How valuable is it to the local historian trying to discover the treatment of the poor in the region? The census can tell us who those receiving poor relief were at the time of the completion of the census – for example, their gender, age, place of birth, previous jobs, handicaps etc, which we can use to compare and contrast with other workhouses, but we can not tell how they were treated. There are no specific details as to why these people were in the workhouse or how long they were there. There is nothing to tell us the food they ate, the work they would have done or the punishments they have received. Whilst the census is useful as a starting point to assess the scope of the community we are dealing with, we are not able to make any judgments as to the treatment they would have received.

Another source that can be used by local historians is a book of correspondence between the Poor Law Board and the Brighton Union. This book contains newspaper cuttings, audit reports, letters, guidelines for the running of the workhouse, complaints, inspection reports and much more. We will look at a couple of examples to see what they can tell us about the workhouse and its inmates.

There are applications for poor relief, specifically from Henry (surname illegible), a 39-year-old married man whose “...wife keeps herself and has done for years.” Henry applied for relief five times over a 6-year period and his forms, along with the annotations from the Union staff, provide a brief insight into his life. This type of information is very useful as it tells us a lot about the type of people in the workhouse and their background. The annotations can provide a more personal touch and can give us an idea of the attitudes and relationships between the Union staff and the inmates.

The newspaper cuttings within the book include letters from members of the public complaining about the behaviour of the staff and inmates and also about how much taxpayers money is being spend on caring for the poor. We can see from these letters how the local inhabitants felt about the presence of a workhouse in their locality, obviously in this instance they were not a popular addition to the community.

The final source that I am going to look at is a selection of the minutes from the weekly meetings held by the workhouse Board of Guardians. These minutes are from January to March 1902 and are provided in a typed format – removing the need to decipher handwriting. The minutes contain a range of information from workhouse accounts, amounts received from the collectors of the Poor Rate, granted requests for poor relief, employment and resignation of staff.

Some of the items mentioned briefly in the minutes can provide information the more personal aspects of the workhouse. There are thanks given for the provision of a pantomime for the inmates, with gifts of snuff, cigars, sweets, oranges and tobacco. The 'Aged Inmates' were taken out on a day trip for the New Year. Funds were allocation for games, pictures and periodicals. In the accounts, funds for gin (10s 6d), piano restringing, handkerchiefs and clothing are listed. Gifts are listed – two specifically mentioned are a white horse and a cow. There is noted the disappearance of an attendant of the Male Imbeciles – although the board didn't seem too worried and re-advertised his job within a week.

The board minutes list in great detail the accounts of the workhouse. In the period I was looking at, there are quarterly and monthly accounts with all salaries, purchases and income listed. This can provide a snapshot of the cost of running a workhouse and where the money came from. The Poor Rate collections seem to have been recorded every meeting, and on 21<sup>st</sup> January were worth £9451 18s and 10d. There are also records of rates being claimed from other Poor Law Unions if the workhouse had an inmate that hailed from that Union/Parish – the reverse also is true and other institutions claimed money from the Elm Grove Workhouse.

Reading through the minutes of these meetings provides a useful set of data, both qualitative and quantitative. We can see the mechanics as to the running of the workhouse, the funds that greased those workings and the items that were needed, like coffins, vaccinations, oil, food and staff. From the information gathered we can make assumptions about the care that was provided for the poor of Brighton, and with gin and pianos it doesn't seem all bad. But again, this is only one view of the day to

day life and coming from the people that ran the workhouse we could assume that this is biased and would only show the 'good side'.

There is a wealth of primary evidence available to the local historian through, for example, public record offices, local history societies and local libraries. All are subject to close study and careful interpretation. The three sources detailed above make a wide variety of information available to the modern day historian, which can, in this instance, tell us a lot about the life of the poor in Brighton. The census is an important document and gives us a snapshot view of the inmates in the workhouse at any one time, which can be presented in a statistical way to show the way the community was made up, but it doesn't show how the community changed, lived and was treated. The book of correspondence and the meeting minutes give a more rounded description of the workhouse. We can see personal depictions of problems and attitudes, which bring the day-to-day aspects of the workhouse to life. Standing alone, each source gives us an explanation of certain aspects of the life of the poor but cannot provide the whole picture. To present a balanced view, we must consider a number of sources and view them side-by-side.

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