This thesis examines Poor Law administration in the urban industrial union of Preston, Lancashire, from the introduction of the Poor Law Amendment Act in the region in 1837 to the eve of the Lancashire Cotton Famine in 1861. For many years historiography has emphasised that, despite the attempt to engender a greater degree of uniformity through unionisation and the creation of a London based central authority, diversity was a defining characteristic of relief administration at local level under the New Poor Law just as it had been under the Old. Local studies are therefore essential to understanding how the Poor Law operated in practice, and this thesis answers repeated calls for more of them. Lancashire has received little empirical attention from welfare historians for the period after 1837, particularly at the level of individual unions, and the study therefore primarily seeks to shed new light on how policy was formed and relief provided at local level in a region that was both the most industrialised in the country and located within the heartland of the anti-Poor Law movement. It is argued that policy and practice in Preston union, like any union, was shaped by a number of broad interconnected variables, the nature and relative importance of which were each determined by local circumstances. Isolated local studies, however, can only tell us so much. Thus, the thesis seeks to draw wider and more significant conclusions by setting Preston union within a broader regional and sub-regional framework. The approach reflects recent historiography which has argued that, in spite of local differences, Poor Law administration varied considerably by region, with a particularly marked distinction having been drawn between an inclusive, perhaps generous, south and east and a less inclusive, perhaps harsh, north and west. Most research in this area has focussed on the Old Poor Law, and this study questions whether, and the extent to which, such distinctions endured into the New. The thesis challenges the notion that spatial patterns of relief at regional level indicate relative levels of generosity. It argues, instead, that socio-economic conditions were chiefly responsible for observable differences at the regional and sub-regional levels, with the durability of the makeshift economy important in the case of the former. Further, it argues that variation at all levels occurred within rather narrow parameters, and that the Poor Law fundamentally served much the same purpose across the country.
The machinery of the new law in itself constituted a virtual administrative revolution: a central commission not under direct ministerial or parliamentary control, with wide powers to establish efficient local administrative units. As early as 1837 the commissioners modified their instructions to permit outdoor relief at Nottingham where the creation of the new poor-law union coincided with a period of acute unemployment. In 1841 a general order was issued to a number of northern unions prescribing rules for the administration of outdoor relief to able-bodied men, half of which was to be in kind (bread, potatoes etc.), in return for some form of supervised work. An Act for the Amendment and better Administration of the Laws relating to the Poor in England and Wales. [4 & 5 Will. IV cap. In 1837 anti-Poor Law propaganda reached its climax when attempts were made to form Unions in the industrial north. The Anti-Poor Law movement was formed in Lancashire and the West Riding, led by Oastler, Fielden and Stephens. The new Poor Law was attacked in the press and on the platform. 1837 also saw the start of the 'Hungry 40s', beginning with a trade depression. This opposition came in the shape of the anti-Poor Law Movement. The workhouse test was never enforced in industrial Unions in Lancashire and Yorkshire: outdoor relief and supplements to incomes continued. The Poor Law Commission concentrated too much on the rural able-bodied poor. They paid too little regard to problems of pauperisation caused by physical/mental ill-health. old age. The new Poor Law ensured that the poor were housed in workhouses, clothed and fed. Children who entered the workhouse would receive some schooling. In return for this care, all workhouse paupers would have to work for several hours each day. However, not all Victorians shared this point of view. Some people, such as Richard Oastler, spoke out against the new Poor Law, calling the workhouses ‘Prisons for the Poor’. The poor themselves hated and feared the threat of the workhouse so much that there were riots in northern towns. Tasks. The lesson can also be used as a starting point for investigating the new Poor Law in more depth and discussing attitudes to the poor in 19th century Britain. Sources. Source 1 : EXT 6/1 (extracted from HO 44/27/2).