

Workhouses

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In the nineteenth Century, no official support system or benefits were available for those who were unemployed, elderly, sick or disabled. People had to work to earn money, and so if they were unable to for any reason, they had no means of paying rent or buying food.

Workhouses were introduced after the *Poor Law Amendment Act*, or *New Poor Law*, was passed in 1834 and it was decided that help should be provided for the needy. The idea was for *parishes* (like council wards) to join funds in order to build a *workhouse* – a place for the poor and destitute to live and work. Several parishes were grouped together into *Unions*, so that many of the establishments were known as *union workhouses*. They were set up across the country as part of a national government system run from London, but with each Union directly responsible for the building and management of their workhouse.

Before these changes brought about by the New Poor Law, the poor had been provided for in a different way. Parishes and generous benefactors had given money and handouts, *poor relief*, to the needy in their own homes. This allowed the poor to remain in their lodgings and to look for work. However, the growing poverty in urban areas meant that a harsher method of assistance was needed to combat the problem.

The idea of the workhouse was to provide shelter, food and clothing, earned by hard physical labour. The general attitude towards the poor was one of disdain, and the belief that they deserved their unfortunate status was widely held. Conditions in the workhouses were deliberately basic to act as a deterrent, and to discourage people seeking an “easy” option. It was meant as a last resort solution to poverty. Only the most desperate people turned to the workhouses for help.

Those wishing to claim poor relief had to give up what little belongings they had and leave their lodgings. For many, it was also a case of leaving their hometown and travelling miles to the workhouse, as many parishes had been joined to form the unions. People who wished to be admitted to the workhouse had to apply, and be interviewed by a Board of Guardians at meetings held weekly. Applicants waiting for their interview would be held in a receiving ward, and if found to be ill after their mandatory medical examination they would be placed in a sick ward.

Once admitted to the workhouse, people were known as *inmates*, demonstrating the attitude towards the needy, and the unpleasantness of their plight. Each inmate was recorded; their clothing and belongings were checked over and then taken from them and listed on an Inmates Property Register. They were then bathed; their hair was cut very short to prevent spreading lice, and given a workhouse uniform. The new inmates would be categorised into the seven following groups:

1. Aged or infirm men
2. Able-bodied men and youths above 13
3. Youths and boys under 13
4. Aged or infirm women
5. Able-bodied women and girls above 16
6. Girls above 7 and under 16
7. Children under 7 years of age

Each inmate was then taken to a segregated wing of the building, depending on his or her status. This made the workhouse residents even more like prisoners. They were not free to roam the building, and were restricted to their own specific areas. Inmates were physically separated, even if they were related, meaning many families were split up. In some workhouses occasional visits between relatives were allowed, but only for short periods of time. In others, family members lost contact permanently. The rules were amended in 1847 so that married couples over 60 could request to share a separate room, but only if the design and capacity of the building allowed it.

The men would even eat separately from the women and children. Inmates were seated in cramped rows, and would dine quietly. It was originally ruled that they should follow the tenets of "*silence, order and decorum*" but this guideline was later relaxed to omit "*silence*". Moral biblical slogans adorned the otherwise plain walls, to remind the inmates of their lowly status and that they should be grateful to their union. The menu differed from workhouse to workhouse, but all meals were basic at best. Cheap filling food such as *gruel*, a thick porridge-like sludge, bread and cheese, broth, and potatoes were most common. The meagre amount of food allotted to workhouse inmates was far below that served to their contemporaries in prison: The H.M. Prison official ration was 292oz of food per prisoner per week, whereas the weekly ration for workhouse inmates was around 140oz – less than half.

The inmates were expected to work hard. This served two purposes: to keep them busy and instil a diligent attitude; and also to subsidise the expenses incurred by the unions to house them.

Jobs were found for the inmates, usually inside the workhouse, performing domestic chores to maintain the building and the other inmates. The women would work in the laundry, washing the linen and clothing of the inmates and even local families. Others would be put in the workhouse kitchen preparing food in the kitchen for the meals. Those unable to work, such as the sick and infirm, were expected to supervise and teach the children in the workhouse what little they could. Men were also sent out to local pits, or farms as cheap labour, and in some cases the younger girls were sent to work in local houses as domestic servants. Some institutions had vegetable plots and workshops for weaving or sewing staffed by the inmates to make the building almost self-sufficient. Male inmates used their own strength to grind corn to produce poor quality flour, or they chopped wood to fuel the workhouse.



Other tasks were carried out to raise funds for the union, making saleable goods. These included oakum picking, stone breaking, bone crushing, and gypsum crushing, the results of which were sold to trades. Bones were crushed for use as crop fertiliser, but the task was banned within workhouses after a scandal at Andover Workhouse. The inmates were reported to have been so hungry that they had been driven to gnawing at the rotten flesh on the bones. Oakum picking was the tedious task of unravelling the fibres from old ropes, the results of which were then used to seal wooden ships with tar. Broken stones were used for laying roads, and crushed gypsum was used in the plaster trade. The work undertaken would go towards the inmates' keep. No wage was paid to them, making it impossible for them to save towards a future outside the workhouse.

Workhouses had infirmaries for the sick, and some of the more adept inmates were employed as nurses there. As the majority of inmates were illiterate, the infirmary staff were therefore unable to read medicine labels. This led to a lack of faith in the workhouse hospital, and ill inmates and other unwell people of the parish union were reluctant to go.

If any inmates were lucky enough to leave the workhouse by finding employment, they would need to leave behind the uniform they had been provided with. This made it difficult for people to leave as they may have had few belongings of their own, and would possibly have outgrown their own clothes, particularly if they had gone to the workhouse as children. If a man with a family left the workhouse, he would be required to take his entire family with him. This meant that any employment he had found would have had to pay a wage sufficient to support them all rather than just himself. Some of the brighter and more fortunate children would have been given apprenticeships by local businesses, and were thereby given a means of escaping the drudgery of life in the workhouse.

Many children were born into workhouse life, as unmarried mothers were cast out from society and forced to seek shelter in the workhouse. It was seen as immoral and unacceptable for women to have children before they were married, and shameful for their families. They would often be rejected by their relatives and turned away from their homes without support, and so the workhouse was the only option. There, they would have a place to stay and food to eat, and their children would be provided for.

The workhouses were strictly run, with many rules which were to be adhered to at all times, with consequences for those who flouted them. There were two official types of misbehaviour, *disorderly* behaviour, and *refractory* behaviour. Disorderly behaviour included being noisy, swearing, refusing to work or follow orders, and attempting to escape. The consequences for such "crimes" were two days without "luxuries" such as butter, tea, and broth, or they could be given just bread and potatoes to eat for those two days. Refractory behaviour included mistreating a member of staff, assaulting another person, damaging property, writing offensive material or acting offensively, and also being drunk. These offences could be punished by a reduction in their food allowance, solitary confinement for 24 hours, or inmates could even be sent to a Justice of the Peace if they had caused serious injury or damage.

Case Study: Whiston Union Workhouse

An example of a workhouse from the latter half of the 19th Century is Whiston Union Workhouse and Institution, built between 1845 and 1909, expanding and developing over the years. When it was first completed, inmates from other workhouses in the Lancashire area were re-housed there, and so the smaller workhouses of Prescott, Bold, Sutton, Windle, and Much Woolton were closed. It eventually had a large infirmary, and like many other workhouses around the country, it provided the only public general hospital services until 1930. It was managed by a Master and Matron with a small number of official staff including a “proper” nurse, cook, and teacher. This arrangement was the similar throughout all union workhouses. The building itself had its own staff accommodation, offices, sewing room, and a separate chapel. The Workhouse and Institution was built in the form of a cross with a central hub, the exterior of which was octagonal in shape, three storeys high. The central hub allowed a guarding member of staff to see down the four corridors and be aware of the conduct of the inmates at all times.

Although workhouses had been created as a last resort to poverty, and made deliberately grim, they were much needed. Even in the 20th Century 600 such institutions existed, with around 226000 inmates. Workhouses continued in Britain until 1929 when the Local Government Act abolished them. It was then the responsibility of local councils and county boroughs to provide for the poor.



Workhouses - Activities

Activity 1 - Have Your Own Workhouse Style Lunch

You will need:

Large deep pan

Metal ladle

Wooden spoon

Sharp cutting knife

Bowls and spoons for the children (paper bowls and plastic spoons would be fine, but make sure you explain that the bowls would have been made of tin or wood, and the spoons also of wood)

Ingredients (to serve 3 small portions – multiply quantities as required):

1 Tablespoon suet (use vegetable suet in case of those with dietary issues)

1 Teaspoon fine oatmeal

1 Onion. Salt & Pepper

Cinnamon if required

Milk or water as required

To make the gruel: Chop the onions finely. Melt the suet in the pan, and slowly cook the onion until it has softened but not browned. Slowly stir in the oatmeal to allow it to soak up the fat and continue until you have a sticky paste consistency. Gradually add the liquid until the mixture resembles a thick white sauce, and season with salt pepper and even cinnamon to taste. Boil well for ten minutes, adding more liquid as required if consistency becomes too gluey.

Serve hot.

To serve: Before or during the preparation of the gruel, arrange the desks in tight rows with no gaps so that access is only available from either end. When ready to serve, put the pan of gruel on a table at the front of the class and either assign a child to dish out the gruel or serve it to the children. Split the class into boys and girls, and make them form two separate queues. The two groups must not communicate.

The children must advance in single file to the front desk where each child will collect their bowl and spoon in turn and have their portion ladled out. They must then make their way to one end of the first row of tables and walk down to the opposite end so that the row fills, and then the queue would move onto the next row and so on. The girls and boys must be in separate rows. You should signal when they are allowed to eat and insist that they eat in silence without complaining about the flavour. (The children don't have to eat it all – it's more for them to try and to understand the grim fate of the poor) Explain that any unruly behaviour or ingratitude would have resulted in punishment and eventual expulsion from the workhouse.

The bowls should then all be returned to the front desk in the same manner in which they were collected.



Discuss the activity:

Did they enjoy the gruel? Could they have eaten it every day? What did they have for breakfast/lunch/dinner the day before? Look at the menu for typical workhouses and compare.

This could be extended or adapted to a role-play activity, or even as a mathematical problem, multiplying the amounts of ingredients to feed different numbers of inmates.



Activity 2 - Compare the children's day with that of a workhouse inmate

Ask the children to draw a table like so:

Time	What I did	What an inmate did
6am – 7am		
7am – 8am		
8am – 9am		
9am – 10am		
10am – 11am		
11am – 12noon		
12noon – 1pm		
1pm – 2pm		
2pm – 3pm		
3pm – 4pm		
4pm – 5pm		
5pm – 6pm		
6pm – 7pm		
7pm – 8pm		
8pm – 9pm		
9pm – 10pm		

Then ask the class to complete the “What I did” column with their actions the day before. When that is complete, read aloud the following actions of the inmates, for the children to fill in the “What an inmate did” column:

6am – Woke up by the Workhouse bell
 6.30am–7am Breakfast
 7am–12noon – Work
 12noon-1pm – Dinner break
 1pm-6pm – Work
 6pm-7pm – Supper
 8pm – Bedtime

The times given relate to the official guidelines proposed by the Poor Law Commission for 25th March to 29th September of each year. For the days between 29th September and 25th March, the hour of rising changed to 7am, with breakfast 7.30-8am, and work beginning at 8am. The rest of the timetable remained unchanged.



Discuss the timetable: is there any correlation between the children's and inmates' timetables? What did the inmates do between 7pm and 8pm? No television, remember! Some books were made available to the inmates. Do they fancy getting up at 6am everyday?

This activity could be extended with roleplay. The children could act out different scenes of life in the workhouse, playing both inmates and staff using what you have taught them.



Activity 3 - Study A Workhouse Census Entry

The Census of Great Britain began in 1801, with the aim of monitoring how many people lived in the country, and whereabouts they lived. The study has been taken every ten years since. Every member of every household is recorded, along with their age at the time the census is taken, their marital status, and their occupation. Looking at census results is a good way of finding out more about the past, particularly how people lived.

The following is a genuine extract from the 1881 census return from Whiston Union Workhouse, Whiston, Lancashire, showing the inmates' details.

Photocopy the sheet on the next page to give to small groups, or pairs.

Ask the children to study the list, looking carefully at the names, the people's ages, where they came from and what they did.

In the *Marital Status column*, *M* = married, *U* = unmarried, *W* = widowed. In the *Sex column*, *M* = male, *F* = female. The *Relationship* column refers to their status within the household, or in this case, the workhouse.

Discuss the details: can they find any families? How could they have ended up in the workhouse? Who is the youngest/oldest inmate? Who had travelled furthest to the workhouse? Could any of them have been born there? Are there any who could be orphans?

You could develop this further by asking the children to write a story about one of the people on the census, based on what they have discovered about workhouses, and what they have figured out about that person.



1881 Census: Residents of Whiston Union Workhouse, Whiston, Lancashire

Surname	Name	Marital Status	Age	Sex	Relationship	Occupation	Handicap	Birthplace	County
Abbott	George	U	51	M	Inmate	Shoemaker		Appleton	Lancashire
Allen	Harriet Ann	U	19	F	Inmate		Blind	Widnes	Lancashire
Allen	William	W	87	M	Inmate	Potter		Prescot	Lancashire
Anders	Alice	U	1	F	Inmate			Parr	Lancashire
Anders	Margaret	U	17	F	Inmate	Glass Polisher		Parr	Lancashire
Anrock	James		4	M	Inmate			Widnes	Lancashire
Anrock	William Henry		1	M	Inmate			Widnes	Lancashire
Arnold	Ellen	W	72	F	Inmate		Imbecile	Windle	Lancashire
Ashcroft	Margaret	U	34	F	Inmate		Imbecile	Windle	Lancashire
Ashton	Jane	U	24	F	Inmate	Domestic Servant		Whiston	Lancashire
Ashton	Thomas	W	72	M	Inmate	Farm Labourer		Liverpool	Lancashire
Atherton	Margaret	W	66	F	Inmate				Ireland
Atherton	Mary	W	58	F	Inmate	Seamstress	Imbecile	Eccleston	Lancashire
Bainbridge	Edward	U	35	M	Vagrant	Sailor		Northwich	Cheshire
Banks	Mary	U	26	F	Inmate		Blind	Sutton	Lancashire
Banner	John		7	M	Inmate			Prescot	Lancashire
Banner	Mary	M	48	F	Inmate			Prescot	Lancashire
Banner	Thomas	M	68	M	Inmate	Watch Frame Maker		Widnes	Lancashire
Barrow	Jane	W	89	F	Inmate			Aukle	Lancashire
Bate	Alfred	M	29		Inmate	Chem Works Labourer		Leigh	Lancashire
Bate	Alice	M	28		Inmate			Widnes	Lancashire
Bate	Edith		1m	F	Inmate			Whiston	Lancashire
Blannin	Ada Elizabeth	U	11	F	Inmate		Imbecile	Halewood	Lancashire
Boardman	Sarah Ann		1	F	Inmate			Windle	Lancashire
Bracken	James	W	65	M	Inmate	Shoemaker		Cockermouth	Cumberland
Bradshaw	William	M	33	M	Inmate	Watch Tool Maker		Prescot	Lancashire

Activity 3 - Workhouse 1881 Census



Prescot Whiston Workhouse Union



Prescot Whiston Workhouse Union - Staff



Prescot Whiston Workhouse Union Choir