

# THE MEDWAY UNION WORKHOUSE, 1876–1881: A STUDY BASED ON THE ADMISSION AND DISCHARGE REGISTERS AND THE CENSUS ENUMERATORS' BOOKS

David G Jackson

David Jackson has recently retired after being employed in the pharmaceutical industry in Cheshire for twenty five years. He maintains his interest in north Kent, where he was born and grew up, by carrying out genealogical and small-scale population studies.

## Introduction

Under the New Poor Law of 1834 each parish in England and Wales was allocated to a Poor Law Union, and each union was required to provide workhouse accommodation for its destitute. Working people were expected to be reliant on self-help and mutual aid, with charity available if these strategies failed.<sup>1</sup> Poverty *per se* was not to be relieved, as it was necessary to encourage the poor to work, and was distinguished from destitution, which was to be relieved.<sup>2</sup>

Poor relief was a last resort, and it is natural to regard workhouse inmates as a section of the population prepared, or forced by circumstances, to accept the harsh environment, confinement, humiliation and stigma of the workhouse. However, evidence is available that inmates did not necessarily regard themselves as an inferior race, set apart from those outside the workhouse. Some paupers did complain, sometimes in writing, about their treatment.<sup>3</sup> The Poor Law Commissioners' ideal, of separate institutions for each class of pauper, was not practicable, and the norm was a single establishment, with segregation of different classes of inmates. The principle of less eligibility, whereby a workhouse inmate's lot was to be less desirable than that of the poorest independent labourer, was promulgated by the Poor Law Commissioners. The destitute were to be offered relief in the workhouse, which they would accept only if there was no alternative. This offer of the deterrent workhouse regime was known as the workhouse test.<sup>4</sup> Life in the workhouse was sometimes materially better than the life of an independent labourer, but any perceived advantages were offset by psychological deterrents such as the separation of family members.<sup>5</sup>

Another principle espoused by the Poor Law Commissioners, and closely allied to less eligibility, was the prohibition of outdoor relief to able-bodied males.<sup>6</sup> In 1835 the First Annual Report of the Poor Law Commission stipulated that, firstly, relief in money should not be awarded to employed able-bodied male paupers or their families, except in case of illness or accident;

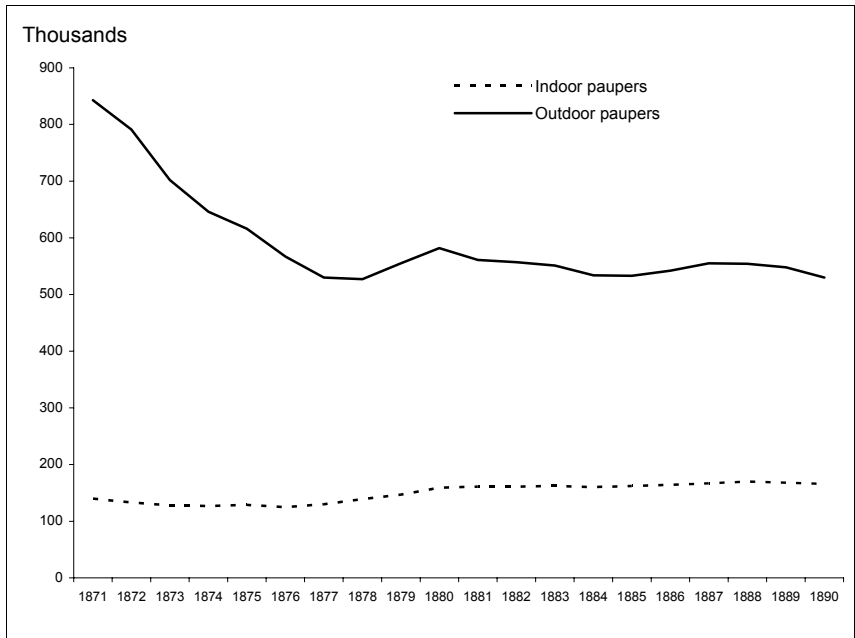
secondly, male paupers on parish work should receive at least half their relief in kind; thirdly, at least half of the relief given to able-bodied widows and single women should be in kind; and fourthly, payments towards rent should not be made to able-bodied male paupers.<sup>7</sup> However, total prohibition of outdoor relief was impracticable in the face of large-scale unemployment, as was recognised when the Outdoor Labour Test Order of 1842 was issued, permitting provision of outdoor relief to able-bodied men in return for monotonous and unpleasant work. This order was of use to those unions that had insufficient workhouse accommodation.<sup>8</sup> The central authority encouraged use of the workhouse test, but many unions did in fact continue to give outdoor relief on grounds of humanity (families were not broken up), expense (relief could be supplemented by work and charity), and the fact that a man living outside the workhouse could look for work more easily than one confined within it.<sup>9</sup> The New Poor Law introduced an element of discrimination into relief and employment policy, as it was cheaper to employ family men and relieve single men than vice versa.<sup>10</sup> It has been argued that the purpose of the New Poor Law was to abolish outdoor relief to able bodied men, rather than to all classes of paupers.<sup>11</sup> The New Poor Law was directed at the two parent family, with a male breadwinner, and paid little heed to the problems experienced by deserted or abandoned women with dependents.<sup>12</sup> However, women attempting to support their legitimate children were granted outdoor relief.<sup>13</sup> Further measures against relief to able-bodied males were included in the 1844 Prohibitory Order and the 1852 Regulation Order, both of which permitted outdoor relief to sick men.<sup>14</sup> Such exceptions provided loopholes which local guardians could exploit by giving outdoor relief under the guise of relief in aid of sickness.<sup>15</sup> This and other abuses, including relief from the highway rate, were recognised in 1847 by Edwin Chadwick, the secretary to the Poor Law Commissioners.<sup>16</sup>

A system providing outdoor relief in the form of money was susceptible to abuse, in that overseers, who enjoyed a high degree of autonomy and freedom from central control, could encourage recipients to spend their relief money at selected shops owned by the overseers or their friends, family or associates; employers could profit from the system by paying recipients of relief at less than a fair rate. There was, of course, no guarantee that recipients would spend their relief money wisely.

From 1870, the attitude towards outdoor relief hardened, as indicated by The Goschen Minute, which appeared in the *Twenty-second annual report of the Poor Law Board*. This minute unequivocally stated the principle that the provisions of the poor law should be used only to relieve the destitute, who were to be maintained wholly at public expense (which meant in the workhouse); extension of statutory relief to the merely poor was considered inappropriate as this group was seen as a legitimate object of charity.<sup>17</sup> The success of this harsh policy is indicated by the removal of one in three recipients of outdoor relief in the period 1871–1876.

The mean annual national totals of indoor and outdoor paupers from 1871 to 1890 are shown in Figure 1. The decline in numbers of outdoor paupers between 1871 and 1876 indicates the success of the harsh policy adopted at this

**Figure 1** England and Wales, national annual mean numbers of indoor and outdoor paupers, 1871–1890



**Source:** K. Williams, *From pauperism to poverty* (London, 1981), 159–160.

time. In 1871 the Local Government Board, which had taken over responsibility for the Poor Law, demonstrated its commitment to the reduction, if not abolition, of outdoor relief, by issuing a circular in which Guardians were blamed for the defective management and administration which resulted in an increase in outdoor relief. Options that Guardians were encouraged to consider, and that indicate a hardened attitude towards applicants for relief, included taking some of the children of widows and single women into the workhouse as an alternative to outdoor relief, and careful scrutiny of applications for outdoor relief submitted by the aged. The workhouse could also be used to temporarily house some of a family's children while the family overcame temporary difficulties.<sup>18</sup> An important source of detailed information on individual paupers is the census enumerators' books (CEBs), which are available for each decennial census from 1841 to 1901. Only a few authors have made use of this source for the study of workhouse inmates.<sup>19</sup>

The aim of this article is to explore the circumstances and characteristics of workhouse inmates from the information contained in the admission and discharge registers of the Medway Union Workhouse in Kent for the period 1876–1881. Reasons for selection of this union and period included, firstly, the size of the workhouse population, which was small enough to be compatible

with the combination of manual and computer-based methods used but large enough to allow meaningful conclusions to be drawn about the workhouse population as a whole; and secondly, the registers were well kept and legible. Surprisingly, little detailed work has been based on workhouse admission and discharge registers, although lists of surviving registers are available.<sup>20</sup> Indoor relief lists have been used as the basis for work on the population of the Bedford workhouse.<sup>21</sup> Such lists were not available for the Medway Workhouse for the period under study. The precise period selected for study was 1 April 1876 to 1 April 1881, the finishing date being chosen to coincide with the 1881 census, so that information from the CEBs could be used in conjunction with that from the workhouse registers.

The Medway Union was situated in north Kent, on the Medway estuary, and comprised Chatham, Gillingham, Rochester St Nicholas, Rochester Cathedral Church Precincts, Rochester St Margaret, Lydsing and Grange.<sup>22</sup> In the second half of the nineteenth century the Medway Towns and nearby areas were undergoing great industrial expansion.<sup>23</sup> The population of the Medway Registration District increased by 128 per cent, from 42,796 in 1851 to 97,546 in 1901.<sup>24</sup> Increases in population also occurred in outlying villages.<sup>25</sup> Important factors contributing to this expansion included the growth of cement and brick manufacture, requiring machinery and barges, which were provided by local engineering works and barge yards. The naval dockyard at Chatham underwent expansion between 1855 and 1885, and although much of the labour was provided by convicts, 1,144 of whom were enumerated in the 1881 census, the work would have provided considerable stimulus to the local economy. Other local industries included oilseed crushing and clothing manufacture.<sup>26</sup>

According to the 1881 census report the population of the Medway Registration District was 61,644.<sup>27</sup> The enriched version of the 1881 census was used to provide background occupational information on the registration district. This database held a total of 61,401 records for the registration district.<sup>28</sup> The discrepancy between the report and the database amounts to less than 0.4 per cent, so correction was not attempted. Table 1 shows that 39,811 inhabitants were aged 15 years or over, of whom almost 40 per cent were unoccupied. In this age group, the most frequent occupational groups were defence (9.1 per cent), workers and dealers in general or unspecified commodities (8.2 per cent), domestic service or offices (8.0 per cent), workers and dealers in dress (5.5 per cent), and workers and dealers in houses, furniture and decorations (3.8 per cent). Males comprised 53.1 per cent and females 46.9 per cent of the adult population. Children (aged less than 15 years) constituted 35.1 per cent of the population of the registration district, those aged 15-59 years comprised 58.0 per cent, and the elderly (aged 60 years and over) comprised 6.9 per cent.<sup>29</sup> Nationally, males accounted for 47.9 per cent of the adult population and females for 52.1 per cent, while those aged less than 15 years constituted 36.4 per cent, those aged 15-59 years accounted for 56.2 per cent, and 7.4 per cent of the population was aged 60 years or over.<sup>30</sup>

**Table 1 Occupations of Medway Workhouse inmates and general population, aged 15 years and over**

Order	Workhouse (per cent)	Registration district (per cent)
General/local government	0.0	1.5
Defence	0.2	9.1
Professionals	2.5	2.4
Domestic service	24.3	8.0
Commercial	0.0	0.8
Conveyance	2.2	3.6
Agriculture	4.7	1.8
Animals	0.0	0.3
Books, prints and maps	0.0	0.3
Machines and implements	0.5	2.0
Houses, furniture and decorations	5.7	3.8
Carriages and harnesses	0.7	0.3
Ships and boats	0.2	4.6
Chemicals and compounds	0.0	0.1
Tobacco and pipes	0.0	0.1
Food and lodging	1.7	3.4
Textiles	0.2	0.9
Dress	12.4	5.5
Animal substances	0.2	0.1
Vegetable substances	0.5	0.7
Mineral substances	2.7	3.7
General/unspecified	19.1	8.2
Refuse matters	0.5	0.1
Unoccupied	21.3	39.8
Total	100	100
N	403	39,811

**Source:** K. Schürer and M. Woollard, *1881 Census for England and Wales, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man (Enriched Version)* [computer file]. Genealogical Society of Utah, Federation of family History Societies [original data producers]. Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive [distributor], 2000. SN4177.

### Format and content of the registers

The Medway Union workhouse admission and discharge register is contained in a landscape format book.<sup>31</sup> Each double-page spread of the register was divided into columns and was devoted to admissions and discharges for a particular week. From April 1876, 26 columns were available for information on admissions; the first seven were headed as follows; 'Day of the month'; 'Day of the week'; 'Next meal after admission; name'; 'Calling, if any'; 'Religious persuasion'; 'When born'. The next 11 columns were numbered 1 to 9, with 4a

and 8a, and were grouped under the heading 'Class for Diet'. The remaining four columns on the left hand page were headed 'No. affixed to the Pauper's Clothes'; 'Parish from which Admitted'; 'By whose Order admitted'; 'Date of the Order of Admission'. The first three columns on the right hand page related to admissions, and were headed 'If born in the House Name of Parent'; 'Observations on Condition at the time of Admission'; and 'Any other General Remarks'. Eighteen columns were devoted to discharges. The first four were 'Date'; 'Day of the Week', 'Last Meal before Discharge'; 'Name'. The next 11 were 'Class for Diet', as for admissions. The remaining three were 'How Discharged and if by Order by whose Order'; 'In case of death say dead'; 'Observations on general Character and Behaviour in the Workhouse'. From 1 January 1878, two columns were added in the discharges section, one for 'Age' and one for 'Parish'. The general standard of record keeping appears to be high, with almost all the required information being entered. The only items of information that were frequently missed were 'No. affixed to the Pauper's Clothes' and 'Observations on General Character and Behaviour in the Workhouse.' Instructions at the foot of the page stipulated that the Classes should correspond with the Classes of the Diet table in use in the workhouse, and that columns 4a and 8a were for children.<sup>32</sup>

At the head of each of the 11 'Class for Diet' columns in the admissions section is the total number of paupers in each class at the beginning of the week. Following the list of paupers admitted during the week is the sum of those present at the beginning of the week and those admitted. Beneath this is the number of paupers in each class discharged during the week, derived from the totals in the discharges section. The bottom row, derived by subtracting the total number of discharges from the sum of those present at the beginning of the week and those admitted during the week, represents the total number of paupers present in each class at the end of the week. This figure is carried forward to the top of the next admissions page. Grand totals of paupers present at the beginning and end of the week appear to the right of the Class 9 column. The registers show evidence of auditing at approximately six monthly intervals.

### **Inmates enumerated in the census**

Census enumerators' books (hereafter CEBs), intended to collectively list every person present in the country, have formed the basis of many demographic studies. The great advantages of the CEBs include widespread availability, wide geographical coverage, and inclusion of all social classes, but their disadvantage is that they only provide a static snapshot of the population every ten years. In the current study, the snapshot provided by the 1881 census was used to complement the dynamic picture provided by the admission and discharge registers.

A total of 605 inmates were enumerated in the Medway Union Workhouse in the 1881 census, of whom 46.6 per cent were male and 53.4 per cent were female.<sup>33</sup> Inmates aged less than 15 years constituted 33.4 per cent, those

between 15 and 59 years comprised 31.8 per cent, and those aged over 60 years accounted for 34.8 per cent. Pre- and post-1834 workhouses of East Anglia showed a bias to the young and old.<sup>34</sup> In Hertfordshire in 1851, approximately one third of inmates were aged less than 15 years and about another third were over 60.<sup>35</sup> In the fifth and sixth decades of the nineteenth century, only one sixth of the population of the Bedford workhouse was aged 60 or over.<sup>36</sup> In two Hampshire workhouses (Winchester and Basingstoke) in 1851, 40-45 per cent of inmates were aged less than 15 years. About 20 per cent were aged at least 60, a figure in accord with the statement that in 1851 less than one in five workhouse inmates was aged 60 or more.<sup>37</sup> About 40 per cent of Hampshire inmates were aged 15-59, compared with about 46 per cent of the population of the county.<sup>38</sup> In Leicester in 1881, the young accounted for about 28 per cent and the old for about 38 per cent of inmates.<sup>39</sup> In eight Kent workhouses in 1881, 34 per cent of inmates were under 15 years of age, and 36 per cent were 60 or over.<sup>40</sup> Children constituted roughly similar percentages of the workhouse and general populations, but the aged represented a much greater percentage of the workhouse population than of the general population. This increased percentage of elderly inmates in the Medway workhouse in 1881 compared with workhouses earlier in the century is consistent with the suggestion that provision for groups other than the aged was made outside the workhouse as the nineteenth century progressed, and the observation that in 1891 inmates aged over 65 constituted one third of the national workhouse population.<sup>41</sup>

### **Total numbers of inmates in the Medway Union Workhouse.**

Figure 2 shows the total numbers of male and female inmates by week throughout the study period, derived from the weekly totals described above. The seasonal variations are striking, with the workhouse population reaching annual maximum levels between January and April, and minimum levels between August and October. Broadly similar seasonal variations in workhouse populations were seen in rural Hampshire in the fifth and sixth decades of the century.<sup>42</sup> The current study shows that seasonal variations were not confined to agricultural districts. If the summer minimum of Medway inmates for each year from 1876-1881 is compared with the preceding winter maximum, reductions of between 15 and 22 per cent are apparent. Corresponding national figures vary between 10 and 17 per cent.<sup>43</sup> This contrasts with earlier work which suggested that summer minima seldom fell below 90 per cent of winter levels in the mid-nineteenth century, and that even this differential had almost disappeared by the end of the century.<sup>44</sup> Further work on seasonal fluctuations in workhouse occupancy, revealing considerable variation between summer and winter in the agricultural counties, is in preparation.<sup>45</sup>

Total numbers of male and female inmates increased over the five year period, subject to short-term variations and the seasonal trends mentioned above. Numbers for the two sexes show similar trends with female inmates outnumbering males for almost the entire period under study. This finding is at variance with other workhouses in Kent in 1881 and Hertfordshire in 1851 and is discussed below.

**Figure 2 Medway Union Workhouse male and female inmates, 1876–1881**



**Source:** Medway Workhouse admission and discharge registers, 1876–1881.

### Reasons for admission

Reasons for admission given in the register were assigned to summary categories, shown in Table 2. This table shows reasons for admission that accounted for at least 4 per cent of admissions of children or adult males or females.

The commonest reason for admission of children under 15 was destitution. Other common reasons were desertion, birth in the workhouse, illness/injury, and admission of a parent. Reason for admission was not stated for 10.0 per cent of children. Only 2.4 per cent of children were admitted as orphans. A category 'returned from service' comprised six girls who had been discharged 'To service' up to four months previously and one for whom no discharge was found. Of two boys 'Returned from sea', one had been discharged 'To sea' six weeks previously and one was recorded as 'Taken into service' nine days earlier. Clearly, attempts were made to place these children in work, but the reasons for their return to the workhouse are not known.

Table 2 also shows that for inmates of both sexes aged 15 years and over the commonest reasons for admission were illness/injury and destitution. The only other cause associated with more than 5 per cent of admissions was the mental



**Table 2** Reasons for admission of all inmates, and of those who died in the workhouse

Reason	Total children (aged less than 15 years), per cent	Children who died in workhouse, per cent	Total adult males, per cent	Adult males who died in workhouse, per cent	Total adult females, per cent	Adult females who died in workhouse, per cent
Born	12.1	28.9	–	–	–	–
Deserted	16.1	8.9	0.1	0.6	4.0	0.8
Destitute	43.0	28.9	27.3	9.7	34.8	11.3
With relative	7.9	11.1	–	0.6	–	0.8
Illness/injury	11.4	13.3	62.2	85.1	43.7	80.6
Mental	0.4	2.2	6.8	3.9	7.9	4.8
Pregnant	–	–	–	–	4.8	0.0
Other	9.1	6.7	3.6	0.0	4.8	1.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N (with reason stated)	1,003	45	1,258	154	1,104	124

**Source:** Medway Union Workhouse admission and discharge registers, 1876–1881.

category. Caution must be exercised when interpreting reasons for admission. Some comments are ambiguous; for example, does ‘from asylum’ mean that the individual was cured or untreatable, and similarly does ‘from hospital’ mean that the individual was successfully treated or considered incurable?<sup>47</sup> Should inmates admitted with a relative be considered as admitted with a relative, or classified by that relative’s reason for admission? Sickness or infirmity could predispose to poverty and destitution, so some inmates admitted as destitute could well have reached this condition as a result of illness.<sup>48</sup> These reservations are minor, and the conclusion that the workhouse fulfilled an important function as a hospital is inescapable. Illness (including mental), and pregnancy accounted for 63.1 per cent of adult admissions. Destitution, desertion, birth in the workhouse and illness/injury were together responsible for 82.6 per cent of admissions of children.

### Matching admission entries with discharge and census information

Between 1 April 1876 and 3 April 1881, 3,771 admissions and 3,682 discharges were recorded. For the purposes of the current study, a record was created in a computer database for each admission, with a field for each column in the register. A second database was created for discharges, again with a field for each column. For each admission entry, a search was made in the discharge register for the discharge of the relevant inmate, and the data for the discharge was copied to the record in the admissions database. The standard search facilities of the database program were used to identify candidates for linkage,

but the final decision to link or not was made by the investigator. When admission and discharge records were linked, name was the most important field used. Trivial spelling differences were numerous and were ignored when linking records, as were the occasional instances of extra forenames and transposition of multiple forenames of an individual. Class for diet was used when necessary to provide support for links made and from 1878 age and parish were also used. Age on admission was calculated by subtracting the birth year given in the register from the year in which the admission took place. Age on discharge was copied from the register. From the calculated age on admission and the given age on discharge, the age difference was calculated as the mode of the following expression:

Age difference = age on discharge – (age on admission + number of completed years between admission and discharge). Where the age difference between admission and discharge entries was greater than ten years, the two records were not considered to constitute a match.

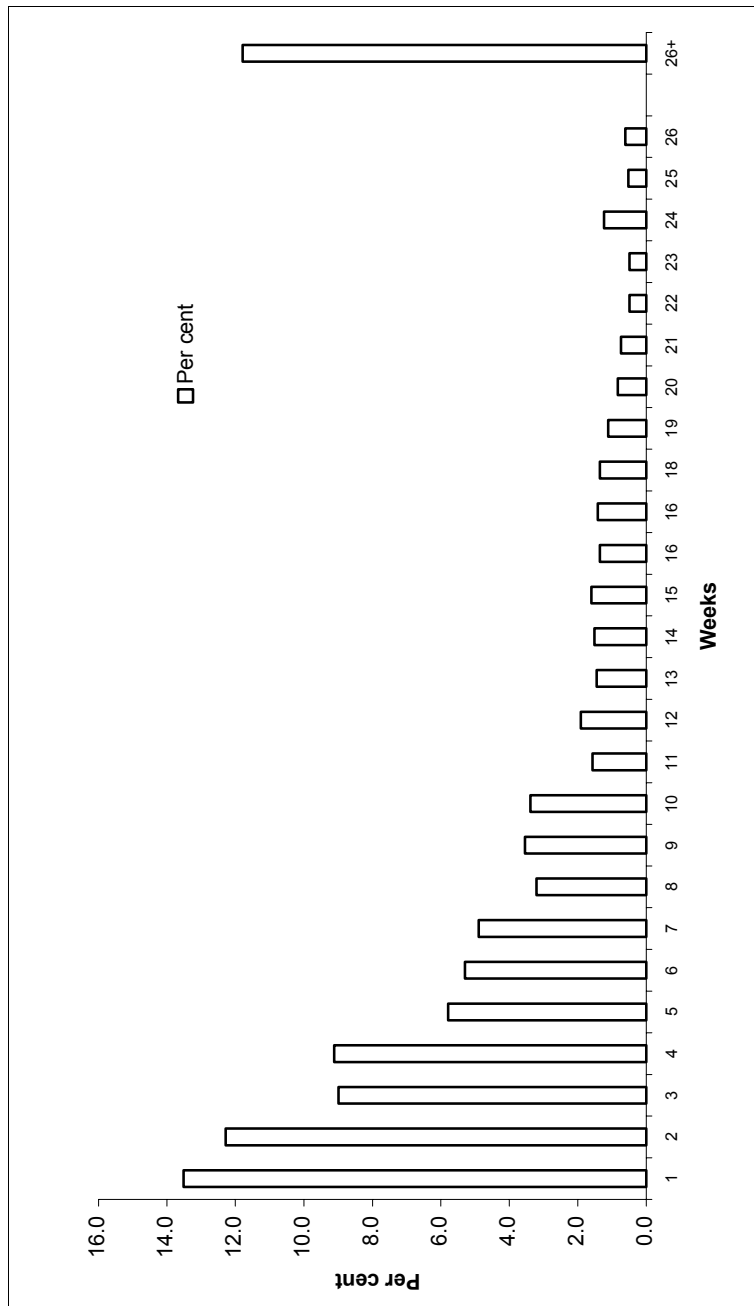
If an admitted inmate was not found in the discharge register, a database of the 1881 CEBs for the Medway workhouse was searched, and where possible entries were matched on the basis of surname, forenames and age. Age difference was calculated in the same way as for discharged inmates, with the census date being used in place of the discharge date.<sup>49</sup>

Age differences were not available for the 986 admission entries matched with discharges that occurred before 1 January 1878, as age at discharge was not recorded. When discharges occurring after the end of 1877 were matched, problems with multiple inmates bearing the same name were not encountered, and age difference provided grounds for non-matching in only 18 cases. These 18 cases were excluded from subsequent analysis, but data from inmates discharged prior to 1878 was included, in order to extend the study period to five years. The very low failure rate of non-matching consequent upon a large age difference indicates that this approach did not seriously impair the integrity of the study.

For only 90 (2.4 per cent) admission entries were the criteria for a successful match not met. Ninety-seven per cent of the matches showed age differences of five years or less. A high level of internal consistency was thus maintained in the keeping of the registers and CEBs. Of the 3,682 discharges that took place during the period under investigation, 11.3 per cent were not matched with admissions. Even if the registers had been totally error-free, those discharges relating to pre-April 1876 admissions could not have been matched.

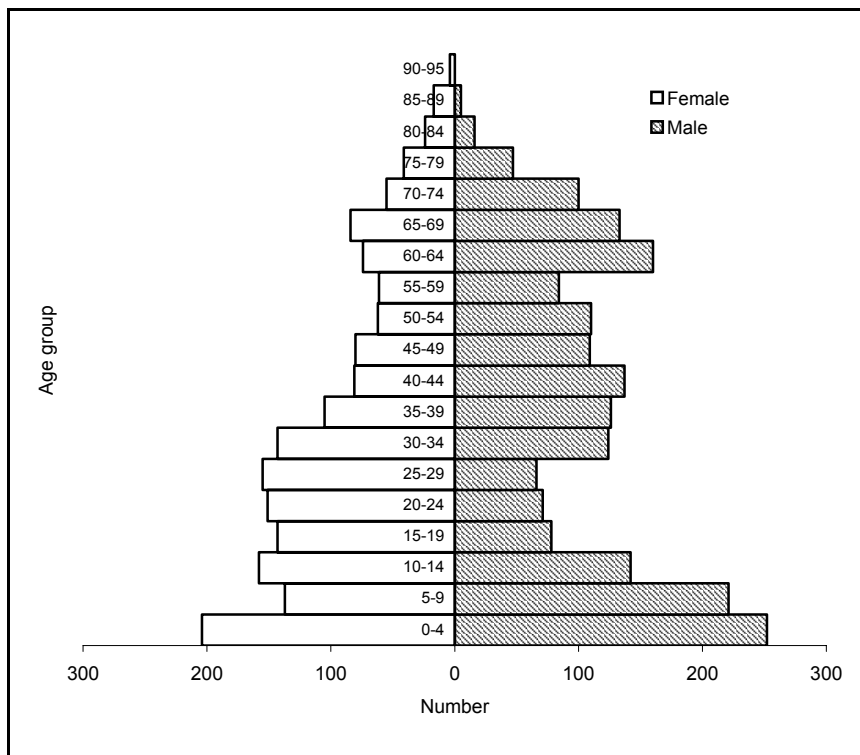
The 1881 CEBs list 605 inmates. Four hundred and thirty (71.1 per cent) were matched. Unmatched census entries were spread across the age range. In the current study, 24 children were admitted as orphans and were matched. Seven of these appear in the discharge register, with only four having durations of stay of less than 14 weeks. The remaining three stayed for 25, 62, and 104 weeks. Of the 17 orphans enumerated in the census, one had been present for

Figure 3 Durations of stay for discharged inmates



Source: Medway Union Workhouse admission and discharge registers, 1876–1881.

Figure 4 Population pyramid for admissions



Source: Medway Union Workhouse admission and discharge registers, 1876–1881.

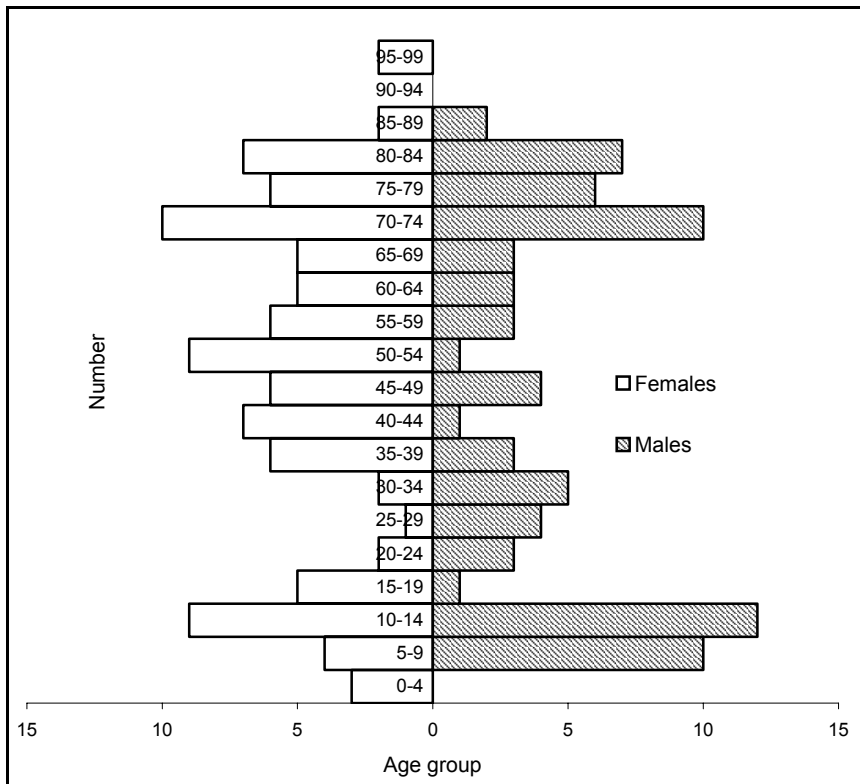
six days, three for 32 days, and the remainder for between 36 and 113 weeks. These findings support the suggestion that orphans became long-term residents in the workhouse.<sup>50</sup>

### Duration of stay

Figure 3 illustrates the durations of stay of inmates whose admissions and discharges were matched. Inmates most commonly spent up to two weeks in the workhouse, with exactly seven days being the commonest period. A similar situation prevailed between 1850 and 1857 in the Winchester Workhouse, with short durations of stay being the norm.<sup>51</sup>

A population pyramid for the 3,760 admissions with age assigned is presented as Figure 4. This shows that up to the age of 9 years, male admissions outnumbered female, while between 10 and 34 years females outnumbered males. Subsequently, up to the age of 79 years, males outnumbered females.

Figure 5 Census inmates without admission entries



Source: 1881: K. Schürer and M. Woollard, *1881 Census for England and Wales, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man (Enriched Version)* [computer file]. Genealogical Society of Utah, Federation of family History Societies [original data producers]. Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive [distributor], 2000. SN4177.

From 80 years, more females than males were admitted, presumably as a result of the greater longevity of women.

Duration of stay for matched inmates who stayed up to a year showed no major differences between the sexes. A population pyramid for inmates enumerated in the 1881 census but without admission entries during the study period, Figure 5, shows a preponderance of females, suggesting that most very long term inhabitants were female, and provides an explanation for the consistently predominantly female population of the workhouse. Goose suggests that counts of admissions of males were skewed by seasonal variation in availability of employment, and that long-term inmates are more likely to appear in the census.<sup>52</sup> There were 175 enumerated inmates (78 male and 97 female) without admission entries, constituting 28.9 per cent of the total

**Table 3 Family types of individuals admitted to the workhouse**

Family type of inmate	Per cent
Lone person	61.7
Mother with child(ren)*	25.9
Father with child(ren)	1.5
Both parents with child(ren)	3.6
Brothers/sisters under 15 years	4.7
Husband and wife	1.3
Other/uncertain	1.3
Total	100.0
N	3,771

**Note:** \*Women who were admitted alone and subsequently gave birth in the workhouse were classed as mother with child.

**Source:** Medway Union Workhouse admission and discharge registers, 1876–1881.

recorded in the census. The young (aged less than 15 years) and the aged (aged more than 70 years) represented 21.7 and 29.7 per cent of unmatched enumerated inmates respectively, suggesting that the young and the old constituted the majority of long-term inmates.

## Occupations

The enriched version of the 1881 census was used for investigation of occupations.<sup>53</sup> The classification is described by Woollard and is based on the Registrar General's scheme for 1881.<sup>54</sup> For all individuals enumerated in the census, the code assigned during the enrichment process was used without modification. Occupations listed in the admission register were assigned manually, using the same classification. Only individuals aged 15 years or more were included in the analysis of occupations. This analysis is presented in Table 1, which shows that the only occupational groups that contributed more than 5 per cent to the workhouse population at the time of the census were Domestic Service or Office', Workers and Dealers in Houses, Furniture and Decorations, Workers and Dealers in Dress, Workers and Dealers in General or Unspecified Commodities, and Unoccupied. Unsurprisingly for an area housing a dockyard and barracks, over 9.1 per cent of the population was involved in defence, while less than one per cent of the workhouse population fell into this group. Domestic Service accounted for 8.0 per cent of the total population, but 24.3 per cent of the workhouse population. Of the total of 3,191 domestics in the total population, over 92 per cent were female; in the workhouse, over 96 per cent of the 98 domestics were female. While domestic service was clearly an important source of female employment, the high percentage of workhouse inmates belonging to this group indicates that such employment failed in many cases to provide an adequate income and independence. Workers and Dealers in Ships

and Boats comprised over 4 per cent of the total population, but only one member of this group was present in the workhouse. Unsurprisingly, employment for these workers was secure in an area with a naval dockyard and a requirement for barges to transport heavy local commodities such as bricks. Workers and Dealers in Dress were over-represented in the workhouse, accounting for 12.4 and over 5.5 per cent of inmate and total populations respectively. In the workhouse, 72 per cent of the 50 inmates in this group were female, while in the general population, 75 per cent of 2,194 individuals were female. Forty-four per cent of the workhouse inmates were described as needlewomen or 'sewing,' compared with 14 per cent of those members of the general population in the Dress category. It appears that, like domestic work, needlework was a poorly paid occupation for women, which often failed to provide sufficient income for an independent existence. Workers and Dealers in General or Unspecified Commodities were also over-represented in the workhouse, accounting for 19.1 per cent of the workhouse population and 8.0 per cent of the general population. General labourers represented 64.4 per cent of this category in the general population and 96.1 per cent in the workhouse population. The Unoccupied category comprised over 38.8 per cent of the general population, but only 21.3 per cent of the workhouse population.

### **Family structure**

The registers did not have explicit provision for recording family relationships of inmates, except for identification of the mothers of children born in the workhouse. However, groups of inmates admitted with the same surname could be confidently ascribed to family groups, and the reason for admission of children sometimes contained the information that an individual was admitted with an identified family member. Examination of the Medway registers does not support the statement that 'The only distinction which can be established with some certainty is that between those entering with a spouse and those entering alone.'<sup>55</sup> Seven family types were identified, as listed in Table 3. A group was identified as a mother with children if the woman was over 16 years old, and was at least 15 years older than the oldest child admitted with her. A corresponding rule was adopted for groups consisting of father and children. Groups consisting of mother, father and children were identified by the presence of a man and a woman, each aged over 16 years and each at least 15 years older than the oldest child admitted with them. Examples of the other/uncertain category include groups of brothers and sisters some of whom were over 15 years of age, and groups containing adults of different sexes with the same surname but an age difference great enough to cast doubt on the assumption that they were husband and wife.

Table 3 shows that 61.7 per cent of admissions were of lone people. The next most common category was that of mothers with children, contributing 25.9 per cent. The remaining categories together contributed a total of less than 13 per cent. In only two instances was there evidence of family members entering at different times. Fanny Archer entered with her child, aged less than one year, to be followed five days later by two children aged four and ten years with the surname Archer. The reason for admission of these two children was 'Mother

**Table 4 Durations of pre-and post-natal periods spent in the workhouse**

Duration (days)	Pre-natal stay (per cent)	Post-natal stay (per cent)
0-1	8.9	0.0
2-7	9.6	0.0
8-14	6.1	17.0
15-21	4.4	41.5
22-28	6.1	17.0
29-35	7.0	3.2
36-42	8.8	5.3
43-49	6.1	3.2
50-313	22.9	12.8
Total	100.0	100.0
N	114*	94*

**Note:** \*Fourteen children died in the workhouse, so their mothers are excluded from the post-natal stay column. Six children were enumerated as inmates with their mothers in the census, and are also excluded.

**Source:** Medway Union Workhouse admission and discharge registers, 1876-1881.

in house.' In another case, Elizabeth Duffell was admitted with three children aged between one and 11 years, to be followed two weeks later by 11 year-old Susan Duffell, admitted because 'Mother in workhouse.' No other admission entries made reference to previously admitted family members. The 1851 CEBs for six Hertfordshire workhouses, selected because family groups were readily identifiable, list a total of 87 families (defined as one or both parents with child (ren)). In only 14 cases were both parents present. Of the remaining 73 families, nine were headed by a widower.<sup>56</sup> Although the numbers in the study on Hertfordshire and the present work are derived differently, it is clear that in both instances the commonest family group was a woman with children.<sup>57</sup>

### Birth in the workhouse

A total of 121 births (including one pair of twins, classed as two births) were recorded in the admission register during the study period. The admissions of all but six of the mothers were identified in the register. Four of these six mothers gave birth between April and July 1876 and were probably admitted before the start of the study period. The remaining two gave birth in July 1879 and September 1880, and their names were illegible in the 'name of parent' column.

These six births were excluded from the analysis, leaving a total of 115 births and 114 admissions of pregnant women (making allowance for the mother of



twins). Table 4 shows that 28.9 per cent of admissions of pregnant women occurred on the day of the birth or the day before and 39.5 per cent occurred within a week of the birth. Mothers appeared to be in no hurry to leave the workhouse after the birth, with none leaving less than 11 days after the birth (Table 4). 75.5 per cent of discharges took place when the children were between 11 and 28 days old. The period normally spent in lying-in hospitals at this time was between one and two weeks.<sup>58</sup> The maximum stay after the birth was 313 days. Fourteen children who were born in the workhouse died there, eight of them in the first fortnight.

Six mothers of children born in the workhouse were enumerated there with their children in the 1881 census. One child was born on 3 April 1881 (the day prior to census night), and the ages of the others varied between one and 100 weeks. Six women gave birth in the workhouse on more than one occasion. Five of these gave birth to two children and the third gave birth on three occasions. Most women giving birth in the workhouse were young, with 32.5 per cent aged between 21 and 25 years, while the 16-20 and 26-30 years age groups each represented another 22.8 per cent. The children who died in the workhouse were mainly those of younger mothers, 46 per cent of the mothers being 17-20 years old. It is probable these young mothers were giving birth for the first time, and that the children were illegitimate. Firstborn children and the children of unmarried mothers faced a greater risk of early death.<sup>59</sup>

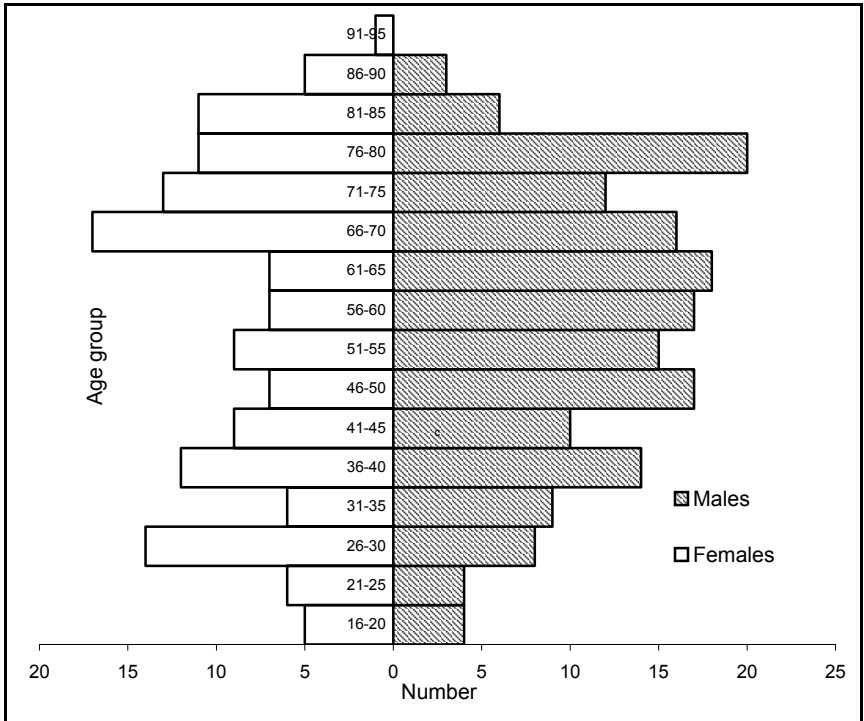
### **Death in the workhouse**

Numbers of deaths in the Medway workhouse and in the registration district for the complete years 1876-1881 are contained in the *Annual reports of the Registrar General*.<sup>60</sup> During this period there were 6,868 deaths in the Medway registration district. Of this total, 574 (8.4 per cent) occurred in the workhouse. This is in accord with the observation that, for much of the nineteenth century, death in the workhouse was rare, accounting for less than one in ten of all deaths.<sup>61</sup> Between 1876 and 1881, the national percentage of deaths occurring in workhouses varied from 5.8 to 7.0 per cent.<sup>62</sup>

During the five year study period, 480 deaths were recorded in the discharge register, representing 13.0 per cent of the 3,682 discharges. Three hundred and sixty three of these deaths, or 75.6 per cent, were successfully matched with admissions, and only these will be examined further. Age at death was calculated as age at admission plus the number of completed years between admission and death. This approach was adopted because it allowed a uniform method to be used for deaths without an age at death recorded in the discharge register and for those deaths occurring after 1 January 1878, for which age at discharge was recorded. Furthermore, it can be argued that a figure based on age at admission, which was probably given by the inmate, is likely to be more reliable than one based on age obtained from other sources after death.

Fifty deaths (13.8 per cent) were of children aged less than 15 years. Of the remaining 313 deaths, 173 were of males and 140 were of females. A population pyramid for deaths of inmates aged more than 15 years is presented in Figure

**Figure 6 Deaths by age**



**Source:** Medway Union Workhouse admission and discharge registers, 1876-1881.

6. Numbers of male deaths exceed or approximate to female deaths across almost all age groups, although female deaths outnumbered male in the 26-30 and 81-85 groups.

Reasons for admission of inmates who died in the workhouse are summarised in Table 2. Unfortunately, the discharge registers do not give information about the cause of death. The two commonest reasons for admission of inmates who died aged less than 15 years were birth and destitution, each accounting for 28.9 per cent. Illness/injury accounted for 13.3 per cent. Table 2 indicates that no single reason for admission showed an association with subsequent death in the workhouse for inmates aged less than 15 years. For inmates aged 15 years and over, illness/injury was by far the commonest reason for admission of inmates who subsequently died, contributing 85.1 per cent for males and 80.6 per cent for females. These figures are substantially greater than the 62.2 per cent and 43.7 per cent for admitted inmates. Destitution, at 9.7 per cent for males and 11.3 per cent for females, was the next most common reason.

## Conclusions

Throughout the study period, variations in numbers of paupers in the Medway workhouse reflected the national variations. Total numbers increased over the period, and superimposed on this trend were seasonal variations whereby numbers increased during the winter months. National numbers of outdoor paupers showed similar but less marked trends, and the ratio of outdoor to indoor paupers declined, in accordance with the requirements of the Local Government Board.

No single definitive explanation can be given for the predominance of females over males in this workhouse. Reasons cited for the general predominance of men in workhouse populations, particularly in agricultural counties, include the ineligibility of single men for outdoor relief on the grounds of family sickness, the preference of employers to employ married rather than single men, the vulnerability of manual workers to physical infirmity or injury, and lack of family support for elderly male family members.<sup>63</sup> Such considerations could well have applied in the Medway area, but barracks and a Royal Naval Dockyard were situated here, and would have provided ample male employment. Furthermore, it is possible that women entered the workhouse when their husbands went to sea or were posted away. In the absence of more information on reasons for admission, this theory can neither be proved nor refuted. Outdoor relief to the families of soldiers was permitted, and it is possible that the servicemen's wives entered the workhouse in an attempt to force the Guardians to send them to join their husbands.<sup>64</sup> In any case, if married servicemen were posted abroad, their wives could well encounter hardship and, if they could not find casual employment, be forced to enter the workhouse. It is of interest that although the population of the workhouse was at all times predominantly female, most admissions were of males, a reflection of gender differences in average length of workhouse residence.

Most inmates stayed in the workhouse for short periods, most commonly a week, and stays in excess of three months were unusual. Inmates enumerated in the census had in many cases been in the workhouse for longer periods, more than a quarter having no admission entries during the study period. The fact that most of the enumerated inmates without admission entries were female supports the view that most very long term inmates were female, and provides an explanation for a predominantly female workhouse population in the face of more male than female admissions. Durations of stay up to a year did not vary significantly between the sexes.

Assessment of the occupations given in the admission register confirms the low social status of most of the inmates. Categories markedly over-represented in the workhouse compared with the general population were domestic service, dress (both predominantly female) and workers with unspecified commodities (predominantly male labourers). The seasonal pattern in the numbers of labourers admitted to the workhouse is not unexpected, as many labourers would have worked outdoors in agriculture or brickmaking. In the

Medway area brickmakers' labourers could often fall back on agricultural work.<sup>65</sup> However, both these occupations were seasonal.

Most admissions (61 per cent) were of lone people. The commonest family group to be admitted to this workhouse was mother with child(ren). This may be attributed to the husbands being members of the forces who were posted away.

For pregnant women, admission late in pregnancy was the rule. This may reflect a general fear of 'the house,' reluctance to be separated from friends and family, a need to continue working (paid or unpaid), or other reasons. In some cases, labour may have started unexpectedly. Post-natal stays were longer than pre-natal, with mothers and babies remaining at least 11 days, reflecting the normal 'lying-in period'. Notwithstanding the apparent wish of women to delay entering the workhouse for as long as possible, six women returned to the workhouse for subsequent births. The fact that younger mothers gave birth in the workhouse is consistent with the institution's role as a maternity hospital. The high percentage of inmates admitted as ill or injured is consistent with the institution's function as a hospital. This work supports the view that 'The workhouse provided a home for the aged, the decrepit and the geriatric and a hospital for those who were temporarily or chronically sick.'<sup>66</sup> Children were also a significant group in the workhouse population. The widely held belief that the Victorian poor dreaded death in the workhouse and the consequent possibility of a pauper's funeral may well be based in fact, but the reality appears to be that workhouse deaths were a rare occurrence.<sup>67</sup>

## Acknowledgements

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## NOTES

1. A. Kidd, *State, society and the poor in nineteenth-century England* (Basingstoke, 1999), 2-3
2. M.E. Rose, *The relief of poverty 1834-1914* (London, 1972), 7.
3. D. Englander, *Poverty and poor law reform in 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain, 1834-1914: from Chadwick to Booth* (London, 1998), 45.
4. A. Digby, *Pauper palaces* (London, 1978), 107.
5. Digby, *Pauper palaces*, 13.
6. The Poor Law authorities never defined the term 'able-bodied'. It has been suggested that the term was used to describe people aged 15 years and over who could work to support themselves: see Digby, *Pauper palaces*, 110, 144.
7. M.E. Rose, *The English poor law 1780-1930* (Newton Abbot, 1971), 102-3.
8. Englander, *Poverty and poor law reform*, 14.
9. A. Brundage, *The English poor laws, 1700-1930* (Basingstoke, 2002), 123.
10. Digby, *Pauper palaces*, 118.
11. K. Williams, *From pauperism to poverty* (London, 1981), 59-61.
12. Englander, *Poverty and poor law reform*, 13.
13. Digby, *Pauper palaces*, 151.
14. Williams, *From pauperism to poverty*, 64-5.
15. Digby, *Pauper palaces*, 112.

16. Digby, *Pauper palaces*, 114.
17. Englander, *Poverty and poor law reform*, 104–5.
18. Englander, *Poverty and poor law reform*, 105–7.
19. N. Goose, 'Workhouse populations in the mid-nineteenth century: the case of Hertfordshire', *Local Population Studies*, **62** (1999), 52–69; A. Hinde and F. Turnbull, 'The populations of two Hampshire workhouses, 1851–1861', *Local Population Studies*, **61** (1998), 38–53; D.G. Jackson, 'Kent workhouse populations in 1881: a study based on the census enumerators' books', *Local Population Studies*, **69** (2002), 51–64; S. Page, 'Pauperism and the Leicester workhouse in 1881', *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society*, **63** (1989), 85–95.
20. J. Gibson, C. Rogers, and C. Webb, *Poor law union records 1. South East England and East Anglia* (Birmingham, 1993) lists admission and discharge registers, and other surviving Poor Law Union Records for South East England and East Anglia. The series covers the country. Hinde and Turnbull, 'Two Hampshire Workhouses', shows graphs derived from the admission and discharge registers of the Winchester workhouse; Goose, 'Workhouse populations in the mid-nineteenth century', tabulates data for the Hatfield workhouse.
21. D. Thomson, 'Workhouse to nursing home: residential care of elderly people in England since 1840', *Ageing and Society*, **3** (1983), 53.
22. *1881 Census Of Great Britain, Vol II. Area, Houses and Population*. BPP 1883, **LXXIX**, 51.
23. J.M. Preston, *Industrial Medway: an historical perspective* (Rochester, 1977), 207.
24. *1861 Census of Great Britain, Vol I. Numbers and Distribution of People*. BPP 1862, **L**, 226; *1881 Census of Great Britain, Vol II*. BPP 1883, **LXXIX**, 41; *Census of England and Wales, 1901. Preliminary Report and Tables of the Population and Houses Enumerated in England and Wales and in The Islands in the British Seas*. (London, 1902), 58.
25. Preston, *Industrial Medway*, 65.
26. Preston, *Industrial Medway* 66, 148–9.
27. *1881 Census of Great Britain*, BPP 1883, **LXXIX**, Vol II, 41.
28. K. Schürer and M. Woollard, *1881 Census for England and Wales, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man (Enriched Version)* [computer file]. Genealogical Society of Utah, Federation of family History Societies [original data producers]. Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive [distributor], 2000. SN4177.
29. Calculated from Schürer and Woollard, *1881 Census of Great Britain*.
30. Calculated from *1881 Census Of Great Britain, Vol III. Ages, condition as to marriage and birthplaces of the people*. BPP 1883, **LXXX**, 5.
31. As no independent source is available for checking the information, it was decided to assess internal consistency between the admission register, discharge register and CEBs. The CEBs, listing inmates who were in the workhouse on 3 April 1881, were completed from information provided by workhouse staff, and cannot therefore be considered independent. The consistently good layout and handwriting of the registers and CEBs support the view that they are reliable sources of information.
32. Unfortunately, no reference to the diet table of the workhouse was found in the Medway Archives catalogue.
33. *National index to 1881 British Census and 1881 British Census*, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter day Saints [CD-ROM] (Salt lake City, Utah, 1999). This database lists 606 inmates, but inspection of the CEBs shows that one entry was crossed out.
34. Digby, *Pauper palaces*, 37.
35. Goose, 'Workhouse populations', 54.
36. Thomson, 'Workhouse to nursing home', 54.
37. Thomson, 'Workhouse to nursing home', 46.
38. Hinde and Turnbull, 'Two Hampshire workhouses', 41.
39. Page, 'Pauperism and the Leicester workhouse', 89.
40. Jackson, 'Kent workhouse populations', 57.
41. Thomson, 'Workhouse to nursing home', 47.
42. Hinde and Turnbull, 'Two Hampshire workhouses', 43–48.
43. Poor rates and pauperism – comparative statement of pauperism, BPP 1877, **LXX**, 475–577; Poor rates and pauperism – comparative statement of pauperism, BPP 1878–9, **LX**, 393–494; Poor rates

- and pauperism – comparative statement of pauperism, BPP 1881, LXXVIII, 409-512
44. Thomson, 'Workhouse to nursing home', 48.
  45. N. Goose, 'Poverty, old age and gender in nineteenth-century England: the case of Hertfordshire', *Continuity and Change*, 20 (2005), 1–34 (forthcoming).
  46. Goose, 'Workhouse populations', 55; Jackson, 'Kent workhouse populations', 64.
  47. As a consequence of overcrowding in lunatic asylums, a provision of 1862 allowed chronic lunatics to remain in the workhouse, Digby, *Pauper palaces*, 172.
  48. Kidd, *State, society and the poor*, 41
  49. The database used was *National Index to 1881 British census and 1881 British census*.
  50. Hinde and Turnbull, 'Two Hampshire workhouses', 48
  51. Hinde and Turnbull, 'Two Hampshire workhouses', 43
  52. Goose, 'Workhouse populations in the mid-nineteenth century', 55; Jackson, 'Kent workhouse populations', 64
  53. K. Schürer and M. Woollard, *1881 Census for England and Wales, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man (Enriched Version)* [computer file]. Genealogical Society of Utah, Federation of Family History Societies [original data producers]. Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive [distributor], 2000. SN4177.
  54. M. Woollard, *The classification of occupations in the 1881 census of England and Wales*, (Colchester, 1999), 1–56
  55. Thomson, 'Workhouse to nursing home', 56.
  56. Goose, 'Workhouse populations', 58; Jackson, 'Kent workhouse populations', 58.
  57. The work of Goose is based on the CEBs. The present work is based on admission registers. The arrangement of the Medway CEBs did not facilitate identification of family groups. The layout of the register, with admission of parents and children together, allowed family groups to be identified with some confidence.
  58. I. Loudon, *The tragedy of childbed fever* (Oxford, 2000), 59, 125.
  59. R. Woods, *The demography of Victorian England and Wales* (Cambridge, 2000), 251.
  60. *Thirty-ninth annual report of the Registrar General of Births, Deaths and Marriages in England (abstract of 1876)*. BPP 1878, XXII, abstracts of marriages, births and deaths 1876, 32, 104; *Fortieth annual report of the Registrar General of Births, Deaths and Marriages in England (abstract of 1877)*. BPP 1879, XIX, abstracts of marriages, births and deaths 1877, 32, 104; *Forty-first annual report of the Registrar General of Births, Deaths and Marriages in England (abstract of 1878)*. BPP 1880, XVI, abstracts of marriages, births and deaths 1878, 32, 104; *Forty-second annual report of the Registrar General of Births, Deaths and Marriages in England (abstract of 1879)*. BPP 1881, XXVII, abstracts of marriages, births and deaths 1879, 32, 104; *Forty-third annual report of the Registrar General of Births, Deaths and Marriages in England (abstract of 1880)*. BPP 1882, XIX, abstracts of marriages, births and deaths 1880, 32, 104; *Forty-fourth annual report of the Registrar General of Births, Deaths and Marriages in England (abstract of 1881)*. BPP 1883, XX, abstracts of marriages, births and deaths 1881, 36, 98.
  61. Thomson, 'Workhouse to nursing home', 60.
  62. *Thirty-ninth annual report of the Registrar-General*, abstracts of marriages, births and deaths 1876, 99; *Fortieth annual report of the Registrar-General*, abstracts of marriages, births and deaths 1877, 99; *Forty-first Annual Report of the Registrar-General*, abstracts of marriages, births and deaths 1878, 99; *Forty-second annual report of the Registrar-General*, abstracts of marriages, births and deaths 1879, 99; *Forty-third annual report of the Registrar-General*, abstracts of marriages, births and deaths 1880, 99; *Forty-fourth annual report of the Registrar-General*, abstracts of marriages, births and deaths, 93.
  63. Goose, 'Workhouse populations', 61; M.A. Crowther, *The workhouse system 1834-1929* (London, 1981), 234.
  64. Hinde and Turnbull, 'Two Hampshire workhouses', 47
  65. Preston, *Industrial Medway*, 92.
  66. Englander, *Poverty and poor law reform*, 34.
  67. Fear of death 'on the parish' was exacerbated by the 1832 Anatomy Act, which allowed the dissection of unclaimed pauper corpses: see P.C. Jupp and C. Gittings, *Death in England* (Manchester, 1999), 221.

Bury Union Workhouse (Jericho Institution) Admission Registers Bury Union Workhouse (Jericho Institution )Discharge Registers Bury Union Workhouse (Jericho Institution )Creed Registers. Please note the original records for the Bury Union institution are now held at Bury Archives. Cheshire Workhouse Records. The 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act established nine poor-law unions in Cheshire, each with its own workhouse.Â Once sufficient funds had been gathered, a ballot was held and the winners were put forward to receive their naturalisation papers. The records tell you the name of your ancestor, the amount they paid to the fund, and the date of their payment. Find your family history.